



A Long and Distinguished Service...

The General Reserves. The ultimate career ender. Duties included such magnanimous roles as the manning of Stateside training bases, and preparing equipment for other, more important divisions. Their funding was miniscule. Their reputation beyond salvageable as the place for uncooperative servicemen and derelict officers. The last commander of the General Reserves was the undistinguished eighty-six-year-old Douglas Erhenshraud, who received his promotion as the only candidate who did not refuse it leading up to the Battle of Redsector. Petty graft was rampant, discipline looser than a cannon, and no one cared. It was an inconsequential afterthought in Section 9's plans, one that served its purpose in the heaving bureaucracy of war, but little else.

So it was that it caused quite a public scandal when Commander Ryhan, the man who had led the invasion of Europe, was transferred to the General Reserves. Privately, it caused an even greater uproar. Commander Ryhan was well connected among the well connected, and a great deal of highly positioned and decorated men and women owed their careers, and in some cases, unsullied reputations, to him. On any other occasion, in any other circumstance, Ryhan would have escaped the Disaster at Redsector relatively unscathed. Perhaps a reshuffling, or paid leave. Perhaps even some performative congressional hearings if they were really pissed about it. Ryhan had played the game for so long and so well, what did he have to fear?

As it turns out, the DMV, Section 9, did not take well to humiliation. A loss, they could stomach. A draw? Fine. But a complete rout? The destruction of the entire Grand Army and the utter retreat to the coast? The loss of the invasion force was, to Ryhan, a military disaster. Material losses. Manpower depletion. The cost of war. To the tight-knit group who had formed around the top-secret councils and task forces of the Signals research, however, the cost was nearly incalculable. Ryhan soon found his erstwhile friends suddenly not returning his calls, others disappearing entirely. His demotion came shortly afterwards, cutting through what would normally be a process that could be dragged on for years with the right cards, to mere hours. It was blunt, efficient, and without mercy. The ink was still drying on his transfer papers when Military Police arrived to escort him out of his multi-million-dollar Virginia summer home. He took it with little dignity. Footage of him screaming and fighting the stoney-faced guards made the rounds on national television.

He would learn later, stewing in the Tunisian Allied Command base (as close to front as his new 'position' allowed him to) that the DMV-9 had tried to have him arrested, and put on trial for gross incompetence. His vast network, a lifetime spent weaving, had merely saved him from a slightly more ignominious fall. It wasn't fair. It wasn't his fault! Who could have expected Redsector? Who could have expected the resistance he faced? He had been promised glory, a magnificent capstone to his career. He had only maneuvered himself to lead the attack because it



was supposed to be a shoe in! Those bastards in the DMV-9 were no better than him, covering their ass at the expense of others, but without the common decency to respect the rules.

So neither would he. Graft at the bases he led seemed to disappear overnight. Reports of 'all normal' began to flow out at boring, regular intervals. Discipline returned, in dress parades and spotless inspection reports. Camaraderie had never been higher: the men found themselves in possession of more booze, women and 'opportunity' than they knew what to do with. Officers who had previously resigned themselves to forgotten drudgery found fresh vigor in the face of new privileges rolled out to those who gained and kept Rhyans confidence. The Tunisa base was expanded and expanded again. Suddenly, the once insignificant plot in the desert had ports, airfields, a refurbished power plant, extensive repair capabilities. Such construction contracts were not mere coincidence. The DMV-9, whether it knew and didn't care or simply was unaware of the consequences, had made a list of enemies that spanned nearly the whole of the old Military-Industrial complex. When they began their long shadow war against the corporate hegemony that had arisen out of the post-shattering build up, those newer captains of industry looked anywhere for help, and everywhere they turned, one name kept coming up as the man to turn to. From Tunisa, expeditions to Italy and Southern France were possible, as long as certain eyes looked elsewhere for a short time.

But the great corporations across the sea were careful. They did not give what could not be taken away, and kept their newfound asset on a tight leash. Money, the commander could have. A token amount of influence would assuage his pride. But no more. To compound the issue, the General Reserves began hitting the limits of its already meager autonomy. The only fighting vehicles they received, necessary for traversing the dangerous expanses of the Shattered lands, were 3rd or 4th rate clunkers, vehicles whose cost to scrap was barely outweighed by the cost to dump them in Tunisia. Recruitment, too, dried up. With out the generous bonuses and incentives implemented to boost recruitment prior to the invasion, there were much less 'disposable' men being sent Rhyans way. But it was in for a penny, and in for a pound for the disgraced commander, and after the first wonder from the continent began making their way back to the clutches of his cross-Atlantic patrons, Rhyans began work on what would become the infamous Neverland Route.

To construct this rail line, Rhyans took whatever warm bodies he could find: volunteers enticed by patriotism or the promise of steady work, debtors running from the long arm of their collectors, refugees fleeing the chaos of France and Spain. But his most prolific well that drew the greatest source of manpower for the project, were the prisons. Prisoners in the United States, its South American protectorates, and the European satellites were not subject to military recruitment. Time served could not be commuted to military service. It was simply out of the question. They were not, however, exempt from the New Economic Plan of 1951, which allowed



prisons to loan out their prisoners in the service of infrastructure and maintenance purposes, in exchange for a small sum.

When Rhyan announced the creation of a new rail line almost 1900 miles long stretching from the Tunisian base to the Suez Canal, ostensibly for reaching the recently abandoned territory there, near half a million people across the American empire departed whatever life they had been living before and were shipped to the Mediterranean, where they found long hours, scorching heat, and miserable exhaustion. Conditions on the rail were abysmal, though not completely intolerable. The days would pass by, slowly blurring together until miraculously, a way out would present itself. A well-dressed man in military uniform would appear, contract in hand, to take them away from this hellish place. So far from home, sometimes with a language barrier and always with no legal advice, most who were offered signed on. Rhyan picked them carefully, in close concert with the places he pulled them from: he bought debt from collectors, drummed up inspiration among the gullible. In the prisons, inmates with long term illness, those whose sentences would be up shortly, and those who caused too much trouble for the wardens' tastes would cost the prisons the least to let go, and maybe even save some costs in the future. Rhyan smoothed the process with generous donations, favors, bribes, and the ubiquitous 'service fee'. In exchange, death certificates, dizzying medical re-re-re-transfers and false release papers began flying off the shelf for those prisoners working the Neverland Route. The total number is unknown, but at least 50,000 prisoners were 'relocated' in this way to the Tunisian base, roughly quintupling the number of personnel.

END OF PART 1