

June 2nd, 2024 New Roanoke fire department

Official dismissal of Captain Persival Herst of the 407th Rescue Company.

Dismissed with full honours and is entitled to full Roanoke Fire Dept veterans fund despite less than 20 years of service

Reason for dismissal: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Acute Schizophrenia. Herst demonstrates mental stability under normal conditions but exhibits erratic behaviour in high-stress situations. The incident on [REDACTED] despite his success, show that Captain Herst shouldn't continue in his position in the fire brigade.

Additional notes: General Adstrom of the 109th Paratroopers brigade: Persival Herst is a reliable and exceptional individual that has saved my life on multiple occasions. He has served a total of 5 tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, and was honorably discharged due to a knee injury. His quick healing allowed him to join the brigade upon my recommendation, but I understand and support the dismissal of Herst with full honours. The man has gone through trauma for 3 men, and deserves to rest. You may have trouble getting him out of service, Herst is a workaholic and thrillseeker to an unhealthy degree. Godspeed, Persival Herst.

Fire Chief Adamat: Herst, this isn't a punishment. You've done enough for the country already, enjoy your early retirement. Find a girl, you're a grown man for Christ sake!

You're hanging from a rope above a fire. You grip the rope with one hand, and you hold a gun in the other. The devil holds the rope up. You don't know why, or what he'll do, but he isn't pulling you up. The bottom of the rope starts burning. You can either shoot the devil, killing it but dropping you into flames, or drop the gun and climb out. What will you do?

Chapter 1

"Three tours in Afghanistan, two tours in Iraq. 47 confirmed kills and over 150 non-combatants saved. Three medals of honour and you declined promotions over 6 times to stay on the field. That is quite the resume Mr Herst."

"I know, I lived it" Herst replied, looming over the tiny secretary, palms face down on her desk. "So, am I hired or not?"

The small woman didn't flinch, despite Herst being more than twice her size. "No, I'm afraid. Mr Anderson received note that you might reach out for a field position here. I'm afraid-" The secretary responded, before being cut off as Herst abruptly stirred.

"Let me talk to the damned idiot" Herst grunted, walking past the secretary, flinging open the doors. "James, you damned idiot, you could of at least said it to my face"

A man sat behind a nice mahogany desk, fingers steepled in front of him, a grin on his face. "Either way you would of made your way over here, I might as well let Alexis do the heavy

lifting. Alexis, don't worry about it. I told you you wouldn't be able to keep him out." He said, motioning Herst to enter, giving his secretary an apologetic smile.

The women shot a withering glare at her boss before slamming the door behind the two of them.

"You look like shit, Herst."

"I know." Herst responded, taking a seat in the chair opposite to James. "3 PMCs, 2 Private security companies, and 4 search and rescue teams. James, I'm not fucking crazy."

"And that is just what a crazy person would say." James replied, smirk on his face growing wider. "You know Adstrom shot everyone a message. You won't find another job in any type of field position. Hell, you don't need a job. You have pensions from both the Fire brigade and the Military."

Persival raised his eyebrow. "You really think I want to sit at home all day and watch football or whatever?"

James chuckled, "I know its not your thing." He replied, "But just give it a try. Give yourself a few months, you never know what will happen."

James Anderson is a war criminal. He authorized the use of Sarin Gas on residential installations in afghanistan, and plans on selling prisoners to human trafficking rings.

Herst's breath caught in his throat, his ready response disappearing from his mind as he stared at his friend in shock.

"Something wrong?" James responded, cocking his head to the side.

Persival Herst let the rest of his breath out, sinking deeper in the chair. "Fuck" he said, staring up at the ceiling. His hands went to his face and he groaned.

James, as predictable as always, let out a light chuckle. "I'll tell you what, Herst, take a vacation to the andes, like we did in training. This time, no drill sargents or waking up at 5 am, and see how you feel. I'll pay for it myself, I've got money to throw around and your a good friend."

James Anderson wants you out of America for 4 weeks so he can get his affairs in order. He wants to keep you in arms length, but needs to clear the ledgers first so you don't notice anything suspicious.

"Or he could be just a friend that wants you to take a break" Herst thought to himself. "Let me think about it" Herst said, careful to keep his voice measured. He stood up slowly, staring James in the eyes, trying to parse out his friends true intentions. James was too good for that. The man had rose through the corporate world of PMCs in less that 8 years, he knew how to keep a secret and Herst wouldn't know his motives unless he wanted them known.

James didn't push the offer. "Alright, alright" he said, the innocent grin on his face seeming more suspicious. "My offer still stands, feel free to give me a call if you change your mind. I'll see you around, *Brother*."

The last word sent a shiver down Hersts spine for some reason, but he didn't let it show. He left the office, leaving his friend, more questions asked than answered.

Chapter 2

Herst stood shoulder to shoulder in the cramped elevator. He had to keep his head down to make sure he didn't hit the ceiling, and he loomed over the two old ladies that shared the small space with him. "How are you dear?" one of the elderly women asked him.

"I'm good, miss Chatrelet. Would you like some help with those groceries?" Herst responded.

"Barbra, leave the young man alone. He already has a lot on his plate without your nagging." The other elderly lady responded.

"Oh, its no worries." Herst responded.

"No no," the first lady responded. "It must be difficult being a firefighter, speaking of my late husband was also a firefighter." The elderly woman started rattling off about her late husband, and Herst watched the elevator tick upwards towards his floor.

"Well, this is my stop. I'd love to hear more about your husband but I have to go, have a good night." Herst said, pulling himself from the cramped confines of the elevator, into the less cramped but still claustrophobic confines of the apartment hallways.

"Well, good night dear." One of the ladies responded. Herst didn't care to see which one. He waved behind him and continued down the hallway as the fatigue started to close in.

The hallway was cramped and smelled of mildew, with the buzz of electric lights being the only thing that kept it from feeling derelict. Herst kept his back hunched in order to prevent himself from hitting the roof, and brushing the walls. Herst arrived at his flat, the one at the very end at the hallway, and fumbled for his keys before finally unlocking the door.

The place was still cramped, but allowed Herst to stand up without hitting the ceiling, and smelt of burnt rubber and fire extinguishers. The familiar smell of fire retardent soothed Hersts nerves, and he felt his eyes grow heavy. The place was one of organized chaos, with uniforms, tools, and food hapazardly organized everywhere. Herst gingerly stepped over a box of frozen mashed potatoes, 3 weeks expired. He'd clean that up eventually.

Herst unholstered his 9mm and placed it down on the nightstand with a little too much force. He wasn't supposed to have the weapon, but all veterans carried one. Just because a piece of paper and some shrink with glasses told him he was unfit to conceal carry didn't mean shit to him. He'd saved enough lives, and he felt like he could control himself. Right?

He huffed out angrily, unable to express his anger in any meaningful way without destroying something, and looked around his room. He had to find a new place sometime. He had money now, he just hadn't gone to the bank to get the basics sorted out. It just seemed too distant. Ledgers and cheques, bankers and clerks. It didn't really mean anything. It was an elaborate circus where dogs jumped through hoops for treats. He'd get to it.

His stomach growled, and he realized he hadn't eaten since morning. He didn't bother to eat anything though, he was too tired. "fuck" he groaned, throwing himself onto his bed, He hadn't washed the sheets in a few months, but he didn't feel like doing it anytime soon either. He

didn't feel like doing anything. What was the point? In the past he'd usually go to a range or look for a barfight to break up, but he didn't have the energy for that.

He felt so tired. His eyes threatened to seal shut, and his arms felt heavy. He had to do one thing though. With great effort he pulled himself upright, and fumbled absently for the ankle bracelet at the foot of the bed. Eight hours. He wanted to make sure *that* didn't happen again. He didn't know what happened last time, but he had to make sure. It could of just been a fluke. He wasn't sure. You couldn't be too careful. Herst stared up at the ceiling, not bothering to close his eyes, and wasn't even bothered that the lights were on. He continued to stare, and as his mind quieted, he almost thought the voice had gone away.

Tonight. 7th and bay. Just around the corner. Drug deal gone wrong will become a shootout. 12 dead.

No such luck. "Why me?" he mouthed silently. "Why is it always right."

"Why" he screamed. He didn't notice he was screaming even as he screamed. "TELL ME MORE" He roared, not bothering to think about the other people on the floor, most likely sleeping.

A rough knock on the wall brought him back, and he calmed himself. He finally closed his eyes. It had to be wrong. Everything so far was a coincidence. He drifted off silently, towards the shores of peace.

Peace was never that easy to achieve.

Chapter 3

A bar. An alleyway. A child. A car. Herst stood, holding a gun in one hand, Holding a child in a chokehold with the other. Waking up like that usually caused one to stumble and reel, but years of training kept him up. He kept the gun trained... on what?

Herst woke up in cold sweats. "What the fuck was that?" he whispered, even though nobody was in the room. He looked around. Everything was as it was when he slept. Was it? It looked about right. Just a nightmare. Not a scary one either. A knock came from the door. Herst tried to get out of bed, and cursed as his foot snagged on the bedframe due to the ankle bracelet. He bend down, double checked that the bracelet hadn't been tampered with. So it ws just a dream. Herst unlocked the bracelet with a key he hid under the floorboards. He really only needed to make sure nothing happened when he was asleep. \

Another knock came to his door, and a voice broke him from his mind fog. "Brother you there?"

"Yeah Yeah, one minute." Herst shouted back, grumbling for no reason in particular. Hearst finally got himself free of the self imposed binding, and wandered over to the door, still tired despite his sleep. Herst opened the door, and took a minute to recognize the stranger that stood there. "Jerimiah?" Herst said in disbelief.

"Hey." The 6'3 black man, muscled much like Herst, replied. "It's been a while huh? I heard what happened to you brother." The man's face was one of concern, and he looked Herst over with a critical eye.

"Where have you been brother?" Herst asked, voice one of disbelief. "I tried to track you down after service. The rest of the guys also did, hell we thought you moved out of the states."

Jeremiah chuckled nervously, one hand scratching the back of his bald head, the other in his pocket. "You can call me Jay brother. Jeremiah sounds too clean." He said, "Yeah, I went into intelligence after we got back. They wiped my record clean, sorry I couldn't tell you guys. I got out a few years after, but never remembered to come say hi until Adstrom sent out his message. No idea how it got to me, but I decided to say hi. Things must be rough eh?"

"Wow. That's amazing Jay." Herst said, unsure of what to do next. "My place is a shithole, but you can come in if you want." Herst moved aside, quickly picking up garbage scattered haphazardly across the floor. Mashed potatoes, Unopened mail, and awards that ended up on the floor. Herst hesitated for a second, then just threw it all in the trash. Just paper.

Herst sat on one of the bar stools in the cramped area, motioning his friend to sit on the other one. "Oh," Herst said, quickly getting up and grabbing his pistol from the night stand. Don't show, don't tell. You wouldn't snitch on one another for something like that, but you kept your stuff out of sight, just good practice. Jay nodded silently, clearing one of the seats by placing the stack of papers, mostly mail from the bank carefully on the floor, making sure not to disturb anything else.

"You look like shit Herst." Jay said, analysing his friend's face with a critical eye. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Did I sleep last night?" Herst repeated, surprised at the question. "Of course I d-" Hersts gaze wandered to an empty glass on the counter, and Herst noticed his appearance. His face, chiselled and lean, had deep dark rings around his eyes, and his blond, neatly cropped hair was unkempt and long, almost reaching his eyeline. His blue eyes were red from exhaustion, and his stubble had grown on his beard. "I do look like shit." Herst admitted, as if admitting defeat to himself. "I've been looking for another place on the field. I just hate being stuck in a box, or not doing anything."

Jay nodded, looking around Hersts room with a calculated eye. "Tossed aside once you have nothing to give." He said, shaking his head.

"I don't know anymore." Herst sighed, rubbing his eyes, as if the act would rub away exhaustion itself. "I don't have anything else in my life."

"All veterans are like that," Jay said, a distant look in his eyes. "Chewed up, sucked dry, and spit out. I had to join up with the suits because my mama had cancer. We couldn't afford health care otherwise." Jay's voice wasn't one of anger, it was one of apathy.

"Damn." Herst said, realising where his friend had been all those years. "I just want to save more lives. Be a hero, y'know?"

"Simple and straightforward as always." Jay said, expression a weak smile. "Tell you what, there's a group I'm a part of. Former soldiers, Service workers, people like that. Come tonight, maybe some other perspectives will help you find some clarity."

"Sure. I've got nothing better to do." Herst said, immediately regretting it as James' face fell. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

"Yeah, I get what you mean." Jay said, shifting in his seat. "I've gotta go now, but I'll leave you the card. I'll see you there at 7?"

"Yeah." Herst responded, taking the card from his friend and standing up. "I'll get some more sleep."

Jay nodded, and silently left the apartment without exchanging any more words. Why did that feel so off?

Jeremiah Turner is a corrupt CIA official that leaked military data and continues to leak data for profit.

The voice hit Herst like a punch to the gut. He stared at the door unsure what to think. James could make sense of. James had always been driven and power hungry. Not evil, per say but single minded. It made some sense, if he jumped through hoops. Not that he believed that. Jeremiah, he was a decent, hardworking man. One of character that Herst respected. Herst didn't understand why or how Jay would have become, or even think about doing such a

thing. The fucking voice. The fucking voice. Herst squeezed his eyes in anger, trying to silently crush the voice with his mind, to no avail. It came in, ruined his life, then left without a word. Fuck.

Herst opened his eyes, and decided to clean his place up. He couldn't let bullshit dictate his life. He was an adult, he would act like it. Herst started picking up the rest of the crap he had, memorabilia, old photos, awards, and started throwing it in the trash. He cleaned up the spoiled food lying around, and swept the place. It took him around 2 hours to make his house look like it did before he "retired" but at least now it looked presentable. Herst looked around with bleary eyes, and decided to shower, and groom himself. No reason to look like a vagrant. Herst stood in the warm water, letting it cascade down his face and body, as if washing away his problems. He still felt lifeless. The cleaning had kept his mind off the voice, but standing in the shower let it creep back in. Was it right? Was it wrong? It was always right. Was it? Let's check. Last night there was supposed to be a shooting. Herst got out of the shower, shaved his face, and went to his TV. He absentmindedly clicked through the different channels, looking for the presumed shooting. Nothing. Police stopped the drug deal it seemed. The voice was probably a coincidence. Probably. Herst checked the time. Four hours until seven. He could take a nap. Herst crashed into bed, exhausted from his cleaning and thinking. He again, drifted off towards the shores of peace. This time he made it.