AFTER HEART

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CHAPTER ONE

The Council

The entire room was dark, circular shape, with various crumbling stone pillars around the perimeter—it was a wonder they hadn’t completely collapsed yet. It was cold, but most of all, empty. It was a sorry excuse for a council chamber, that much couldn’t be denied. Though it did little more than house countless fruitless arguments, anyway, so it often went neglected. However, today was a different day. Today, there was surprisingly a matter for the counselors to discuss. A man. Though one would be mistaken to call this a man; a monster, he was. A war criminal. One that went by the name of Barney Beckham, though this was a pseudonym, what his actual name was, was unknown. Until today. Beckham had been caught red-handed, while smuggling previsions out of the heart district to one of the finger districts, unruly places where the limbs of the law never could reach.

“Kelmen.” Captain Rayan Goodly said, standing in front of Sander Kelmen. The captain was an older man, despite his years of experience and trauma he had undoubtedly gone through, his eyes had not dimmed from their vibrant green tone, unlike most others. He seemed to be the only one in the upper ranks with any life left in him, and those in the lower ranks, like Kelmen would likely soon undergo this transition as well.

“Kelmen.” Captain Goodly said again. Kelmen looked up this time. “Look lively son, they’re bringing Beckham through.”

“Yes, sir.” Kelmen straightened his back and formalized the grip on his rifle.

Captain Goodly scanned his eyes over Kelmen, inspecting his posture, hair, and uniform before leaning in to brush his sleeve, flattening it out. “You’d best get this ironed tonight. Can’t go ‘round looking like a vagabond while you represent the Heart Corps.”

“Yes, sir.”

Captain Goodly nodded, then made his way into the center of the room, in the middle of the horseshoe of tables and chairs in the middle.

Within a moment, the large swollen doors to the room cracked open, a group of men, wearing military garbs, and black carbon street-policing armor. Not unlike his own, though his was white, and his armor was concealed under his uniform and much less *protective* than theirs. This mainly being due to the treatment, which had made armor less necessary for himself as well as all others in the Heart Corps.

The black-armored men, all crowded one point. Kelmen squinted, looked around, trying to get a look at Beckham who was undoubtedly at the center of the group. The men brought him to the center of the room, in front of Captain Goodly before they took their places back near the door, leaving Beckham to Goodly.

Beckham stood, back straight, shoulders resting naturally. His hair combed and his black garbs tumultuously matched, but neat, nonetheless. But what surprised Kelmen the most, was the smile on his face. Not only that, but it did not seam like a malicious smile at all, but a rather pleasant smile.

“*Barney Beckham*.” Goodly scoffed. “After all this time. You’ve cost us more time, and resources than any other.”

“Suppose I have.” His voice reflected his appearance; Somewhat disorderly, but amiable.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

Beckham leaned in, chuckling. “I’ll save it for my audience.”

Goodly shook his head, irritated, while the seven councilors filed in, taking their seats around the room. They all dressed in suits, neckties, and folded cuffs. The room was filled with shuffling papers as they piled groups of folders and papers, all covered in black ink.

“Welcome everyone.” The counselor at the head of the group spoke to the others. His name was Benjamin Gorin, the counselor of the heart district. “Before we start, I’d like to thank you all for making the long trek to the heart district. I know it can be quite a perilous journey for some of you. I promise to all of you, that the trip was well worth it, because today we have the infamous Barney Beckham here in front of us today.”

The other counselors began clapping. A small and weak applause, it was, but it seemed to be the most heart that the counselors could muster.

“A day that we rid this filth is a good day, indeed.”

“—Actually,” Beckham broke in. “I’d like the record to state that I personally fancy myself to be quite clean.” He smiled, chuckling, looking around the dull faces. His smile fell off soon after.

Gorin began speaking once again, disregarding Beckham’s comment. “Now all we must do, is decide how to deal with this situation.”

One of the counselors raised his hand, waving his finger about. “I recommend that we set this man to the chains. And publicly so, it would be a good message to all who might wish to fill his spot in his absence.”

A few began to nod their heads, with one raising his head. “I agree with this course of action.”

Another one responded. “I agree with the public part, though I feel like a simple imprisonment might be read as a bout of weakness on our part. It might incentivize continued resistance. I recommend we execute this man. As it was; publicly so. This would snuff out any hopes of resurgence in this ‘organization’ at the root.”

“I suppose that would be a way of permanently cutting it out, though a public execution is rather barbaric. We stopped doing them years ago, in favor of more civil methods.”

“That being so, I believe this would be a good instance for a break of convention. After this man is out of the picture, we can revert to the norms. A single instance won’t have any stain on this institution.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Beckham’s eyes began to dart between the counselors, and his smile had vanished.

Gorin stood from his seat, hands resting on the table. “Is there anyone who does not concur with this proposal.” The room fell silent. Not one of the counselors raised their hand. “Then I suppose that settles the issue. The execution will be held here, in the heart district—”

“—Wait.” Beckham broke in. “Are you really not going to let me speak?”

“Why would we?” Gorin said, sitting back down.

“I—” He paused, his brows furrowed, he was clearly confused and surprised, not knowing how to handle the current situation. “Wow. I thought this was a hearing. Not.” He waved his hand; the other being trailed closely behind in their cuffs. “Whatever this is.”

“Why? Do you have something you’d like to say? Plead your innocence?” He sighed. “I suppose let’s get this over with. Do you deny the charges against you?” Gorin’s voice was beyond sarcastic.

Beckham huffed. “By your standards—no.”

“Well then, this concludes the hearing, thank you *Barney Beckham* for your patience.”

“This is not at all how I expected this to play out. You’re not at all interested in how *I* can benefit *you*?”

“You’re nothing more than a common thug, who thinks he’s bigger than he is. What *could* you have to offer to us?”

“How about the main supply cache of the After Hearts?”

Gorin stopped. “A supply cache? And what might be in this supply cache?”

“Oh, all sorts. Guns, ammunitions, food, some vehicles.”

A long moment of silence preceded this declaration.

One of the other counselors stood. “How do we know this is real? He could be saying just what he needs to make his escape.”

“I’m not. How do you think we repelled your attacks for so long? It’s quite the sight, actually.”

Another stood. “I say we hear him out. If there really is this supply cache, we could use those supplies, and in taking them for ourselves, we would permanently sever this rebel group.”

“I agree. We should send a few men to secure this cache.”

“What men? We have no spare men.”

“Surely we can spare *one* man for this operation?”

Gorin looked up at Goodly, who looked around the room. Hesitantly nodding after a moment of quiet contemplation. Gorin looked back at the counselors. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to investigate this claim. Beckham, where is this supply cache of yours?”

“Way out in the wastes of the fourth finger.”

Gorin groaned. “That’s on the other side of the colony.”

“What did you expect? We weren’t going to place it right next to the heart.” The room went quiet with contemplation and anticipation. “I’ll take you right to it, in exchange for my freedom.”

“*Freedom*. We can’t just have you roving the union.”

“Freedom is the price of order. If you want your precious order, you need that cache. Believe me; it was far too easy for a small, lightly armed group to take on the *full* might of the union. And do so quite successfully, I might add.”

“The cache for your life. Under heavy surveillance, you will be allowed low end residence within—”

“—Outside.” Beckham interrupted. “Outside the district.” He thought, before his head finally fell as he let out a sigh. “And surveil away. As long as it’s from afar.”

“Very well. Is there anyone oppose to this exchange?” None of the men raised their hands. Some looked around to the others for a moment, clearly unsure about their decision, but in the end, it was decided, nonetheless. “Right, well, Captain Goodly, I’ll leave this operation in your hands.”

Goodly nodded.

“If there is anything further to discuss I recommend it be brought forward now. There will, of course be more council meetings to discuss other matters in the coming week, but for the moment we are settled. I’ll let you all get back to your residences and settle in.”

Without a second thought, the room spun into motion once again. All the counselors stood up with their documents under their arms, the street-police in their black outfits and gear began to funnel toward Beckham, grabbing him by the arms and leading him out of the room behind the line of counselors. The only ones who did not move were the four men of the Heart Corps that stood at the opposite sites of the room, as well as Captain Goodly. Once the room had emptied, the Heart Corps filed out, led by the captain.

Kelmen walked at the back of the line, into the main hall that was no less ravaged and desolate than the main hall. However, it was darker and danker, a thick claustrophobic feeling pressed inward, as it did for nearly all buildings in the union. Slowly, the men broke from formation as they took turns toward their dormitories. Kelmen was no different, at the bottom of a precarious concrete staircase, he turned left into his small, sparce dorm. It had little more than a bed, a small table, and a chair, as well as a small bookshelf occupied by all the pieces of literature he’d managed to collect over the years. Even considering his considerable dedication to the project, the shelf was still only half-full, and few of the books, magazines, pamphlets, and documents on it were in decent enough condition to read without having to squint or re-read each word a dozen times. But he was proud of his collection, anyway. Few in the union were literate, and even fewer cared at all for literature. Historical records, the life, community, and culture of the past, within each sheet was used more for warmth than the knowledge contained within.

Without hesitation, Kelmen unbuttoned his jacket, throwing on the bed. He removed the breastplate, finally replacing the jacket with a far less formal—but more comfortable sweater. Over time, it had become covered in sewn patches, some of which sealed holes in the fabric, others simply for decoration. The base light blue of the sweater was barley visible, but all the colourful patches were distinct as he pressed them flat, proudly.

Spinning out the door, he made his way down the hall, to the brightly lit room at the end. There was chatter, shuffling of shoes, clinking of dishes occupying the pungent smells of grist and sour spores. Though somehow, this was the most freeing smell in the entire compound.

“Look who it is!” Rung out from a small man, with a large cup of foaming beer raised high. As soon as Kelmen entered the room. “If it isn’t Sander—fuckin’—Kelmen! The big man in the arty outfit himself!”

Kelmen stepped over the bench, sitting in the middle of the group of men. “Hey, Richter.” He nodded to Richter, who set his cup back down on the table after taking another drink. Kelmen nodded to the rest of the men, who all reciprocated, one by one. “How’ve things been on the streets?”

“Well.” Richter cleared his throat, letting out a croaking hiccup. “Quiet enough for me to get a drink.”

“Or a few, by the sounds of it.”

“Richter,” Another man, who sat at the end of the table chimed in. “If there was a war raging outside your window, you’d still think it quiet enough to get a drink.”

“Nope. Then, the situation would be *helpless* enough, to get a drink.” He took another sip, pointing to the group of men, with his cup, small amounts of foam splashing around. “See, everything’s goin’ to hell anyway. This ship’s sinkin’ with everyone in ‘er. I say, *might as well go for a swim*.” He leaned back. “Y’know, enjoy it, ‘fore we tire out, and sink to the bottom.”

Another man leaned into the conversation. “I’m not sure for how much longer though, we got Beckham finally. The bastard.”

Richter chuckled. “You *really* think that’s going to solve anything? We’ve got one man. He’s their leader, but still, he’s just a man. People seem to forget that. If you want to know what will happen, here, I’ll tell you exactly what. One of two things. Number *A*, they forget Beckham. Get someone else to fill the podium with noise. Or two, they come back for Beckham, empowered by their desire for retribution. They attack in the night, while our guard is down, and take Beckham back, along with all the junk they’d managed to nip from us. As well as the fact that we’d be down even *more* then we already are.”

“Kelmen.” A voice called out from the door. Captain Goodly stood at the entrance. “A word.” Goodly left the room, though he could still be seen standing outside, through the small window in the door.

Kelmen stood up, weaving his leg between the bench and the table, before meeting Goodly in the hall.

“I’m sorry to take you from the pulpit.”

“Is there an issue?”

“There’s always an issue.” He shook his head, frustrated. “But to properly answer your question; yes.”

“What’s the issue.”

“You were there, you understand the situation with Beckham?”

“I do.”

“Good. Well, I guess I might as well get right to it. I’m sending you to mark this cache for pickup.”

“Alright, has Beckham given us the coordinates?”

“No. Beckham will be coming with you. As your guide.”

“With me? The man is a terrorist. You’re sending him accompanied by one soldier out to the fourth finger, the edge of the union?”

“Yes.”

“He will escape!”

“He will not, unless you allow him to.”

“Can’t you at least send a few more men with me?”

“A few more men? We don’t have a few more men!”

“Surely there’s *one* spare one *somewhere*!”

“Do you have any idea how many men we have? One thousand! One thousand, total. Across the entire union, dotting all the battalions! There are no more men. Last year alone, it was double that. Not only that, but even disreguarding Beckham, we have bigger issues to deal with. Tensions with the east union have never been good, but they’re only getting worse. Chances are, the floodgates will burst any moment, and we need every man we have *here*, to defend the heart. We can barely even spare you.”

This shocked Kelmen. He knew the manpower shortage was severe, but never to this extent. It was no wonder the council didn’t want the numbers in the open. “It’s a long trip, he will see a chance and he will take it.”

“And you will bring him back to his knees. You’re a soldier, not a shake. You were given a gift! The treatment was not given to you, so you could cower behind an excuse! You have been made bigger, stronger, and faster than him, you will use that. This is the order, and you will carry it out.”

There was a moment of silence. Kelmen’s mind had remained unchanged, but he knew he had no choice in the matter. “The fingers are desolate places untouched by the law, this whole scheme is a plot for his men to break him out.”

“Maybe so. That’s why you’ll ignore his instruction, find your own way around. Get him to tell you the direction, you will decide the route. Understood?”

Kelmen sighed. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. You’ll be setting off tomorrow, sunrise. You’d better get a good night’s sleep; you won’t have another for a while. I’ll meet you tomorrow to give you the briefing before you set off.” Goodly started back down the hall, stopping himself a few steps in, turning around. “I’m sorry this came to you. I wish it didn’t have to.”

“I’ll see you in the morning, captain.”

He nodded one last time, finally vanishing down the hall. Though Kelmen did not. He stood alone in the hall for a while, his mind so overwhelmed that it lacked all thought. He didn’t even know where to begin, though he knew that he didn’t feel like going back into the cafeteria.

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He laid in bed, in his pitch-black room, cold and dewy. He’d been trying to sleep for what must have been hours, with no luck. His mind was racing, and his inner monologue was louder than ever. He wasn’t going to get a good night’s sleep for a while, and no matter how eager he was to take advantage of the one peaceful night he’d have for at least the next month, he simply couldn’t. His eyes aching a pulsing buzz, and every edge of his skull pressing in, all the while trying to convince himself that sleeping is just a task like any other. As if he could convince his body to give in to the pressure and fall asleep. Every word was fruitless. In a final attempt to get whatever sleep he could before the sun rose in a few hours, he began to whisper to himself.

*I, the hand of the counselors. I, the finger of the people. I, the heart of union, swear my loyalty, love, and life to the betterment of the union. I, Sander Saul Kelmen shall take every stone casted, front every offensive and carry out every order with absolute certitude. Until I cease to be.*

*I, the hand of the counselors. I, the finger of the people. I, the heart of union, swear my loyalty, love, and life to the betterment of the union. I, Sander Saul Kelmen shall take every stone casted, front every offensive and carry out every order with absolute certitude. Until I cease to be.*

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The Heart Corps’ creed. Every man of the corps knew this creed by heart. He had never forgotten the day of the treatment, the day he was initiated into the corps. It would always linger in his mind. It was the day his life changed, and he would never be able to go back. His road was laid out before him, and the road had been set and dried long ago. This creed was a reminder of that fact.

CHAPTER Two

The Orders

Kelmen sat on the edge of his bed, hunched over, his eyes wobbling and fading with every passing moment. He had only managed to get a few hours of sleep before having to wake up, and he felt it in every bone and muscle in his body. It took him a while to build up the energy to lift himself from the bed, but eventually, he did. Wandering over to the shelf, where among the various books and magazines, he eyed a small, faded bottles of pills. The bottle rattling with the plastic capsules inside as he lifted it and popped off the cap. It was nearly empty, though there were never many in it to begin with.

He hesitated, looking at the two pills he had poured out into his palm. They were white. But an off white, not a pure one. The kind that one could find in the eyes of a dishonest man.

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