

A Ranger's Way

written by

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FADE IN:

INT. CHEAP HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

ELI GOODSMAN, 33, stands in his US ARMY DRESS UNIFORM looking at himself in the mirror. A near-empty bottle of whiskey in one hand.

He's drunk and barely standing on his own two feet. He looks at the collection of EMPTY PILL BOTTLES on a nightstand. He offers himself a shaky salute.

ELI

Rangers lead the way, buddy.

He takes the last few pills in his hand, tosses them in his mouth, and takes a swig from the bottle. A nod to himself to seal his fate. His eyes widen, followed by a pained grimace while smacking himself on the head.

He stumbles in the dimly lit room to the desk. He sits and powers up a laptop.

ON THE DESKTOP: a video program shows Eli taking another swig. The bottom right shows a notification "3 Missed Video Calls."

Eli clicks to dismiss the notifications. He looks to the LAPTOP CAMERA, shakes his head in incredulity, then clears his throat, and clicks the red RECORD BUTTON. A TIMER starts.

ELI (CONT'D)

Everything has just been a fog or something. Doesn't really make sense.

Eli looks up again.

ELI (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I just can't... I don't want to...

Suddenly a video call comes in -- UNKNOWN CALLER. He answers, revealing the ghastly visage of a seemingly dead college-age METALHEAD, riffing his bass guitar.

METALHEAD

A little fogginess is okay, dude.

Eli is confused.

METALHEAD (CONT'D)

Hey, that's some nasty stuff you're drinking. Have ya tried butterscotch schnapps? It's really good.

ELI

You're...

METALHEAD

Far out, right?

Eli looks back to the pill bottles, trying to piece things together.

ELI

I'm seeing things.

METALHEAD

What's wrong with that?

ELI

I didn't want to end up like you. I wanted my life to mean something.

METALHEAD

Don't buy into that, kemosabe. It's all a big party.

ELI

Easy for you to say. All you ever cared about was getting high. Look how that turned out for you.

METALHEAD

Oh, of course the heir to the throne can afford to be so righteous! Don't worry, you'll like oblivion. Pretty sure Mom does.

At the mention of "Mom" Eli twists his forearm to reveal a tattoo of eyes -- one blue, one green.

ELI

You don't get to talk about her.

He sits up and knife-hands.

No... No, you don't know what she was like after you...

METALHEAD

Hey, chill out!

(plays guitar)

Just enjoy your song, bro.

Eli ruminates, then looks up to see the metalhead gone and the video recording timer still ticking away.

ELI

Focus, Eli. Focus on what's important.

Eli addresses the camera once more.

ELI (CONT'D)

A suicide bomber... out of fuckin' nowhere. For whatever reason, no one else made it. Why me? I keep thinking about what I could have done differently, and it just... hurts.

A VIDEO CALL ALERT pops up and Eli reflexively answers. A new window displaying a dead woman appears. She wears desert fatigues, a matching hat, and a harsh gaze. She has one blue eye and one green.

Eli flinches and inhales sharply.

ARMY NURSE

"Hurts" you said? A little pain never hurt nobody, soldier. Now, you gonna tell me what this is about?

ELI

We... my unit, we didn't see him until it was too late. They all died.

ARMY NURSE

Yeah, shit happens sometimes, didn't you ever hear that? But those boys knew what they were signing up for. They don't need your sorry ass to join them.

Eli slams his hand on his desk in anger.

ELI

You don't get it.

ARMY NURSE

What, you think I don't understand  
loss?

Eli breaks apart, and tears flow.

ELI

When you didn't come home, at least  
it meant something. You saved  
lives! I just... got lucky. I let  
down the ones who counted on me.

ARMY NURSE

And now you're letting everyone  
else down by going AWOL.

ELI

I tried! But their faces...

He closes his eyes. FLASHES of the faces of his fellow  
soldiers, bloodied, dead.

Eli's tone frosts over.

ELI (CONT'D)

You had it easy.

The Army nurse's eyes meet Eli's, and as her resolve fades,  
Eli eyes slowly blink. Only the video recorder window  
remains, the timer still running.

ELI (CONT'D)

Come on... you need to finish this.

Eli takes another swig from his bottle, his words  
increasingly slurred.

ELI (CONT'D)

Ashley -- I'm sorry for how I've  
been lately. My mind... I just keep  
seeing it happen over and over. You  
don't deserve all this. You deserve  
better.

Another call pops up and Eli clicks on it. A window opens  
showing an empty kitchen, with half-prepared plates of food  
on the counter. Ashley, 33, rushes past the frame.

ASHLEY (O.S.)

Ellie, put those toys away! It's  
time for dinner.

Eli squints and tries to look around the edge of the frame.

ELI  
Ashley?

No response.

ELI (CONT'D)  
Ash?

Ashley rushes to her seat.

ASHLEY  
(still distracted)  
Oh, Eli, I've been trying you and  
wasn't expecting you to be still  
awake. Where are...

Ashley's eyes square with her camera and she leans in as Eli  
is finishing a yawn.

ELI  
Hi Ash, I'm...

ASHLEY  
Eli! Are you okay? Talk to me!

ELI  
I'm here Ashley. It's good to see  
you.

ASHLEY  
Eli! Eli! Wake up!

ELI  
What? I'm awake. Is Ellie with you?

Ashley inhales sharply and calls 911 on her phone

ASHLEY  
Yes, I need help! It's my husband.  
Hello?

Ashley glances into her camera then gets up, her tone  
increasingly frantic and fearful.

ASHLEY (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Can you hear me? No, I don't know.  
He's in some hotel room. Can you  
track his computer or something?  
It's urgent!

Ashley's voice fades into echoes.

ELI  
Ashley! Everything will be fine.

In the call window, an 8 year old girl's head peeks out from the corner, with a soldier action figure in her hand.

ELLIE

Daddy, look what Mommy got me!

Eli's eyes spring open and he leans forward.

ELI

Ellie! Hi baby girl.

ELLIE

Are you coming home soon?

Eli averts his eyes. Ellie plays with the soldier, making it march in front of her.

ELLIE (CONT'D)

Hup, two, three, four...

ELI

Sweetheart. I just wanted to tell you...

His eyes return, and he smiles warmly.

ELI (CONT'D)

I love y--

Ellie's skin turns paler, speckled with ridges, as she continues to play.

ELLIE

Hup, two, three, four...

Eli's mood drops as he watches with alarm.

Ellie's eyes droop as her lips tighten. Her veins darken. Eli now stands in darkness, in front of Ellie, as the soldier continues to march.

ELLIE (CONT'D)

Hup, two, three, four...

ELI

Ellie! No!

Eli's breath quivers as he stands and claws at his scalp. The deathly visage of Ellie, now wearing a scarred military helmet, considers the toy soldier.

ELLIE

You were supposed to protect me.

Eli pleads to his dead daughter.

ELI  
It... It was for you.

Ellie puts the toy down and looks up.

ELLIE  
I reminded Mommy of you.

Eli, at a loss for words tries to reach out, his hand passing through Ellie. He crumples with tears streaming.

ELLIE (CONT'D)  
I wanted to be with you, Daddy.

ELI  
(stuttering)  
I... I'm... s...s...sorry.

Eli covers his face and sobs, letting it all out. Eli's vision fades to black.

ASHLEY (O.S.)  
Eli? Are you there?

ELLIE (O.S.)  
Daddy, wake up!

ASHLEY (O.S.)  
Eli! Eli!

Eli's arms shake and strain as he pushes himself back up, his eyelids fighting consciousness. The call window shows Ashley and Ellie, both very much alive and frightened.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)  
Tell us where you are! Eli, can you hear me? Where are you?

ELI  
Motel 66... Victory Drive...

Eli's head thumps back to his arm.

ASHLEY (O.S.)  
He's at the Motel 66 on Victory Drive, probably near Fort Benning. Please, hurry...

FADE OUT.