

Driven

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For my father-in-law, who knew the conflict

ALVIN HAWKING AWOKE two hours after dusk. He slipped out of his cot and dressed in the dim yellow light that washed through the screen door at the end of the barracks. Several of the soldiers around him were snoring. He could hear music and the thrum of loud voices from the next barracks over and he knew that the mechanics were getting high again. Across the aisle Clemens was sitting on his cot, propped up against his pillow, scratching out a letter under the glow of a flashlight balanced on his shoulder.

"You're up tonight, huh, Al?" Clemens said.

Alvin nodded. He pulled his boots on and tied the laces.

"You want to borrow a pack of Luckies?" Clemens asked. He put his flashlight down, leaned over the side of his cot and rummaged through his duffel bag. "Gets pretty lonely out there all night."

"No, thanks," Alvin said.

Clemens looked up and grinned. "Oh, yeah. That Mormon thing. I keep forgetting."

"See you in the morning," Alvin said.

The night air was warm and slow, sharp with the gray smell of salt blown in from the Gulf of Tonkin. As Alvin walked, he could hear the electric buzz of the power poles and the hundreds of wires that hung over the base and divided the night sky into a crooked grid. He looked down and watched the dark sand passing beneath his boots. Soon he had forgotten his route and destination and was merely walking, moving without purpose, his mind having turned its focus inward. He thought on how dark and surreal his life had become, how different from the life he had intended. It was almost as though he were not human anymore, but more like some animal driven before a wildfire.

He had been happy, he remembered. The summer had been good. He returned to Salt Lake City from his mission in May. In June he'd begun again to date Lara Sanchez, his high school girlfriend. Then, in August,

he was drafted. He remembered the numbness that had taken him that day. He remembered driving his father's Plymouth slowly through Salt Lake City, staring out at all the people. People who, seeing his face behind the sun-glinted windshield, would never know what had just happened to his life. When he finally pulled into the carport at his parent's house and turned off the engine, it was well past two o'clock in the morning. The needle on the fuel gauge pointed to empty.

Alvin came to a chain-link fence and looked around. Then he remembered. Guard duty. He turned and started back toward the ammo dump. He thought about Lara then, though at first he tried not to. He thought about the night he told her. They were sitting on the hood of his Plymouth, parked on the slope of a foothill as near Ensign Peak as Alvin dared travel on the gullied dirt road. The city lay spread below them, electric grids and networks shimmering beneath the dark peaks. Although the night was still warm, Lara shivered. She buttoned her jacket and turned up the collar.

When he told her that his number had come up, she turned away and stared across the night-gray fields at nothing.

After a few minutes of silence, she spoke: Are you going?

The question startled Alvin. He thought for a moment, then told Lara that he had to go, that Mormons had never backed down when their country needed them. The answer sounded empty, an excuse more than a reason.

Could you kill someone? Lara asked. Is that what the Church is about?

A cool canyon breeze spun past them, full of the dry smell of sagebrush. Alvin could think of nothing to say.

So they sat on the hood of the Plymouth in silence. Alvin turned away, looked down at the Salt Lake Temple, at its sharp granite angles and spires visible just above their shoes and the square hood ornament. Lara followed his gaze.

I'll pray for you, she said.

Alvin said nothing.

God takes care of his own, she said.

"What's your name?" asked the soldier, standing at the door of the building.

Alvin stared at him dumbly.

"Your name?" the soldier said, louder.

"Hawking."

The soldier looked at his list, then back at Alvin.

"Go ahead," he said.

Alvin went into the building. He was issued an M-16, helmet, flak jacket, and radio. Another soldier named Gary led Alvin out the back door to a waiting Jeep.

"Looks like you get the north side tonight," Gary said.

He started the engine and shifted into gear.

"North side's pretty quiet," Gary said. "Far enough out that you don't get noise from the base. I've taken the shift a couple times myself."

Alvin nodded and looked down at his M-16. The last time he'd held one had been at Camp Wilson, Alabama. That was when he met Heber, the only other Mormon on base. Camp Wilson was Heber's final stop on the way home, Alvin's first stop on the way out. They often spent their off-duty hours together, chatting, walking around or relaxing on the benches near the surrounding woods. Heber usually did the talking, his stone-gray eyes wide behind his thick glasses, his hands tracing strange forms in the air.

Alvin relaxed back into his seat and listened to the rumble of the Jeep's engine. He wondered what Heber was doing. Maybe he was at the movies with a girl. Maybe he was reading another one of those history books. Alvin's thoughts turned to his final conversation with Heber. They had been sitting on their usual bench, talking about fly-fishing, when Heber had suddenly grown serious.

You know, Hawk, it's not the flesh that makes a man hard to kill.

What's that mean, the flesh? Alvin asked. Sounds biblical.

It means that it's not the face or the body or anything else. It's the story. You can't think about the story.

The story?

Heber raised both hands, taking hold of an invisible rifle, steadying it against his shoulder. He squinted and angled his head to the right.

You should see nothing more than a statistic, Heber said, and his arms and right shoulder recoiled suddenly. Your bullet will surprise him, cut through him like he was never there. Like he never had a story.

Heber let his weapon fall back into memory. He slouched against the bench. Sweat trailed down his face and his thick standard-issue glasses slipped down his nose. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. Alvin turned away, watched as a red bird glided in over the treetops and landed on a dead branch straight out. He was never quite sure he understood Heber when he talked about war.

You believe in visions? Heber asked.

You mean like in the scriptures?

I saw one out in the field, Heber said.

Alvin looked at Heber. The sunlight flashed across lenses, hiding his ice-gray eyes.

What did you see? Alvin asked.

The face of God, Heber said. The void where God should've been. Hard to say which.

Alvin looked down at his hands.

It was all a mistake, Heber began. I was sharing Jared's hole because

Ronnie was dead in mine. Jared was radioing for air support, but our radio friend kept saying they that another squad was on its way and they couldn't send in the birds until it reached us.

Wow, Alvin said.

Heber nodded and looked down. He gripped his thighs.

The attachment never made it, he said. They were ambushed crossing a field on the other side of the river. Every one of those boys got zapped before they made it to cover. You have any idea how I know that?

No, Alvin said.

Because our radio friend suddenly told us we had air support. By that time the VC had figured time was up. All of the sudden it was absolute quiet. Smoke still rising into the air. But our planes sure torched those empty hillsides. You should've seen it, man. Like the Fourth of July.

Alvin could only shake his head.

After that Lieutenant Birches called in the dust-offs. He had everyone that still had two legs set up a perimeter. Except me. I had to help load bodies. Funny thing is, when I picked up Ronnie, all I could think of was he felt like a bag of potatoes. Hard and broken, just like potatoes. After a while I couldn't think of anything. Just buzzing in my head.

When we finished they flew us across the river so we could load the other squad. We touched down and the first thing I saw—the very first thing, Hawk—was this dead soldier lying on his pack, staring up at me. Black boy, eyes wide-open, one ear missing, smiling like he was going to ask for a hand to get up. And he talked to me, Hawk. He told me something.

I thought you said he was dead.

That's what I said. Dead. As in, *dead*. I picked him up and he whispered in my ear. It was a vision, I guess. I don't really know what to call it.

If this is one of those stories to scare cherries. . .

Heber turned and looked at Alvin.

What did he say? Alvin asked.

Heber ignored the question.

I loaded him and loaded the others on top of him. Then I got in and sat on the pile and rode back over the river.

My God, Alvin said.

You think so? I've found it's not so easy to believe as it used to be. He never did show up for me, you know. Or maybe I'm just going crazy.

Alvin said nothing.

You believe God decides who lives and dies? Heber asked.

Alvin looked toward the trees. The red bird was gone.

Heber pressed the matter: Did he decide I would live and Ronnie would die?

I guess we all die in the end, Alvin said. I don't know. Maybe we just have to do some things alone and accept the consequences.

Yeah. Alone. Just do what you have to do and the other guy does the same. God can sit on his throne and watch.

Heber took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes. He stood and stretched his skinny arms toward the cloudless sky.

Gotta run, Hawk. Suppertime. I'll stop by and see you before you ship out tomorrow. You can tell me some more of your mission stories. Where was it again? South America?

Mexico. See you later, Heber.

Heber stood there a moment longer. In the slant light of evening, his shadow stretched over the grass toward the trees, his hands on his hips enclosing two bright triangles of grass.

Don't worry, Hawk. It goes by real fast. Soon enough you'll be back here going through this stupid decompression stuff yourself.

Enjoy your supper, Alvin said.

Heber's shadow fell over the bench, across Alvin's face, and then it was gone. He had not come to visit Alvin that night, and they had not written any letters since.

Gary slapped Alvin's shoulder. "Watch this," he said.

Alvin looked at Gary. He was smiling. He turned off the headlights and slowed the engine to a crawl. Alvin stared out and tried to make sense of the shapeless dark. After a minute or so, Gary stopped the Jeep. He leaned toward Alvin and whispered, "One, two. . ." On "three" he switched on the Jeep's brights and leaned on the horn.

In the sudden light Alvin saw a wall of sandbags and beyond it, in the fringes of the light, the bulldozed perimeter and a razor-wire fence. To the near side of the sandbags, a soldier shot up into sitting position and jerked around, throwing his helmet from his head. His squinting, blinking face looked dazed and pale and he raised a hand to shadow his eyes.

Gary hollered out a laugh. The soldier, swearing violently, climbed to his feet and turned his face away.

"You weren't sleeping, were you?" Gary called, still laughing.

"Real funny," the soldier said. He stooped down, picked up his gear, and walked to the Jeep.

"All yours," he said, looking at Alvin.

Alvin got out and the other soldier took his place.

"Someone will come get you at four hundred," Gary said.

"Thanks," Alvin said.

Alvin watched as Gary turned the jeep around and started back toward base. The taillights soon disappeared behind a wide hill and the growl of the engine faded. It was very quiet and dark then, and Alvin walked over and sat down against the sandbags. To the east, from behind the low mountains, came a gray light. He sat there, unmoving, watching as a three-quarter moon rose slowly into the sky. He felt very tired.

He began to wonder what guard duty was like for the soldiers out in the field, the real soldiers who didn't work nine-to-fivers in rear-support areas. He imagined that he was sitting in a foxhole somewhere to the North, looking up at the same three-quarter moon. He imagined that he could hear the slow breathing of the other men dug in around him. Suddenly there was a low whistle and the flash-thud of a mortar. The men were awake and yelling. The quick popping of AK-47 fire. Someone cried out in pain or fear. Alvin pulled his helmet over his head and slumped deeper into his foxhole. Another mortar hit, closer this time. The concussion jarred his senses. Dirt rained over him. He screamed.

Alvin startled awake and blinked a few times. It was quiet. A warm breeze was blowing off the Gulf, pushing in gauzy clouds that gave the moon the illusion of speed. He stood and paced behind the sandbags, trying to clear the echoes of battle from his head. After a while he sat down again and took off his helmet. He thought then about his first day in Vietnam, when he was called away from the other new grunts fated for battle and taken to a small building where a man named Porter gave him a typing test. Alvin typed fifty-five words a minute. Porter took the test results and left the room. Twenty minutes passed, during which time Alvin offered more than a few silent prayers. Porter finally returned and handed Alvin a folder. Written at the top, beneath Alvin's name, was his new MOS:

*Headquarter Company File Clerk
Ordnance 184 Battalion
Camp Haskins*

Alvin sat down again and slouched back against the sandbags. Two months had passed since then. Two months of clerical work in the heart of a war-plagued country. He'd been sitting at his desk in the Quonset hut that was the clerk's office when he'd found out about guard duty.

As was his habit, he'd come in early that morning. The predawn hours in the office were his only time alone. Outside, rain fell in steaming sheets, beating against the corrugated tin roof. Alvin leaned back and pulled open the wood flap that covered the open-air window, letting in the smell and sound of rain.

Clemens slammed through the door. He took off his poncho and shook the water off with a strong snap.

Looks like I won't be sailing today, he said.

Clemens had rebuilt a junked sailboat and rigged a rusty pontoon as an outrigger. He'd painted *USS Pakalolo* on the stern. For his girlfriend back home, he'd said, and explained that she was part Hawaiian. He had the boat tied down at the beach, and when the weather was clear, he'd take it out and roll joints and drift in the wind. Alvin had been out with him only once; the smoke had made him sick.

Clemens threw his poncho over an empty chair and walked to his desk.

Reminds me of Seattle, he said, except here the rain makes you hotter. Never been to Seattle, Alvin said. He let the window flap slam back into place.

Nice city, Clemens said. Real green.

Clemens sat down and began to sort through his stack of I-15 forms. He rocked his chair back on two legs and put his muddy boots up on the file cabinet.

Find anything noteworthy, Al? he asked.

Haven't looked yet.

Alvin picked up his papers and stared at the first.

Here's one, Clemens said, flicking a paper with his middle finger. Some crazy lieutenant out in—I don't know how to say these names—Ganam Sing? Angam Sing? Anyway, he's going to get juiced over this one.

What happened?

Get this. Some guys move in on this village and an old man stabs the lieutenant in the leg with a pitchfork.

They have pitchforks?

Hold on, it gets better. So this lieutenant pulls out his pistol and starts yelling that he's going to put the old man down. Not enough sleep the night before or something. Anyway, one of his boys tells him not to, they get into a fight, the lieutenant lands a good one and this kid's blinded in one eye. Can you believe that?

Alvin considered the matter. How do you do that? he asked.

Do what?

Just try to kill an old man like that.

Practice.

I don't know if I could kill someone.

Clemens snorted. What choice do you have?

I just wonder, that's all.

If you don't do it, the other guy will.

Maybe. I don't know.

Maybe? There's no *maybe* about it. Who's going to protect you if you don't? Jesus?

No. I don't know.

Clemens shook his head. What do they teach you guys in that stupid church of yours?

Alvin listened to the rain against the roof. He forced a quick laugh and asked, I wonder if that blind guy will get a Purple Heart?

Clemens chuckled. If I were him, I wouldn't want one. Imagine trying to explain to everyone back home how you got it.

You could chalk it up to hand-to-hand. Does it say what they did to the old man?

Doesn't say, doesn't matter.

Why not?

He's crazy, just like everyone else out here. Us, them, all crazy. You've read enough of these reports. Haven't you figured that out yet?

The office door opened and Jameson entered, arms hidden beneath an oversized poncho.

Change of plans, he said. We're signed up for guard duty. We have to go get our assignments.

Who signed us up? Clemens demanded.

I don't know. Dill, maybe.

We have to do guard duty? Alvin asked.

Look, guys, Jameson said. It was coming either way. Might as well get it over with.

Jameson waited while Alvin and Clemens put on their ponchos, then they stepped out into the rain together. Their boots sucked into the shiny mud, and the buildings faded in and out of sight, indistinct and colorless in the—

A gravelly voice came from the ground beside Alvin. "Hey, Charles, you there, man?"

Alvin picked up his radio and looked at it. After a moment a softer voice fuzzed with static responded. "I'm with you."

Alvin put the radio down. He lay back and let his M-16 rest across his chest. He put his hands behind his head and stared up at the night sky, at the moon drifting behind the thin clouds.

"Where you at?"

"Southwest. You?"

"Quarter mile over your left shoulder."

"At the point again?"

"Where else."

Silence for a moment.

"You up again tomorrow night?"

"No. I go back to laundry."

"So you're cool to trip out to Danang with me on Friday?"

"You know it. I been saving my five bucks."

"Right on. Girls around here ain't Philly class, but I still like to—"

Alvin switched off the radio. He closed his eyes and worked himself into a more comfortable position.

Some time later he awoke. He couldn't remember falling asleep. He had been lying there, waiting and drifted slowly away. Away from Vietnam. Far away to where Lara was waiting, her sweet hair against his face like desert rain. The delicate line of her perfumed neck so close.

But he must have fallen asleep, because there were no clouds in the sky, the wind had died, his M-16 was lying on the ground beside him. And Lara was gone. The final letter had come a few weeks earlier. Two short paragraphs. She was gone.

At first Alvin wanted to fall back into the dream. But soon that desire

left him, replaced by blunt anger. He felt foolish for thinking about her. He hated her. No, he realized, he hated the war. He hated everything his life had become. He hated that nothing was his anymore, that he no longer had any choice.

He sat up and grabbed his M-16. He slid his fingers over the smooth steel of the barrel. Then he slowly brought the rifle up and aimed it at his boot. His forefinger hooked over the trigger. Maybe he did have a choice.

A few long seconds passed. He relaxed and withdrew his finger from the trigger guard. He put the rifle down and was about to stand and stretch when he saw the man. He dropped down to his knees and peered over the sandbags.

The man was small, standing fifty feet away at the far edge of the bulldozed perimeter. Silent and still. He had somehow passed the fence and the coils of barb wire. No shirt. A cloth bag limp at his side, held by a cord over his shoulder.

Nothing about him suggested a threat. Yet he should not have been there.

Alvin remained crouched. The man's shoulders quivered and Alvin could hear a sort of stuttered sniffing, rasping. Alvin closed his eyes and when he opened them the man was still there. It was then that he understood the noise. Crying.

Alvin reached for his M-16. Lying there in the dirt, the dull black steel was darker even than the night. When he looked up again, the man had stopped crying. Or at least the noise had stopped and his shoulders no longer quivered. And he had begun to walk mechanically toward base. Toward Alvin.

Alvin inched over to a space between the top sandbags so that he could see better.

The man continued his maddeningly slow advance, his knees stiff, his back straight, his eyes fixed on the denuded earth before him, on the black shadows pooled within each hardened bulldozer imprint. He was halfway across the perimeter, about twenty feet away now.

"One more," Alvin mouthed.

The man took the step. Alvin stood. He held the M-16 with his left hand under the stock, the right at the trigger, the weapon pointed over the man's head toward the stars. He waited, the upper half of his body now exposed above the sandbags.

The man did not see him. He took another slow step. Then he pulled his foot back, as though the ground had revealed itself to be unstable. His eyes rose to meet Alvin's.

The man's face was ashen in the moonlight, a pale circle in the darkness. And he was young, no older than Alvin. Something in the way he carried himself had made him seem old. His slender arms moved to the cloth bag. He gripped it with both hands.

Alvin acted without thought. The M-16 whipped through the air and centered the man. The product of instinct or cinema, Alvin couldn't be sure which.

"Stop!"

The man didn't acknowledge. Instead he pulled the bag to his chest, gripping it as tightly as though it were his life's last hope.

This time Alvin had to think about it: he forced the words out, his voice violent against the quiet.

"Take your hands away from the bag!"

The man screamed something in Vietnamese and crouched down, as though preparing to leap forward. He stabbed his finger at Alvin and screamed again. Alvin shouted back and their voices clashed together.

"Come on, man! I don't want to shoot you!"

Alvin's left hand cramped and he tried to relax it. Then silence, as harsh as the shouting. Breathing and the slosh of blood through Alvin's ears.

"You!" the man yelled. "You! You!"

Sweat stung Alvin's eyes and he tried to dry his forehead with his shoulder.

"What do you want!"

"You! May-ree-ca! Go! Go!"

"Put the bag down!"

"Wife dead! You may-ree-ca! Dead!"

Alvin's stomach sickened as the man shouted his story into the night.

"Go back!" he shouted. "I won't shoot if you go back!"

"Shoo me!"

"Just turn around and I won't!"

The man thumped his chest with a fist. "Shoo me! Shoo me!"

"No!" Alvin screamed. "Go back!"

The man's hand jerked out of the bag. Alvin hadn't seen him reach in. The man screamed again in Vietnamese and raised his hand above his head. Something dark, solid, round in his clenched fingers.

Grenade.

"No," Alvin murmured, groping at his rifle, trying to find the safety. Fumbling. Panic. His fingers tripping over the steel. At last he found it. He aimed his weapon at the man's shirtless chest. His hands trembled and the barrel would not hold its target.

The man did nothing. He said nothing. He still held the grenade above his head.

This time Alvin didn't scream. His voice was calm, as though someone else were talking for him.

"Put the grenade down."

The man lowered the grenade to his side. No emotion on his face. He stepped toward Alvin.

"Stop. I'll shoot."

The man took another step.

Alvin was screaming again: "Stop!"

The man jumped forward and shouted, beat his chest again with the grenade.

"Dead!"

Alvin could taste vomit in his mouth.

"Dead!"

Alvin heard himself yell. He heard the M-16 crack.

The bullet snapped through the man's shin and he fell thrashing to the ground, the cloth bag tangled around his neck, the dust rising around him. In those few seconds several thoughts, as bright and fleeting as streaks of moonlight on water, flashed across Alvin's mind. He wondered if he'd made some fundamental error, if Lara would ever take him back now, if God would judge him harshly, if Heber also would have fired.

Then Alvin saw the grenade lying in the dirt. He saw the man, his face bent with pain, reach out and grab it. Alvin suddenly knew what would follow. He dropped his rifle, leapt over the sandbags, and sprinted toward him.

"Don't!"

His ankle turned on a rock, and with a grunt he tripped face-first onto the hard earth and slid into the man's body. He rose to his hands and knees, his face only inches from the man's, close enough to see the thin pallid scar that sliced across the man's forehead, through his eyelid and into his cheek. The eye itself was blank, fogged white with disease.

"Ai Han," the man whispered.

Alvin felt him move, heard a faint metallic click. He grabbed at the man's wrists, but too late: the pin had already been pulled. Alvin flung himself back and clawed at the ground, trying frantically to crawl away, his mind blurred by two simultaneous and conflicting realizations, "I tried to kill him, I tried to save him."

A dull thump, a flash, then absolute darkness.

Some time later, Alvin surfaced into a dim half-consciousness. Pain like a shriek inside his head. Inescapable, throbbing with each heartbeat. He moaned and tried to roll to his side. Rustling, unidentifiable noises sounded from the space around him. Someone held a blinding circle of light over him.

"Look at that!" a voice said. "What did that?"

Someone yelling: "Shut up, Perry! Leave the body alone and help us."

"Well just look at it. I've never seen—"

"Shut up! Either help or get out of the way!"

Alvin moaned again and struggled to pull free of whatever held him

down. A soldier was suddenly staring at him, his face very close, the stink of his breath in Alvin's nose.

"Quit moving. You're only making this harder."

The face disappeared. Alvin screamed as his foot caught fire.

"I can't get this boot off!"

"Where's that morphine?"

"I don't know. It's not in here."

"Where is it?"

"How should I know?"

"Find it!"

Alvin thrashed and a gargled sound came from his throat.

"Easy! Easy!"

Something forced him back, held him pinned to the ground.

"I got it!"

The light moved away from Alvin's eyes. Shuffling for a moment, then a sting at his arm.

"Get that stretcher, Perry. Quick."

The face was over Alvin again, staring into his eyes. "Don't worry," he said, "You're going to be fine. On a plane back home in no time. Just hang in there, buddy."

Then he was gone. A strange warmth began to glide slowly from the sting at Alvin's arm up into his chest. His head felt as though it were expanding, and the pain began to float further and further away. Soon Alvin could no longer remember where he was. He wondered if perhaps he was already home, if perhaps he had never left. He felt a vague sense of happiness.

A distant tinny voice: "Lift on three. One, two. . ."

His breathing slowed and as the medics lifted him onto the stretcher he sagged into a heavy sleep.