

“What do you mean ‘the judge has thrown out the appeal?’” Micheal yelled in the phone’s receiver. “He can’t do that, she’s my daughter!”

“Mister Rostov,” the woman on the other end said in a far too calm voice, “We presented the appeal to the judge, but in view of your dishonorable discharge he—”

“I was set up! I told you that, I told them!”

“You did,” she replied, still too calm for Michael’s liking, “but you couldn’t provide any evidence of that. Unless that’s changed, we can’t go back to the judge on that account, but it wasn’t the only factor. Your inability to keep any sort of employment over the last year, your lack of support from your family, and the way you exploded at the custody hearing led him to decide there was no point in letting the appeal go through.”

“What did they expect me to do?” Michael snapped. “They took my daughter away from me! What kind of father am I if I just sit there and don’t fight for her? What kind of soldier?” The plastic of the receiver’s handle creaked as he tightened his grip on it. He wanted to smash it on the table so she’d wake up, show some kind of emotion, instead of calmly telling him he’d lost the only reason he had left to live.

“You aren’t a soldier, Mister Rostov, not anymore. And the judge expected you to be the kind of father who could accept the judgment and work on improving his situation while his daughter lives with his wife.”

“She’s not my wife,” he growled. “She divorced me. Took everything except the house. She had no fucking right to take my daughter too.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with the divorce case, but at least she left you a place to live, Mister Rostov, many spouses don’t leave anything to a man in your situation. My recommendation is to take this time to work on your situation, Go see a therapist, find work, keep it for at least six months, then come see us and we will be happy to bring your case back to the judge and discuss visitation rights.”

Michael couldn’t find the words, a therapist? How was he supposed to pay for that without help from the military? He’d tried to keep a job, but no one would cut him any slack when he had a panic attack.

“Thank you for choosing Malone, Stein, and Jude to represent you, Mister Rostov, we look forward to more of your business.” She hung up.

Michael held the receiver to his ear, desperately trying to come up with something to say to get her back. They couldn’t abandon him like that. They had no right! Lawyers were supposed to work for him, fight for him. Now they’d left him behind, alone, to fend for himself.

The loud beeping from the receiver told him he needed to hang up. He looked at the bills on the table, all of them with late notices. How was he supposed to pay any of them when he didn’t have any money? Couldn’t anyone cut him any slack?

He couldn’t breathe. Fuck. He needed to breathe. He was going to lose everything. He was going to end up like those other veterans dying in the alleys. He grabbed his Colt Government, the one thing he’d managed to smuggle out when he was discharged. Made sure there was a bullet in the chamber and flicked the safety off.

He was not going to turn into one of those wrecks.

The phone rang, and he snatched the receiver off. “Yes?” he asked desperately.

“Mister Rostov, it’s Denis Vignoly, it’s been a couple of days since we talked.”

“Yes, tell me you found something, please. I need some type of evidence General Carpenter set me up.”

“I’m dropping your case.”

“What? You can’t do that. I paid you for three months, gave you all I had left, I need that proof.”

“I’m sorry, Mister Rostov. I’m mailing you a check for the amount you paid me. I can’t continue working for you. Don’t call me back.” The line went dead.

Micheal hurried to search through the address book next to the phone for the private detective’s number. He hung up, picked up the receiver, and punched in the numbers. He got the rapid tone telling him the other end was on a call. Or, more likely, hadn’t hung up to make sure Micheal couldn’t call him back.

Michael hung up.

This was it, he realized. The PI had been his last hope for getting Mary back, to get his life back. He looked at the Colt as the phone rang. He ignored it, picking the gun up. It had saved his life multiple times while deployed in the Gulf. It was only fitting it would end his misery now.

The phone still rang. It was on the twentieth ring, Michael realized absently. Didn’t they know to hang up after five unanswered rings? He turned the Colt in his hands. He wasn’t afraid, he wasn’t panicking. He was calmer than he remembered being in a long time. This was the right course, the only course he had left.

Thirty-five rings.

He glared at the phone. Couldn’t they just hang up? Wasn’t it clear he didn’t want to talk to anyone? He wasn’t here anymore. He turned the Colt, looked down its barrel.

Hell, his mother’s voice sounded from his memories. Suicide led to hell.

He’d been in hell already, was still there, so what did it matter if with a few pounds of pressure on the trigger he ended up in the hell of his mother’s beliefs?

Fifty rings? Really? What was so important?

He grabbed the receiver. “What?” he demanded.

“Hello, Michael,” a man said. The voice wasn’t familiar, and it had something to it, like it was run through a sound manipulation board like they did for computers on television shows.

“Who is this?”

“I am someone with an offer.”

He groaned. “Look, I don’t want to buy anything. Call someone else.”

“What if you had a second chance?” the man asked as Michael pulled the receiver away. He hesitated, brought it back to his ear.

“What do you mean?”

“I understand things are difficult for you right now. What if you could restart anew?”

Michael looked at the bills, his gaze falling on the eviction notice. He'd bought this house when he and Lisanne were married, and now some faceless bank was kicking him out. "Restart how? Would I get my daughter back? My life? I don't understand what you're talking about. Are you offering me a job?" Michael put the Colt back on the table. What kind of job could it be that a stranger called him out of the blue?

"I am offering you a chance to restart anew. What comes of it will be up to you. If you accept, your fate will be entirely in your hands. You will get to decide what you do; if you don't want to blindly take orders, you will never have to."

Michael closed his eyes. Taking orders was how he'd ended up here. Never questioning them, even when they felt wrong. When he opened them, he was mesmerized by the word floating before him, shimmering lightly.

Restart?

He didn't understand how he could see it, but the only thought he had was 'what do you have to lose'?

"Yes."

* * * * *

Darkness.

Michael didn't know how he'd gotten here, or where here was. He tried to move and found he couldn't. It was more than being restrained, he didn't feel his body. No, no. What had they done to him? God, he'd been captured, they were going to torture—

"Who are you?" a voice resounded from the darkness all around him. A deep voice, authoritative.

"Michael Vladmyr Rostov, Captain in the United States Army, 85-632-47, born fifteenth of May 1962."

Name: Michael Vladimir Rostov

Michael groaned in spite of himself. "You spelled it wrong. It's Vlad-myr. No middle 'I' and the other one's a 'Y'. Everyone spells it wrong."

Name: Michael Vladmyr Rostov

Michael found the interaction with the voice had prevented his panic attack. Now the words floating before him made him wonder something. Maybe he'd imagined that phone call, and he'd pulled the trigger after all.

"Is this hell?" he asked, unsure if the voice would answer him.

"This is neither your hell nor your heaven," the voice said as more appeared under Micheal's name.

Statistics

Strength 10
Agility 10
Intelligence 10
Endurance 10
Wisdom 10

“This is a place of transition.”
The numbers shimmered and changed

Statistics
Strength 14
Agility 12
Intelligence 11
Endurance 15
Wisdom 8

Michael stared at them, realizing they formed a somewhat accurate representation of who he was; military training had made him strong and tough, he'd always been physically decent, and he'd considered himself of average intelligence.

“Can I ask for a change? I think I'm wiser than the average person. That's what ten is, right, the average?” Why wasn't he panicking? “Those numbers represent me, right?” He ignored the numbers of bad decisions he'd made, the many times a mission had felt wrong and he'd let a superior talk him into them anyway.

“Your starting statistics are set based on the life you lived, then constrained within set parameters. They can not be changed here.”

“Lived? So I am dead?” the idea didn't scare him as much as he'd expected. The idea of never seeing Mary again, never holding her, left a hole in his heart, but she was with her mother. He had to hope she'd remember him well, and not as the disgraced man who'd returned from the war.

“You are transitioning,” the voice said.

“To where?”

The voice remained silent.

“You said the numbers can't be changed here. That implies they can be changed elsewhere. Is that where I'm transitioning to?”

“Statistics can be improved as you gain experience and skills,” the voice said.

At least that implied he was going to be doing something, where ever he was going. “Are you an alien?” Michael asked, the absurd thought popping out before he could stop himself. “Is this what this is? You've abducted me, now you're going to run experiments on me?”

“No,” the voice stated with what Michael thought was a hint of annoyance.

“Okay, what can you tell me about where I'm going?”

“That is not my role.”

“What is your role?”

“Arranging the transition.”

Michael looked at the numbers, his statistics. “So, is there more to it than that?”
he asked after a few seconds with nothing happening.

“No,” the voice said. “Restarting now.”

The darkness exploded with light.