

Linchpin

April 3rd, 2020

A pair of fingers snapped in his face.

“I hope you’re not dozing off on me, this one’s actually good.”

Blaine snorted and brushed the hand away. “Yeah, yeah... So good it’s putting me to sleep, right?”

“Right,” Jameson said, grinning. “You sure the heat hasn’t gotten to something up there, Nick? Maybe melted something important?”

Blaine grinned back. Jameson was the only person who called him by his first name.

“Don’t be jealous just because you don’t have anything important up there *to* melt.”

Jameson threw an obscene gesture in Blaine’s direction and chuckled. “Anyways, like I was saying... My gran comes running up the stairs, waddling side-to-side like a damn penguin. And man, she’s just screamin’ and hollerin’, and everyone starts freaking out, wondering what’s going on. Man, I come outside and she’s got a—” He cut himself off with a contagious kind of laughter that spread to the rest of the group almost immediately. Even Blaine, who had heard the story at least a dozen times by now, found himself unable to keep from smiling.

Of course, that was the point. Jameson — more so than anyone else Blaine had ever known — had a talent for improving morale, no matter how low. And morale didn’t get much lower than on days like today. Water back at base had been out for almost a full twenty-four hours, with no estimation on when it would be fixed. No washing machines, no showers, and no working toilets all conspired to make for one pungent, unhappy group of people. Even now, the only thing on Blaine’s mind was how the sweat that was soaking into his uniform would remain there indefinitely, how his shirt would probably still be damp when he struggled into it tomorrow. Maybe everyone was preoccupied with the same thing he was.

Maybe that's why no one saw it.

Jameson finished his story, which was receiving all of the laughter and comments that Blaine knew it would. "...*No way she picked up an entire burmese python by herself,*" and, "*you're such a liar,*" and, "*shut up.*" He marched up next to Blaine, obviously pleased with himself. He shot an exaggerated wink in his direction before moving to take point.

He didn't see what Blaine had.

"Wai—" Blaine tried to yell, but it didn't matter.

The wires buried underneath the sand — the ones that the wind and elements had just barely exposed — had been spotted a second too late. Time slowed as Blaine watched Jameson plant his boot into the sand, into the spot where an IED was waiting for him.

Jameson turned around and shot a curious glance back at Blaine.

And then the world exploded.

December 16th, 2020

Blaine glanced at the two chairs on either side of him. The leather seats had no indication of wear. Intricate, embroidered pieces of furniture that never saw any use. *How much did a single one cost? Two-thousand? Three?*

Finally, the office doors opened. A pleasant, if somewhat out-of-breath, woman came to sit across from Blaine. "I am so sorry for the wait, Mr..."

"Blaine," Blaine provided.

The woman studied him for a moment. "Right, Mr. Blaine," she said, turning her attention to a stack of papers on her desk. Blaine watched as she organized and shuffled things around.

He clenched his jaw.

“Right,” she continued, finally looking up. “So what you brings you in today, Mr. Blaine?”

Blaine took a deep breath. *Short list of things it could be, considering.* He ran his fingers through his hair. “I was denied disability a couple months back. I was told I should appeal it here.”

“Yes, yes. I see...” she said, flipping through her papers. “And so, what new evidence for the claim did you bring with you today?”

Blaine stared at her dumbfounded. “New evidence?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes,” she replied, flipping through what could only be his file. “It says here you were denied due to a lack of evidence.”

“*Lack of evidence?* What more evidence do you need than *this?*” He rolled his wheelchair backwards, catching one of the office chairs as he did so.

The woman grimaced. “Look... I understand the realities of your current situation, but unfortunately — according to this — there just wasn’t enough evidence to indicate your injury was service related.”

Blaine rolled forward until he slammed into the desk. “Lady, I stepped on a *bomb* for God’s sake, how much more ‘*service-related*’ do you want it to get?”

She flinched away from Blaine’s voice. “Yes sir, I understand. But unfortunately, the operation that actually amputated your legs didn’t take place until almost five months after you’d been discharged.”

“Yes,” Blaine said, gesturing with his hands. “I know this, how many times can I explain to you people that the doctors were waiting to see if they could regain any use, if they would

heal.” He rolled back and threw his hands in the air dramatically. “Apparently,” he said, “they couldn’t.”

The woman chose her words carefully when she next spoke. “Yes sir, I understand. I will put in another request to have the decision appealed.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Normally it takes around three months, no more than eight at the latest.”

“*Three months?* Just so I can get told no again? I’ll be *evicted* in less than two.”

“I understand sir... and I’m sorry. But it’s out of my control.”

Blaine stormed out of the office. He suddenly wished he could’ve kicked open the doors on his way out. Despite his fury — or perhaps because of it — he found himself laughing at the idea.

February 9th, 2021

Blaine slammed the bottle down on the eviction notice that he had started using as a coaster. At one point the bottle had been filled with a liquid that could’ve been mistaken for water — but that was no longer the case.

Blaine leaned back and eyed the bottle. The back of his wheelchair had begun to fray and was no longer able to support his full weight, not that he had much weight left to support in the first place. Being reminded of how frail and weak he had gotten made Blaine nauseous — mirrors had become his enemy over the past year.

He caught his distorted reflection in the glass of the bottle and growled, swinging a drunken haymaker in its direction. Instead of connecting, Blaine’s arm missed it by a couple

inches, and the momentum from the swing caused him to tip over in his chair. He landed on the trash-strewn floor with a meaty *thud*. Stunned, and far more sober than he was a moment ago, Blaine buried his head in his hands. He rolled back and forth on the cold hardwood, not concerned with picking himself up from the filth, not concerned with much of anything really. Tears seemed inevitable, but they never came. Blaine wasn't sure why they didn't, but his mind drifted to memories of Jameson all the same.

Hours passed with him on the ground before sleep offered Blaine a blissful escape. Had it not been for the irritating chime of a phone call waking him up, he might've laid there forever. He grumbled, still disoriented and with half of his face submerged in a pool of saliva. With some effort he managed to pick himself up and crawl towards the incessant ringing.

“What?” he spat into the phone.

There was hesitation. “Hello, is this Mr. Blaine?” The voice belonged to a young man, one that was foreign to Blaine, but not entirely unfamiliar.

“That's me,” Blaine said. His head throbbed.

“Hi,” the man said, uncertain. “My name is Erik Jameson. I know you were deployed with my uncle.”

Blaine drew in a breath.

“My aunt told me about your situation. I was calling to see if you'd be interested in a job?”

July 24th, 2022

The elevator opened with a *ding*, and Blaine rolled himself into the wide open office space. Dozens of conversations competed for dominance within the room, all of them involving aid or insurance claims. He pointed himself towards his desk and did his best to avoid looking at anyone. It didn't matter. Out of the corner of his eye he still caught the pitying glances of his coworkers, the same glances he received everywhere he went. He clenched his jaw and rolled faster.

Erik was already at the cubicle when Blaine got there. "Got some good news," he said, landing two hearty slaps on Blaine's shoulder.

Blaine grinned. Erik was the only person who didn't act like there was something wrong with him, like there was something missing. "Yeah, what's that exactly?"

"Well I can't make any promises," Erik said, barely containing a grin himself. "But someone *may* have gotten you onto the big one."

Blaine's jaw dropped. "There's no way, I heard they had the team picked already."

"Well, they might have. But someone *may* have heard that you wanted to be a part of it, and someone *may* have pulled a few strings to make it happen."

"You didn't have to do all that for me, Erik."

"No, no," he said, throwing up his hands. "It's the least I could do for you, especially after all you did for my uncle."

Blaine didn't say anything. Even after all the time that had passed, the memory of Jameson was still painful. They may not have been blood related, but Blaine knew that he'd never find a brother like the one he had in Jameson.

"Well," Blaine said, "I'm not sure what I can say other than '*thank you*'."

April 3rd, 2023

Blaine had steeled himself in preparation for what he knew would be a hard day. The anniversary of his accident and Jameson's death weren't light events. But he couldn't have possibly known *exactly* how bad the day would get.

A vibrating started in his pocket, one that he almost ignored. He had asked for the day off months in advance: no one should have been calling him. After a few seconds of consideration, he finally decided to answer. The name on the screen surprised him.

"Hello?" he asked.

Sobbing was what he heard in response. "Blaine," the woman finally managed, "it's Erik."

April 9th, 2023

The funeral was in an hour and Blaine still hadn't gotten out of bed yet. He hadn't moved in days, for that matter. Food hadn't been touched since he got the news. Even if it had been, chances were that he wouldn't have been able to keep it down.

I should've known.

But he didn't. Apparently no one did. His mom was unfortunate enough to find the body and the note that he had left. *Idiot kid*. He didn't need to leave a note, though. The day he chose to do it was message enough. As hard as it had been for him, he never stopped to think about how it must've been for Erik. Jameson may have been his uncle, but he was way closer to a father.

Blaine felt sick. And angry. Indescribably angry.

If they had just gotten the water fixed...

Someone should pay. Someone should hurt how he hurt. Maybe it wasn't right, maybe it wasn't even sensical, but it didn't need to be.

Erik was the only person who had shown him any kindness — the only person who went out of their way to treat *him* like an actual person.

And now he was gone.

April 11th, 2023

Blaine didn't go to the funeral. And it was only after he started to experience real, physical pain did he manage to get food down.

He couldn't remember when the idea came to him.

It must've popped into his head at some point during the days after the funeral, but he couldn't place when. Of course it's possible that it had been there for a while, brewing under the surface. Maybe it had been the week or so after Erik's death. Maybe it was the months after getting turned down by the VA. Maybe it was the years of building hate and anger from losing his legs and his best friend. Or maybe he was just looking for justifications. Regardless, it didn't matter.

He had made up his mind.

Oct 4th, 2023

The test couldn't have gone smoother. A year's worth of hard work had finally paid off: the national emergency alert system was fully functional.

Blaine almost wondered if it was fate.

Erik got him the job at FEMA first, and then onto the project that *was* the nationwide emergency alert system test. It gave him the access he needed, the intimate knowledge of how it worked.

Yes, perhaps it was fate.

Feb 11th, 2024

His cursor hovered over the *ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO THIS SEND ALERT?* on screen. The superbowl played quietly in the background.

Blaine put his head in his hands. *Can I really do this?*

He read the message that he had spent months refining. It was simple, but that's what made it effective.

This is NOT a test. You are in DANGER and need to seek MEDICAL attention IMMEDIATELY. The WATER supply has been CONTAMINATED with a BIOLOGICAL AGENT. Risk of EXPOSURE is HIGH.

And then, at the bottom:

YOUR GOVERNMENT HAS LIED TO YOU.

He didn't need to wonder if what he was doing was right. Obviously it wasn't. What he couldn't decide was whether it was justified.

Blaine thought back to the explosion. He remembered seeing Jameson lying there — or what was left of him — as the others dragged him away. That image would haunt him until he died.

He thought back to the VA and how they used him, how they denied him help when he needed it most. He remembered how close he had come to homelessness, the utter despair and humiliation he felt drinking himself to sleep every night like an alcoholic.

And then he remembered Erik.

He owed so much to Erik. If it hadn't been for him, Blaine *knew* he would've ended up drinking himself to death, cold and alone in some dead-end alley without a single soul to miss him.

The damn water.

They should've just fixed the damn water. If they just had gotten it done, if everyone hadn't been distracted that day...

Blaine would still have his legs. Erik would still have his uncle. And the both of them — Erik *and* Jameson — would still be here.

Blood rushed to his face.

Behind him, he heard one of the teams score a touchdown.

He pressed *YES*.