

A FOREST DARK

Written by

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"Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost."

- Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

FADE IN:

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

1975.

Hands untie a headband. Remove a denim jacket with a V.V.A.W. pin. Work boots kicked off followed by torn jeans.

They're replaced by slacks. Dress shoes. A collared button down. A blazer.

PULL BACK to REVEAL ANDREW "SHEP" SHEPARD smoking a cigarette as he eyes himself in the mirror. He's 30s with long hair and a thick mustache. Brazenly counter-culture. Has that keyed up vulnerability of Pacino in "Dog Day Afternoon".

He adjusts the jacket, uncomfortable in it - uncomfortable in his own skin, really - but trying to look presentable. He smooths his long hair back over his ears.

He sighs heavily. He still looks like a freak.

Shep opens his closet and rustles around. Top shelf. Way in the back.

He pulls a duffle bag down and opens it to reveal Army dress blues. He pulls the necktie off the uniform and puts it on.

His HAND TREMBLES in the mirror as he knots the tie and he freezes.

He holds the hand in front of his face to study its tremor. He's seen this before.

SHEP
Jesus Christ.

EXT. ARMY BASE - DAY

Wet leaves cover the roads of a North Carolina winter.

Shep guides his pickup to an entrance. A sign reads:

FORT BRAGG

Home of The Airborne and Special Operations Forces

AT THE GUARDHOUSE the truck stops and Shep rolls his window down. The GUARD eyes Shep's hair with disdain.

GUARD
ID.

Shep hands him his license and refers to a letter.

SHEP
I'm Andrew Shepard here to see
uh...
(reading)
...David Kearney.

GUARD
Here to see who?

Shep hands him the letter, pointing.

SHEP
Kearney comma David.
(then)
He's with CID.

The Guard looks him over again, not sure what to make of that.

The Guard checks him off on his clipboard and waves him through. He shakes his head as the truck passes, a peace sign painted on the tailgate.

CLOSE ON: AUDIO TAPE reels spin. A tabletop MICROPHONE.

KEARNEY (O.S.)
January 19th, 1975. This is the
testimony of former Sergeant Andrew
Shepard. Questioning conducted by
Investigator David Kearney.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

Shep sits in a folding chair across from KEARNEY, whose demeanor is as starched as his shirt.

Shep's already sweating.

KEARNEY
Mr. Shepard, thank you for joining
me today.

SHEP
Oh, sure. Yeah. Great to be here.

KEARNEY
Do you know why I've asked to speak
with you?

SHEP
You want to ask me some questions
about the war?

Kearney doesn't respond.

SHEP (CONT'D)

I got a phone call from one of the guys in my old unit. Like a heads up after he sat down with you.

KEARNEY

And he told you what I asked him?

SHEP

Sure, yeah.

KEARNEY

Do you have a reaction to that?

Shep laughs, oozing discomfort. He lights a cigarette.

SHEP

Um. I suppose I do, man.

KEARNEY

This doesn't have to be difficult. I'm not here to accuse you of anything. You were a part of a very special group of men.

SHEP

So special we weren't supposed to talk about it. The experience was to be held as closely as possible.

KEARNEY

I beg your pardon?

SHEP

That's what they told us on day one. Does not and will not ever exist. Now I'm getting phone calls, I'm getting letters, you got questions. I dunno. That part of my life didn't happen, you know?

KEARNEY

Unfortunately recent events have made this conversation unavoidable. I want to assure you that my clearances are in order and that this conversation, along with your service record, remain classified.

SHEP

...Sure.

KEARNEY

To start I hoped you could help me understand the culture of the unit.

SHEP

The culture?

(grins)

I don't remember seeing a lot of culture in Vietnam.

KEARNEY

What did you see in Vietnam?

Shep shakes his head.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

Just generally. What kind of impression did it leave you with.

SHEP

Were you there?

KEARNEY

No, I wasn't.

Shep nods.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

Why don't we start with what you can tell me about Bronson Donnelly?

SHEP

Donnelly? Jesus. You wanna jump in the deep end.

KEARNEY

What do you mean by that?

SHEP

Look, I can't explain the unexplainable. I've tried to before but it just comes out unsatisfying. Incomplete.

KEARNEY

How so?

SHEP

(struggling)

Let's say... Let's say that you saw the face of God.

Shep holds his arms out like Moses.

SHEP (CONT'D)

You saw Him and someone asked you what sort of impression it made on you. You think you could tell them what he was like?

KEARNEY

I don't know.

SHEP

Well, what's harder than that? Standing nose to nose with the devil. With- with reckless, unprejudiced evil. And you're asking me what kind of impression that made on me? That's- that's really hard, man.

KEARNEY

Why is that?

SHEP

Cause you talk about the devil and you realize that you're more like him than you care to know. We all are. You, me, anyone. I seen it.

As we PUSH IN on Shep falling backwards in time...

FADE TO:

INT. OFFICE - DAY

1967. Da Nang.

Shep wears the uniform of the Green Berets. He's an altogether different man than we saw earlier. Crew cut. Serious. Confident. He's hot shit and he knows it.

He stands at attention before REED, an officer, who flips through his personnel file.

A MAN IN SUNGLASSES leans against the wood panelled wall. Watching. He's CIA.

All but Shep smoke cigarettes.

REED

Infantry. Rangers. Recondo. And now you're volunteering for special assignment. You just can't get enough of a good thing, can you?

SHEP

No, sir.

REED

So what do you want from me?

SHEP

SOG, sir.

Reed's eyes narrow before he remembers to act confused.

REED

...What's SOG?

SHEP

I've heard the rumors about the Studies and Observations Group. SOP doesn't apply. They work directly with the CIA. And... They operate in Laos.

Reed glances at the Man in Sunglasses.

REED

Those are very specific rumors. You Greenie Beanies are some chatty fuckers, aren't you? Too bad your little friends can't be right. The ground war is in South Vietnam. Perhaps there's a special assignment in *this* war that interests your highness? What do you even know about Laos?

Shep remains at attention.

REED (CONT'D)

Geography quiz. What's the capital?

SHEP

Sir, the NVA use Laos as a staging ground. They retreat across the border - where we can't follow, - to resupply and regroup. They operate with impunity while the Laotian government looks the other way. I want to be with whoever's taking the fight to them.

(then)

And the capital is Vientiane.

Reed laughs. He turns to the Man in Sunglasses to see if he thought that was funny too.

REED
 Fuck me, did he get the capital
 right?

The Man in Sunglasses doesn't respond.

REED (CONT'D)
 Wish we could help you, son. The
 Laotian ambassador has been very
 clear that a ground war will not
 spread across the border. Sure
 would be nice, though. If we could
 go in there and get some work done,
 wouldn't it? Cut off supply
 routes, destroy NVA
 infrastructure... Rescue POWs.

Shep realizes that both Reed and the Man in Sunglasses are
 studying him, waiting for his response.

SHEP
 That would be very nice, sir.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES
 Then maybe we should do it anyway.

Reed hands the Man In Sunglasses Shep's personnel file. He
 flips through it as he sizes up Shep.

SHEP
 I'm sorry. I don't think we've
 been introduced, sir.

REED
 He's a spook. Get used to it.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES
 (reading)
 You spent two months captive?

SHEP
 65 days.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES
 That's tough. Mentally.

SHEP
 Yes, sir.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES
 What got you through it?

SHEP
 My faith.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

I might have felt abandoned by God
in that situation.

SHEP

He will not fail you nor forsake
you. Do not fear or be dismayed.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

Where'd you hear that?

SHEP

Deuteronomy.

REED

Holy shit, it reads. He's gotta be
an NVA spy then. Can't be our
Special Forces.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

And you feel prepared...
(struggling to find the
word)
...emotionally?

SHEP

They took too much from me not to
take it back.

The Man in Sunglasses drums his fingers on the personnel file
as he considers this and then hands the folder back to Reed.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

Brief him.

REED

Hey kid, you wanna go kill Charlie
in Laos?

Shep grins.

EXT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - KHE SANH - DAY

A Huey helicopter lands at an air strip. Shep jumps from the
back holding a duffle bag.

A single, dirt runway separates one story office and supply
buildings from a grid of hooches.

At the end of the pad stand two OFFICERS. Shep approaches
and salutes. They don't return it.

INT. BLACKBURN'S OFFICE - LATER

The Officers lead Shep in.

NOLAN BLACKBURN's a strict Army lifer, a veteran of WWII and Korea. He's the Chief SOG and architect of this unique unit.

CAVANAUGH, a Mississippi good 'ole boy and SOG's resident old-timer/armorer, takes Shep's duffel bag and rifles through it. He removes anything that could identify Shep as American and drops it in the trash can.

BLACKBURN

I'm Colonel Blackburn. This is Sergeant Major Cavanaugh. Welcome.

SHEP

Thank you, sir.

BLACKBURN

Everyone gets the same speech on their first day. This unit does not exist nor will it ever exist. Your experiences here shall be held as closely as possible.

SHEP

Yes, sir.

BLACKBURN

You have a standing order to maintain deniability at all times.

CAVANAUGH

That means there can't be nothin about you that says American. You got a tattoo of any your old units? We got a feller that can black it out if you do.

SHEP

No, sir.

CAVANAUGH

Where's your cigarettes?

SHEP

I don't smoke.

CAVANAUGH

No American cigarettes, you smoke we got Chinese ones.

SHEP

I don't.

BLACKBURN

Now, pay attention. We operate exclusively in target rich environments. Another way of saying that is you will always be outnumbered. We are across the wire at all times - always watching, always working - in a place that's as close to hell on Earth as you may find. And we're good at it.

CAVANAUGH

Real damn good. We got the highest kill ratio in the history of these armed forces so if you ain't yet had your fill of killin, you will.

BLACKBURN

But son...

Blackburn chooses his words carefully as he rounds the desk to Shep.

BLACKBURN (CONT'D)

If any of this doesn't suit you get back on that bird, go back where you came from and nobody ever needs to know of this little discussion. My men make a different sort of commitment. Do not take it lightly. I certainly don't. If you're going to be SOG I need you to want it. Understood?

Cavanaugh holds out his hand.

CAVANAUGH

Dog tags.

Shep pulls his dog tags over his head and hands them over. Cavanaugh trashes them.

EXT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - ARMORY - DAY

Shep, lugging new gear, follows Cavanaugh who points across the air strip.

CAVANAUGH

Your hooch is that one, find yourself an empty bunk. Your team is on Bright Lights detail.

SHEP

What's Bright Lights?

CAVANAUGH

Can't tell you, new guy. It's classified.

SHEP

Excuse me, sir? But I'm-

A splash of prop wash interrupts them. A smoking Kingbee spins down into a rough landing on a nearby helipad. The chopper's punched full of holes, the windshield's so spiderwebbed from bullets it's opaque.

Cavanaugh yells over the noise.

CAVANAUGH

These your boys. Recon Team Carolina. Come on.

From the back of the chopper, amidst the confusion of injured soldiers and medical personnel, a BALD SOLDIER steps out.

Though surrounded by chaos he's preternaturally calm. His face and head are covered in camouflage paint to resemble a GREEN AND BROWN SKULL. He's wet with blood. Not his own.

Cavanaugh approaches with Shep.

CAVANAUGH (CONT'D)

Andrew Shepard. You go by Andy or Drew?

SHEP

Shep.

CAVANAUGH

Shep then. This here's Bronson Donnelly. He's your SO.

The bald soldier, BRONSON DONNELLY, is the epitome of the Special Forces. Huge. Severe. Heartless. He's a fiery-eyed madman.

Donnelly takes a deep breath of air now that he's safely out of the shit. He retrieves a necklace of human ears from beneath his shirt that he kisses and replaces like a talisman.

He eyes Shep. Then grins.

DONNELLY
Welcome to SOG.

CUT TO:

TITLES