

"The Blindfolded"
Brayden Hirsch

The freezing water gushed onto the sand, licking at our feet as we waited. Like a blindfold, strapped around our entire world, the black, heartless sky glared down at us, nailed with stars that blinked every now and then—torn parts of the blindfold, perhaps? Eyeholes where one could peer out and glimpse a shard of glowing light, something of a better world? It wouldn't surprise me.

What did surprise me was how much smoke the explosion had left.

"I can't see anything," said the big man beside me, coughing. I watched as he collapsed to his knees, his bulbous body shaking as he gasped for breath. "This blasted smoke is—"

I gripped my gun tighter and struck the man's head. "Shut up."

Murmurs from the other men.

His green eyes were full of tears—or was that just the smoke, getting to him?—as the man climbed to his feet and nodded. "My apologies, General Pierce."

"I said shut up."

"Yes, Gen—"

"Shut up!" I screamed, and started pacing.

Truth be told, it was all I could do not to collapse, too, breathing in so much of the smoke. Somehow I remained standing, staring out at my men. Five rows of them, far as the eye could see in this hellish blackness, made for an elite team. We'd fought together for years, battled in the cliffs of the Swiss Alps, in the gorges of the Grand Canyon—wherever the New War took us. But this? This was our first time working with...with *them*.

A man three rows down, with scraggly black hair that fell to his shoulders and a thin-as-a-post frame, raised a trembling hand. "General Pierce?"

"What?" I snapped.

The man coughed a little, and blinked. "How can we trust them?"

"Well, we can't. We just have to wait, for the signal."

"Then why—"

"Because we have no other options, gentlemen," I yelled, raising my machine gun. I threw a finger at the water, still lapping up but now soaking the sand with a crimson tinge. "See what they did to our enemies?" The water washed up a charred hunk of metal, and I jogged to pick it up. I hoisted it up onto my shoulders, so that all my men could see. "Our enemies are like us, the 47th Brigade, in many ways," I shouted. "They build their ships with titanium, one of the strongest metals in the world. And look what they did to it!"

I listened for the usual murmur, but heard none. For the first time since the New War began, my men were terrified.

"We have no option but to trust them," I yelled, and glared at the man with scraggly hair. His matted beard, stretching like some sort of weed across his face, was soaked with tears. I couldn't glare at him for long. "And gentlemen," I called out to the entire army, hearing my own voice grow softer. I didn't take my eyes off the one man. "I'm sorry that it has to be this way. I truly am. Just wait for their signal. I—"

Something behind me boomed, and the ground trembled.

I whirled around.

Once again, flames were spewing, crackling so loud we could hear it all from the beach.

Another explosion. They had struck again.

We waited there for the signal, huddled on the sand, for another hour or more—hell, how am I supposed to remember the time? We were all about to die, victim to some crazed order of monsters from the sky, you see—aliens with enough guns to blow apart a titanium-made warship. The New War seemed like some sort of faraway heaven, compared to this.

In fact, it was.

Before the aliens came, in those little boxes they called spaceships, plummeting down into the world's oceans like shooting stars, the New War was rolling along quite smoothly. Sure, nuclear bombs were being dropped daily, on both sides, but the fight was looking good for us—us, the Westerners, that is. Ask anyone living a hundred years ago, back in the twenty-first century, they would never have guessed that the worst war ever to weather the rocks of the earth would've been split evenly down the middle—the people of the west, the American, Canadian, and Mexican armies, against the warships of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Millions had died already.

But other than that, everything was fine.

Until the aliens came.

How such ugly, slimy creatures—the tallest of them stood to my knees, about, and I was only six-foot-one—could wreak such havoc, I had no idea. Their guns were small, long like sniper rifles, and yet they shot grenades twice as lethal as our best bazookas. They were perfect in every way, it seemed, and heartless as the demons of hell. They felt no remorse.

In other words, I was the first one to cut a deal with them.

My men were right—how *could* we trust them? Of course it seemed impossible, but what other options were there? It was either die later, when they betray us, or die now.

Now I'd been shivering all night, but my teeth were clanking so loud I bet every man in my brigade could hear me by the time the scarlet flare spiraled into the sky.

We heard a snap, a pop, and we all looked up.

It was the signal.

All the men were murmuring, jerking back and forth with eyes spilling with tears as they muttered their prayers and clutched the cross-shaped necklaces hanging on their chests.

I paused, looked down at my feet. What had I done? Somehow I knew that this time, there was no hope. This time it ended here. I gulped, looked up, and jabbed my machine gun into the black sky. "That's the signal, men. Let's move in."

"But General Pierce, I—"

"We're going to do what they told us to, Soldier." I heaved a sigh. "God help us."

It was me who led the way, alone, with the rows of soldiers jogging behind me, as we waded into the water. Towards the flaming warships we swam, perched on the surface of the black depths, to take out whatever troops remained alive on the warship.

At least, that was what the aliens had said.

As we swam, none of us noticed their submarines, prowling around the depths with canons pointed up at us, sitting like ducks on the water. None of us saw the short and stubby little monsters, fangs dripping and scarlet eyes flaming as they swam only feet

underneath us—piranhas waiting to strike, I guess. For the enemy warships had already hit the seafloor. There were no survivors.

Not even us.

The aliens had lied.

And yet I led my men out, paddling with my left hand and holding my machine gun—a brittle weapon, here, like a child's toy sword or something—with my right. We swam into the pit of blackness, murmuring prayers all the way. We had no idea.

All that was left to do now was die.

I don't think I need to finish the story, do I?

This is General Alec Pierce, signing off from heaven or hell—I still can't tell which this is—with all due respect to the families of the brave troops of the 47th Brigade, now also known as,

The Blindfolded.