

Tom's Story 03

"What the fuck happened?" The ram seated behind the desk was glaring at him. Tom was sure of that, even though he couldn't see it, looking at the floor.

His hand was in a cast, and Helen was confirmed that other than a few bruises and the cut to his thigh he was okay. He didn't tell her about where he was really hurt. He would never tell anyone about that. He wouldn't survive that humiliation.

"I failed, sir." Tom's voice was barely above a whisper.

"That's kind of fucking obvious. How come? You're suppose to be the best."

"He was better. I wasn't told he had training. I didn't have complete intel."

"How the fuck can he have training. we've never had anyone see him get trained." The ram sighed. "Why did he keep you for so long?"

Tom swallowed hard. "To hurt me."

"Then why did he let you go?"

Tom had decided how he was going to answer those question in the day and a half he'd had to wait before the general would see him. he just hoped he wouldn't press for too much details.

"To give you a message."

"To me?"

Tom nodded. "He knows about you." Please don't ask how, please don't ask how.

"That's just fucking great. What's the message?"

"That you are a bad man."

The general was silent for a moment, then he laughed. "That's it? He thinks I'm a 'bad man'? What the fuck do I care what he thinks."

Tom didn't say anything, but he couldn't help wondering again at what the tiger might do to the general.

"Did he say anything else?"

Tom shook his head.

The was a long silence. "Get the fuck out of my office. You're a disgrace."

He left, surprised to discover the general's words didn't mean anything to him. Over the following week he was debriefed, where he told them the strict minimum of what had happened, and then he was discharged.

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Tom had plenty of money from years of black ops jobs, always being on the move, and hardly spending any of it, so he didn't worry about not working. He even turned down the private security firm that sought him out. He knew what kind of work they did, and he didn't want to do that anymore.

He'd joined the military to protect his country, and somehow in the process of doing that he'd became a bad man. He was branded for the rest of his life, he didn't want to make it worse by working for some "security" company that engaged in

outright illegal work.

To give himself time to think things through he got himself an apartment in a quiet neighborhood, but he quickly found that he wasn't used to quiet and peace anymore. He got antsy. He'd spend a good decade always on the move, in the middle of the action. Not having anything to do wasn't agreeing with him.

So just to have something to do he got a job at the local Walmart. It went well for a few weeks. Customers rarely tried to touch him, and his coworkers accepted it too. The anti-anxiety medication the VA doctor prescribed him kept him functional, and the constant walking around the floor satisfied his need to move. On top of that helping the customers reminded him that he wasn't doing something bad.

It changed when he was showing an older lady, a gopher, one of their larger television sets. To be able to properly demonstrate its features it was connected to the cable network, and he was showing her how she could group her preferred channels together for simple access.

While he did that, the channel was on the local all news, with the volume down. he saw a name displayed and took the remote from her hand, raising the the volume.

"The body was discovered by his maid, yesterday morning." The announcer said. "The police haven't released any details at this point, but they have indicated that General Anthony Roselum died of an apparent self inflicted gun shot, and that pending further investigation, it is considered a suicide."

Tom didn't hear what else was said, on the TV or around him. All he could do was wonder how long it took. How long did it take the tiger to break the general. He had been a bad man, and deserved what he got, the tiger had taught him that.

And Tom was a bad man too.

He looked around nervously. Was the tiger here? Was it now his turn? There was too many people around. He could be hiding anywhere. No, he knew the tiger wouldn't hide. When he came for him he would stride forward, not sulk in the shadows. Tom couldn't stay here. He didn't want to die, even if he deserved it.

He walked out without a word to anyone and went home. There he locked the door and the six dead bolts. He took a small case out of the closet, unlocked it and took out the pistol and put the clip in.

It was a Glock 40, and he wasn't suppose to have it. He didn't have a permit, and with the medication he was taking there was no way he could have obtain a permit, but he had money. Even with the regulations in place, it was just a questions of spending enough of it. And it wasn't like he was going to commit a crime with it. He'd bought it for his protection.

He huddled in the furthest corner from the door and waited for the tiger to come for him. He waited for days on end, barely

sleeping. He was too scared to sleep, and the few times exhaustion did claim him the nightmares ensured it wasn't for long.

On the fourth day he looked at the gun, and found himself wondering what he was doing. He was kidding himself if he thought he could stop the tiger with it. When the tiger came for him, he would die, there was no way around it.

He turned the gun in his hand. It was a good weapon, good to fifty yards even in the hands of an amateur, and Tom was no amateur. It was loaded with standard bullets, because he hadn't planned to do anything bad with it, just protect himself, but even that could do a lot of damage, especially at close range.

He looked at the door and at the gun again. Shouldn't he make this easy on himself? He had no idea what the tiger would do to him when he came. Sure, he would die, but would he be merciful and make it quick, or would he make him suffer again for his transgressions? It wouldn't be quick. The tiger had said it himself, he didn't have any mercy.

Tom turned the gun on himself and put the barrel in his mouth. He couldn't go through that again. It would be better to end it now, quickly and cleanly.

He stayed like that, gun in his mouth, finger on the trigger for ten minutes. Then realized he couldn't do it. As much as he feared what the tiger was going to do to him, he couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger. To do that would brand him as something worse than a bad man. It would brand him a coward. And Tom would never be that.

The tiger would come for him, and Tom would die, but he would die like a man. He wouldn't take the torture, he would force the tiger to kill him quickly. This time he wouldn't give him a choice.

After two weeks like this, of barely sleeping, of jumping at every noise from the other side of the door, Tom could barely think straight. He was still lucid enough to realize he needed to be able to sleep to take on the tiger, so he ventured out to get something to help him sleep.

He came back home a nervous wreck, with a few boxes of various sleeping pills and two bottles of vodka. The pills would help him sleep, and the alcohol would steady his nerves while he waited to die. The first two bottles lasted him a week. The next two another week, than another. In the middle of the fifth week, he found he'd already drank both, so he forced himself out for more.

After three months a bottle barely lasted him two days, and the pills didn't help him sleep. He was buying more vodka when a guy in his twenties approached him, and almost got himself shot. Tom had been reaching for the gun in the small of his back when he realized the other man wasn't armed.

He'd noticed that Tom was self medicating, and that maybe he could help. Tom didn't trust him, but if he did have

something that could help him sleep, he would be grateful. He had to be ready for when the tiger came.

That was Tom's start with drugs. Over the next few months he tried all kind, until he came across something his friend claimed was new. It was drug called wave, and it came as a colorless pill. if anything could make Tom feel better so he could sleep, that was it. And it did.

When he took it, waves of calm washed over him. He had his first dreamless night under it's effect. And the next day he was calm enough to realize that staying cooped up in his apartment waiting to die was stupid. There was no point in not living while waiting for the tiger to come.

He went back to the store to see if he could get his job back, but it had been months since he'd walked out, so it was understandable they wouldn't take him back. That was fine. That job wasn't really much of a life anyway.

Life for him had been the hunt, the killing, but he didn't want to go back to that. That had been a bad life. He wanted to enjoy whatever time he had left. So he went to clubs. Parties, girls and wave, that became his life for a year.

By then he needed a pill every hour, because once wave wore off all the fear it had pushed away came back at once, and Tom didn't want to feel that. He wanted to be okay with his coming death, not afraid of it and what the tiger would do to him.

After that year, Tom discovered he didn't have any money left. he was able to get waves for an extra week by selling everything he had and canceling his lease, but after that his friend would only give him some if Tom did things for him. Criminal things, bad things. As low as Tom was he wasn't going to do anything bad, ever again.

He moved about the city, collecting garbage and selling what he could, begging for money so he could afford that calm again, even if only for a few minutes. At times he considered doing something bad, so he could get more money and get more calm, but in those times the tiger always showed himself to remind him what was waiting down that path.

He was always naked and hard when he appeared, and Tom knew what that meant. He wouldn't kill him easily. He would take him and he would make him enjoy it again.

So Tom suffered.

Years disappeared this way. With Tom doing anything he could, that didn't bring the tiger back, to get some calm. He knew he would do this until the tiger finally came for him, but he couldn't do anything about that, he either was calm about it, or too scared.

Then one day a woman approached him. He was huddled in a large box, the place he went to when the wind got cold in the winter. She was a rabbit, and she said she was from the VA. That his file had somehow slipped through the cracks, but that she had it now, and she wanted to help him.

He asked her for wave.

She didn't have any, and she wouldn't get him any.

He told her to leave.

She came back the next day, and the next, and the one after that. each time bringing him a coffee, which he'd refuse. No matter where Tom was, she would find him. After two weeks he finally accepted the coffee. While he drank she told him that she knew of a place where he could get off the street, have a warm bed.

Tom snorted. He knew those kind of places. He'd have to listen to sermons, and then someone would steal his things in the night. he wasn't interested.

On a cold day she convinced him to at least come see the place. The cold, more than her words did the convincing. The place surprised him. It was clean, and each bed had a room, with a door. It wasn't a dormitory where anyone could move about and pilfer.

She explained that they specialized in dealing with veterans, that if he came here he could get good food, a warm bed, and doctors could help him get better.

He almost bolted then. He didn't want doctors to look at him. he didn't want them to find out what he'd gone through, and that in the end he'd enjoyed it. She was able to calm him when she said they would only help him if he asked. Nothing would be forced on him.

He spent the night there, but he didn't sleep. He was too worried about someone entering his room, even though he had locked the door. About the doctors coming in to examine him without his consent, discovering his shame.

Over the next month he returned there when the nights got cold, and then when it rained, then when it was windy. After two months he slept there every night. Then he spent part of the day there, because when he'd had a breakdown, instead of attacking him and kicking him for being noising and disturbing them, they helped him.

In time he started talking with the psychologist there, Not about anything important at first, but eventually about the things he'd done, about being a bad man. About what the tiger had done to him because he was a bad man, and about what was coming.

She listened, and didn't judge, even when he finally told her about his shame. With her help he came to realize that after all these years, the tiger probably wasn't thinking about him anymore. That he hadn't done anything bad in a long time, so he wouldn't come for him. Tom wasn't sure he believed her, but he was now calm enough to be functional, so he started helping.

The anxiety attacks were less frequent now, and the fear not as strong. Tom joined AA and tried to sober up. It was a rocky process. Working at the clinic, he got paid, and the temptation to use that money to buy some calm was very strong,

too strong at times. When he gave in, his sponsor would pick him up off the floor, take him to a meeting and Tom would start the process again

Then one day, a man came too see Tom.

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The buck was looking out the window in the unoccupied office when Tom entered. The buck wore jeans and a sport jacket. He turned and smiled at him. Tom was immediately weary. It's seen that kind of smile often on the street. It was the smile of someone who wanted something.

"Mister Bracha, I'm happy to finally meet you. I'm Derrick Winston."

Finally? "What do you want?" Tom's tone was blunt. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to this man.

"Direct, I like that. Will you sit?"

I sit, you stand? power position. "No."

"Very well." The buck sat down behind the desk. "I represent Royal Security, and I'd like to..."

"No."

"You haven't hear what I'm offering."

Tom rested his hands on the back of the chair. "I know what so called security companies like yours do, Mister Winston. I don't do that. I am never going to do that kind of criminal work ever again." Was he here to test him? Was the tiger putting his resolve to the test now that he was getting his life back together?

"I'm afraid you're wrong. We don't do illegal work. We provide bodyguard services, we offer security to companies, and we specialize in rescuing kidnapped victims. We do what we can to help people."

Tom narrowed his eyes. "I don't believe you. I've worked with companies like yours. They all put up a good front, but underneath, they are rotten to the core."

"Tom, we aren't like that. we really want to help people. You're right, a lot of security companies are nothing more than fronts for mercenary organization who will do anything so long as they're paid enough. There's enough of those, and to be honest, when this company was started in eighty-seven, that's what it was. But we changed hands in twenty-eight, and the new owner had a different vision."

"That's still just talk. You can say anything you want here, you can't back it up."

"I can. We are the ones who paid for your time here."

Tom shook his head. "No, the VA did that."

"The VA would never spend the money needed on a clinic of this caliber."

"I don't believe you. Elizabeth told me this was covered by the VA when she brought me here."

"We knew you wouldn't consider it otherwise. we instructed her to say that."

He'd been lied to. Tom started edging for the door. Was this place really a clinic? had they done things to him under the guise of helping him?

"Tom, please, I'd like you to calm down. I don't mean you any harm."

"What's this place?"

"It's a rehabilitation clinic, just like is says over the entrance."

"You own it?"

"No. I don't know who owns it, but I can find out if it'll make you feel better. I just know it's one of the best clinic in the city."

Tom tried to calm himself. He'd been trained to control his emotions, but that training had been broken by the tiger, and it didn't want to respond now. He had trouble thinking clearly. He needed information, but could he trust the only person he had access to? "Why me? how did you find me?"

"We have people in the army who keep an eye on potential candidates for us. A few years ago your name came up. I don't have the details, but again, if it'll make you feel better, I can get them. I was tasked with recruiting you."

"If you knew about me years ago, why wait until now?"

The buck chuckled. "Mister Bracha, we contacted you, and you turned us down. Then you quite thoroughly disappeared. It took years to find you again. When we did, you weren't in any state to work for us, so we arranged for you to come here."

"Am I that special that I deserve all this?" Tom spat.

The venom took the buck aback. "I'm not sure how you expect me to answer that. We didn't do anything for you that we wouldn't do for any other person we wish to recruit."

"Why? Why would you spend the kind of money you've implied this place cost on someone like me? What if I tell you to go fuck yourself?"

"We did it because we want to help, you in this specific case, and others. If you don't want to work for us, then nothing changes for you. You've been working here for the last month, so that's been paying for your room and your meals. You can continue to work here, I know the people here like working with you."

Tom's legs were wobbling. He pulled out the chair and sat. Could this be true? was there a place out there where he could use his skills to do good work? where he could balance the bad he'd done? He had to be careful, he'd thought he was doing good while in the army and in the special ops.

"I... If I say yes, I can't be forced to take any jobs. I have... I need to have the right to refuse them without being questioned." The buck's ears straightened. "The reason I found myself where I was," Tom offered, trying to decide how much he wanted to say. "It's because I never questioned the orders I was given. I can't afford to do that anymore. I can't blindly follow

ordered."

The buck nodded. "That's understandable, and I don't see it as being a problem."

Tom swallowed. Was he agreeing to this too easily? "I'm going to need some time to think about it."

"I understand." The buck took out a card and handed it to him. "Here's my number. If you decide to join our company, just call me and I'll have someone come pick you up."

Tom took it and left, trying to figure out what he wanted, beyond not being a bad man. At his next session with his psychologist, he told her about the offer, and she helped him weight his options. It took three more sessions before he decided to accept the offer.

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The first year was hard. He was out of shape, his training was rusty, and he still had trouble not flinching each time someone touched him. But he got back in shape, he trained hard, and with his psychologist's help he was able to put his fear of the tiger in a place at the back of his mind where it only surfaced occasionally.

He found that he wasn't offered any jobs he felt the need to refuse. To his surprise the company actually did the kind of good work Derrick had claimed. The closest they came to illegal was the surveillance they needed to run, and the intelligence gathering, but both were done by enough law enforcement agencies that Tom didn't see a problem with it.

Over the years Tom went up in ranks, to running a team, then an office. Tom didn't want to run the office, and for years that title was symbolic at best. He'd delegate all the office work so he could remain in the field. He never thought he'd want to stop field work, he lived for it. He would died doing it, helping people.

And then he met Ania. She was a beautiful jaguar who'd moved to town. He'd met her grocery shopping, and he'd been immediately taken by her. She was smart, funny, and opinionated. Her temper could flare when she saw an injustice, but she cared so much about helping those in need.

They dated for two years before he asked her to move in with him. That was when he started considering that maybe one day, he might stop doing field work. But he didn't know how to proceed with that. He'd already told her so many lies about who he was that he didn't think he could come clean. She thought he just ran an office, not that he put his life in danger every day.

For years he thought this would be okay, but then they started talking about having children, and Tom needed to make a decision. if they were going to have children, he wanted them to be married, but could he marry her with all the lies around him?

His answer came from a young employee, who told him to either tell her the truth, or make the lies true. So he'd

decided to settle in his office, and asked for her hand. it hadn't been an easy adjustment, but he'd made it for her, and now for the daughter she carried.

And he found he enjoyed the peace of paperwork, and managing people. Which brought him to this fateful morning, the tiger with the blue eyes.

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Tom slowly opened his eyes, he was in his office chair. he looked around, saw the tiger, those blue eyes, and he bolted, huddling in the corner. It was him, The tiger. he'd finally come to end him. Tom didn't want to die. He didn't want to leave Ania alone to raise their child. This wasn't fair. He hadn't done anything bad in years.

Someone sighed. "It might be best if you leave Damian." It was Patrick.

There was silence.

"Tomas, look at me, please."

Tom didn't want to look, but he couldn't refuse that voice. Those blue eyes were piercing him, and only the fear of what the tiger would do to him if he looked away kept him from moving.

"I wanted you to know something before I leave," the tiger said, "You are a good man." He turned and left.

Tom didn't immediately react. Then he was crying. This man, who had branded him a bad man, had just exonerated him. After a moment someone place a hand on his shoulder and helped him stand.

"Come on Tom, lets get you back in your chair." Patrick guided him there, and Tom started drying his eyes. "Are you okay?"

Tom sighed. "I need a drink."

Patrick's ears straightened. "Well, If you're sure, I know Erika had some Bourbon in her office."

Tom laughed. "I'm not throwing away fifteen years of sobriety over this." He studied Patrick for a moment. "You're related to him."

"He's my uncle." Patrick got two bottles of water out of the mini fridge.

Tom's eyes grew wide, and then some things about his friend suddenly made sense. "He's why were were protecting you."

Patrick nodded and handed him one.

"Did you know?"

"Not then. I started suspecting when we first met, here I mean, when I joined the company. You looked really familiar. It took me a few weeks to realize you were the guy in the bar's parking lot."

"You didn't say anything." He sipped the water.

Patrick shrugged. "I didn't see the point. I mean I realized that was how Damian kept his promise to keep me safe, and that was enough. How about you. did you know who I was?"

Tom shook his head. "You were just the new guy I was

training, who I'd been told to train extra hard," he added with a smile. "I didn't see your full name for three month, that's when I got curious and checked to see if you were the same guy."

"You didn't say anything either."

"I didn't know how you'd take it. I'd started liking you, and I was worried that you'd quit if you found out we've been following you."

"I wouldn't have quit." Patrick smiled before taking a long swallow.

"Pat, what do you know about me and him?"

Patrick put the bottle down. "Until now, I didn't know that what I knew was about you. He never gave me the details, but he told me about the assassination attempt."

Tom winced and looked away.

"I also know him well enough to have an idea of what he did to you in retaliation."

Tom's ears burned and they folded back. "What is he?"

"You mean other than our boss?"

Tom's head snapped up.

"You didn't know?"

"That... that can't be right."

"He owns Royal Security. he bought it years ago."

"No, you don't understand. This company, it saved my life. because of... what happened with him, I found myself in a very bad place. This company found me and helped me out of it."

Patrick nodded.

"He wouldn't. He'd never have allowed that."

"He probably arranged it."

"W... Why? I was a bad man. He wouldn't try to help me."

"This is just a guess, but during the attempt, and what followed, you impressed him somehow. My uncle doesn't like seeing potential go to waste."

Tom remembered the tiger saying he was impressed. he steadied his breathing. "The reason I tried to... kill him, I was told he was a terrorist. Was that true?"

Patrick laughed. "Hell no. If anything, in his own crazy way, my uncle's a humanitarian."

Tom nodded.

"Tom. I know you're afraid of him."

"Aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I know his reasons, how he goes about deciding who is fair game and who isn't."

"I guess you don't have to worry, you're safe from him, being family."

Patrick laughed. "Hardly. But in my case I know that whatever he'll do to me, it won't be to hurt me. It... it helps."

Tom swallowed. "He'd do what he did to me, to you?"

Patrick shook his head. "He wouldn't be looking to hurt me. He just sees the word differently. His methods can be brutal."

Tom nodded again.

"But if it's any comfort, you're off the hook."

"I'm a good man."

"He doesn't go after good people."

"What if I screw up at some point? I'm not a saint, I make mistake."

"A mistake doesn't make you a bad person, Tom, just makes you normal. To be a bad person, you have to consciously set out to hurt others. But even then, I don't think he'd come after you again. Normally he goes after more important people. The kind who can hurt a large number, not people like you and me."

Tom wondered how many of the suicides in the news were actually caused by the tiger. People who had hurt others. "For years I was terrified he'd come and kill me."

"He doesn't kill."

Tom frowned. "The general?" had he really just committed suicide?

Patrick was silent for a moment. "He isn't proud of that. It takes a lot to get my uncle angry, and that did it in spades."

Tom nodded. "Because he wanted him dead."

"Only partially. My uncle's used to people trying to get rid of him in one way or another. He has a lot of enemies. You were the main reason he was so angry."

"Me?"

"You became a bad person, by his definition of it, because of that general's actions. He didn't have a choice but to do what he did to you, but he didn't like it."

"He enjoyed it well enough." He blushed at the memory.

"That doesn't mean he liked it. Like I said, he doesn't see things like we do. So when he got to him, he was a lot harder on him than he felt he should have been."

They were silent.

"Why was he here? just to... see me?"

"No. He came to tell me my time here was done."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm leaving the company."

"What? why? I thought you liked it here."

"I do, but this was always just a stepping stone to something else."

"What are you going to do now?" What could a security company lead to?

"For the next few years Damian is sending me to university, to learn economic and politic."

"That explains some of the reading you've been doing."

"Trying to get a leg up. It's going to be my first time in a higher learning institution."

Tom thought about trying to convince Patrick to remain here. he was great in the field, everyone liked him, he could do great things here. Except, he couldn't refuse the tiger anymore than Tom could.

Patrick stood and extended his hand. "I'm going to go clear my desk. I know I should be giving you two weeks notice, but the semester starts next week, so I have to get things ready."

Tom shook his hand. "You're going to be missed."

"I'm going to miss this place too. but it isn't like I'm leaving town. so we can still hang out."

"You sure?"

"Of course I am. You might have been my superior for the time I was here, but you're a good friend too. I don't want to lose that."

"Alright, When you know what your class schedule is we'll have to make sure to meet for coffee."

Patrick left his office and Tom sat back down. For the first time in his life he felt at ease. He had a wife he loved, a daughter on the way, a fulfilling job, and he knew, without the shadow of a doubt, that he was a good man.