

This story contains mature themes and situations. I guess this is where I say no one under 18 admitted without parent or guardian.

The Worst Xian: Installment IX

The Post War Years

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"Jack, I know you don't really take life particularly seriously, but I am, *technically*, your superior, and this is *technically* a business meeting."

Margaret seemed displeased. She leaned over her print out strewn desk. Various active pages scrolled incoming information and page layout variations and updates. The stock ticker was mesmerizing. Numbers from all the open markets around the world updating in synchronicity with the real world screens they represented. Letter codes and color coded numbers marked the rise and fall of the fiscal world. At the same time they began to blend; a swirl of infinite cryptographic pattern. A great mystery, a novel, or a play perhaps? If I just watched it long enough perhaps a pattern would resolve itself.

"Jack?"

I snapped out of my reverie, with a sniffle.

"Yes?" The word felt like gravel across my raw throat. It wasn't the first thing that I had said to her today, but it felt like it. I sipped coffee from my mug it burned my throat, seared the plaque from my teeth. I wanted another cigarette, but had run out while waiting for the Purple Line metro hours ago. Odd because I live closer off the orange.

"So, why do you look like fifty miles of bad road?" Exasperation was creeping into Margaret's voice. After that it would be frustration, and after that I would probably be looking for a new job. She rested her face in the palm of her hand, red hair falling through her fingers, resting its end on her shoulder. Unintentionally I thought: "Delicious".

"I, was..." I tried to remember, but everything came slowly, my mind a mist covered pond of molasses. "I was writing you a story. I mean *the* story you wanted." The answer explained a whole lot, not necessarily to her, but at least to me.

I had to focus. The side effects of mixing all those minis and all the liquor were beginning to accumulate. Had to make it through the meeting, could curl up and die in a vacant cube later.

"And writing makes you look as if you've been fed through a chipper shredder?" Margaret cocked her head to one side as she spoke. An uncomfortable pause filled the air. I looked about at her many awards feeling mute and stupid. "When's the last time you slept?"

I began summoning all my strength in order to sit up straight in the chair. The bones in my spine seemed to grind against one another in the most excruciating manner possible. My head felt too heavy, as if my sinuses were filled with lead. Again I sipped my coffee, to buy time. The inside of my head was an ugly collage of the last few days: messages, gin, pills, stylus, screens, knives, robots.

Saturday.

"Saturday." The word sounded like sandpaper. "I slept for a couple hours before I got your message." It began to sink in that this was not a good answer. On their own Minis are pretty harmless speed. However adding alcohol to the mix usually makes things like thinking painful.

For Margaret's part she got credit for not freaking out at the news. Indeed it probably explained the fact I looked like I had slept in a dumpster almost excusable. She shook her head a bit. "Next thing you know you'll be in a convertible headed for Las Vegas."

"Actually, I think, I just rode the Metro for fifteen hours..." It explained the Purple Line. Talking about it all began stirring my memory. Not wanting to be late, I decided to get on the metro and write until the meeting. That had been what? Yesterday evening? I spent the time writing and transferring from one line to another; after I had reached the end of a line.

Margaret sat upright in her chair, taking on her proper airs as the authority figure. She was pretty, in the older woman sort of way. Her features pronounced without being extreme. Her wardrobe always pleasant, built from years of discarding whatever did not work. It lent her a timeless feeling, sort of a quality noire film. She held up a sleek wood veneered pad, not much thicker than a dime. I slipped the cover back on my own slightly battered pad and pointed it at hers.

#### **FILE TRANSFERRED**

I looked down at my copy of the file as she settled in to reading hers.

"Oh." I momentarily interrupted her. "I have a filter that will change all the swearing into something printable," she looked bemused. Whether it was because I used "Fuck" three times in the first paragraph, or because, as I was now noticing, the story would be over one hundred and fifty printed pages I wasn't sure. She went back to reading.

My eyes were beginning to feel as if they were lubricated with hot melt glue. The coffee wreaked havoc on my stomach. Hiding under the edge of her desk my hands were began to shake and cramp. Despite the growing pain in my skull I managed to form a coherent thought: "Coming down in a bosses office equals bad."

I looked up from my hands to see Margaret was watching me.

"Go home Jack. Take tomorrow off, get some sleep, and possibly some help. I'll call you in the afternoon." Without a second look she went back to reading.

I could not summon the fortitude to ask whether she would be calling to fire me. Instead I raised my hollow frame from the chair. Brittle bones and heavy head created an interesting mix of both dull and shooting pains with each step. The bustle of the newsroom only made things worse. I tried to remember the last hangover that was this bad, and realized I was having trouble remembering what Margaret had just said to me.

"Jack my man!" A hand came crushing down on my back. Pain resonated momentarily as I fixed my dead man stare on Dan. "You look like hell."

"Get me home." I rasped.

It took us some moments, or hours, to get a cab. Dan sat next to me yelling at the cab driver. The noise had ceased to be painful, or at least not painful enough to get through the sensation of my body turning itself inside out. The last thing I remembered over the din of DC traffic was Dan's harsh voice.

"No motherfucker! You're supposed to know the way YOU'RE the driver. Just get on your mother fuckin' thing and ask your super visor how to get there. No FUCK YOU! I'm paying for this. I don't care if he pukes in your shitty cab..."