

Mark sat and looked at the cup in his hands. The handle had long broken off and dirt, dark dirtiness, had been ground into the open pores of porcelain. His thumb and pointer finger held a small twig and delicately swirled the dark liquid. He had become accustomed to the taste; he could not remember what real coffee tasted like, or even—God forbid—the taste of instant. Mark remembered a time when he joked that even camping was not reason enough for instant coffee, that lugging equipment to grind and press a fresh cup of coffee was part of the joy of camping.

Those camping days were gone. Have been for years, too many to remember, blending together into one long course of misery separated by seasons of grey snow and seasons of rain. The only track of time Mark had was the tradition of drawing a star on your shirt for each grey snow season. It was presumed that these *seasons* were close to a year, but no one really knew for sure. The habit of keeping track of days on a calendar was a thing of the past, a long gone action before the missiles were launched. Some recruits were energetic about the idea of keeping track and swore they would—"I'll keep track of the days between the grey snow," an effort to see if it was a year's time. But no one did. After awhile you stopped caring, and just lived.

The drudgery and stillness of life since then had a way of sucking any hope you had. Mark had seven stars on his shirt and he enlisted early on after people started dying. By his calculations, he was twenty-five, his graduation from high school three months before signing up. His parents and sister were dead. His friends, too. The military promised stability and two meals a day.

Mark looked up from the coffee cup, caught by the motion of someone entering the room. It was no one. Just another soldier like him. A low level soldier like him. Mark's attention went back to his coffee, a thin line of discoloration spiraled within, likely something from the unwashed cup. What sloshed about in his cup, creating the greater color, was engineered coffee. He had gotten used to the flavor. Mark knew that the flavor was not true coffee, and there was only the lingering hint of a memory of coffee, or maybe it was just the act of drinking something warm in a cup that made everyone accept the taste as coffee. This dark, thin liquid that spun in his cup was squirted from a tube, in measurements "to taste," a recommendation on the silver tube, and thinned with hot water.

A smile crept across Mark's face from memories of camping. He put the cup down on the counter, unknowingly lining up the cup with the ring of moisture left by the bottom of the cup, and looked behind him, across the room of people dressed in grey, like him, to an ad-hoc

message board across the room. The board was painted black by scavenged paint and chalk was used, until gone, to spell out the day's duties.

Mark's crew was usually listed last so he started from the bottom of the message board. Mark's crew was moving on to section 6; having finished section 5 last week, the brilliant suits must have decided that 6 was the logical choice. Mark found himself laughing, a quiet chuckle to himself. There was little reason to number the sections. The numbers went on and on, but it gave the governing powers some sense of accomplishment to cross off a number. Mark imagined a wall-sized map of Oregon sectioned off into hundreds of sections, and a ceremonial cheer once a section was cleared.

But those people in that room, the room with the map, had no idea what it was really like in a section. A section could take days, weeks, months to clean—to sterilize. They were far removed. Even the name of Mark's crew was shortened to "Steri" in an unconscious effort to distance the reality from the proposed dream.

Humanity was struggling to come back from an illness that had washed across the continents, and many believed that humanity would pull through. Mark was willing to help them in their rosy hope. He did not, however, believe it would come to pass. The rosy future. The saving of humanity. The survival. But Mark kept plugging away each day "Steri-ing" the sections for however long it took. He didn't have a personal death wish, but he knew better than to hope.