

ERIC DUENEZ

THE EMERALD ASH BORER (an excerpt)

Clay Pigeon watched the news with the rest of the troops. It was streamed in via satellite. The news acted as the post-game show, bringing in the box scores, the daily highlights, and playoff implications of the war with Russia. Everyone watched hoping to catch a glimpse of themselves in some heroic battle, like a wide receiver in a foot ball game, diving for a one-handed catch in the end zone, but it was hard to stand out in a game that had over a million players on each team. They watched a missile close in on a compound that supposedly housed enemy intelligence. Clay wondered how long it would be before bullets came with cameras and live video feeds.

After the news was over, Clay and a few others watched a nature program on invasive species. The narrator rattled on about the dangers of certain species of blue-green algae, zebra mussels, and the emerald ash borer. Clay was on the edge of his seat, as most of the troops went off to bed or cleaned their guns. The narrator told Clay how, as an invasive species, the emerald ash borer has killed over fifty million ash trees in the United States. The larvae feed on the trees' cambium and phloem, girdling the tree, killing it within two years. Death by halo. The borer's natural enemy is a parasitic wasp that lays eggs within the larvae, that when hatched consume the larvae. These wasps are so microscopic they may even appear invisible to God.

When Clay was still in high school, he was getting the mail and noticed the shell of a cicada on the maple tree in front of the house. As a child he had enjoyed collecting the empty Cicada shells, bombed out tanks of some forgotten front in an imagined war. They were mythical shells, belonging to some miniature death machine that had crawled from beneath the earth. They were something that stimulated his imagination. He had caught one once and had kept it in small cage made out of wire screen and wood until one day it died, a prisoner of war that gave up no secrets. But that day on his way to the mail box, there was not just one cicada shell, there were many cicada shells, left empty and hollow, holding on to

the bark of the maple tree, one even piggybacked another. Clay hurried around the tree, frantically counting the ghosts that fueled his now dulled-down imagination. Twenty-three. He was amazed. It seemed odd that so many would be gathered around this tree, while at his old house he might find only one or two on a tree, one on the yellow brick of the house, and maybe one on the sidewalk. But here they gathered like cultists, waiting for some celestial body to come close enough to offer escape, or maybe they had escaped. Surely, it meant something. Clay just couldn't put his mind around it. Weeks later, the deluge brought on by the remnants of Hurricane Ike didn't even wash away these disposable shells. They were to be lasting monuments to whatever it was that they symbolized.

After graduating, he had enlisted, with mixed reactions from his friends and family, into the armed forces of his beloved country. His mother cried, shedding tears down the left side of her face for the future she had dreamed that he was throwing away, and shedding tears down the right side of her face for fear of him dying. Of course there was the praise offered for doing his patriotic duty, being a true American hero. The truth is: he just didn't know what else to do.

Then the war broke out between Russia and the United States. It wasn't as cold as it had been before. For quite a few young men, it was getting a little hot in fact, enough to make the back of their necks sweaty in that uncomfortable way. Clay was sent to the Georgian front, much to his chagrin. He wanted to be on the Alaskan front, defending his homeland, but fortunately for him the Georgian front wasn't suffering as severe of losses.

Clay's platoon was a small search-and-destroy unit running missions away from the front. They spent a lot of time marching from small backwater village to small backwater village, looking for insurgents to shoot. Although it was harder finding an insurgent when you couldn't rely on the color of skin as an indicator, all of the more experienced soldiers agreed it was good to be out of Iraq.

One time Clay asked Pvt. Lee why it was so good to be out of Iraq.

"Well shit, now I've had the opportunity to kill someone in five different countries, covering three different continents. I'll be damned if they don't send us to the Alaskan front so I can kill someone in North America."

"I took care of that before I enlisted," smirked Slim.

"Doesn't count. My two pair's still good," Lee never took his eyes off the tree line, just waiting to pop a shot into any one looking the tiniest bit insurgent.

"What two pair, you got again?" Clay asked.

"I told you before: jack of spades, jack of diamonds, five of clubs, and the five of diamonds."

Clay had to pull out the sheet Sgt. Baker had given him and look those up again. He always had a hell of a time keeping all of the awards straight. The jack of spades represented the Decapitator award, which was given for shooting someone and detaching at least one third of their head from their body, by weight or surface area. The jack of diamonds represented the Early Bird award, given for killing three people before ten in the morning. The five of clubs represented the Globetrotter Silver award, given for killing someone in five different countries. The five of diamonds represented the I'm a Big Kid Now award, given for racking up five kills without dying. Clay was the only one in his platoon that didn't have the five of diamonds.

"Boat up bitch, then talk shit. I'm straightening out," Slim said and threw down his cigarette.

"You ain't ever gonna be straight, no matter what da cards say."

"Tell that to yo' mama."

"Incoming!"

The whistling of the incoming mortar reminded Clay of his mother making tea on the stove. The explosion sent everyone flying. Clay was nearest the impact and stood up dazed; dirt rained down from the sky. It was just like some World War II movie he watched on cable while waiting for the soft core porn to come on. He couldn't hear anything. Someone was in front of him, saying something; their lips reminded Clay of the fish in the aquarium of the doctor's office back home. Clay shrugged. They pulled him down to the ground. The lips were still moving. Clay shook his head and said I can't hear you. They nodded and started laughing.

"Three of spades, Clay, three of spades." The three of spades represented the Can You Hear Me Now? Award, given for permanent or temporary loss of hearing.

Clay understood the Achievement system the first time it was explained. It mimicked all the first person shooter games he had played as a child and teen. He had practically raised himself on videogames. If you accomplished certain feats you were awarded certain titles. In the army, these awards were assigned certain values, represented by playing cards. The cards were used to play poker. At the end of each day the sergeant would award a prize for the highest poker hand of the day (sometimes this was just a pack of smokes for the high card; it wasn't every day someone racked up two pair or a

straight). However, the cards were kept and the game went on. Johnny Two-knees had a Jack high flush. Dirty Dog Rog' had three eights. Sometimes a bigger prize was awarded after an especially dangerous mission. Dirty Dog Rog', picked up all three eights on a covert mission and won a night with some destitute Russian girl, prostituting herself. Dirty Dog was beside himself, he was sure she was only sixteen and she had been ferocious in bed, scratching his back all to hell.

After Clay gained his balance and some of his hearing, he quickly followed the others into the small village up the road. He would have to hurry to get any kills. The other guys were so quick. It seemed they would be able to shoot the insurgents, before Clay could even decide if the villager was hostile or not. The bullets hissed and whistled past his head as he ran into the village. A man with a pistol stepped out of a doorway and aimed at Clay. Clay had just enough time to aim his gun before the villager pulled the trigger. The bullet took a bite out of Clay's left arm. He steadied his right arm and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the man smack dab in his left eye. Clay smiled and then dropped to his knees.

"You Ok, buddy?" Sgt. Baker asked.

"I think so."

"Good. King of hearts, queen of hearts. And wait here just a second." Sgt. Baker walked over to the man Clay had killed. The king of hearts represented the One Good Turn Deserves Another Award, given for shooting someone who just shot you. The queen of hearts represented the Purple Hearted Pansy Award, given for being wounded in battle. "I'll accept it. Jack of spades."

It was also his fifth kill, five of diamonds. Clay would write home that it was a big day for him. He'd almost been killed, he would write with a smile. Of course his mother would break down in tears, but she hadn't known that in one minute, one pull of the trigger her son went from one card to five, and had three to a straight, and three to a flush. She wouldn't know they were playing a game.

(an excerpt)

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