

An owl was slowly gliding beneath a clear blue sky. There was not a cloud in sight. It was another beautiful day, and John Smith would have it no other way. Rising up from his couch, he stretched his arms and legs, preparing for another day of being a productive citizen for the Tyrants.

Of course he shouldn't complain, he had it all: economic stability, loyal friends, a loving wife, three beautiful children (soon to be four). But there was something he couldn't shake off, a wrongness to everything around him. Things have changed in recent years, despite everyone's best efforts. He could see his wife put on a strong face, and everyone he knew had a sense of somberness to them. Even the children could feel something wasn't right.

He was once a member of the Federalist Party, proudly flying the patriotic colors of democracy in his own front lawn. Things were right back then, despite the best efforts of both Tyrant and aliens.

But we all know how that ended. Half of the people he knew were gone. The old order he loved and cherished was nothing more than a footnote in history. He should be grateful none of those gone were his family, really. He should be grateful the Tyrant's government didn't decide to set him with a 'genetically compatible mate'. He should be grateful for many things.

"John, are you all right?" a soft voice spoke beside him, startling the old veteran. He quickly snapped in its direction, face softening in recognition of his darling wife.

"Nothing, love. Just old ghosts coming back to haunt me. We have much to be grateful for" he said with an almost mechanical tone, like he'd learned to speak in since the conquest. His wife's smile wavered a bit.

"Do we, John?" a tinge of bitterness worked its way through her voice "we can't even choose our future no more. Not us, not our kids, not the one's after 'em."

Quickly, almost imperceptibly, the man looked from around him, almost like he thought an Imperial agent was waiting for them in the shadows.

"Dear, you know we can't talk like that" he tried to reason, more to himself than her "we're still alive-"

"This is hardly living. You know this. We all do." she interrupted, but the words had neither venom nor bite. She was tired "What happened to you, John?"

He could hardly bear to look at her. So he didn't. He muttered something about being late and the quotas the nobles placed needing to be met, and he left.

The planet he lived on was called a frontier, and for good reason. Mainly agricultural in nature, owned by some minor noble house, it was held the very essence of a land tiptoeing the line between civilization and the unknown. He worked at a plantation, given enough to live on but never enough to move upwards. Alongside his peers, he would work for most of the day, doing odd jobs, and listen to the rumor mill at break; which mostly included many meaningless opulent boastings from the small noble house that lorded it over them (brought to them courtesy of their local servants). Then he'd be on his way home. Now John wasn't a stupid man. He knew that the Tyrants wanted to keep them in check, why else would they create an 'Order of Erudition', polluting the minds of children with their vile propaganda? When the Tyrants had proclaimed their 'final victory against democracy', he immediately learned all he could about them. How they lived, how they thought, what they believed in, why they conquered, their laws and noble houses. As much as it pained him, he would keep his head down and nod along to their song of their new 'lords' and 'ladies' while they babbled on about whatever flavor of autocracy was fancied in the month. Through the humiliation, John was always be too small to gain get attention. Always too meaningless to be given a background check. Bearing a hollow smile for whenever his 'superiors' would grace the land he once proudly called home.

And he expected more of the same today as he went to his place of work. As he went nearer, however, something was different in the air. People were conversing, some more agitatedly than others. Hardly anyone was working. Even the Overseer wasn't paying much mind to it, seemingly lost in his thoughts. If was a feeling he could commiserate with. And witnessing all of this a strange excitement was bubbling within John's chest. A memory, close yet so far away, was blossoming once more. Of political rallies, speeches by candidates, his wife kissing him after parliament nominated a now long gone friend. He knew this feeling anywhere, something big was going on.

"Heya, Johnny boy! What's happening? You look like you've seen a ghost" for the second time in the day, John was startled and snapped to the sound of the voice. An old, faithful, childhood friend stared back at him. They both grinned.

"No more ghosts than usual, Mark" he said in reply "Now your turn. Looks like a party is getting started."

"If there were any party, you know where I'd be" Mark said, and then added in a notably quieter voice "Tyrants can't party like we do, Johnny. They wish they had what we did."

"Weird you haven't heard, you're usually all over these sorts of things Johnny boy."

"Just spit it our Mark, we still have our quotas for the day."

And so Mark did. He spoke about the many 'Reforms' the Tyrants made after a rebellion in their ranks. The loose lips of a drunk noble, being tended by his maids and 'commoner' naval officers after foreign ministers came and went. Boastings that his house was finally being "rightfully acknowledged by the Empire!" and slurred toasts of "hail Emperor Heinrich!", alongside words of a new "Public Forum" he had been invited to. Sudden understanding dawned upon Mr Smith. Even a bastardized parliament was still a parliament. Why was this being implemented? Surely not for the people.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Smith said after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah, they made a cheap knockoff of our stuff because their crap broke down. Not even two damn generations and the Tyrants are already at each other's throats. I'm telling you Johnny boy, they needed us to keep each other together" he said brazenly. The Overseer was long gone by now, and most of the workers were dispersing already.

John sighed "they're doing what they can to keep their power. They know how our system worked, and are keeping the good parts while cutting out anything they don't like."

"Well we could still give it another go, don't you think?" as Mark said this John looked at him like he'd grown another head "not 'us' I mean. We still got that old fire kindlin'. Maybe our grandkids-

"I don't think you understand" John said with slightly more ice than he intended "there is an entire arm of the Empire mobilizing against whatever is left of the Federation. It's not something we can beat."

"C'mon, don't you think humans will see the light again someday?"

John grunted in response. They were nearly alone, the crowds dripping away.

He turned to his friend. For more than a decade they had rallied together for congress. Laughing together, fighting in the wars. It was a miracle they were both still around to tell the story.

"It's over, Mark. We're done for."

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It was a lonely walk back home. The best part of John's day was seeing his children again. His wife greeted him, he could see a bit of sorrow left over from the morning. An owl's call in the distance, and a orange hued sunset was slowly melting into the distance. There was not a cloud in sight. Another beautiful day had ended, much like the ones prior.

He felt a small hand tugging at his coat. Looking down he saw his youngest, Maria, smiling and telling him about her day at school while her two older brothers were playing. Soon mother, father, and children all went inside to eat.

As they did and while they talked, John Smith realized something. He and all that he once fought for might fade away into the dark, but his children would still live to see another day.

John took a bite out of his food. It was delicious as always. He smiled at his wife, she warmly smiled back.

There was much to be grateful for.