

WOAH!

UH

HEY THERE!

I mean-

I can't believe it! A new face! Nice to meetcha, buddy pal!

The name's Needo.

Gave it to myself.

Just one of the perks of being stuck 'round this place.

Can't deny a fresh face when it reveals itself to you, you know? See, I've already consorted with *everyone else* here, so you're a real sight for sore eyes!

...You can't see *everyone else*, necessarily, but trust me. They're here.

They're *all around*.

See, I'm a people person, buddy pal. Been bouncin' around at the speed of sound, tryin' my best to rack up those sweet, sweet ups for...gosh, I can't even remember how long now!

And **THAT'S** what's up!

But who's counting, right?

Haha.

Hahaha!

...Well, me. Or, uh, I was **SUPPOSED** to be counting, buddy pal.

Votes...very important to me, it turns out!

But, one thing led to another, and lo and behold...I totally lost freakin' count.

There's just too many of y'all!

See, when I first pitched my tent here, I thought keeping a tally would keep me grounded in the certain sort of place where I look like...well, *this*.

But! Then I went and forgot. That's just how it goes sometimes.

Thing is, I don't get to know how many votes I've got either which way.

At least, that's how they explained it to me.

In a vision.

And since *I* lost count, I s'pose that means you won't get to know what the vote split looks like either.

...You *are* DYING to know the vote split, aren'tcha?

Actually, it's impossible for you to die to know *anything*, what with the whole already being dead thing, and all.

...

Just like me!

...

Uh...huh!

Yup! Didn't seem like you were quite clear on that little factoid there, buddy pal. So, you know, just thought I'd rip the bandage off.

...

...No hard feelings...

...?

...

Welp, now that that's settled, I'd say it's 'bout time we get down to brass tacks!

Okay! So!

ahem

Well then!

...Oh. Shoot. Right, yeah. I guess I should probably explain what the votes are all about, huh?

Yeah, that'd probably make sense. Sorry.

Guess none of that other stuff made any sense without the proper context, huh?

Sorry 'bout that, buddy pal.

So!

I need votes!

And I've only got DAYS_LEFT days left 'til the chickens come home to roost, so to speak.

But not just *any* votes, buddy pal! I need ups! Not downs.

Up votes: good for Needo! Down votes:...not so good for Needo!

Pretty simple, right?

If I get more ups than downs, I get to go...somewhere good. So said the vision.

Or at least, I'd wager a guess it's at least better than being stuck down or up or right or even left here.

And if I get more down votes, well...again, who knows, but I'd wager another guess that it probably won't be too good for ol' Needo!

And I ain't down for that!

Doesn't matter to me who you were in the *before time*, buddy pal. An up vote's an up vote, way's I see it.

See, in the *before time*, Needo was a workin' man! A man of the people!

A real pillar of society type!

Got plenty of stories accrued from back then, buddy pal. And yes, I am a motormouth, but I ain't gonna bore ya with *all* of them.

Just the juiciest, most actively thirst-quenching ones is all!

So let's get started, shall we, buddy pal?

So!

In the beginning...

See, I used to live in this country called 'America'.

I'm sure you've heard of it, buddy pal. Kind of a big deal when it comes to countries!

Back when ol' Needo was still a dashing, spring chicken like yourself, I'd only just made it about ten feet out from my mother's nest to heed the call of higher learning as was expected of strapping, young gentlemen such as myself, when all of a sudden...

Well, you're smart. I'm sure you know this, buddy pal, but there used to be a time when America had this tricky little thing called 'the draft'.

Didn't matter whether you wanted to or not, if you had a couple of arms and legs and knew how to use 'em, you were to do time for your country.

Now, normally I'm not one to pay heed to the demands of anybody but me, myself, I, my mother, my pops, and beautiful, handsome, strapping young carriers of up votes the world over such as yourself.

But for my country?

Home of the free?

THE America?

Pfftt, why didn't you say somethin', I told 'em!

I took a torch to all those notebooks and textbooks and...blegh, novels I'd saved up for my entire youth. Who needs 'em, I says!

Yep, ended up servin' time with vigor and candor, I did! A truly valiant effort, if I do say so myself.

My CO back at Fort Benning, he said to me, you know, and I could tell by the look on his face the moment I first laid eyes on him that he recognized in me something truly special, buddy pal.

Figure that's why he ended up giving, nay, *gifting* me with my very first job. Not just in the service, mind you, but in my entire freakin' life baby!

And what a *tour de force* of real-world preparation it was for me!

Yep! That's right!

Ordnance disposal was the name of the game, buddy pal!

EXPLOSIVES!

B-B-B-B-BOMBS, BUDDY PAL

An accredited educational institution simply could never!

If the bad guys got things go 'boom', just send in ol' Needo to clear out the room!

All the other recruits stationed with me were always sayin' that, laughin' real hard when they did 'cause of how true and good a thing to say it was.

See, everyone knows the best way to dismantle a bomb's to first learn how to make a few from scratch!

Yessir. See, even when I'm not on the clock, I'm always workin' on learnin' things for when I'm back *on* the clock! My brain just never stops churnin' once it gets to goin'!

Lucky for me, you could find everything you need to crank out more than a few sploseys in the barracks. Not that a hard-workin' joe like yours truly ever spent much time in there, buddy pal! Barracks is for freakin' chumps!

AND you had plenty of materials left over just in case you screwed up on the way to figuring out what piece of the ordnance pie goes where.

Not afraid to admit it: I screwed up a few times. Yep. Even ol' Needo makes mistakes.

...Though all that worked out much better in *the before time*.

...'Course, and I mean it's not like there was much they *did* look down upon, but...I don't know, buddy pal. I guess they just couldn't wrap their minds around why extracurricular activities like that were worth investing in for me as their ordnance disposal specialist.

I mean, knowing's half the battle right? Gotta expand your horizons when you got the time to. This is all pretty basic stuff.

But, well, one thing led to another, and...

...The split was amicable. I get it. Plus, no one can stay mad at Needo for too long! The lawyer massaged it down to what they call *honorable discharge*'. It's true what they say: it's less about what you do, more about who you know!

So, they shipped me back home. Lawyers get paid a pretty penny by the house, so all of a sudden I found myself with no money, no prospects, nothin' but some albeit pretty decent insurance benefits and the appropriate discharge papers.

After kickin' around a few odd jobs that went nowhere, decided I'd try in fit in with the rest of civilized society: I did the family thing.

Met the first nice, pretty lady I could find, woo'd her with a couple o' good stories which are a little too *sensuous* to tell here...though maybe if you play your voting cards right, I'll fill you in!

So to speak! Haha!

But yeah, long story short, we got hitched! Rented an apartment in Bushwick, just a little studio but, you know, we made it work, then we got busy, had a couple of kids...the whole nine yards.

Problem is, all that family stuff? It ain't come cheap!

A family man with no work! Can you believe it? Truly, I've been through it all, buddy pal...

And the VA won't do your bills much good, either...trust me, I checked. *Double-checked*.

So once the honeymoon in Central Park was over, 'bout midway thru the first pregnancy I decided I'd polish off the ol' résumé and start job huntin', this time for somethin' serious.

Well, truth be told, I didn't really *have* a résumé at that time. Reason is 'cause I lost it. And I lost it 'cause working at convenience stores, which I did a bit of after discharge...that was a whole thing...

Anyway, you know, alls those kinds of places care about's whether you can show up on time. And that's easy!

But no, yeah, I definitely had a résumé before I got fired from that job, for sure.

Word of advice, buddy pal: write down everything *twice*, no matter how trivial the thought. You'll thank yourself later.

Case in point: yours truly. I couldn't remember a single great thing I'd done to spice up my résumé with! Service time will do that to ya. Just cleans out your noggin to make room for all these specific instructions and routines and all that. Just not my style.

It was a good thing I got kicked out, actually. The best thing for me, really.

So I just fluffed up the résumé with all the technical minutia ya need to know to carry out the very important task of maki—disposing of explosives and the like.

Managed to fill out like a whole page with just that kind of thing. Maybe it was two? Can't remember. Not like I'll be needing it!

I listed all the little jobs I did after discharge under 'other'. Best to let recruiters fill in the blanks with their imagination, ways I see it!

Thought I could pull a 9-5 in an office making like 15K a year. That's a lot of money these days. You gotta have ambitions, buddy pal!

And I love my kids. They really deserve the best that money can buy, you know? Tony and Mel are their names. Cutest you ever seen. I really lucked out there. *We* really lucked out.

If you ever get the chance in *whatever* comes next for us—and I hope you do, buddy pal—make sure you get yourself a couple of kids. The wife, husband, whatever way you fancy, that stuff, you can take it or leave it.

But kids! Now *that's* the thing.

Ended up landing a job workin' the lines at the factory making...not 15K.

But I can't complain! A full-time job's a full-time job! And in this economy, that's all you can ask for, really.

Gig was real simple: yams come down the conveyor belt, and it's up to ol' Needo to give 'em a real good scrubbin'. That way, they're all nice and clean before they get sliced, diced, and canned up for mass distro all 'round the world!

Got real thorough 'bout it too! Certainly the war effort helped with that.

Think I musta worked there...what's it, maybe four years? Five? You start to lose track of these sorts of things after a while.

And not just *anybody* could do it, mind you! Takes a special pair of eyes to seek out all those little crevices and cracks. See, that's where all that naturey residue tends to hide.

Filthy gunk loves to Trojan horse its way from the factories and into the meals of you and your loved ones.

What a vulgar sight! I simply can't stand the thought of it, buddy pal!

I wouldn't stand for it!

I was on the freakin' front lines, buddy pal! There I was, in the trenches, down and dirty, pinned by advancing gunks...they were circling in on my position! So I never stopped scrubbing; at one point I found myself scrubbing five or six yams at once just to keep them at bay!

All that is to say...I was good at it! And taking pride in your work is key to a happy life!

Ways I see it, after a proud day's work, folks just want a nice meal to swallow it all down with. And who doesn't love canned yams!?! There's so much you can do with 'em! Roast 'em, bake 'em, candy 'em...

...Probably some other ways too, I'm guessing? Never could slot them into my budget.

So that's where folks like me come in. And that's what I mean when I talk about pride. Worth in work!

'Course, lovin' what you do can only get you so far in life. I ain't blind to that. I see the cogs in the machine.

You see, buddy pal, there was just one thing weighing down this otherwise pretty righteous workplace equation...

Managers!

Bosses! Dress shoes, tailored suits, leather belts...the kinds of folks that know only three things: maximization, tax evasion, and how to tie a tie properly.

And trust me, ain't no workin' class folks like me ever learned how to tie ties all proper-like. Used to have just one tie that I always kept tied just so I could throw it on for interviews.

Cheetah print. I liked that ol' thing.

...Not that I ever spent much time looking for new work when I was working the yam lines, mind you! I really did love that job, for the most part! But sometimes, you get to wonderin', buddy pal.

See, one thing was that in that line of work you tended to keep some pretty lengthy hours. When you made what I was making, you kinda have to say yes to shifts on days off and holidays. Those managers I mentioned? They look at you funny if you don't. And they talk.

Meg couldn't work because of her condition, and of course the law is the law so neither could the kids.

It's hard to keep a family together when you and the misses are practically lives apart. And we kept together through some really tough stuff. 'Through thick and thin, and peace and din.'

Once lost an entire paycheck to a nasty medical bill. See, my youngest, Lil' Tony, took after his old man in a couple of ways. Mostly good.

But one way he and I parted was, well, he couldn't well throw a fist. Couldn't punch his way out of a paper bag.

And most kids, you know, at a certain age they can just get *brutal*. Relentless.

Probably should have drafted some of these lil' tykes into the service before me! Haha.

Just kidding. That's unlawful!

But yeah, just absolutely vicious.

And they knew it too. These kids knew, they knew that they could have whatever they wanted, *whenever* they wanted, long as they found the right victim to take it from. And poor Tony was a sitting duck. Real nice kid. Smart. Takes after his pops!

And it just so happened that one of these brutes from school, little shit named Mike, just the fuckin' worst, 'scuse my French...but he lived just across the street and a couple apartment complexes down from us. Could see his family's place from my stoop, if you wanted.

I'd get home late at night and have to listen to Meg tell me all about the horrible things this boy would say and do to poor lil' Tony, both at school and whenever he'd try to play outside with the other kids, which as you can imagine started happening less and less as time went on.

And I just felt powerless. Like, there's nothin' I could do about it. By the time I'd get home, he's out like a light. Who can blame him?

Meg had to have some pretty rough heart-to-hearts with that kid's parents. She mentioned how the last one got pretty heated...shame I couldn't make it.

Nice people otherwise. Mike's pops drove product from the factory to retail chains. Used to see him there before he passed, nice guy. But still. Something had to change.

Some time passed, and I guess eventually that little fucker got word that Tony had talked to his mother 'bout all the bullying that'd been going on and decided he'd teach him a lesson, if you see where I'm headed with this.

They put that prick Mike away for a few years after what happened, but it was already done. Tony was never the same.

My baby boy. He's still alive, you know. I know it.

.....

...But I definitely slept more than a handful of nights in a company-provided cot. And not one earmarked for just ol' Needo, either.

.....

Yessir, managers. They make a dollar, and the workin' folks of the world make a dime...but only when that biannual bonus check mails out on time, 'course...

If it comes at all.

Where was I? Ah yes. Sorry 'bout that, buddy pal.

Anyways, so there I go one day, just tryin' to make an honest dollar, business as usual. Had to wake up even earlier that morning to take a little detour, and it was real humid that day, so I'm even tired...r than usual.

9 PM sharp, the last hour of the day. Couldn't have been a Tuesday, since that's my short day.

So, you know, I'm workin', bustin' you-know-what, tryin' to max out those minutes, scrubbin' away, doin' what I do best, when all of a sudden...

KAPOW!

BAM!

GRUHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

A bunch of real, real loud types of noises, one after another!

For a second, you couldn't even hear the machinery buzzing and chirpin' away like they always do! That's how you know it was loud.

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Matter o' fact, can still hear that ringing, a sort of...and to be frank, my back was never the same from having to clean up after everyone's mess all the time. Meg, bless her heart, she was always around...she really didn't need to listen to all my whinin' and yappin' about it, 'bout everything.

...Just wanted to do what needed to get done, no distractions. They didn't get that.

By this point, I'll be honest: I know I'm on ice. Blessed with one more chance, and I remember. I didn't need to take that turn, but I did. So I'm blowin' it. But *still* I give into my urges.

Everyone else starts gettin' nervous. I just wanted some peace and quiet. *You idiots! It's just an act of God! Do yourselves a favor and don't get involved! Hell, they pro'ly deserve it, ask me! 'Cause we all know what's goin' on!*

We've all got eyes on the back of our heads, that's how you keep afloat...how they take and take when alls you want is some peace and quiet for you and yours!

Can't even send your kids to school no more! Not how it was when I was growin' up...you see's a crash on the highway and everyone drops everything to rubberneck it.

Dogs...I just see the road.

...No help, no prospects, no good food, insurance wouldn't cover it, unions busted...Alls we got left is claims to pay off. So we gotta stick together if we wanna try and make it work. 'Cause if just one piece's out of place, it ain't worth *none* of it.

...'Course, nothin' I say can quell their curiosity. So everyone heads outside to try and figure out what's going on.

Not a good idea, if you ask me. Lots of snow that time of year! And I can't be buyin' up warm clothes from Jim's. Hated walking through it every day. And don't even get me started on the trip back at night!

...You know, I'll say this: it's incredible how quickly everything can just, shut down all at once.

Everyone just, stopped what they were doing!

Like you'd never seen before!

They never...who was responsible...in the service...you know, you saw a lot of that sort of thing if you knew where to look.

Anyways, not too long after all the funerals wrapped up, the factory went under. We had to move out to a small apartment a few cities away since, well, things were starting to get a little...hot.

Tony didn't say it, but I could tell he was happier to be away from it all. Meg, maybe less so, but...

And then I got sick. Cancer.

Yessir, happens to the best of us, buddy pal.

Had lots of trouble finding a job wherever I applied. Never mind my **YEARS** of experience...nobody seemed to care all that much.

All the while, my illness just sort of...did its thing.

Pretended not to feel it churnin' in the pit of my stomach. But disease has a way of things.

...Meaning a lot would go left unsaid to a lot of people that didn't deserve the silent treatment like that.

Yep...wonder how they're all doin'. Never did find a place that would take my insurance. VA insurance too! Go figure.

That's just how it was. You couldn't blame 'em for it. We're all some kind of broke, ain't we?

.....

So there it all was, just like that.

Yep, yeah.

Alright, alright. I give.

I give! Uncle!

I'm through tryin' to butter you up all nice and juicy-like.

Erm...did I mention you're lookin' amazing, buddy pal? Because you are. Matter o' fact, sure wish we had a mirror 'round here so you could see just how fierce you're lookin'!

Ah ha, yep.

...Yeah. No use puttin' off the inevitable, huh?

It's high-time for me to face the music.

Nothing goin' for me here. I need to buckle down and get what's comin' to me!

And that, my friend, is up to the likes of...folks like you.

If the majority of folks say I deserve lenience, then I deserve lenience. And if you say damnation's what I deserve best, then it's damnation for me 'til the end of time. Just like I was told in that vision when I got here.

Just think over everything we talked about, buddy pal. Very carefully-like, if you'd be so kind. I've only got DAYS_LEFT days left 'til the deadline, after all.

You know, uh...

Now that I get to thinkin' about it, it probably would have worked out better for me had I asked for your vote BEFORE goin' on and on like that...

But hey! That's just another golden life lesson for ya, buddy pal! I'm practically given' them away at this point.

So what do ya say, buddy pal? Mind giving me an up vote? Or, after everything we've been through, will it be down?