A LIAM GROSSMAN SHORT STORY

THE FLAG BEARERS

Tarek Gara

A short prequel to Mortal Past.

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A Liam Grossman short story

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PART

I

"Great men are products of humble beginnings."

The two men stared at each other for what felt like an entire hour.

The uniformed man, with an aristocratic beard and posh haircut, took a deep breath, preparing to speak.

"Don't say a word," Liam Grossman said. "Just...listen."

The man smiled, tilting his head ever so slightly, and nodded.

"This is a little crazy, I know."

"It's not just crazy," the man said, gesticulating with his hands. "It's suicide."

"Just hear me out," Liam responded calmly.

The man resignedly went silent. Liam could tell there was reproof coming his way. What he had suggested was not expected. It was indeed suicidal.

"My job as a Representative is to guarantee the government is working as it should be. Right now, there's no government to supervise. The economic state of the country is going downhill if we don't do something. I understand...it's a cumbersome job."

The man across from him was shaking his head.

"If I don't go forward with mine, someone worse will go forward with his."

"Being president is more than wearing a suit and smile-waving to citizens from a balcony. It's a responsibility."

"And it's my responsibility. There are rumors in the House."

"Liam, listen."

"No, Vern. You listen. Do you want to see Richardson as President? He's gathering votes, for Christ's sake!"

"This country is doomed. Andrew Wilson left nothing of it. This...it—you can't do this. You're not made for this job."

"Did you say that to Andrew Wilson at the time?"

Vern chuckled. "I wasn't ministerial then." He paused. "And I didn't vote for Wilson. The man was ill."

"I know his...backstory. They killed his son. I fucking get it. But what he did was plain dumb. Retaliation was supposed to be directed at the terrorists who killed his son, not civilians. Not his country."

"As I said, you can't."

"I will."

"Becoming President of Talienk will fuck up your life. This means no marital life. No friends, no family, no nothing."

"I don't need that. I have a duty."

"Did you sleep on it, Liam?" Vern crossed his arms. "Because I see no point discussing this with you now. It seems to me that you've already made up your mind."

Liam sighed. This was not how he had pictured it in his mind. He wanted to break it to his friend in a more celebratory way, although the state of the country was the exact opposite of celebratory.

"It's just...I'm determined. I want your help—your support."

Vern shrugged. "You know you've always got my support. But help is something I can't give you."

"Why?"

"Because, Liam. This isn't running for governor of Lashinburg.

This is the whole country. This is being in charge of the House, of the Palace."

"And you think I'm not capable of that."

"No. I think you'll be a great President. But I'm trying to warn you. Of what's to come. You're..."

"Say it, Vern. Please."

Vern sighed. Frustrated, he stood up and turned his back to Liam. "What can I say, Liam?"

"I'm the nice guy. The yes man. The pitiful politician who doesn't know political monopoly. I don't mind hearing it."

Vern looked out the window. "Liam, you have my full support. If you do this, I'll be the first to cast my vote. And I'll encourage them to vote for you."

Liam stood up and moved behind him. "Then what is it?"

Vern took a deep breath. He turned to face Liam.

"What it is, is that your loss is certain."

• • •

When Liam had won the elections for the prosperous municipality of Lashinburg six years ago, it wasn't because of his verbose personality. It wasn't because of the promises he had made—he couldn't remember he had made any promises to anybody. His mantra was: *If you see me fit for governor, vote for me. If you don't, simply don't.* And even when he had been told that this strategy would only make him lose, he hadn't budged.

He had dedicated his life for the citizens of Lashinburg. Everything that his job dictated a necessity, he had done. But after his term had ended, there was a need for something bigger. A wider circle where he could influence something more important than a municipal paddock.

Initially, the thought of becoming a Representative was stupid. Their work was tedious, and the effect they had on the country's decision-making was reduced to zero during the past decade.

When Andrew Wilson first became President, Liam could only imagine how things would become. He had known Andrew since high school. A nice guy; quiet, shy, and introverted. His voice always low, his movements restrained, but his brain more than lively.

When he had first heard the news on live TV, he had recoiled in his seat. *Hey, is that Andrew Wilson?*

Then the troubles began. And it was at that moment that Liam had decided to become a member of the House. Perhaps he could have become the legislator who would change things around.

And so he had filed his application to the Presidential Office. He recalled every minute of his meeting with President Andrew Wilson. Something was different about him. He wasn't shy anymore, and definitely not nice. Of course, as a President, he ought to have basic good manners, but when you're a part of a game, there are no secrets.

"Why apply for this shitty job, Liam?" he had asked.

Liam had regarded him with a smirk. "I don't think it's shitty."

"Well, what can I say?"

Andrew spun in his chair, and at that moment, Liam had realized that this wasn't an official meet-up with the President, but rather a friendly get-together.

Speak your heart, Liam had told himself.

"I want to help run this government. I can make change. As you probably know, I was governor for years, and in this kind of jobs, experience is vital."

Andrew had hesitated. "I know. I just have one question."

"Mm-hmm?"

"Did you apply because you thought I'd do you a favor as pals from high school? Or was it because you really thought, 'wait a minute, this country is falling apart, and I can change that'?"

Liam's answer had not been perfect. But he had been granted the offer.

A few months passed before Andrew Wilson had strengthened his

grip on the Palace. Slowly, Liam had realized, this government will become the next Syria.

After Andrew Wilson's last year of presidency, there was more to do than just sit in a reverberating hall with other men of varying ages and experiences and discuss the status quo.

This time, he knew he could do things differently if he were to become President.

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The phone rang at exactly 8:00. Usually, Liam woke up at five in the morning for his sacred morning routine—something he had maintained steadfast for over a year now. And today started with the wrong foot.

God knows what can go wrong today.

He groaned, picking up the phone.

"Grossman," he said.

"You're still in bed, I presume."

"Bingo. What is it, Vern?"

"Well, if you want to keep your presidency a dream, then keep on sleeping." He paused, chuckling. "Let me tell you something, Liam. Presidents sleep two hours a day. They simply have no time for peaceful shuteye."

Liam wiped at his face. His eyes burned, and his throat was stinging-dry.

"So, I've been thinking."

"Mm?"

"I know someone who can help."

Liam sat up straight. "Go on."

"You want votes, right? And, while you can do what Eli is doing—"

"I can't. I don't have that kind of money."

"R-right. You can influence the votes by doing something else."

"I'm not breaking the law."

"Nothing illegal, Liam." Vern took a deep breath. "Diego Cooper. He's fairly new to the House, just like you."

"How is he going to help me?"

"I know he looks dumb—he is, but that's not the point. He has contacts. He can pull strings around the House."

"If I remember correctly..." Liam thought for a minute. "Cooper was on Wilson's side. He bolstered all his sanctions."

Vern sighed. "I told you, Liam. It's what you do to win, man. You must make compromises. If you want to win, you do this. Speak to him. Make him buy your story. Money is not an issue for him. And, while you may hate the guy, you know as well as I do that people love him. Reps like him too."

"Stop right there, Vern." Liam shook his head as if to freshen up. He couldn't think straight. "Someone like him will put my candidacy at risk. His ideologies...I don't want to be supported by someone who endorsed Wilson's government."

"I was right when I said you weren't made for this job."

Liam sighed. "Vern..."

The line went out, and Liam lay on the bed with heavy thoughts fogging his mind. He didn't know what to do. If he were to accept such proposition, his whole set of ideas was done. If he wanted to become President, he wanted to do it by following his own philosophies, not those of the enemy.

And Liam could not think of a more dangerous enemy than Andrew Wilson's regime.

• • •

Diego Cooper had agreed to meet with Liam under one condition: it was to happen in the Coopers' residence in Talienkia.

Liam had picked his finest suit to wear for the evening, knowing that whatever he wore, Diego would outclass it.

When he arrived at the brick building with high pine trees and a

white strip of wall that surrounded the vicinity, Liam knew he was in for a treat.

He rang the bell twice. The door opened and behind it stood a gorgeous woman. Her smile was awkwardly lovely.

"Mr. Grossman," she said, making way for him to enter. "Come in! Diego will be here shortly."

She ushered him into the house, and then made a left to a high-class kitchen. Everything inside looked sparkling new, and Liam couldn't spot a speck of dust in the expensive household. He envied the man.

"I'm Lynda," she said, walking to the counter. "You have a reputation in the House," she said, sending him a smile.

"Which house?" Liam asked dumbly.

"The House," she laughed. "Diego has told me about you."

Liam was taken aback for a second. "What did he tell you?"

"Lots of things." She opened the cupboard and removed two glasses. She took a bottle of wine and opened it smoothly. "Drink?"

He waved it off. "Just water."

She shrugged, holding the glass and going for the tap. "He's told me that you're determined to change this shithole."

He chuckled. "I'm planning to become President," he said. Perhaps too early to go public with my announcement, he thought immediately. But then, he was determined. Sooner or later, everyone in the country would know.

"So I've heard," she said. She filled the glass and offered it to him. "Good luck."

Liam smiled, nodding as he grabbed the glass from her. "Thank you. You seem to know politics. What do you do for a living?"

She chuckled, gulping down the wine. After she put down the glass, she gestured to her body. It wasn't until she spoke that Liam realized she had gestured to her dress.

"I'm a fashion designer." She wiped at her nose. "In this country

you ought to know politics if you want to survive. You guys make it harder for us to live the simple lives we want to live."

"I wish for one," Liam said.

"Lawmakers want nothing but money and reputation." Before he could answer, she promptly added, "Don't try to deny that. Hell, it even applies to Diego. Who you think built this mansion?"

Liam couldn't fathom the idea that he was being hospitalized in a mansion by none other than a renowned member of the House. Someone with a list of contacts so big he could become President tonight.

Money did buy everything. Including happiness? Liam didn't know for sure.

"Well, it is nice indeed," Liam said, although it was more than nice. It was...otherworldly. "But we wouldn't be what we are today if it wasn't for the lawmakers that changed things around here."

"Oh," she snorted, "Liam! Please, Andrew was an idiot. However..."

"However," Liam said, taking over. "You still voted for him?"

She tilted her head. "I mean, yeah. It's not like I had any other choice."

At least she did not deny it, thought Liam.

"And who did you vote for back then?" she asked, finishing her drink.

"He didn't."

Liam turned around and froze. Diego Cooper, the slightly short, medium-built, quirky-looking politician stood in his nightclothes with a Cuban cigar between his lips. He smiled widely as he continued to slither down the stairs.

"I...didn't." Liam smiled, looking Diego up and down. "Mr. Cooper, hi."

"Ugh, please, call me Diego. And I know you are a few years older than me, but I'll call you Liam, is that fine?"

"Uh, sure, sure." Liam chuckled.

"Welcome to the Coopers' residence. How you like it?"

"It's...great. Thank you."

Lynda poured a second drink for herself. She stood by the counter and snorted at Diego.

"I'm sorry I look this way," Diego explained. "I just...can you believe it—I'm out of suits! And ties. Ha ha."

"That's fine." Liam sipped his water and watched as Diego puffed smoke out of his round mouth.

"Please follow me into my study." Diego walked slowly as Liam followed, both men leaving Lynda to do what Liam assumed she did best: lurk and drink. "So, how many years do you think we still have to still keep calling ourselves Talienkian Congressmen? Is that even right? For some reason I still associate 'congressman' to the US. Talienkian Reps, if you may."

"It's still...early. Plenty of time." Liam sat down across from Diego, who went for the counter, where a vast collection of spirits was at display.

Unlike his wife, Diego poured into two glasses without asking. He placed them on the low table and sat down with a grunt.

Liam looked around the study. Neat desk, no clattering paperwork, or dusty shelves with miscellaneous junk, and, quite surprisingly, nothing that made it personal. A man with Diego Cooper's prosperous history was ought to have his achievements framed and hanging on his walls. For some reason, Diego had not done that. Perhaps the bragging was just spoken, emitted only by words. Or this just was not his house.

"So, out with it, Liam. What's up?" Diego sat comfortably in the other chair and crossed his legs.

Liam hesitated; not because he was afraid—or mind you, ashamed—of the offer. He was a man without backup solely heading into a battlefield of armored forces. His words would make no sense to Diego.

"As you know," Liam started, "the government has collapsed. And we, Representatives, have a duty toward our people. Now, you may as well know that Richardson is gathering votes. He's going public with his candidacy very soon."

"Uh-huh. Yes, and my party isn't liking it."

"So, I have been thinking for a long time. And I've come to you with a tightknit scheme to return to Talienk its glory."

Diego rubbed his hands together and then took hold of his glass. Sipping, he gestured for Liam to continue.

"We need an independent, reliable candidate. By we, I of course mean the whole Talienkian nation. And that's why I've come to you."

Diego chuckled ever so slightly. Without pausing, he said, "You know...you're not the first one to come with this offer. And quite frankly, I can't express how delightful I am for this opportunity. I—I am honored, I really am. I've come to realize there's plenty of people who've shared the same thought."

What thought? Liam hoped he was not being misunderstood. He said nothing, but listened, praying that Diego Cooper was not thinking about...

"Yes. I will happily run for President. And I'd very much appreciate—and later even reward—your support."

Liam could not do anything except force a smile on his face.

PART

II

"What do you mean?" Vern said, his voice overridden by the echoing of high-pitched orchestral singings. "You...but you surely told him he misunderstood you, right?"

Liam could not remember what had exactly been discussed with Diego Cooper. It was as if he had not met with the man, nor had he chitchatted with his fashion designer wife. He felt as if this whole plan to run for President had been doomed before it had even begun.

"N-no," he said, stammering. "I—it's complicated. He, uh, said that other people came to him to say the exact same thing."

"To pledge support for his candidacy? I told you he was dumb!" Vern chuckled loudly, then cleared his throat, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Everyone's giving me that look of 'shut the fuck up, you're disturbing the play.'"

"Where're you now?"

"At the opera house in Lisor. With Catherin. She's looking at me with killer eyes too."

"Well, enjoy the play. And while you do that, think of how we can fix this."

Liam hung up. He pictured his friend watch and giggle and tear up at the perfect performance of Ulla Anderson in the retold Shakespearean marvel, Macbeth. Almost everyone had wanted to be present in the vast hall of the Lisorian Opera House, but Liam couldn't be bothered with that. Even though the actress herself had sent invitations to every House member and the nonexistent President, Liam did not go.

Instead, he walked silently to his abode—an apartment beyond the privilege of being called home. It was small and cozy but decaying to the point that he had started hearing strange crackling voices whilst he slept. In a few months, after the money started to kick in from the House membership, he promised himself he would move to a bigger, more respectable apartment. And then he would get married, hopefully.

But now, what preoccupied him was the problem of Diego Cooper. It would not take him long to go public with the decision.

In way of relaxing, Liam sat at his eat-work desk, and opened his favorite philosophy book. For him, the process of reading a book with deep narration and a mind-bending logic was soothing, especially after a long day of nonsense politics.

Diego Cooper, being a Realist, believed that what had happened in Andrew Wilson's era was a clear case of lust for power. He had told Liam that, if he were to become President, he would be able to flip-flop the whole status quo.

For the better? Liam had asked him. But Diego shrugged in answer. Liam assumed the answer was for both the better and the worse. One could never know what happenstances would occur in the future. The human mind is unpredictable, irrational at times. And so Liam knew for the first time—regardless of how aware he was of the fact—that Diego Cooper becoming President was the worst thing that could happen to Talienk.

Even worse than Andrew Wilson.

After reading a few chapters on decision-making and the art of determinism and one-choice approaches, Liam went for a walk. During this, his mind went back—surreally so—to the moment when Diego had misunderstood him.

Yes. I'll happily run for President.

A few seconds after that, the fashion designer wife came in bearing congratulatory drinks. A smile was glued to her face like a brand-sticker on a product. She had rehearsed everything: her walk, her smile, her words.

We are very much happy. Thank you for...

She had given Diego a heartfelt smile, and continued, for this opportunity. I have been trying to convince him. I'm glad we agree that he is the man for the job!

At that moment, Liam had wanted to punch her in the face. And then punch her husband until his face was recognizable no more.

He phoned Vern again, hoping the play would have been over by now.

Vern picked up almost immediately.

"I was going to call you. What's up?"

"It was a mistake, going to Cooper," Liam said. "I'll have to tell him. Before it's too late."

Vern sighed. "Before he goes public. He told you other people came to him with the same thought?"

"Yes. They're as dumb as he is."

"Well. I wonder who these guys are. I think he's just lying." Vern paused for a few seconds. "I have an idea."

"I'm listening."

"Go public with your candidacy. This way, he will be bound to lose even before the elections take place."

"I see where you're going with this."

"House members would like to see him in favor of the next government, but they definitely don't want to see him form it."

"Okay. But I'm all alone at this point. I counted on Cooper's support—he was going to get us votes, wasn't that the plan?"

"Y-yes. And now he's going to hate you. But if he is who I know him to be, he will call you first thing in the morning."

"And you...you're not going to announce your support? For my campaign?"

"You never know. I might as well surprise you."

• • •

When the sun shone in Lashinburg, Liam had already contacted a few friends he had known in the House. He had gotten minor players with him, but they were all nonetheless eager to take on Diego Cooper. He had already gone to a nationwide printing company and signed a contract with a campaign manager and a management firm. He had his consultants ready, his spokespeople and press release specialists a phone call away.

All he had to do now was go public.

• • •

The first call he had gotten after the announcement was from TNTV, the Talienkian National Television broadcast channel. The editor-in-chief spoke in a jolly tone. True, Liam had been friends with her in his adolescence years, but not anymore. More than that, they had nurtured a hateful relationship over the years leading to Liam's victory in the Lashinburg elections.

"I can't remember when the last time I spoke to you!"

Liam groaned. "I'm trying to fathom the fact that you still have my number, Felicia."

"Well, you know what they say...never delete your contacts, lest you need a favor in the future."

"I'll assume it's just you who says that. What do you want?"

"You're kidding me right now? But first, why're you so grumpy, Liam? You're running for President! Cheer up!"

"Are you calling to talk me out of it? Make me go back to my father's 'farmlands'?"

The joyous tone was gone now.

"Listen. I am sorry. I...I didn't get the chance to apologize after our last...meeting."

"You had my phone number. You could've called."

"I am really sorry, Liam. It's in the past now—we were young, and I was...naïve."

"No grudges, Felicia. I know you've changed—I've seen your show."

"Really? Do you like it? Oh! Already got my next City Paper title! It's along the lines of 'Future President Watches the Live Show with Felicia Spielberg'. Now that'll make a great hit."

"I'm getting other calls. Perhaps I should see what The Libocratic is up to."

"No, no! Liam, you have got to give me this. To tell you the truth, it is not great here—revenue-wise. You—you're my savior."

"Tomorrow?"

"Thirty minutes. Are you still living in that crappy apartment?"

"Really, again? It's not crappy, Felicia."

"It's a no-can-do, sir. We'll have to meet at the newsprint. You drive?"

In response, Liam gave out a tired sigh.

• • •

"Is the camera rolling?" Felicia asked, pacing around the set. She smacked her forehead. "Of course not. God, so stupid," she said to herself.

"Perhaps you'd like to sit down? Take a breather?" Liam asked her. If he didn't know the woman, he would have never accepted to give her

an interview. There was always something eerie with him and women. Not only was he awkward in their presence, but he also felt that he was not particularly liked.

"I can't. It's been a while. Sorry, Jeff," she said, resting a hand on her cameraman's shoulder.

The cameraman nodded at her, then returned his eyes to the monitor. "You can sit down now," he said.

Felicia sat down and adjusted her hair. She looked at the camera with a TV smile and cleared her throat.

The cameraman gave a thumbs-up to them.

It weirded Liam out that it has come up to this. He hated everything to do with TV, journalism, or radio. It was very simple to do so, given the fact that it was all for clout and capitalist revenue. All in all, he would have given his time to a local non-profit gazette that actually cared about their audience being human, not mindless robots.

Throughout the interview, it was evident that Felicia wasn't interested in Liam as a person—as a friend. Instead, her questions leaned more toward being investigational. It was obvious why, and Liam wasn't bothered by it. He was bothered by the sudden reappearance of his old friend. A relationship he never knew could blossom again. The last time they had talked was when he ran for mayor in the Lashinburg mayoral elections. She had made an ostentatious op-ed about why Liam Grossman wasn't a good fit for mayor. She had issued personal attacks on him and his family and concluded by mocking his farmer background.

As Liam recalled the mishap now, his answers to her questions began fluctuating. His tone changed, and whether or not she apologized did not matter.

But Liam had always been tolerant. Forgiving. Even to people who had done worse than what she had done. He had received death threats from strangers claiming to be patriotic and nationalist; he had to go about his daily life with a state-employed bodyguard on the lookout

for him. Part of him liked this stance—the attention and the increase of value and importance little by little as he rose in the political field.

But the other part despised this lifestyle. It was exhausting.

"Are we done here?" he asked as Felicia concluded the interview, scribbling in her notepad.

She nodded. "Thank you, Liam. I'll make sure to get this ready as soon as possible."

He nodded, getting up and adjusting his necktie. "I hope you don't write for the *Gazette Royale* about what a bad fit I am for presidency."

She sighed, closing her eyes. "I don't know what to say. I'm sorry, Liam. I'm really really sorry. I redacted the article the next day, man. I apologized in public. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Out of anger."

Liam froze momentarily before tilting his head. "Anger, you say? Why?"

She seemed as if preparing for a long story. "I had a...a friend. She was going to become the next mayor. You uh... prevented that from happening."

"What do you mean become?"

"It means that she had the position even before you thought about running. But when you announced, she retreated. And she was a best friend. So I was mad on her behalf."

"Also, a she? In Lashinburg? I smell nonsense."

Felicia shrugged. "Believe what you want. I'm telling the truth."

"Fine," he said. "I forgive you. But know that journalism is never about sentiments. If you want to reach the *New York Times* or one of the big guys, make sure you're not writing out of emotion, but out of the search of truth. It's the essence of your job."

"I know that. That happened years ago. I'm a different woman now."

"I hope so," Liam said as he left the room.

• • •

As soon as he entered his apartment and closed the door, he heard a sigh coming from the dim-lit corner, making him turn around immediately.

"Close the door and sit down."

Liam tried to make out a face out of the darkness, for the voice was unidentifiable.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The man sighed, swinging his leg that sat on his other. "A messenger, you could say."

"Oh yeah? Who sent you?"

"Sit down. We can talk."

"You know I'm expecting someone in a few minutes," Liam said. He wasn't expecting a soul—it was early for that. "You need to leave right now before the cops come along."

"You're not expecting anyone, Liam. Sit down."

Liam scoffed. He sat down resignedly, focused on the mysterious man that just appeared in his apartment.

"What is this joke?" Liam asked. "We haven't already started god-dammit!"

"Settle down, Liam. I'm not here to kill you."

"Then why are you here?"

The man sighed. "I'm here to convey a certain expression. Are you following still?"

"Not at all. I'm a strong opposer to vague poetics. Get to the point and leave me be. I have stuff to do."

"Of course. I'm here on behalf of certain people."

"Let me guess. Diego Cooper."

"You *are* following, I see."

Liam wasn't the type to cater for those who opposed him. He thought he had already established that long before he became a politician. But Diego Cooper's enthusiasm to curry favor was also well

established. He would do all of the shady stuff just to win. *Whatever it takes*.

"How can I be of help?"

"I must admit, that was a slick move you did there," the man said.

Liam could now see his face clearly, but still knew nothing about his identity. He stared ahead at him, wondering if this is how his political life would resume until its conclusion.

"Thanks, but we both know you're not here to compliment me or my ways. So tell me what you want so we can move on."

"You're right. I'm here to tell you that you'll drop your candidacy first thing tomorrow morning."

"Says who?"

"Says common sense. Here's the thing, Liam. Without Diego Cooper, you're not going to win. Diego Cooper will not win without your support. It's a loss-loss and you both pave the way for yet another old hag to run this country."

"It's called an election. If people choose an *old hag* to run this country, then that's a national problem, not mine. And if they happen to vote for me, I'll happily serve."

"You're not listening."

Liam rose. "No, *you're* not listening. I went to Cooper to garner his support, *not* push him forward to candidacy. He blindsided me because he's as stupid as it gets in the political game. And now we're going against each other."

The man chuckled.

"And you still haven't told me who you are. So if that's all, get out of my goddamn house or I'll have the police usher you out."

"Pretty modest for our next president," the man said, standing up. "I hope you're ready to stay here, because your campaign is a failure."

• • •

After the man left, Liam was stranded with his thoughts. Religious

figures had already publicly supported his campaign. Surprisingly, liberals as well. And even in a hectic climate such as the Talienkian, Liam could somehow gather votes and amass support from different poles—ones he never knew could unite under a unanimous front. But even then, the man was right. Without Diego Cooper's fiscal capabilities and wide range of contacts, the chances of Liam becoming president were slim at best, nonexistent at worst.

When Liam arrived at the doorstep of his old friend, Vern Sorensen welcomed him in as soon as he knocked. Vern's jubilant face was dimmed tonight, and Liam could sense something was wrong.

"This wasn't the plan," Vern said as he ushered Liam inside. The living room was lit; drinks were still on the tabletop, and a half cigar rested on the tip of the ashtray. "Sit down."

"That's what you get. Diego Cooper is as sharp as a football. I have never met anyone with such unawareness."

"Too bad, because he's going to be the vice president. Under you, of course." Vern said this with so much casualness that it felt real. He picked up the lit cigar and puffed, studying Liam's expressions.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Listen, Liam. I know I'm in no place to give you advice, but—"

Liam scoffed. "Yeah?"

"This is real life, not some idealistic simulation. You have to make compromises in order to further your agenda."

Liam didn't respond. He just listened.

"Tell me. Why do you want to become president?" Before Liam could reply, Vern followed with another question. "Why *did* you become the mayor of Lashinburg?"

"You know why. Because the government sucked. And because this nation was in shitty hands. Talienk has gone through so much torment, its people massacred in war after war after war. I was one among many who sought change. *You* were too. And Diego Cooper? He's just as

deluded as he is keen. And he'll do whatever he has to just to stay in power. If not today, then tomorrow. I can't let that happen."

"Understand that politics don't work your way. Good people, despite their intentions, sometimes must shake hands with murderers. They have to risk catering to a criminal warlord or proxying for a hoodwinking chieftain. Sometimes it's about money. Sometimes it's about interests: political, economic, hegemonic even...But other times, it's simply to save lives. To avoid a ruckus."

"And you think this time it's what?"

"Avoid a ruckus, Liam. We can't afford a political gambit like the one you're attempting. If you lose, you *lose*, in every sense of the word. There will not be a second chance. Look at every other country in the region. You have to make bargains. When you get the high ground, do whatever you see fit. But now..." Vern slowly let out a puff of smoke. "Avoid a ruckus."

Liam knew he was defeated. Vern was a veteran politician, with so much more experience and wisdom that Liam could only agree with him. Even if he tried his best, amassed support from the people, and had the best of teams, he would still lose to Diego Cooper. His only chance was to swallow his pride and do what's best for the people.

"What do I do now?"

"I've spoken to Cooper," Vern said, butting the cigar and reaching for the wineglass. "I've also spoken to...an associate."

"Spoken about what?"

"Cooper is yet to agree, but I have my ways of making him. He'll serve as your vice-president."

"I trust you, Vern, but I don't trust Diego Cooper. And by the time he's sworn in, there is no going back. And it'll be on you."

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