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for an envelope.



Game Plan

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I never wanted to tell this story. But I've got to get it off my soul. I'm sure you understand how it is. I was sitting by the window, waiting for the mailman. Like a watched pot, the mailman never comes as fast as you would prefer. There were a couple of kids in the street, bouncing a basketball off the pavement. They weren't playing so much as using the ball for an excuse to be on the street. The ping, ping, ping, of the ball on the blacktop, was the only sound on the street. Ping, ping, ping. It was getting on my nerves. If this went on for much longer I was going to go out there with a hat pin and poke a hole in the stupid thing. But I understood what they were doing. They wanted to be there if it came today, almost as much as I did. They wanted to be here when it arrived. So, I sat there waiting for the letter as the neighborhood kids bounced their ball. Ping, ping, ping. If I knew then, what I'm about to tell you now, I wouldn't have been waiting. I'd have been running for the hills.

OK, there aren't any hills in my neighborhood, but it gives you an idea of how far I wanted to run. My neighborhood was one of those flat, near-city suburbs in the mid-west. One of those small single-floor dwellings with only five rooms. If you didn't have my address, you'd never be able to find my house. It's in the center of one of those developments where all the houses appear the same. Oh, there's different painting styles and some of the houses are flipped left to right, but they all are as near to identical as basic variety allows. After all, no one paints their house hot pink.

In the old days, you'd glimpse kids riding their bikes around the block. Some of the younger kids still do. But now, they mostly stay inside. This is the video game generation. Kids locked in their rooms, staring at screens. Yelling into the computer microphone so loud, the kid they were talking to down the street didn't need speakers. I'm one of them. Racking up the highest scores in my neighborhood. Last month I placed the highest score in the state. Of course, my grades wavered in the opposite direction. Good gaming month, not so good grades. Bad week and I had much better grades.

Well, I used to be one of those kids. The only time you'd find me outside was when I was mowing lawns to earn a few bucks for the next release at the game store. Until I got the invitation from Gamelings. Most games you buy off the shelf or over the Internet. But you couldn't buy a Gamelings game, they weren't for sale. You couldn't afford the hardware required to play. Players had to earn an invitation. Of course, there is a substantial fee attached. After I got the email invite ... not long after I graduated from college ... I took pointless, dead-end jobs for a year to earn the entrance fee.

My parents never made much money, so they didn't have much savings. My father was a teacher at the local community college. One of those low paying positions where the salary wasn't even enough for you to afford the health benefits you didn't get. My mom makes more money. She's a retail clerk at the Yarn Barn.

Yea, I still live at home with my parents. Don't stare at me with those sad eyes. Didn't you understand what I said? It took a year, OK? Now, I was sitting there, waiting for an envelope. You couldn't get into the building without the special pass it contained. It was more than a building, it was a whole complex in southern Manhattan. They even had their own power generator. They called it Game Town. Players when in and stayed for months at a time before reemerging. Every player agreed it had been the most fantastic and realistic experience of their lives. A game like nothing else. A game beyond imagination.

I was starting to sweat. The entry letter was also supposed to explain the role you were to play. I'd had all sorts of daydreams about my character in the game. Race car driver, flashy pirate, playboy

businessman, Conan-style warrior barbarian with scantily clad girls dripping off my arms. Fine, I admit the last one was my most frequent, but I'm a single game player ... what do you expect ... dreams of playing Gandhi?

I could tell the mailman was on the street before I saw him. The sound of the ball pinging on the pavement stopped. The change was so abrupt, it was like the roar of a low-flying jet. More kids ran out into the street; their curious parents watching from the windows. Finally, the U.S. Mail truck pulled up in front of my mailbox. I was going to be cool and wait a few minutes before rushing to the box.



But the mailman left his truck on the street and marched his way up to the front door. He was holding a heavy, yellow manila envelope. I rushed to open the door before he rang the bell. So much for being cool. "You Ricky Deal?" he asked in a toneless voice of your average civil servant.

"The one and the same," I replied trying to restrain my jaunty anticipation.

"Registered letter," he barked.

I stood there, hand extended, waiting for him to give it to me. "You got to sign for it," he had a thick Chicago accent. I wasn't even aware people had those anymore. Then it hit me. Of course, I'd have to sign for it. Gamelings had to be sure I got the thing, right? Made sense. "Hey kid, I don't got all day. You gonna sign for it or what?" He held out a clipboard. I took the board and the offered pen and scribbled my name on the green form. He took both back and tore the form into parts. "Here, this is your copy." He handed me part of the form I'd signed.

If he didn't give me the letter soon, I was going to jump him and grab it. I was so anxious, I was shaking. Finally, finally, He shoved the yellow envelope into my sweaty palm. "You enjoy it kid." He said with a smug sense of superiority. As I stood in the doorway, he headed off back down the driveway to his truck. On his way, he passed a whole group of streaming kids walking up the drive.

I gradually walked out onto the porch as everyone gathered around. The stupid thing was sealed seven ways from Sunday and I had the devil of a time getting it open. Finally, I slowly pulled out the cover letter. "Read it," some of the younger kids shouted out loud.

"Welcome to Gamelings, blah, blah, blah, blah ... your entry fee has been processed and you have been entered into the next game. Blah, blah, blah, blah. The game begins at 9 AM on July 9th at our facility in New York. Please respond as soon as possible with the acceptance form enclosed. A stamped, self-addressed envelope has been included for your convenience, blah, blah, blah." Everyone was getting antsy. The younger kids were dancing around on their feet. They wanted me to get to the good part. The section where they tell you what character you're going to play.

"You have been assigned the role of President of the United States ..." There was a gasp in the crowd. I wasn't as impressed as the assembled throng. I was hoping for more of a pirate ... OK, I'll be honest, I was hoping for the sword-wielding Conan-type. Still how many times do you get to play the President of the United States? I guess it would be cool. Power is supposed to be a real babe magnet. It was early June, so I had a few weeks to get ready.

A small card fell out of the envelope. It looked like a security pass. It even had my picture on it. This was what I would need to gain entrance to the Gameling's studio. One of the kids picked it up off the ground for me. I took it with my left hand because I was still holding the manila envelope in my right. I held it up with my palm, gazing at my name and picture superimposed over the Gameling's logo.

I started to read some of the small print. Some confusing dribble about DNA identification, when the pass melted right in my hand. It acted on instinct. I shook my hand to try to get it off, but nothing doing. In a moment it was gone as if it had never existed.

"Sorry man," one of the older kids from across the street sympathized. "It probably would have been cool." The kids started to disperse after the card melted. Heading back off to their homes. But I was pissed. I went inside and looked all over for a customer service phone number, but there was nothing. I emailed them with, I'm sad to say, a few choice words. The only reply I got was some dribble about the card accepting my DNA pattern. I decided to go down there and have it out with them in person. No way I was paying their huge fee for an entry pass which melted faster than a candy bar on an August highway.

The only problem was, I still didn't have enough scratch for the flight to New York. I did lawns, gardening, moved boxes at the Scrimp and Save. In the end, the kids on my street held a bake sale. They gave me the money to make up the difference. The whole crew came down with me to the airport. I really felt something for them, not only for the money but for everything we'd been through. Every one of them had played in the same games. Fighting off the player pirates who don't want to be bothered collecting points, so they'd attack you and steal your points instead. Together, we fought off hundreds of Kraken, crappy players who replaced game skill with gobs of money. None of us had money to burn on games. For us, it was the slow, painful crawl up to the top. The game grind.

Well, none of us were at the top. You couldn't ever beat the Kraken in the first place. As soon as you did, he'd simply buy more points. Better armor, cooler guns. Which is why I was surprised to get an invitation to the Gamelings. It was my impression they only picked top players.

Sometimes, the Kraken invite lower ranked players into a game, so they had someone easy to steal from. Every one of us on the street had been trapped in the sacrificial goat position from time to time. I was getting the sinking feeling I was headed into another similar debacle. The rich kids need a poor kid in their midst, so they don't seem so exclusive. Plus, you can't be a player pirate without some other player to rob. So, it was like killing two birds with one stone. The more I thought about it, the more depressed I became. I should never have accepted the invite.

I started going through the game instructions, to take my mind off the depression. The game date is 19 September 1931, the Kwantung Army of the Empire of Japan had begun an invasion of Manchuria immediately following the Mukden Incident. The rest of the document was page after page on the other characters in the game. Governmental bureaucrats, Prime Ministers, Party leaders, office holders, the list was extensive. It made me wish I'd spent more time paying attention in history class. It didn't sound exciting.

Still, I guess there is nothing to worry about. I'd probably never get in without the ID pass. Maybe the whole thing was a joke. A Gameling Kraken joke on the poor kid. They'll all laugh as I stood there mortified. I went back to reading the game papers. Before I knew it, we were landing in JFK.

I didn't have enough money to take a cab, so I rode the subway into lower Manhattan. The nice part of being poor is almost everything you own fits into a backpack, so riding the subway is no big deal. The Game Town complex overlooked Battery Park. It was a set of four low glass and steel towers. The floors halfway up the building had the smallest area, which gave the impression some giant had pulled a belt tight around the tower's waists. I sauntered up to the main door. I was ready to demand a visit to someone in customer service. Maybe I could at least get my money back.

There was no guard at the door. Only a camera and a pad. One of those things you put your hand on and it opens the door. It was on the right side, so I put my right hand on it. There was a blue glow surrounding my fingers, but it quickly changed to a blood red. I tried it again with the same results. There was this stinging sensation in my left hand, the one holding the pass when it melted. For laughs, I put my left hand on the pad. Same blue glow, only this time, the light changed to green.

I took it off the pad and read: "Welcome to Gamelings Mr. Deal." In bright text letters on the pad. It was followed by a loud click of the door unlocking. I guess I was in, so I opened the door. Inside the air was fresh, much more breathable than the gas-fume filled streets of lower Manhattan, I can tell you. A blue arrow lit up on the floor. Overlaying it was the text announcement: "If you'll follow the arrows please, Mr. Deal." Walking in the direction of the arrow, a second one lit up on the floor ahead of me, as I was about to step off the last one. The lit arrows in the floor led me to the main elevator bank. The door opened when I arrived.

Stepping in, the doors closed again, and the elevator started moving as soon as they closed. There was no set of buttons for which floor you wanted, only a modest screen. On the screen, it said: "Almost there Mr. Deal. We hope you are prepared for the most exciting game of your life." The elevator stopped with a jolt. On the other side of the slowly opening doors, I witnessed a large room. Sunlight was streaming in from the large plate-glass windows.

In front of the elevator was a short young woman in business-like attire. One of those business suits cut for women. Instead of a tie, her shirt was open and there was a large crystal hanging from a chain. An incredibly long chain. I tried not to stare, but the view was particularly distracting. It was a bit of a shock, mind you. She was the first person I'd met in the building. She was enormously ... attractive.

"I so pleased to meet you, Mr. Deal." She held out her hand to shake mine. "My name is Annabeth Norris. I'll be here to help you get orientated and to answer any questions you might have."

I took the proffered hand and started right into my spiel, "Before you ask, I don't have my pass. The stupid thing melted as soon as I put my hands on it. You should have a talk with ..."

She didn't let me finish. She interrupted me with her vibrant, perky voice, "Of course you do." She tapped my left hand, treating me as if I were a small child. "You got it right here, don't you?" She was wearing a smile which could have flattened all four buildings. "Did you have any questions about the material we sent you?"

I was having a problem getting my tongue to work in conjunction with my teeth. I wasn't used to talking to women who weren't the age of my mother. No, I had plenty of teachers who were my mother's age. Attractive was the term I was after. It was attractive women I wasn't used to engaging in conversation.

And this one had two ... stop staring, it's not polite ... right, anyway, I was having a little trouble conversing. "No," I finally blurted out.

"I need you to sign these forms," she explained; handing me an electronic pad.

I could vaguely tell there was writing on the pad's screen. Together with a line at the bottom for my signature. Using my finger, I scribbled my John Hancock on the aforementioned line. Then she used her finger to flip the page. "You need to initial here and here." She continued in a cheery voice. I did the needful in the boxes she indicated on the page. There were six more pages of initials and two other signatures. At last, she took away the pad.

"We're almost done. Don't you hate lawyers?" She smiled again, and I was almost blinded by the flashing light from her dental work. She turned away and everything seemed to go back to normal as if someone had given me my brain back. When she returned she grabbed my hand and led me off to a desk near the elevator. I thought I saw ... no, I must be imagining it. You don't witness such things in a business setting. She hit me once more with the smile. Brain when right out the window again.

On the desk was a massive blue binder. It must have been 800 pages long. A paper binder, real old school. Annabeth opened the binder and flipped to the last page. Then she handed me a pen and pointed to a signature line. "One more and we're all done." I could have been signing away my life or accepting hazardous levels of radiation, but there was Annabeth's smile. How could I say no? I finished the final signature and Annabeth closed the binder.

"There all done," she remarked.

I felt as if I'd finished my first day of grade school. OK, I felt like an idiot ... happy now?

Annabeth measured the level of distress in my eyes with a caregiving glance. "Can I get you something to drink? Would you like to sit down for a bit?" Annabeth asked, still delivering her lines with an excess of perkiness. I shook my head no.

"Excellent, shall we get you started on your game?" I could no longer tell if the majority of the sunshine was coming from the windows or from her ... metaphorically speaking. Annabeth took out a small controller from her jacket pocket. The type my parents used to change the volume on their TV. She pressed a button and a panel opened in the floor. Up rose a heavily-padded chair, complete with headrest and footrest. The kind you sit in at the dentist office. Where you'd rest your head there must have been 50 cables, hanging below the top, flowing down as if they were an electronic version of Jamaican dreadlocks.

Once it moved into position, she motioned me into the couch. Right now, I was ready to do anything Annabeth said. Up to, and including, throwing myself out the window. I lowered myself into the desired position. I had a strange feeling and I started to sweat, even though the room was overly air-conditioned.

"Do you have sensitive skin, Mr. Deal?" he ran her fingers across my lower forearm. It sent a tingling sensation over my entire body.

"You can call me Ricky," I explained.

“Ricky’s a boy’s name,” Annabeth answered. “You should have people call you Richard.”

Annabeth placed the first electrode on my right hand. The wires didn’t have any suction cups or needles and I couldn’t imagine how they would stay attached. They made a clicking sound as she connected them to my skin. I lifted my hand in an attempt to understand how they were connected, but I couldn’t ascertain any reason why they were remaining in place. No tape, no glue, no clips, only a little flat end.

“You’ll be more comfortable if you’ll sit still for a moment while I get you hooked up.” Annabeth smiled. Once again, I was too entranced with her appearance to do anything but comply. She reached over and ... no, it couldn’t be. She ran her chest across me as she attached cables to my head. Honestly all I was paying attention to where two soft forms being pressed against my chest. Each time Annabeth reached over to the far side ... well, let’s say I had no desire for her to stop.

“You’re the devil, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Who told you?”

She finished plastering the electrodes. “Any last words?” That smile, those two ... wait a minute, what did she say?”

Her smile brightened. “Only kidding. Are you ready to for the ultimate adventure?” If I’d had known the tag line she had used was a slogan of the White Star Line had printed up for the Titanic I might have said no, but instead I shook my head yes. There was a blinding flash in the room. It was so bright it was painful. My whole body went stiff as if the air temperature had gone to - 273.15°C, but there was no impression of cold at all. Still, there was no way I could move my arms and legs. It was impossible even to move my head.

I might have fallen asleep at this point. It might have been for a minute, a day or even a year. There was no way to tell time. When I opened my eyes ... OK, you should be sitting down. The next part is a little tough to believe. I’m in the Oval Office. Yep, the White House. I glanced over at the Resolute desk, the desk of the President of the United States. On the desk is a campaign button. Red and white stripes and the slogan, “The Real Deal.” Behind the text is a black and white picture of ... me.

So, this is the game. It doesn’t seem like a game. It’s as if I’m really here. I’m wearing this stupid three-piece suit with a watch chain in the vest. Totally out of style. I must say I’m really impressed with the technology. Then I started thinking about drugs. What if they drugged me? This could all be a hallucination. Seems real though, not like a drug-induced dream. God, what if it’s addictive? It could be how Gameling makes its money. They get you addicted and then collect money from you to avoid withdrawal pains. They had me sign all those papers and I didn’t even read one. I’m so stupid.

The door opened and an attractive woman in a 1930’s hairstyle walked in. She couldn’t hold a candle to Annabeth, but she was attractive in her own right. “Your four o’clock is here sir. The secretaries of State and War.” She waited for me to respond, but I was still in a state of shock. “You wanted them to brief you on the situation in Manchuria. Mr. Stimson and Mr. Hurley are waiting.”

I felt a surge of confidence. The confidence which can only come from complete ignorance. I had no idea what I was doing, so I had no idea what it was like to do it wrong. “Send them in.” It was Hubertus, pure and simple.

Two men in remarkably similar suits entered through the same door as the woman exited. "Thank you, Mrs. McConnell." The second man muttered.

I directed them to seats. "So, what's going on in Manchuria?"

The two men squirmed in their seats. They looked amazing similar, both were narrow-faced men with mustaches, But it was the one with gray on the sides of his short-cropped hair who spoke first, "The Japanese have moved 11,000 men into the area around Mukden. Zhang Xueliang has personally ordered his 250,000 men not to put up a fight and to store away any weapons. We expect the Japanese soldiers to quickly occupy and garrison the major cities of Changchun and Antung and their surrounding areas with minimal difficulty."

"Is this the opinion of the War Department?" I asked.

"State, sir," he replied.

OK, first mistake. I started thinking back to all the paperwork I'd been sent for the game. Henry L. Stimson was the Secretary of State. He was the one with the gray hair. Patrick J. Hurley was the other man, the Secretary of War.

"OK, so Henry, what can we do to help the Chinese government?"

"Nothing sir," his remark was blunt as if he was reading the definition of a word in the dictionary. "When we signed the Washington Naval Conference back in 1921, we guaranteed a certain degree of Japanese dominion in the Far East. Any intervention on the part of America would be a breach of the Washington treaty, sir."

When you are dealing with your own complete ignorance, you have no idea what can't be done. So, you're happy to try anything. I had no idea what I was doing. I tried to recall the goals of the game scenario. "I'm afraid your answer is not acceptable. We must do something. The Japanese can have as much dominion as they care to acquire, but I'm not going to let them gain it by invading their neighbors."

I turned to the Secretary of War, "Pat, how many men can we muster to send over there?"

"I'm afraid the army can't do anything at this time," Hurley answered with the same bluntness the State Department head was using.

"Why the devil not?" I figured if I wasn't getting the answers I needed from the cabinet, I wouldn't lose anything by bullying them. Ignorance is triumphant.

"Sir, the army only has 16,000 men under arms," Hurley announced. "We might be able to do something in Mukden, but the Japanese have an additional 90,000 men in Korea. They'd overwhelm us in short order. Even if you signed a draft order today, the new men raised would have to be equipped and trained. By the time we got them to Manchuria, it would be too late. The Japanese will have already conquered the area."

"What about the 250,000 men this Chang, Chang fellow has got?" I demanded.

"Zhang Xueliang, sir" Henry added, "The call him the Young Marshal."

“His is the best-equipped force in China.” Hurley explained, “He has tanks and four battalions of artillery.”

“So can’t we support this Young Marshal? Can we at least send some men and equipment?”

Patrick leaned forward, “If he’s given up Mukden, then he’s probably lost all his tanks and artillery already. They may be well equipped, but his men don’t have any combat experience. They are not ready to fight. The Japanese Imperial Army is well trained and already has combat experience. On top of this, the Chinese government seems to believe the communists as the danger. Their opinion is the Communist Party as cancer and views the Japanese as simply a scratch. They’d order all their men to stand down to save them to fight the communists.”

“We simply don’t have enough men to hold back the Japanese buy ourselves,” Stinson explained. “Even if we sent the entire US Army to China it wouldn’t be enough to stem the tide, sir.”

“And it would leave the rest of the country completely undefended.” Hurley added, “We have our own communist as you are well aware. Labor activists, discontents, even ex-war veterans. We’ll need them here.”

“Mrs. McConnell,” I screamed to into the next room. “Get the Chinese ambassador. I want him to pay a visit to my office. Henry, you should be here too. Gentlemen, thank you.”

“Mr. President,” they both declared at the same time and left by the same door as they came in.

“Mrs. McConnell, Don’t we have any couches in here? What’s with these cane-back chairs?”

She stuck her head through the door, “But you bought them, sir.”

“Well, I changed my mind. Get them out of here. Get me a real couch.”

“Yes, sir.”

I must say, power is fun. This is going to be a fun game after all.

The Chinese ambassador was a short gentleman dressed as a western businessman. He was wearing the round, Mr. Moto style, glasses. I had to fight off the urge to laugh. The Gameling folks need to work on not having racial stereotypes or they are going to get complaints. He was carrying a leather briefcase and after we shook hands in scrounged around in it for something.

Smiling, he brought out a small silk cap. “Please accept this as a gift from the people of China. I regret it is quite simple, but we understand you are not allowed gifts or more than \$20 in value. Still, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek himself asked me to give you this personally as a testament of our thanks for your unending support.”

“Thank you, I keep this. You are from Shanghai aren’t you Dr. Yuan?”

“Yes, quite.”

“I’m told it’s a beautiful city.”

“Quite so. You should visit it when you leave office.” He bowed respectfully.

"I understand it's not polite in Chinese society to rush right into business, but you understand I am concerned about the situation in Manchuria. What are your government's plans for ejecting the Japanese?"

His smile did not disappear as I was expecting, but his face did adopt a more serious countenance. I got the distinct impression he was about to lecture me. "We are not going to deal with the Japanese in Manchuria. We can't, we're not strong enough."

"You've got 250,000 men in Manchuria. The Japanese only have 11,000. Twenty to one odds seem pretty good to me."

The ambassador's grin expanded, "If it were a western army, I would agree with you. You must understand, most of the men in Manchuria were once troops of a warlord faction. They joined to impress the unarmed locals ... well, rob them in any case ... they are not experienced in real combat. Especially when facing troops which are prepared to fight back. There are still only a few of us who comprehend China as a nation which is worth giving one's life. Too many of those died fighting imperial troops in the 1911 revolution. You must appreciate we spend more time in China fighting each other. The three kingdoms, The five kingdoms, the warlords. The Ming don't get along with the Han and nobody likes the Manchurians. Even now, we spend most of our time fighting the Communists. If we send troops into battle, the brave ones who love China will die first. They always do, because they'll go in first. Then the rest of them ... well, they will melt away like the snow in spring. There are maybe 1,000 soldiers who love China in Manchuria. So, you see, it's really the Japanese who have the ten to one advantage."

"We'll supply your troops with the best tanks and artillery in the western hemisphere. Far superior to what the Japanese have. You'll be able to roll over them like wheat at harvest time." I responded.

"Even the best tanks need drivers." Dr. Yuan explained. "It pains me to tell you our warlord-based forces would abandon them the first time one of them was hit by a Japanese anti-tank gun. What China needs is time, time for us to build a real nation-state. One worthy of the lives of our people to defend. Too many of us grew used to not fighting hard for the Empire during the rebellion. We need time for people to forget being cowards for the Empire. Right now, all we have is space. It is the generalissimo's plan to trade the space we have for the time we need. As I recall, America struggled with fighting European armies after their revolution. The War of 1812 you called it? It wasn't until World War I you burst onto the world stage. It took you almost 150 years to build your nation to take on serious foes. I'm sure you understand the Republic of China needs at least a little time to grow into a great state like America."

"What can we do, then?" I was a little frustrated.

"Pray, Mr. President." The ambassador's smile dropped in an instant, "we can pray." He could tell I wasn't happy with his answer. "Don't let the Japanese worry you, Mr. President. They can only take our land, they can never take our people. If my government is exceptionally lucky, we'd defeat the Communists ... who *are* taking our people. The Japanese will fall later."

He had an intense interest in the P-26 Fighter we were making. He made a request for modern planes, like the P-26. But he made it plain they were to be used against the Communists, not the Japanese. I'm afraid I was non-committal, even more so after he announced the Chinese government would need a

loan to make the purchase. Planes to be used against the Communists weren't something I received points for in the game. He picked up his briefcase and headed for the door, bowing as he exited.

"Mrs. McConnell," I screamed, "Get the English and the French ambassador in here."

Yes, power is fun. It's frustrating, but it's fun.

The French and English ambassadors wouldn't arrive until the next morning, so I got to take the tour of the residence. The parts which are not on the regular tour. It was a rat hole. Loose boards on the floor, steps which looked like they had been worn down since the Civil War. The place was in need of major renovations. I spent a sleepless night. Are you supposed to sleep in a game? Is it even allowed? In the end, I must have fallen asleep, or maybe I simply stopped thinking about it.

In the morning, Mrs. McConnell escorted in the English Ambassador. He had a scowl on his face, in complete contrast to the Chinese ambassador I'd seen the day before.

"Lord Howard," I greeted him, remembering his name from the game briefing documents. I shook his hand, but he seemed disinterested. Before we got to more than chatting, Mrs. McConnell brought in Charles Maurice de Rochebouët, the French Ambassador. As I shook his hand, the temperature in the room dropped about ten degrees. It was hard to imagine these two were allies only a dozen years ago.

"Before you begin with your entreaties," Charles began, "I must inform you the French Republic has no plans to send any troops to China. China is a problem for the Chinese, not the French people. We're especially not interested in defending Manchuria if the Chinese are unwilling to do so. Of course, we will continue to protest the Japanese action in the League of Nations. Unfortunately, you will not be able to join us, as you are not a member of the body your own President Wilson insisted we create."

"Wilson only made his proposal because you folks couldn't keep your guns in your pockets," I spat back as impolitely as I could. The French must be the crassest people on the planet. "What's the matter with the French anyway? You lose your taste for shooting Asians? You don't seem to have much trouble shooting the locals in Indochina."

"You will ... how does the American saying go? Attract more flies with honey, no?" de Rochebouët declared, refusing to take the bait.

"You can attract even more with manure. What's your point?"

"As always, you Americans are working on cornering the market on being crude." Charles' retorted.

"What about Great Britain, Lord Howard?"

"Well, as you know," the English lord stuttered in his High Street London accent, "his Majesties' empire is still trying to recover from the Great War. It was costly for us in both the lives of your young men and our finances. I'm afraid it would be too much of a strain on both those resources if we attempted any adventure in China at this time. I dare say, my party would be voted out of office if our people were to read causality list from our expeditionary forces in China."

"Good," I smiled, "I'm glad we agree." Both ambassador's faces changed from condescension to confusion faster than you can blow out a candle.

“Excuse me,” Lord Howard protested.

“You misunderstand me, gentlemen. The United States has no interest in asking you to provide troops in Manchuria. In fact, we’d like you to keep out of it.”

OK, I was being selfish. I didn’t get the answers I wanted, so I was determined to make them feel bad about it.

“I afraid I don’t understand? Why are we here then?” de Rochebouët was inquisitive.

“You’re here because the United States is going to ask the Weimar Republic to send its entire army to Manchuria to support China.”

“They’ll never do it,” Lord Howard announced.

“They might change their minds ... when I support them in their desire to increase their army, breaking the Treaty of Versailles. And when I tell them the United States is going to fit the bill.” I sneered.

“Then there will be another war in Europe,” Lord Howard announced.

“Oh, I don’t believe there will be, Lord Howard, you wouldn’t want the people of Merry Olde England to start reading causality lists in Europe.” I was dismissive. I was contemptuous as only a true American can be. It’s one of our least endearing qualities. “Thank you, gentlemen.”

The two left the Oval Office with the same dejected facial expressions. The type which comes from realizing you have been upstaged by someone who you had dismissed as a lesser, younger and not so bright cousin. Outsmarted by an upstart. Well, at least at the time, I thought I could distinguish the distaste in his expression; now I’m not so sure.

Otto von Roon, the German Ambassador from the Weimar Republic, entered dressed in what I would consider a totally modern suit ... ultra-modern considering the time period. It painted a sharp contrast with his gray mustache and the gray sides of his hair. The entire picture was uniquely German, it seemed to me he even clicked his heels when I shook his hand.

“Mr. Ambassador, I would like to propose the German government sent its army to China to resist the Japanese takeover of Manchuria.” My voice was stern but friendly.

“Mr. President, I’m sure you recognize my government has a particularly small army, as prescribed by the Treaty of Versailles. It’s suitable only for internal security.” His voice was spirited and brought to mind a schnauzer, sinking his teeth into your pant leg.

I smiled in a polite but knowing way. “So, the Kama tank school you’ve been operating outside of Kazan, exists merely as a piece of humor? A joke to amuse the Russians?” There was a quiet pause between us. One which you could have driven a truck through.

“I must compliment you on the effectiveness of your intelligence services. Still, much as we might want to assist, it’s out of the question. Such an intervention would require our entire army ... which would leave us nothing left for internal security. Under the current political climate, you understand, such support would be beyond our abilities.” He squirmed in his seat as if he was unhappy with his own

answer. "You understand we've been selling arms to the Chinese government. I'm afraid this is about the best we can do."

There was a flash of blinding white light. I sat up in my chair. Annabeth was gawking at me, I swear she had opened even more buttons on her blouse. She gave me an odd stare as if I wasn't supposed to be able to perceive her. Was the game over? Did I lose? What happened? My head was filled with questions, but what I needed was an aspirin. Annabeth started toward me. In the next instant, both the flash and the White House had returned. I shook my head in a sleepy fashion.

Otto was giving me the same stare I'd seen on Annabeth, only his shirt was fully buttoned. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yes," I replied feeling a bit groggy, "I've been up rather late these past few nights. If you don't mind me asking, what is the German government's impression of the Treaty of Versailles?"

"As I am sure you are aware, the German people are not especially fond of the arrangement."

It was the understatement of all understatements. But I suppose diplomats can't use the word hate, can they? "What if I was to tell you the American government was willing to support Germany in her abrogation of the agreement?"

"Meaning?"

"Send your army to China. America will support you raising as many new divisions as you desire. You can build tanks, planes, submarines, the works. All out in the open, no more secret buildings and hidden bases in Russia. The minute the first German soldier sets foot in China. The United States will consider the Versailles Treaty null and void."

"But we can't," Otto stammered over his next few words. "China is a long way from Europe."

"I understand you have an arrangement with the Soviet government. Change the terms. Have them transport your men over the Trans-Siberian railway. The Russians have been selling arms to China as well. I'm sure they would be open to an agreement. In addition, the US Navy will ferry any troops and supplies you might need to drive the Japanese out of Manchuria."

Otto von Roon waited for a moment as if he was half expecting me to take the offer back. "I'll bring it up the Chancellor."

"Please do. Send Chancellor Brüning my compliments." I remarked, showing him to the door.

"I'll send both your messages along as soon as possible," Otto smiled as he shook my hand.

Otto passed Henry L. Stimson, the Secretary of State, on his way out. "Mr. President," Henry seemed distressed. "The Japanese Ambassador is demanding an audience with you, he's quite ... upset."

"Oh? Is it the Japanese turn to be irate today?" I was coy.

"It seems Lord Howard was happy to relate our plans to the Imperial Court," Henry explained in his dulcet tones.

“Tell the Japanese Ambassador he can go to ... no, tell him he can take his protest to the League of Nations. I’m sure they’ll be happy to listen to the Imperial Government’s protests at their next meeting.”

“Mr. President,” Henry seems suspicious, or perhaps a little concerned about my mental health. “As you are no doubt aware, the Japanese walked out of the League after they were censured for the invasion.”

“Well, he’s going to have a problem then.” I smiled. It was one of my devious smiles. I’m good at those. Years of practice in High School. “I believe it would be fitting for the Japanese to have a few problems, don’t you?”

Once the workday was over, I retired to the dining room. I must say, one of the best things about the game was the food. It’s hard for me to imagine how they did this. OK, they had me wired up like the Christmas tree in Central Park, so I sure they could make me witness anything they wanted. Call up memories, movies I had seen. But tastes, how do you do tastes? Especially tastes you have never experienced? Of course. Maine lobster might not really taste like this, I’d never eaten it before. From my point of view, I would have been willing to extend the crisis simply to keep eating the food.

Every day there would be an envelope on my desk. Inside was a telegram with my score. Currently, I was at 10,582. At least it seemed like a good score unless the general idea was to reach ten million. In which case, I was a bit behind. I had no way to tell. With all their technology, it seems as if the game designers could put up some flashing numbers in the room which no one else could see. Well, I guess they wanted to keep everything period specific. I have to hand it to them though, everything seemed unbelievably authentic. Those were my exact thoughts every time I went to bed.

I hope they have a review session after the game is over. I mean for realism, they get top marks ... and I mean *top* marks. But the whole sleeping thing seemed a bit excessive. I guess it was supposed to be like those building games where you must wait while your minions construct your castle. Usually, for those games, I turned the program off during these periods. You could always go back into the game when they were supposed to be done. I would have appreciated spending some time with Annabeth. She seemed to like me.

For the next few months, things went smoothly. The German government agreed to my proposal. I ordered the Navy to move the Pacific Fleet from San Diego to Pearl Harbor. Only I also ordered double torpedo netting installed and around the clock fighter coverage, with the fighters locked away in hangers when not in use. The generals and Admirals were not pleased with my meddling, I can tell you. But I’m nobody’s fool. I’m familiar with what happens when America starts meddling in politics in Asia. The game designers must consider me stupid.

Even the economy started picking up when the government started buying supplies to send to the German army in China. I wish I had done a better job with Keynesian economics when I was in school. I’m sure I could have done a better job with it. The other thing which started picking up was the flashes. One minute I was in the game and the next minute I was in the white room with the chair and Annabeth.

I won’t say seeing Annabeth was unpleasant, it simply seemed like it was some defect in the game process. Sometimes, the return trip lasted for several days in real time. What am I talking about? Annabeth was some of the best parts of the experience. We spent some time together on those longer return trips. She had a better cure for my headaches than aspirin.

But this was still before I knew. Since you're reading this, now you understand as well. It's not a game, it never was. It's a time machine. I not even aware of when it was invented. It's probably the best-kept secret on the planet. All I am familiar with is whoever runs this place has been trying to clean up the mistakes of the past ... for some time now.

It's not working out well. The number I would get every morning, in the telegram? It's the number of additional people who died as the result of my game "solution." I like to say I never got more than 10,582, but I did make my score climb higher ... much higher. So now it's up to you. I was one of the early ones, but I'm on my last life.

Sorry, I had to slip this into your game invite, but I thought you should be aware of what's going on. I have only two requests: 1. Say hello to Annabeth for me. I miss her. And, 2. Watch out for World War 96. Now there was a mess, I can tell you.