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The decor of the courtroom made its authority clear. The walls were painted a business-like faded beige, ~~with not a flick of jivials~~ the floor boards polished to a military shine, the chairs hard and stiff-backed, ~~and~~ ~~and~~ ~~and~~ mirroring the unconditional conformity expected from those who sat nervously upon them. ~~The man sat alone behind his~~  
The man sat alone at his desk, shuffling his small stack of papers absent-mindedly as he looked up ~~towards the men~~ ~~clustered~~ to a cluster of men, safely assentive on the raised podium. ~~Or~~ The shortest of the group ~~had~~ cleared his throat self-righteously and a silence quickly suffocated the murmur of voices behind him. A door opened to the side of the dais and with the short man's shout "all stand!" the room stood as one. ~~A moment or two passed~~ ~~before~~ ~~the~~ A moment or two passed as the court-martial judge settled himself; and then, with a nod, the onslaught began.

"You, Private Mitchells, stand before this tribunal

today to face ~~the~~ the charges brought against your behaviour last October when stationed in Turkey. You have been charged with wilfully disobeying direct military orders ~~which end~~ and subsequently endangering the lives of American civilians. ~~You testified not guilty~~ You have testified not guilty and the panel has heard your case."

The man took a deep breath before meeting the eyes of expectant eyes of the panel ~~to~~ above him. He could see the words forming in the general's mouth, his tongue finding its footing ~~to descend~~ as ~~prone~~ it reached to condemn his past and future.

"We, the court, find you..."

\* \* \*

~~The room was stark~~ The man sat alone in the whitewashed room, his solitude interrupted only by the occasional flicker of the bare lightbulb swinging above his head. ~~He~~ He leaned his head against the white-washed walls, his eyes tired ~~o~~ from reading the old manual now resting in his hands. Beside him lay a telegram, ~~no~~

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a message carefully encrypted so as to be read by his eyes only. With a weary sigh he gathered himself and rose from ~~his stretched post~~ ~~corner~~ the corner ~~to~~ ~~hook~~ his shoulder's ached from huddling in, walking to the control panel ~~that~~ emerging from the opposite wall. The ~~screen~~ screens and buttons <sup>had</sup> seemed anti-climatic ~~when~~ when Private Michaels had first arrived, no bright flashing symbols or wailing sirens to herald the importance of the work he ~~was~~ was about to begin. There was no grandeur in the shelter buried hidden underground, only a sinking sense of responsibility that was difficult to shake. The message had come on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October, a simple directive that left no room for ambiguities: "Station Alpha, ~~test~~ place ICBM on high alert."

Private Michaels had read it almost numbly, and suppressing the anxiety he felt ~~the~~ growing in his stomach, duly typed ~~a~~ the appropriate ~~code~~ code into ~~a~~ <sup>on</sup> ~~the~~ metallic ~~key~~ keypad, ~~the~~ ~~for~~ ~~each~~ each number punching the world a step closer to inevitable destruction. There was no big red button

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to be pressed, for dramatic effect, ~~just a~~  
~~series of~~ no singular ~~no~~ moment of  
accountability his job could be reduced  
to just a series of codes, one number  
after another, an algorithm ~~to take~~ taking  
man's judgement entirely out of the matter.

10 days had passed since the message had  
arrived, ~~and now~~ a week and a half of  
conflicting orders mirroring the back and  
forth ~~between~~ of Kennedy and his men as  
they flitted between a first-strike or a  
retaliatory response. ~~Now the message was~~ ~~than~~  
~~the~~ ~~me~~ The paper was yellowed already from  
the stale air in Michaels' cell, and the  
man clutched it bravely as he faced  
his final instructions awaiting ~~on the~~  
completion, flashing dimly on the center screen.  
Engage ICBM projection code. It was a simple  
code to type, a series of 10 numbers  
the man had checked endlessly in  
the ~~dark~~ manual he'd been handed when  
he arrived so many months ago. ~~It was~~  
~~so~~ ~~it was a simple task~~, The task was  
already overdue, and Michaels knew each

passing second he waited was a precious commodity his country couldn't afford to lose.

The man tried to rationalise the situation, suppress his guilt by logical reasoning, rational argument. Somewhere in Cuba a Russian surely sat just the same as he; ~~finger~~ eyes forward, ~~leg~~ uniform pressed, fingers itching towards a keypad that defined the lives of millions they would never meet. ~~That~~ The two men could be brothers, all humanity and Abel & Cain alike, making <sup>their offerings</sup> to a God as yet undefined with the gentle press of nine ~~with~~ metallic buttons. Michaels took a deep breath and tried to steel himself; I can do this, I can do this, I can ~~do~~

\* \* \*

Private Michaels closed his eyes as his judgement in court was slowly read. He let ~~his~~ the accusations wash over him, he could not claim them unfair. Despite the flaws in the trial process he could not dispute his misdemeanours really, he had disobeyed them he had sworn to

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obey. As the general pronounced his sentence - execution surely - a single terrible wish crossed Michael's mind. If only I had pressed the button. Fleeting as it was, Michael was ashamed of the thought. Condemn all humanity for self-preservation? It was what was asked of him, by his government and his country, but with a slight tear he redirected it as a wish. He couldn't make.

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