

# Phil Marlowe, He Ain't

By Bill Wolfe

On day three, the first two recruits dropped, puss-down in the sand. If they're lucky, their clocks'll stop before the siphons find 'em. It's been twenty years by my Stream and I still got scars. Soon as Tail-End Charlie passed 'em by without more'n an eyeball twitch, two Tenders phased-in and snatched 'em. The Kid's still goin' strong. He don't even look thirsty. I'm keepin' peepers on him, sure. He's gettin' the thin part of a B&B. No doubt about it, but danged if I can tell how. With my fine-tuned detectivatin, I'm seein' he takes a whiz or two every day. The rest of these newbies ain't pissed since day one.

I'm takin' notes on this Kid. Lot's of notes. He might think he's slick but he won't pull nothin' over on me. I'm writin' down what he says, what he does, where he stops to rest, to pee, to sleep. Everything.

All's I know is that you could'a knocked me over with an electron when I hear that his letter of reference is from good old Timmy Sputnik, my mentor in the Program.

He's a legend in the Corps, you know. Figured-out this test halfway through day one, busted a rock to get a sharp frag and slit his wrists. Genius, that one. Tried to teach me how to think like a true Temporal Detective. Some of it musta' stuck, I'm still kickin'. Field work didn't work-out too good, for me, though, so I'm running the death march for Basic Training. Recruits think it's a survival test, but the real object is to teach 'em what it's like to die. 'Course, we bring 'em back and revive 'em once they kick. Half drop-out after this little exercise, which is why we do it early.

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Day six, the Kid's still goin'. Hell, he ain't even hungry! We got ten full-time Time Dicks keepin' an eyeball on him and we're gettin' diddly. At this rate he'll be out of the temporal blocking field by nightfall, tomorrow. This field's special, only instructors can time-phase in it, it negates all known tech and magic. It's some of the highest tech the Corps' got and somehow the Kid's beatin' it like slippin' on ice. Commandant's gonna have my balls if I don't figure this out, pronto. And one more thing, there ain't no damn water within a thousand klicks. This planet is dryer than Arrakis in its heyday and makes Mars look like a swamp.

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Damn that Sputnik! He's bustin' my chops without even showin' up. The Kid made it out of the field and then this Downstream version shows up and jaws with him for a minute. At which point the Kid just sits down and waits. I'm licked and I know it. You know, the Kid reminds me a little of old Sputnik. He always seemed to be just a little too good at what he did. Sputnik beat this test by offin' himself early. It just occurred to me that the Kid has gone and done it, too. Only he done it by survivin' the unsurvivable. Damn.

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"Once again, young man, and this is an order: How did you survive for almost a week without food or water?" The Commandant was tryin' hard not to sound like he was pleading. He wasn't quite makin' it. The sawbones had already confirmed that the Kid hadn't suffered much more'n a sunburn.

"Sir, once again, my Downstream self showed-up at the end of the test and told me that it wasn't a survival test at all, it was a test to see how we faced death. And he told me that I never tell anyone what happened." The Kid didn't even blink. "If I tell you, won't it trigger a causality loop?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I've checked Downstream as far as I'm cleared, and the records show that you never do. They also showed that I asked. You're free to go, young man. Dismissed."

But after the Kid leaves, I hadda ask. I just hadda. Timmy Sputnik had screwed me bad, but he was still the best Time Dick I ever met. Maybe he knew something that I didn't. Maybe he knew lots more.

"Commandant?"

"Yes, Chief Instructor."

"Sir, you're cleared for a lot farther Downstream than I am. This Kid. He's gonna make it big, ain't he? He's gonna really do somethin'!"

"You know, Chief Instructor, you might just have saved your job."

"Sir?"

"After this fiasco, I was thinking of transferring you to a Quartermaster position, but perhaps you've got a knack for spotting promising young recruits after all."

"Sir?"

"You're dismissed, Chief Instructor."

"Yes Sir. Thank you, Sir." As I skedattled, I was more'n a little bent that he hadn't answered my question. Then I wondered. . . maybe he did.

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In due time the Kid did his stint as an Instructor. Just about every agent with some down time—usually for injuries—pulled the duty.

He'd get the chip to allow his Temporal Manipulator to work in the blocking field, and then he'd have a little hiking to do. Fortunately, somebody back then had kept scrupulous notes concerning

his daily activities. Max had sent him the sixpack of Bloodguard nutrient solution he'd asked for, and now all he had to do was to phase fifty years back, bury one edible bottle at each location where he decided to sleep and leave it for his younger self to lie down upon.

He knew full-well that his Upstream self would find the first glass bottle as he tried to figure out what that lump was, under his back. After that, it was easy. He only had to write the note for the first one. Low tech time travel was always the best.

The note read: Head north. Sleep where you want. Five more like this. Keep quiet till we talk.

And, of course, it was his own signature that convinced him.

Larrye

The End