

TALES OF THE FORGOTTEN



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A WHISKEY TANGO FOXTROT NOVEL

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By W. J. Lundy



Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

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PROLOGUE

It had been weeks since the first attack – since the day the world went dark and everyone had forgotten about them. The day he lost his company and most of his friends. They must have more to worry about than a half-dozen stranded soldiers in the back forty of the world. No contact, no messages, not even a flyover from a friendly aircraft. They were completely isolated and alone.

“Target, twelve o’clock. Primal on the wire,” the spotter whispered.

Brad’s team had done well for themselves, considering their situation. They had held up in the customs compound at Hairatan; they’d fortified it, made it a refuge. Their previous mission, in their old life, had been to patrol the streets looking for the Taliban. Now they worked with a former Taliban commander named Junayd, rescuing civilians and rebuilding in the furthest reaches of Afghanistan. Once enemies, they were now unified in a common goal to survive.

“Identified, primal on the wire,” Brad whispered, pulling the rifle into his shoulder and letting his cheek rest on the butt stock. Gripping the heavy M24’s handguards tightly, he forced himself to relax as he lined his dominant eye up with the scope.

The routines had become monotonous, the same tasks over and over. His deployment to Afghanistan had felt the same, but this was different. There was no real end to this, no day circled on a calendar to work towards. No goal to reach, no motivation to press forward. This was just surviving every day, day after day. They did patrols into the city to salvage goods and locate survivors. They had found plenty of the latter, but never any soldiers. He feared his men might be the last remaining U.S. forces in country.

“Range twelve hundred meters, dial eighteen plus one click,” ordered the spotter.

The compound was home now. Survivors of all types seeking refuge had come here looking for safety inside the fences. They all came together working the walls and doing the tasks that kept a camp running, soldiers and civilians side by side now. Brad’s men knew the compound wouldn’t stand against a large mass attack. How could it? Their own base had fallen in the first days, and it had been heavily fortified. That was when the attacks came in the thousands. More recently they would come at the walls in twos or threes. Unless something alerted them, it was very rare to see more than ten at a time during the daylight. No one wanted to think about a mob pressed against their gates, but they knew they were out there.

“Roger, eighteen plus one dialed in,” Brad answered.

His men hated the patrols. But they were a necessary evil, essential to the survival of the group. This wasn’t like hunting the Taliban, which could lead to days or even weeks of boredom, broken only by minutes of unrelenting violence. This was constant. The soldiers were almost guaranteed to run

into conflict every time they left the wire. And unlike before, there would be no calls for medevacs or air support. During the last patrol Brad went on, they'd searched the village market. From all appearances, the place had been abandoned and well picked over, but they needed to break into the storage warehouse to be sure.

"Wind from three o'clock, six miles per hour, dial wind right, two point three," came the spotter's adjustments.

The warehouse was infested with the primals. When they'd opened the large, double doors, they were immediately engaged. They often found hives of them behind locked, barricaded, and closed doors like this. In the early days of the attacks, families would seek refuge in their homes, securing themselves in, often with wounded loved ones in tow—not knowing that their injured family members would turn and attack them in their final hiding place. That was before they'd known how it spread, how deadly it was. Before they knew a deep cut or bite would bring on the rage.

"Roger, dialed two point three, target indexed," Brad whispered, making adjustments to the rifle without taking his eye off the target.

It had taken most of the day and a large amount of ammo to clear out that hive. They had no sure strategy against them; the primals played by no rules. Primals massed quickly and would pour from every direction if they sensed prey. They had no fear of injury or death; they couldn't be suppressed; there was no shock and awe to use against them. Primals couldn't be intimidated into surrender.

Battle drills called for shutting down the immediate threat as quickly as possible, then getting very stealthy, running and hiding from the later waves of primals that always showed up. In the city it was pointless to attempt to stand your ground, there would always be too many. Stealth and escape were the only things that worked.

"Take the shot," the spotter whispered.

Who knew what they would do when the ammo ran out. Close combat with primals was a nightmare; they were fast and strong, and they never tired. They didn't hesitate to strike and they wouldn't quit if they thought a meal was nearby. Brad needed to make long term preparations, but his people were always too busy surviving to look to the future. They needed to make contact with the States, their families, and their command. They needed help.

"Firing," Brad said as he focused the sight picture and pulled the trigger during the natural pause in his breathing.

The SEAL Team Chief was the only one to have had contact with the military after the attacks, but even that was lost when the satellite phone batteries died. Sean told Brad that NATO had pulled out all of the soldiers in the first days. They had been re-called to defend their homelands. Brad's men were not so lucky, blindsided by the fog of war. The government gave little advanced warning that the attacks were coming; as always, '*the need to know*' didn't reach the soldiers on the ground or in remote camps. They were afraid if the intelligence about the biological attack leaked, the enemy would strike early, before the Special Forces could stop them. Either way they'd lost.

"Hit, head, target down," confirmed the spotter.

The fog of war and Murphy's Law had taken down innumerable members in the attacks. Now they were alone, lost and outnumbered. ~~A dozen men from a lost patrol were of little concern to the big picture in the fight for humanity.~~ The United States was under attack and fighting for survival. How could they spare resources to look for others when they were fighting for their own lives? Those were the arguments Brad used to justify the abandonment to his men, but he didn't have one for himself. As hard as it would be to leave the safety of this compound, the decision was clear. Someone needed to leave, to reach out; without support they wouldn't make it out here alone.

"Roger, hit," Brad replied, opening the bolt and chambering another round. This was his seventh kill this morning, and the start to a long watch.

Forward Operating Base Bremmel

Zero day plus one.

He wasn't a bad soldier, just misunderstood. Sergeant Robert Logan was always in trouble, not on the job, but for things he did on his own time. His last adventure had caused him to oversleep and not show up on time for duty. That cost him his team leader position and sentenced him to a week of working in the chow hall. Now the rest of Echo Company was preparing for a patrol, and he was getting ready for a day slinging hash. Time in the mess hall sucks, but not as bad as watching your men roll out without you.

Robert was helping Corporal Méndez prepare his crew for today's mission; this would be his first as team leader. Robert was nervously quizzing him to make sure he was ready for the responsibility. Méndez told him to relax, that everything would be fine. He had a solid crew, Specialist Eric was a good driver, and Private Ryan was one of the best gunners in the company. Besides, it wasn't Robert's concern today, his job was serving up breakfast and the last thing he needed was to be late for work again. Robert shook his former teammates' hands and wished them luck on today's patrol, then walked away towards the chow hall.

It felt strange for Robert to be going to work without the body armor and weapons he was used to. He still carried his M9 pistol in a holster, but other than that he felt naked. Robert made his way to the mess hall and said good morning to the mess sergeant that ran the dining facility. She gave him a scowl, obviously not happy that she was always being assigned the other units' troublemakers to work in her facility. She needed the help though, and couldn't afford to turn anyone away.

She told Robert to get washed up and got him started on peeling and slicing hard boiled eggs. Robert was disgusted by the work assignment, but he settled in and got busy. Even though it sucked, he found the work surprisingly easy. He looked over the counter at the end of his work area and watched the soldiers begin to pile in for the morning meal service.

After a few minutes of peeling eggs, Robert decided to put himself on break and he wandered into the seating area. He saw a good friend of his and a fellow troublemaker, Staff Sergeant Bolder, just sitting down with his tray. Robert grabbed a cup of coffee and made his way over.

"Hey Bolder, how you doin', buddy?" Robert asked him as he sat down at the table across from his longtime friend.

"I'm good, I see they still got you on Kitchen Patrol, how long you got to do this for?" asked

Bolder.

“Well, Sergeant Turner says I can be done at the end of the week if I stop being late all the time, but he said K.P. will be my permanent job if I screw up again. It’s all bullshit, man. So anyway, what new on camp?”

“Shit bro, didn’t you hear? There was a big fight in the aid station last night ... Yeah, from the medevac that brought in those wounded civilians yesterday,” Bolder said.

“What? That was just a bunch of women and children and such. They were just cut up and scratched bad; I even helped unload them from the choppers.”

“Yeah, that’s the group,” replied Bolder. “Seems they got into some shit, must have been on acid or something, ‘cause a couple hours after the medics got them all patched up and into bed, them folks woke up angry as hell. They went ape shit on the medics. Damn, even the kids were biting and scratching at everyone. Had to pull security off the walls to handle them,” explained Bolder.

“What the hell bro, that’s crazy! So where they at now?” asked Robert.

“Oh, the Military Police got them all locked up, but man, it took half the guards on night shift to shut them down, wasn’t cool, bro. I’ve never seen nothing like it. Anyhow, the captain gave all the guards the rest of the night off and told them to get some sleep. He called my crew in early to take over. They needed it though man, some of those guys had some deep scratches; a couple even got the shit bit out of them.”

“Man, this place is crazy. They just need to send our asses home. Got drugged up civilians attacking us now; what’s next, you know?” said Robert.

“I hear ya buddy, I hear ya,” answered Bolder, shoveling in a forkful of eggs.

Robert was about to get up and head back into the kitchen when he heard a loud commotion coming from the main entrance. He turned to see what was going on just as two soldiers burst through the front door. One was dressed only in pants with no shirt; the other was wearing a T-shirt and shorts. The shirtless man had tackled a soldier in the doorway, and several others were trying to pull him off.

The mess sergeant ran from the kitchen looking angry as hell and ready to confront them. Yelling she charged directly into the chaos. T-Shirt pushed off from the crowd and ran directly at her, grabbing at her shoulders. The mess sergeant screamed for help just as the crazed soldier took a snarling bite out of her exposed neck. Robert could see the man pull back with his mouth full of flesh and blood spurting out of the wound. The mess sergeant staggered backwards and fell to the floor.

Robert got over the initial shock of what he had just witnessed. He un-holstered his pistol, took aim, and pulled the trigger. He put two rounds into T-Shirt, knocking him back and away from the mess sergeant. Several soldiers ran to her and began first aid.

Robert stood dazed, with the smoking gun in his hands. To draw and fire had been instinctive, his training taking over; but now to see an American soldier dead by his hands stunned him. Robert holstered the weapon as the chaos woke him from his stupor. He ran over to help the other soldiers restrain the first shirtless man, but he was fighting hard and they were finding it impossible to pin him down.

With the mess hall in chaos, nobody noticed T-Shirt stumble and crawl back to his feet. He

staggered forward with the two bleeding gunshot wounds in his chest and tackled a small female soldier providing aid to the mess sergeant. Robert heard her scream. Turning, he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that T-Shirt was back up and attacking again. *What the fuck?* Robert thought. He started to rush towards the female to help against T-Shirt just as four more crazed soldiers ran into the crowd that had gathered outside the doors.

What the hell is going on? Robert again thought to himself. He stood and took a step backwards, fending off his feelings of panic. Off to the right he could see that the shirtless man was now winning the fight. He had taken a bite out of a soldier and a couple of others had nearly quit in exhaustion. To the left, T-Shirt had silenced the small female and was now wrestling with a third soldier. Back outside the doorway, it was a cluster of bloody bodies all battling for leverage. Fear had taken over and confusion was winning the fight.

Then the gunfire started outside. The first shots startled Robert, the familiar sounds again sparking his training; he redrew his pistol, putting two more rounds into T-Shirt and knocking him down for a final time. Stepping closer, he plugged a final round into his skull. Pivoting hard on his feet towards the shirtless man, he raised his weapon and emptied the magazine into his naked chest, ending the struggle. Shortly after he fired his last shot, the shirtless soldier stopped moving and slumped to the ground. The fight outside was growing, and one of the wounded soldiers jumped to secure the mess hall doors, locking out the madness just beyond them. A few more saw what he was doing and followed suit by piling tables and chairs against the entryway.

Robert turned to look around the room ... the two attackers were down and dead. He saw at least four other soldiers lying on the floor bleeding heavily. Five others were in the room, most of them also covered in cuts and scratches. The cooks came from the kitchen into the dining facility to assist giving first aid. He saw Bolder again; he had a long scratch down his arm from the fight with Shirtless, and Robert asked him if he was okay.

“Yeah I'm good. Man, that wasn't right. That's exactly what went down in the aid station last night. You think them civilians could have slipped these guys some of the same drugs?”

“I don't know Bolder, but those guys were tough as hell. I shot one twice and he still got up and kept fighting. What's going on outside? It sounds like a riot,” answered Robert.

Robert and Bolder walked to a window and looked out. The camp was a mess; they could see soldiers fighting soldiers everywhere. Some had weapons drawn and were firing into masses of fighting men. Everyone was in a panic and in complete disorder.

“Bolder, we've got to get out of here. Let's get back to the company building and find out what's going on,” Robert said.

With Robert leading the way, the two of them cut back through the kitchen and out a back door. The back of the mess hall was positioned against a long concrete T-wall that protected it from mortar and rocket fire. A service entrance led from the back of the kitchen and followed the wall around onto a dirt street. Robert made his way through the service area and guided Bolder onto the street. It suddenly grew quiet and the gunfire ceased. Only screams of agony and the voices of soldiers shouting orders remained in the air.

Robert rounded a corner and looked to the left. He saw that most of the fighting in front of the mess hall had stopped. There were a lot of bodies on the ground. Confused and shocked soldiers

walked the camp, staring at the fallen. Robert and Bolder moved in the direction of the company buildings; they could see soldiers sitting on the ground with cuts on their arms and faces. Others were weeping and trying to provide aid to their friends.

Robert walked with Bolder across the open space. They stood stunned, looking at the destruction around them. There were two dead soldiers in front of them. The soldiers looked like they had been torn apart by animals. Another soldier lay to their left; he had a bandaged arm, and his chest and head showed fatal gunshot wounds.

“That’s Erickson,” Bolder said, pointing at the bandaged man. “He was one of the guards that got attacked last night.”

The silence was suddenly shattered by sirens blaring and loudspeakers announcing, “*Incoming ground attack, all available personnel to assigned security sector.*”

“You got to be fucking kidding me! Let’s go, Robert, time to get to work!” Bolder yelled before he turned and headed for the wall.

Robert looked at the pistol in his hand; he loaded his last magazine, then picked up a rifle off the ground next to a dead soldier and ran after Bolder towards the wall. They got to the front gate just in time to see a large jingle truck racing towards the entrance. The truck was going fast, driving erratically, and blaring its horn. The men on watch fired flares and warning shots but the truck raced on. When they were certain it wasn’t going to stop, they opened up on it with their heavy machine guns. The large caliber rounds ripped into the engine block, skipping through the truck, blowing out the cab and killing the driver. The truck came to a rolling stop in a ditch just short of the first set of barriers.

A young officer with a gold subdued lieutenant’s bar on his helmet pointed at Bolder and Robert. “You two! Get out there and secure that vehicle.”

“Hooah sir,” Bolder sarcastically grumbled back. He slapped Robert on the shoulder. “You ready for this, bro?”

“Lead the way,” Robert answered.

They weaved through the barriers and slowly approached the truck. The destroyed engine made a clicking sound as it died and cooled off in the heat. The front was bleeding coolant onto the ground; steam and smoke billowed from holes in the hood. Robert rounded the front of the truck, sliced the corner with his rifle and aimed into the cab. He found a mess inside with little left to investigate.

They began to lower their weapons when they heard a whimper coming from the covered bed of the vehicle. Bolder gave Robert a quick hand signal and they pressed back to the rear of the jingle truck. Robert took a step back and raised his rifle, providing cover while Bolder lifted the canvas to peer inside.

“Oh shit,” Bolder gasped.

Robert stepped forward to look inside and saw the bed of the truck was littered with wounded civilians, most of them children.

“Lieutenant! We need a medic up here!” Robert yelled back over his shoulder. The lieutenant and another young soldier ran forward to the truck and looked inside.

“Sir? You want me to call for a medic?” the young soldier asked.

“No, they’re busy with the wounded inside, they won’t have time for this shit!” the lieutenant snapped back in frustration.

They heard a soft voice from the front of the covered truck bed, quietly calling for help. Robert climbed over the tailgate of the truck and into the bed, moving forward until he found the man who spoke.

“I’m here,” Robert said.

“Water,” the man pleaded.

Robert yelled the request back at the men and the young soldier tossed him a small bottle of water. Robert opened the container and helped the man sip.

“Why did you run at our gate?” Robert asked. “Why didn’t you stop?”

“We didn’t run *at* your gate, we ran *to* your gate. We ran from *them*,” answered the dying man.

“Ran? Ran from whom?” Robert asked.

The man gave Robert an exhausted, sad look. He raised his hand, pointing over and behind the men standing at the back of the truck. “From death,” he said.

Robert strained to look into the distance. It was difficult to see from the darkness of the covered truck and out into the hot bright sunlight. Far off in the distance, through the waves of heat on the pavement, he could make out a large group of people headed in their direction. Robert looked back down at the man and saw that he had passed.

“Well shit, here it comes,” grumbled the lieutenant, looking in the same direction. “Right on time that would be the villagers from town coming to protest the dead civilians from last night. I’m sure this truck full of bodies isn’t going to help things.”

“L.T., the man in the truck said they were running away from that group; maybe it’s more of what just happened inside. I don’t think they’re protestors,” said Robert.

“Well, nice story, but he can’t help us now. Let’s get back to the barrier and get ready to meet our guests,” the lieutenant argued.

Robert and Bolder turned, closed the tailgate, buttoned down the canvas cover on the truck, and then headed back to the camp’s gate and barriers.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Bolder,” Robert mumbled.

“I know, just stay sharp bro. I got your back,” Bolder said.

They moved behind the barrier and took up a position just inside the open gate. Robert saw the mob moving closer. Yeah, they were definitely pissed off, they were even running! Robert had seen protests at Bremmel before, but usually they were pretty well orchestrated. This one appeared to be spontaneous, with no leader, and they were coming fast.

An Afghan soldier moved to the barrier and started yelling through a bullhorn, commanding the mob to stop approaching the base and to keep their distance. Several more Afghan soldiers dragged a heavy roll of coiled wire across the road, blocking the entrance to the barriers. But they kept coming.

They passed a sign far out on the road that warned that violators would be shot if they approached the base. The mob continued to run.

The lieutenant ordered warning shots, and the machine gunner fired quickly over the crowd, but they didn't slow, didn't even flinch. "Gas!" the lieutenant shouted. The soldiers on the barrier fired tear gas canisters into the charging mob, but they never even paused. The CS grenades bounced off some of the protestors, knocking them to the ground, but they got back up and continued running. "Shotguns up!" the lieutenant yelled, panic growing in his voice. The Afghan soldiers raised shotguns and readied themselves for the mob.

The first wave hit the wire with a screeching roar, but that was quickly outdone by the sounds of the screaming crowd. Protestors were tangled and pushed deeper and deeper into the wire by those behind them. Eventually they collapsed and were pressed to the ground, their bodies covering the jagged strands of barbed wire. Screaming protestors from the back began to climb up and over the fallen, and resumed their charge at the base.

"Open fire!" the lieutenant screamed frantically as he stepped backwards. The first volley of shotgun rounds dropped a few of the charging protestors, but most of them made it to the barricades. The Afghan soldiers were firing as quickly as they could, but with little effect. They racked and fired into the crowd, quickly reloading as they expended every round. The rioters continued screaming and breaching the barriers, the shotguns seemingly worthless against them.

Robert quickly noticed why. They were firing crowd dispersal rounds and rubber bullets that bounced off the crowd or only temporarily slowed them. The lieutenant was expecting protestors, not a feral crowd of rioters. The mob started to push over the barriers. As the barricades tumbled, the mass of people flooded towards the gates. "Weapons free! Fire!" the now fully panicked lieutenant screamed.

Robert saw several of the Afghan soldiers drop their guns and turn to run; others just stood paralyzed by fear as the protestors breached the barriers and swarmed over them. The M2 machine gun on the tower opened up into the crowd, knocking them down, but his angle was wrong. They were too close to the gates now, too close for him to stop them all. The rounds carved a path through the mob, but others continued to pour in and quickly filled the void as the gunner reloaded.

Robert and Bolder raised their rifles and fired almost point blank into the crazed mob. Robert thought his rifle wasn't working as he fired round after round into the charging protestors with no effect. A frenzied man broke free of the swarm and ran directly at Robert. Ignoring direct hits to the chest, he grabbed Robert in a bear hug. Robert tried desperately to push off but it was impossible with the weight of the crowd guiding the man into him. Robert tripped and fell backwards with the man on top of him. He struggled against the weight of the man and the stampeding of feet pounding into him. He felt the man in his face, could feel his breath against his scalp. All he could hear was the pounding footsteps of the crowd and the frenzied screaming of the mob.

Robert violently struggled with the man, trying to push him off or roll him to the side. The man pressed in tight to Robert's head and grabbed at his ear with his teeth. Robert screamed with pain and rage. He freed a hand and was able to draw his pistol, quickly pushing the barrel into the man's abdomen and firing four quick shots. Robert could feel the sticky warmth of the man's blood on his hands. The man bucked slightly, pausing only briefly before he continued to bite, gnawing deeper into Robert's forehead and face. Robert contorted his body, finally freeing the length of his arm. He

painfully raised the pistol to the man's head and squeezed the trigger.

Hairatan Customs Compound

Zero day plus thirty-two.

Brad sat on the roof of the warehouse looking out at the dark city. The fires had quit burning days ago; the blackness had blanketed the city. There was still an occasional scream, and sometimes a gunshot, but for the most part the city had grown silent over the past few weeks. The compound-turned-refugee-camp was growing in size. They had almost two hundred residents now. Most of them had come in the early days of the outbreak: hungry, scared and looking for a home.

Junayd's people would find them on their daily patrols, and if they were friendly, he brought them back to the compound. Brad didn't know how many had been turned away, if any. It was a conversation he didn't want to have. They left the questions of who to take in and who to turn away with the locals. Brad considered Junayd the mayor of this refuge; if anything, he thought of himself as the sheriff. The informal relationship had worked, and the camp was prospering, as well as any camp in a wasteland.

When Brad looked over the edge of the roof and into the compound, he could see his people moving about. *'His people', when did he start thinking of them as that?* Brad looked out at the gates and walls and saw soldiers patrolling the fences, standing watch alongside Junayd's men. The Afghan fighters didn't have the same training and discipline as his soldiers. Even so, they had proven themselves to be trusted warriors over the past month. Many times the Afghans had impressed him; they were very dedicated and loyal to the families they protected.

Brad descended the ladder back into the warehouse, walking through the living area and out into the cool night air. He found a quiet spot, and sat in front of the building that overlooked the gates and his men on watch. He was struggling with the offer that the SEALs had presented to him in recent days. They had asked him to leave this place, to attempt to make it back to Bremmel and beyond, back to society. It was becoming apparent that nobody was going to rescue them. *Were they really forgotten?*

Junayd's scouts had made several runs into some of the neighboring villages, but never returned with good news. They had once braved the bridge and attempted to visit the north. They found large packs of roaming primals. After several dangerous encounters, they wisely determined the risk was too great. The bridge was now completely barricaded; nothing would be able to pass it without a bulldozer.

Sometimes they would see the packs standing on the far side of the river. They probed and hunted

for a way to cross. So far, the swiftly moving water had stopped them. Still, Brad worried what would happen when winter came. Would the primals freeze like the river? Or would they walk across the frozen waters?

Initially they had hoped the disease would run its course and the primals would succumb to it. That day never came. Even thirty days later, the numbers were just as great as before, and in fact were growing. It was true that they saw less of them during the daylight. Primals didn't like the heat.

On a cool, overcast day the killers were out in force. But when the sun was bright, you would only encounter them indoors, or occasionally in a shadow. At night they were the most dangerous. Primals would come out of their hiding places and hunt freely, roaming the streets and polluting the night air with their moans.

The damn moaning! It reminded Brad of the howling wolves and coyotes from his home in northern Michigan. The thought of home made him smile; it was a place far different from this. *I wonder if I'll ever see the green forest again?* he thought to himself. Quickly he put the idea away; it was dangerous to get distracted on the job. He shook his head, smiling again. *Am I even on the job anymore?*

The last one they'd killed was emaciated; its eyes were glazed over and the skin had pulled tight over its bones. Junayd's lead scout, Hasan, had found it tangled in the wire way out past the main fences on one of his patrols. The thing was obviously malnourished and beaten, but it still fought with the strength of five men. Hasan said even after he had removed its head, the primal's eyes had looked at him with hatred and rage until they went dark.

Hasan had proven to be a good hunter. Every day he took groups out to scout and salvage items from the city. Brad didn't know much about the man; he had been mostly silent and usually kept to himself. Even the other Afghans tended to keep their distance. Brad wondered what his story was. Junayd trusted him, and even Brad's own soldiers would volunteer to patrol with Hasan on occasion.

Brad rose to his feet and made his way into the guardhouse they had converted into their barracks. It wasn't the most ideal housing. It was drafty and dusty, and the cinder block walls and concrete floors were less than inviting. His men had done their best to make it cozy with items from the rail yard and things the soldiers had scavenged out on the daily patrols. His bunk was in a corner tucked back in the rear of the guardhouse. His area would be considered sparse at best. Brad had always been a professional soldier and had never taken the time to collect many things, but now there was even less. Next to his bunk he kept his personal possessions; nothing more than a large pack, his armor, and a rifle. He didn't own much now in this new life.

Brad sat on his bunk and looked around the room. Some of the soldiers were still up, but it wasn't like before in the barracks in Bremmel. There wasn't any horseplay, no playing of cards; the men had to keep quiet for fear of luring in the primals. No one was reading books; the guardhouse was too dimly lit at night for that. Laptops and game systems were a thing of the past. They now survived in a quiet solitude. Brad lay back on his rack watching the ceiling, wondering how things might be different at home, his real home. Maybe it *was* time to leave.

Brad woke to the stench of the cooking Afghan slop and his stomach turned. If there was one thing they had plenty of, it was the cans of mystery meat. They had found nearly ten full train cars of the stuff. Nobody enjoyed it, but at least they wouldn't starve. He just couldn't get used to the taste and the greasy coating it left in one's mouth after eating it. Lately it was breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The soldiers had handed over most of the real food to the families, but occasionally they would have their meals augmented with rice and beans collected in the daily scavenge runs.

Brad sat up in his bed and grabbed his shower kit. Standing and stretching, he moved out to the communal showers they had built behind his new barracks. Miraculously they still had running water. Henry, his young driver with aspirations of being an engineer, said the water came from a well. The pumps were powered by solar cells that were installed on the roof. Brad really didn't care how all of it worked, as long as it did. He put the young soldier in charge of facilities, and he had done wonders in turning the place around. Henry's main pride and joy had been the solar water heater: water heated by the sun. It had made him a bit of a hero around camp.

Brad found Sean, the SEAL team chief, on his way to the showers. Sean was heavily bearded now, as most of them were.

"You have an answer for me on that offer yet?" Sean asked Brad with a smile.

"I do. I think you're right and I want in, but let me break it to Turner and the men first. I don't know how they will react," Brad answered.

"Fair enough Brad, but be quick about it, we plan to leave at first light tomorrow. We have a lot of preparations to make," replied Sean.

Sean left him alone and Brad continued on to the showers. They weren't much, just some piping shrouded with some heavy canvas. But it was enough, and he quickly found himself enjoying his solitude in the hot water. Even though they had all been warned to be brief in the showers, he took a couple of extra minutes today. He reluctantly exited the hot water, knowing it might be his last hot shower for a while. Brad gathered his things and returned to the barracks to ready himself for another long day.

After dressing in a clean uniform, Brad walked over to the soldiers' fire pit behind the guardhouse. He found a place on the large crate converted into a table and took a seat. One of the Afghans who worked the soldiers' kitchen nodded to him and brought him a steaming bowl of the slop, which Brad accepted with a forced smile. Turner, the unit's platoon sergeant, took notice of Brad and placed his own bowl in a wash basin, then walked over and took a seat next to him. Turner took a small tobacco box out of his jacket pocket, and laid it across his lap.

"So I was talking to Brooks this morning; he told me you were considering leaving with them,"

Turner said while fumbling with a scrap of paper and trying to roll a cigarette.

“Still messing with those cigarettes I see. You know you’ll be out soon, and withdrawal is going to kick your ass,” answered Brad.

“Nahh, I won’t run out, the Afghan boys have been bringing me tons of this stuff, and one of them found a rail car topped off with it. I’ll run out of paper before tobacco, and then I’ll just switch to a pipe.”

“Well, sounds like you have it all figured out then,” chuckled Brad.

“So seriously, you really leaving us or what?” asked Turner, licking the cigarette then sparking a match to light it.

“Word sure travel fast here, I guess some things never change.”

“So is that a yes then? The way you’re jumping around the subject I’m assuming that it is.” Turner took a long drag on his cigarette. “Hey man, seriously, don’t worry about me, I got your back whatever you decide. I’m more concerned about the men, and they rely on you.”

“I think it’s for the best, Turner. We can’t just sit here forever. I want to go see what’s left down south, maybe we can contact the States from there, you know. And technically I am still on the job. I’m sure if they knew we were here, the Army wouldn’t approve of us just getting cozy. It’s time for me to move on.” Brad rose to his feet. “I really do appreciate your support, Turner, I really do,” he said as he walked past the basin and tossed in his bowl.

Brad made his way to the main gate. He spoke to the remainder of his men, informing them of his plan and that he would be leaving with the SEALs in the morning. Many volunteered to go with him; he explained they would be needed to provide security to the camp. Brad promised to return for them as soon as he could, and somehow he would make contact with the camp again. There were no arguments, and the soldiers shook his hand and promised to help him prepare his gear for the coming journey.

He went back into the guardhouse and took a seat on his bunk. Looking around his living space, he took stock of things he would need on the trip. He didn’t have much that the Army didn’t issue. Brad opened the mouth of his large rucksack and stuffed in his clothing and the remainder of his gear. He placed the most needed equipment on top or in the outside pockets. Tightly rolling his bedroll, he attached it to the top of his pack. He stared at his protective gas mask for a second before smiling and tossing it aside; it landed with a thud on the bulletproof plates that he had removed from his body armor long ago.

He checked and double-checked the ordnance on his vest. He still had twelve magazines for his M4 and three for his M9, plus a couple of frag grenades just in case. He looked over the snaps to make sure everything was securely fastened. He picked up the Sigma pistol, carefully removing the magazine and making sure it was topped off. For some reason he had started considering the pistol his good luck charm, even though he’d never fired it. Maybe the fact that he had never needed it made it lucky. Brad wiped the pistol off and tucked it into the smaller day pack that he had attached to the outside of his larger rucksack, then put on the overloaded vest and hoisted the heavy pack onto his back. Taking a last look around the room, he sighed, then headed out the door.

Brad found Brooks and Sean working on a late model Land Rover Defender in their makeshift

motor pool situated between the warehouses.

“She was a gift from Junayd,” said Brooks over his shoulder as he watched Brad make his way to them.

“You don’t want to take the MRAP?” asked Brad.

“We thought about it, but decided it wouldn’t be right. That MRAP makes a hell of a life boat if your men ever need to bug out of here in a hurry. I don’t think I’d ever feel good about taking that piece of security away from them,” explained Sean. “There won’t be a lot of room, but we should do OK. Can you get your gear over here so we can start packing?”

Brad dropped the heavy rucksack and attached it to the vehicle’s roof rack. He saw that the SEALs had done the same with their own bags. Unlike the SEALs, who carried an abundance of weapons, Brad still considered himself a light infantry man. He carried a standard issue 9mm pistol and his M4 carbine augmented with the suppressor he’d been given. On his vest, he carried a full combat load of ammunition and two M67 fragmentation grenades.

The SEALs, on the other hand, humped a much larger kit. Multiple fragmentation grenades and anti-personnel mines (claymores) were strapped to the outside of their packs. Both of them had suppressed long rifles attached to the tops of their rucksacks. Shorter MP5 submachine guns were always slung across their chest for quick access. They wore H&K MK23 pistols on their hips, and even smaller .22 caliber MKII pistols were carried in their packs. Brad thought it was overkill to carry so many weapons when you only had two hands, but he appreciated the firepower when it was needed.

They spent the rest of the afternoon taking inventory of food and ammo, and deciding what to bring. Water took priority for space, and then food. The team wouldn’t have much more ammo than their personal allotment. There were large stores of it in the warehouse, but the team had unanimously decided that it would be better to leave it with the camp. There would be plenty of it at Bremmel, and they could always scrounge for more on the road. They finished off the packing with a row of four 5-gallon fuel cans strapped to a rack on the rear bumper of the vehicle.

“Ha! We look like damn hillbillies ready to move off to Beverly,” said Brooks with a deep laugh.

The last night in camp was spent sitting on the roof of the warehouse with Junayd and his elders. Sean had his map laid out in front of them, and Junayd was marking it with the best sources of fresh water, and helping them to plan the safest route back towards Bremmel. Méndez came to visit Brad and gave him a bundle of letters his men had written to their families back home. Brad knew that Méndez had a large family and that the last month had been hard on him. He knew it was a pipe dream, but Brad promised that if there was a way, he would see that their letters got delivered. Méndez gave him a last thank you for everything he had done to help get them off the road; he shook his hand and left Brad alone.

Brad broke away from the group discussing the trip; he wandered off to a far corner of the roof and laid out his bedroll and blanket. He thought about what they were attempting to do, and tried to put the thoughts of the ambushed convoy and the visions of Bremmel out of his head. As hard as he tried to block it, the face of PFC Ryan and the night he’d died in the desert always played back in his head like a cheap movie. *I’m definitely going to need some counseling when I get home*, he thought to himself.

Sean woke him just before dawn; he slowly brought himself to his feet and stretched out the aches that you get when you choose to sleep in a corner on a roof. Cole and Henry were on watch in the snipers' nest. Brad walked over to them and shook each of their hands and told them good bye. He walked back to the ladder well and lowered his way into the warehouse. Most of the occupants were still asleep, and he was careful not to wake them. He ventured out of the large overhead door that usually stayed open these days and headed towards the motor pool.

When he got there, he found Brooks making some finishing touches to the load on the vehicle. Brooks saw Brad and tossed him an energy drink.

"Sorry buddy, no coffee today but this has just as much kick," laughed Brooks.

Brad accepted the drink happily and helped him check the straps on the vehicle's roof rack. Sean walked over with a plate of foot bread sandwiches he had managed to scrounge up from the Afghan kitchen and handed them out. Taking a big bite from one, Sean paused to open the Defender's door, then jumped into the passenger seat. Taking that as a sign they were ready to leave, the rest of the team mounted up.

Brooks started the engine which purred to life; it was noticeably quieter than the MRAP. He put the Defender into gear and slowly moved towards the vehicle gate. When they arrived, they found a soldier on duty with one of Junayd's men. They both walked over to the Defender to greet them. Brooks put the truck in park, and Brad and Sean got out to shake their hands goodbye. Brad saw Hasan walk out of the guardhouse carrying a large green backpack and his AK47 slung over his shoulder.

"I would like to join you," Hasan said, dropping his pack next to the already overloaded vehicle.

"I don't know, Hasan. Nothing personal buddy, but this truck is already bursting at the seams, and another mouth to feed splits our food supply even more," said Sean.

"That is true, friend, but I also know the area. I know the tribes. I can be useful in finding more food. I will not be a burden to you, and four guns in the fight is better than three," Hasan answered. Sean looked over at Brooks, who gave nothing more than a shrug of his shoulders.

"What do you think, Brad?" Sean asked.

"It's his country, who am I to tell him no? The more the merrier, right?" Brad answered with a grin.

"Okay then, throw your bag on the roof and get in," Sean said to Hasan, smiling.

They made their way down the city streets. Occasionally, the vehicle would pass a building and they would see a primal move out of a darkened alley or a doorway to moan at them. The sun was just beginning to break the horizon and the temperatures were cool, so they knew the primals would be

active until at least mid-day. They were willing to take those chances and decided it would be an acceptable risk, especially since they were mobile and moving at a high rate of speed. Brooks made a few passes down side streets and one extra unnecessary turn down a long road before cutting onto the Hairatan road. They hoped the extra maneuvering would make it harder for the primals to follow them out of the city.

There is only one way in or out of the city located on the northern border of Afghanistan—and that is the Hairatan road. The other path to civilization would have been through Uzbekistan to the north and over the river. With the bridge out and the packs roaming the other side of the river, the Hairatan road was their only option. Brooks followed the road carefully, easing the Defender onto the cleared lane of the highway that Brad and his soldiers had opened up almost a month earlier when they'd first entered the city.

As the team made its way down the highway, Brad recognized the dead bus blocking the far lane when they passed it; he also knew that the other MRAP rested silently in a ditch on the other side. Slowly the congestion of twisted and broken vehicles thinned out and the road started to clear. Brooks found a comfortable spot near the center line of the highway and eased the vehicle into a cruising speed of forty miles per hour.

They drove for hours. Brad watched Brooks drive with a look of confidence as he avoided obstacles. Brooks wasn't an easy man to get to know; he wasn't a social creature like Sean. In the past it was common for soldiers to ask others questions about home, families, or where they were from. More recently, it was considered taboo to talk about such things. Many soldiers like Brooks would consume themselves with work to avoid personal feelings. Brooks was all business, typically only showing his face when there was a job to be done. The big man even spent his down time preparing for his up time. Brad rarely saw him joke or slack off with the rest of the men. Today Brooks was on the clock and held the wheel firmly, clearly aware that it was his responsibility to keep them safe.

Brad began to space out watching Brooks; the hot sun and the lulling sounds of the tires humming on the pavement caused his eyelids to become heavy. He caught himself nodding off more than once, often waking with a start. The Defender purred down the road, and the non-descript countryside going by in a blur made it hard to stay awake. They curved around and away from the river before entering the vast open terrain. Brad looked out and saw nothing but open dunes; the green was fading into the red and tan shades of the desert as he rested his head against the window and drifted off to sleep.

He woke to the sounds of crunching gravel and lifted his head. They had pulled off the road and Brooks was easing the vehicle up to a walled-in villa. It looked to be a large, two-story house surrounded by an eight-foot wall. From the condition of the place, it looked to have been abandoned long before the outbreak, but you could never be sure in Afghanistan. Brooks parked the Defender where it could not easily be seen from the road and killed the engine. The men got out, stretched, and checked their weapons.

"This is the place. Junayd said it would be empty and easy to defend," Sean declared, walking towards the wall's gate. "Brad, you want to help me clear the house?"

"Okay, right behind you," Brad replied as he grabbed his M4 and screwed the suppressor onto the barrel.

Sean walked over to the heavy wooden doors that marked the entrance to the courtyard; he had his silenced MP5 at the ready and waited for Brad to join him.

“What do you make of this?” Sean asked, pointing. The heavy wooden door was covered with scratches; some of the gouges looked to be stained with blood. Sean pointed at a crack in the door where Brad saw what looked to be a broken finger nail still stuck in the groove.

“What the hell? Someone wanted in here pretty damn bad,” answered Brad.

He took a step back away from the door and raised his rifle while Sean pulled on the handle. The door didn't budge and was clearly locked from the inside.

“Hmm, we seem to have found ourselves in a bit of a pickle,” Sean mused.

“Well it's obvious nobody is home, maybe we should just continue on our way down the road,” chimed in Brad.

“Nope. Sorry buddy, this is our stop. I want to hit Bremmel in daylight tomorrow; that means we stop here for tonight.”

Brooks walked over with a large crow bar and tried to stick it into the door to pry it open. The door had a steel frame and lip that made it hard to set the bar. He tried to get it into a good position, but an amount of force would just pop it out. Finally giving in to frustration, Brooks pulled the Defender up close to the wall.

Brad, shaking his head, said “Screw it,” and climbed up onto the hood of the vehicle, then high onto its roof. He turned to look at the wall, checking to make sure the top wasn't covered with broken glass or nails, which was common in this area to deter thieves. Satisfied that the way was safe, he grabbed hold of it and pulled himself on top.

He could see down into the courtyard and at the lonely two-story home. The entire house was circled by the wall; the building was horseshoe-shaped and its mouth opened towards the wall's entrance. Brad looked left and right several times; although his instincts were tingling, he eased himself flat on the wall. Seeing nothing, he grabbed on tightly and swung his feet over the edge. Hanging by his fingers, he let go and dropped the last couple feet to the ground, landing with a thud. Brad called over the wall to say that he was in, and then moved back to the door.

He readied his weapon and took another look all the way around to make sure he was alone, then examined the door and found it was locked in place by a large steel bolt. Through one end of the bolt was an antique-looking padlock that prevented Brad from turning and sliding the bolt. He called back over the wall to tell the men what he had found.

“Stand back!” Sean yelled. “I'm going to toss over the crowbar.”

Brad took a step to the side, then saw the crowbar sail over the door and hit the cobblestone with a loud metallic *CLANG* which echoed off the building's walls.

After picking up the crowbar, he went back to the wall and placed the flat end of the bar against the bolt in the door. As he started to apply downward pressure, he heard a distant rattle inside the house, as if furniture had just been knocked over. Brad froze in place and turned to look at the house. He waited and listened but, hearing nothing, continued to pull on the bar. Suddenly there was a loud crash and more sounds of tumbling furniture coming from the house behind him. He spun around to look at the front door, located at the bottom of the horseshoe, and was shocked when he saw it rattle from a booming impact.

“Ahh, Sean? I think I have a problem,” he called out.

“I’m assuming that isn’t you making all of that noise in there?” Sean called back over the wall.

“That would be a correct assumption,” Brad yelled back. He applied more pressure to the bar and, disappointed, did not even feel the bolt budge. He heard another loud *BOOM* against the front door. Brad pulled the bar from the bolt and tried to ease it into the door frame. He pulled as hard as he could and the door itself began to split, but it was still solidly sealed shut.

Brad heard another thundering *BOOM*, and glanced back just in time to see the front door of the house start to give. He dropped the crowbar and turned to face the door; taking a knee, he brought his rifle up and tried to adjust his eyes on the doorway nearly twenty feet away. He watched the door shake again from an impact, freeing dust from the boards and the overhang. Brad pulled the rifle tight into his shoulder, aimed where he hoped a head might be on the other side of the door, and squeezed the trigger. Three rounds, one after another, poked holes into the wood. There was a momentary pause in the pounding on the door, then a thud. Brad let out a sigh of relief just as another loud *BOOM* sounded out. Brad lifted his rifle back to his shoulder and fired another three rounds into the door. Another crash, and this time the door gave way.

The door flew open and a primal dressed in white and covered with gore tumbled forward. Not expecting the door to give, its momentum took it to the ground. Brad lowered his point of aim and pumped aimed shots into the thing’s head. He blinked his eyes, trying to get them back into focus on the dark doorway, just as he watched five more pouring out. They were coming at a full sprint. Brad took out the leader with quick shots to the head, then watched it slump to the ground, tripping up a female behind it. He kept firing on the others as they closed the distance. He clipped one in the top of the forehead, making it fall. “Two left,” he murmured to himself as he pivoted and shot one in the face.

The last one collided with him in a hard impact that forced him back against the door. Brad dropped his shoulders and pushed the rifle between them as hard as he could to break the primal’s grip. He knocked it down and at the same time he fell backwards onto the ground. Still on his back, he propped up on an elbow and tried to raise the rifle. In his peripheral he could see two more stepping out of the house, and the one that had tripped earlier was getting to its feet.

Directly in front of him, he could see that his current play date was rolling back to its belly and pushing itself up. “Fuck me,” Brad said to himself, dropping the rifle and drawing his M9. He quickly pulled the trigger, punching three holes into his date’s neck and face, killing it. He rolled to his side just as the other three closed on him. Before he could take aim, Brad heard the rapid firing of Brooks’ MP5 as rounds ripped into the charging primals. Brad watched as their heads exploded and their bodies collapsed to the ground. He stared at the fallen, motionless primals in the dirt, then dropped to his back in complete exhaustion.

Brooks lowered himself off the wall, stepped over Brad and walked toward the heavy door. He looked at the antique lock and held it in his hand. Letting go of the lock he let out a grunt, took a step back and fired a shot into the lock, shattering it. He fidgeted with the lock, freed it from the bolt, then pulled the bolt and swung the door open. Sean and Hasan stepped inside.

“Wow, you should have just opened the door and let us help,” gasped Hasan as he looked at all of the primal bodies lying in the courtyard.

“You OK buddy?” asked Sean, extending his hand to Brad.

“I’m fine, but next time somebody else goes over the wall first,” Brad said, taking Sean’s hand and being pulled to his feet.

The team got themselves together and slowly approached the open door. All of the first floor windows of the villa had been boarded shut, and the windows on the second floor had the drapes tightly closed. They inspected the bodies on the ground and found them to look the same as the ones recently found in Hairatan: emaciated, with skin taut over their bones. The team stepped past them and stacked up on the door.

“Probably not much in there after all the noise Brad made, but you can never be too careful,” Sean said. “Brad, you go right with me, Brooks, take Hasan to the left.” The men gave thumbs up, and Sean turned on the light attached to his MP5. The rest of the team followed suit and they entered the dark doorway.

Brad followed Sean into a large empty foyer, while behind him Brooks and Hasan entered and cut to the left and moved out of sight. Sean moved quickly and efficiently swept the room, then waited beside a door for Brad before he entered the next. Forcefully swinging open doors, they swept into rooms checking all of the corners. They continued like this until they met Brooks and Hasan back at the main entrance.

With the full team once again joined, they formed back into a line. The stairs leading to the second story were offset into a wall at the back of the foyer. Sean gave a hand signal and the men stacked up at the base of the stairs and began their ascent toward the top. When they reached the open space at the head of the stairs they fanned out, each man covering a sector.

The team entered a large, sparsely furnished sitting room. What furniture there was had been tossed randomly around the space. Sean walked to an outer wall and ripped down a set of the heavy drapes covering a window, letting sunlight flood in and over the floor. There were bloody bandages and rags piled in a corner, and what looked to be empty food containers and dishes in another. “The things Brad killed in the courtyard must have sought shelter here when still human,” mumbled Hasan.

“Yeah, probably wounded; they barricaded themselves seeking refuge from whatever was outside the gate while they slowly turned themselves,” Brad answered back.

They said little while they walked back downstairs. Brad and Hasan dragged the primals’ bodies to a far corner of the courtyard. They opened the heavy wooden door as wide as it would go and backed the Defender into the safety of the walls, closing the door behind them and locking the bolt.

They found very little else of use in the home. Upstairs, Hasan found a worn Enfield rifle and a bandoleer of ammo to match. He propped it carefully inside the entry door to the house, deciding he didn’t need it and would leave it for a future visitor. None of the team had any interest in sleeping in the house, so they spread their bedrolls in the courtyard and, using dried wood, built a smokeless fire just large enough to heat their dinner. Brad volunteered to take the first watch. He climbed atop the Defender and settled into a comfortable position where he could see over the wall.

As the sun gradually dropped below the horizon, the temperature began to drop with it. Darkness came quickly and was accompanied by the howling of the primals. Brad was disappointed to hear them; he had hoped they would be things of the city and wouldn't venture out into the desert as much. Junayd's men had rarely reported seeing them in the desert sands during the heat of the day. The scouts had always returned to the compound before sundown, never spending a night outside the protection of the walls. As it grew darker and the air cooled, the howling grew louder. Brad heard the stirring of the men on the ground and soon he found Sean sitting beside him on top of the vehicle.

Sean had his night vision spotting scope in his hand and was scanning the horizon. Brad watched him search, then stop to focus intently on some far off object.

"Now what is this?" Sean whispered. Brad observed Sean's face contort in concentration as he scanned. "Well I hadn't expected this," he whispered again, handing the scope off to Brad.

Brad put the scope to his eye but saw nothing other than the greenish hue of the desert sands. Sean lifted his hand, grabbed the scope, and guided Brad's eye to a spot about three hundred meters into the distance.

"Oh," Brad said. Looking through the scope, he saw a group of fifty to a hundred primals. They were back deep in a berm of sand. Most of them stood and walked in a circle with their noses to the wind, howling that scream, that deep moan. Brad watched as others would rise up out of the sand and get to their feet. After a pack was formed, they broke up into groups of ten to twelve and wandered off into the desert.

"What are they doing?" Brad asked.

"Looks like hunting parties. They must sleep or hibernate during the day, only to awaken and hunt for prey at night," said Sean. "I've seen lions do the same thing in Africa."

"No way, Sean. You think these things are like lions?" Brad asked.

"Keep your voice down. I'm just saying, I saw those things dig out of the sand. Something in them must tell them to stay out of the sun all day. Then they wake up at night. I don't know what to make of it, but in Africa I've seen lions do the same thing. They lay low all day, then hunt in packs under the cover of darkness," Sean answered back. "Doesn't matter Brad, this doesn't change anything. We'll still seek shelter at night and only move during the day." Sean glanced at him. "You look spent Brad, why don't you try and grab some sleep? I'll take the rest of your watch."

Brad lowered himself off the Defender and leaned against the back of it. His head was filled with so many things he couldn't think straight. *I need a drink*, he thought to himself. Frustrated, since he knew that wasn't going to be possible for a while, Brad made his way back to his pack and bedroll. He couldn't help but look at the doorway to the house from which the primals had rushed out and attacked.

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