

FROM THE LAND OF GENESIS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

From the Land of Genesis. (May 2013)

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The narrative of the Combat veteran from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars over the past decade has been largely obscured. This is in part due to lack of media attention and partly to a nation-wide numbness to the prolonged conflict, but also due to a lack of creative publication. Plenty of reporters have published journalistic accounts of events or experiences, and several veterans themselves have published first-hand memoirs of their tours—but there is still no literary publication to represent the conflict for the general public. Through the hundreds of sources we have gathered (from scholarly studies and news articles to journals and blog posts), as well as our interviews with combat veterans, I have developed a series of short stories that represent the experiences and themes of the soldiers who have fought for our nation in its most recent wars. These stories, while independent, depict a large scope of the combat and experiences through an interconnected web of scenes and characters in the structure of a short story cycle (similar to *Dubliners* by James Joyce, or *In Our Time* by Ernest Hemingway). They also aim to contribute to the evolving style of war narratives following Tim O'Brien and Anthony Swafford. Through this project, I hope to reach the general public in an attempt to spread awareness of the

experiences of our soldiers over seas—to tell their stories in a style and medium that will encourage people to listen.

KILLIN' TIME

The desert pulsed red in Peterson's ear. He felt it in the twitching of closed eyelids. Yellow sunlight leaked through cracks in the tent's entrance, penetrating diaphanous skin and tinting his closed gaze. Blood was hot and he felt condensation building behind his temples. Sweat trickled down his neck.

"Pete," a voice called. The clamor of video games and death metal flooded his senses. He opened his eyes to blinding light leaking through an edge of the entrance. The tarp was still, unmoving in the windless heat.

"What?" he said, shifting to escape the light.

"Pete, you're up." The rough outline of a grunt stood before him, dressed in pants and a wife-beater. Jenson's arm extended a half-charged Play Station Portable.

"Too tired." He shut his eyes.

"Tired?" a voice shot from across the room. "Too tired? Christ almighty, Petey. You slept long enough for the whole fuckin' platoon!"

The pair erupted in laughter. Pete failed to suppress a grin.

"Tell you what Smithy, why don't you warm up on Jenson another round. That way you can't complain when I kick your ass."

Jenson stepped back in delighted surprise and "ooohhh"-ed in Smith's direction. His dark skin glistened in the dim light. His arms flexed with movement.

"Yeah, alright," laughed Smith, reaching to Jenson to connect the two consoles. "Jus' don't take too long wrappin' up yer beauty sleep."

Pete rested. His eyes were shut and he had little intention of waking or moving at all. But the leaking light inched toward his eye with the passing of day and his neck ached in its position. The jeers and shouts from outside, the Metallica, grew louder. A wrestling match, most likely.

“Fuck it.”

He lifted himself with a groan from the pile of broken concrete. A few steps across the crammed bunker and he was at the edge of his bunk, plopping down against the splintered, timber wall. He slipped off boots and swung his bare feet on the edge of the cot.

Specialist Branson was in the cot next to him. He lay on his stomach, pillow and elbows propped beneath his chest as he flipped the page of a thinly bound paperback.

“What’re you readin’, Bunny?” Pete adjusted in his cot, using the platoon nickname to attract Branson’s attention.

“Euripides.”

Pete stopped, looking to his friend with startled amusement.

“What?”

Bunny paused, marking his spot with a finger. “He was a Greek tragedian.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Pete, embarrassed. “That’s some heavy shit. Why are you reading it?”

Bunny shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“Well, what play’re you on?”

He skimmed the page for the title. “Well, this play kind of reflects the disillusionments of war and shit.”

Pete’s mouth tightened and he breathed out, shaking his head. He turned and faced Bunny, bare feet on the grainy tarp floor.

“Now what the *hell* made you think that would be a good idea?” he said. “Which one is it, anyway...” Pete reached across and snatched the book out of Bunny’s hands.

“Hey!”

“The Trojan Women. Really? Do you even *understand* this shit?”

Bunny snatched back the book, flustered.

“Damn it, Pete. I almost lost my spot!” He shuffled back the pages.

“You shouldn’t be reading that shit, anyway,” Pete said. “Now tell me, what’s your deal.”

“I don’t know.” He shifted, rising in his bunk. “Sometimes studying shit from the past, ancient Greek shit or whatever—it helps me figure what to make of stuff right now. Like, seeing how they manage it, I guess.”

Pete let out sigh. Movement near the edge of Bunny’s bunk and he lifted his feet. Another tarantula, perhaps. The sand and gravel stuck to his sole, scratching against the fabric cot.

“I dunno, Bunny,” he said.

Branson shrugged, frail shoulders lifting and then back down. He was thinner than a few weeks before. His collar bone stuck out like the bottom of a hanger pushed forward.

“It fills the time,” said Bunny. “I just hate the *waiting*. Like, I’ve accepted it. But the counting days, hours, minutes... It’s torture.” Pete nodded, knowingly. “This at least helps to take my mind off things. Like the mission this Friday.”

Pete let out a groan and fell back on his cot.

“Buuunnnnyyyy...” Hands rubbed down his face, smearing dust and dirt with sweat. “How many times do I have to *tell* you?” He lifted his head and stared at the Specialist. “No one wants to talk about that shit right now. ’Specially after *just* finishing a patrol!”

Bunny frowned and lowered his book. “I know. I’m sorry, Pete. It’s just, after the last tour. Seeing Matthews carried out and all...”

“Look,” Pete interrupted, furious. “You can’t just bring that shit *up*. Matthews’ll be back in a few weeks and it’ll be like that never happened. Now you can either get your shit together and stop bitching, or go gripe to your fucking shrink. But *don’t* come to me with your pussy worries.”

Bunny sunk back in surprise, stricken. Pete checked to see that Bunny understood, but felt sick from the reaction. Pete lifted himself and closed a hand around Bunny’s shoulder.

“Shit, I’m sorry man. I shouldn’t have said that.” He paused. “It was a low blow.”

Bunny shook his head. “No, no you’re right. I shouldn’t be thinking about that.”

He grabbed his book and leaned back on the wooden wall of their bunker. Pete watched him pull out a pair of white capsules, chasing them down with a swig from his canteen.

“Killing Spreeeeeee!!!” Smith yelled, arms high in victory. Jenson cursed and flipped his PSP to Smith.

“Fuck this game,” Jenson spat. “You gone an’ rigged’at shit. I swear.”

Smith hollered happily and turned to Pete.

“Petey, you up?”

“Nah, man,” he replied, leaning back. “Not in the mood.”

“Ah, c’mon, mayne,” said Smith in his Southern drawl. “You’er talkin’ such pretty shit, I thought fer sure you’d wan’ an ass-whoopin’!”

Pete forced a grin. “Not today, Smith.”

Smith grumbled, pacing around in bored frustration. Then settled on Branson.

“An’ what the fuck’re *you* readin’?” he exclaimed, delighted.

Bunny gave Pete a piteous glance.

“Nothin’,” he replied.

Smith lingered at the edge of his cot, eying the book with an eager gleam. They could see the tips of his fingers quiver. Pete caught Smith’s eye.

“Okay, Bunny,” Smith spat, stepping off.

The tension lifted for a moment. Bunny sunk back with a sigh. His fingers relaxed, the book fell and closed upon the floor in resignation.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” he said.

Pete watched Bunny drag himself out of the cot. The specialist sulked passed, exiting the tent. Sunlight leaked through the tarp as it fell.

“Fuck,” Smith grumbled. “Why the hell d’we let that pussy hang aroun’ here?”

“Uh, ‘cause he sleeps here?” Jenson offered. “Why the fuck else?”

Pete laughed, swinging around to lift Bunny’s book and place it on his cot. “He’s a grunt, too, you know.”

Smith turned. “Yeah, if you’d call a wanna-be-fobbit a grunt. Why the fuck you stick up fer that prick, anyway? I hear that pussy wants tah cop out’a this suck fer some air-condish’ an’ burger-king.”

“Cut him some slack, Smith,” said Pete. “The kid’s on his second tour. What if he’s really fucked up? In the head and shit.”

Smith grunted and slammed a fist against his bed frame. Blood in his eyes, he yelled.

“If pussies like Bunny can’t handle the suck, they should’a never got in. We all’ve been in the heat. But it’s *his* job tah keep his *shit* together. We’re the front line. We bear this shit ‘cause no one else *can!*”

Smith's face was red, fists clenched by his side. He had reached the edge of Pete's bunk, sweat beading around his temple and forehead.

"Take it easy, Smith," said Pete, standing. Jenson laid a hand on Smith's shoulder.

"Same side," he echoed.

Smith nodded twice, holding his gaze with Pete. A fire gleamed in his eye.

"Just sayin'," he said, stepping back. "This war ain't over 'till every one o' those Hajis is dead. And pussies like Bunny're jus' slowin' us down."

The tent was silent. Pete sat on his cot, sighing. Smith crossed the room and collapsed, chest heaving. Jenson stood in the center of the room, a confused, amused expression on his face. Then he shrugged.

The room went silent. Outside the music and shouts died down. Their breathing became a hushed rhythm in the stillness.

KAAHHH!!!

Pete sat up. "What the..."

"Firefight!"

Pete was halfway in his armor, grabbing helmet and M16 in a dart out the tent. Sun flooded his vision, cowering in blindness, vulnerable. Jenson followed suit as their eyes adjusted and the two were squatting on the floor, fumbling with helmets and armor.

"Where yah think it came from?" asked Jenson.

"Can't tell."

Pete scanned the clearing, skimming walls and cabins. Soldiers lined the Hesco bastions at the edge of the camp, but there was no consistency of direction. No one knew where the shot was fired.

A few moments passed before Pete and Jenson made their way to a group against the nearest Hesco. Smith emerged, following.

“What’s goin’ on?” Pete asked.

“Ah, probably a stray shot,” said the sergeant. “No report yet.”

“A gunshot, alright,” a grunt added. “Sounded close tah me.”

Something in Pete clicked. *Bunny didn’t mark his page.*

“Fuck.”

“What’s up?” asked Jenson.

Pete turned, grasping him and Smith in panic. “Where’s Bunny?”

“I dunno,” mumbled Jenson. “Wen’ tah the bathroom, I thought.”

Smith laughed. “Shitty place tah get stuck in’a firefight!”

Pete dropped his helmet and ran.

“Hey!” the sergeant called.

“Pete?!”

Pete sprinted between tents, ducking Hescos and dodging soldiers as he cut across camp for the latrines. He ran heedless, ignoring shouts to cover. He ran until legs ached and the air burned like sand in his lungs.

Pete approached the latrines. They looked dull in the desert sun; beige tarps covering separate wooden frames, projecting tan in the faded skyline.

“Bunny!” he called.

No reply.

Pete scaled the steps of the first latrine, bursting through the door. The shaded area became visible. A wooden stool stood in the back corner where a hole led to the feces-filled barrel below. But the stall was empty.

He moved on, climbing to the second as Smith and Jenson arrived. He tried the door. Locked.

“Bunny!” he yelled, hitting the frame.

“The fuck’s he doin’?” Smith asked. Jenson was silent.

“That’s it Bunny, I’m fuckin’ breaking this door!”

Pete hesitated for a response. Then broke in the door with a kick. The weak frame splintered and he followed his step into the outhouse. Light flooded the dark, filthy stall. Pete’s eyes fell to the ground, his throat constricting.

Specialist Branson lay sprawled upon the floor planks of the stall. By his right hand was a black Beretta M-9 handgun. His face was down, pressed into wood. Pete could see the hole where bits of Branson’s brain and skull had been blown out, spraying a side wall of the latrine. Pools of blood gathered on the floorboards, leaking through the cracks and flowing down toward a dark hole at the back of the stall. There it fell: dark, thick red, receding to the black filth below.

Pete’s head spun. He moved outside and felt his stomach clench. Vomit sputtered from his mouth over the stall’s wooden railing. Gasping for breath. He inhaled, felt himself sliding down the side of the wall. Spittle dripping on his pants.

Jenson was first to follow. He stepped forward slow, expectantly. He paused at the doorway, gagging, then silently backing away.

“Fuck,” Jenson cried, hoarse. “The *fuck!* Bunny... what? Fuck, man!” He continued mumbling, sputtering curses with confusion.

Smith moved forward in the commotion. A few other grunts were drawn to the turmoil, having seen Pete, Smith and Jenson sprint across camp. Now Smith stepped boldly to the platform and walked inside. He paused, silent, calm: then turned away.

“Fuckin’ pussy,” he said.

Pete didn’t hear him. Tears streamed down his face, carving shallow canyons through dust. He felt himself talking. Felt himself muttering but he couldn’t stop. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t say anything else: he just chanted softly, over and over and over.

Smith pulled a dirty rag from his back pocket. He held it in his hands for a moment, inspecting, and tossed it in Pete’s lap.

“Clean yerself up,” he said. “You got vom on your chin.”

The cloth fell on his thigh, wrinkled and brown. Pete didn’t move, didn’t look down. A crowd gathered around the latrines.

“What, why...” trembled Jenson, eyes red from shock. “Why’d he do it?”

Smith looked at him blankly. Then turned to the growing crowd.

“He did it,” said Smith. Then louder. “He did it ‘cause he was a fuckin’ pussy.” His tone was venomous, reaching out with dangerous authority. “He was a fuckin’ pussy that couldn’t handle the real shit, so he copped out.”

Jenson was silent. Smith went silent. The whole platoon stood marveling in an obedient silence. Until Pete’s chant rose, deafening in the stillness. His words echoed through the campground, a blasphemous melody of denial and remorse.

“No,” he said.

“No, no, no no no. No.”

CHASING THE SUN

Jesse grinds his foot in the sand, holding perimeter around a convoy in full gear. He digs a hole in the dirt, pushing sand out and watching it pour back. Then nudges the earth again.

“Whatcha think, Jess?” asks Pensley. He leans against their armored Bradley, scanning the horizon. “Reckon we’ll make chow?”

Jesse shrugs, his M-16 rising in the shade. “They oughta be on their last circle now. Probly pull up dry, but who knows.”

The sniper had nicked a grunt of the stranded convoy long ago and would be well hidden now. Vehicles were repaired from the IED blast and night was coming. “If we’re released soon, food might be hot.”

Pensley purrs. “Gawd it’s been a while. Another MRE piece’a plastic shit and I’ll be sharting skittles.”

“Taste the rainbow,” Jesse adds.

They hadn’t slept at base, in a bed, for six days. Life with a Quick Reaction Force was subtle suffocation—living out of a Bradley, sleeping in the desert cramped within vehicles, shoveling down ‘Meals Ready to Eat.’

Jesse spots Lieutenant Davis approaching.

“What’re you staring at, Private?” their Commander taunts.

“Yer pretty ass, I reckon,” laughs Pensley.

Davis flashes a smile.

“You brush those teeth with baking soda, sir?” says Jesse.

“Okay,” Davis laughs. “And get off the damn Bradley, Pense. You make a fine ass target, standin there.”

Pensley thrusts forward with a dramatic groan, standing in mock attention.

“At ease, Specialist,” Davis grunts. “Listen, outer patrol is pulling in soon. We’ll escort this convoy to the nearest checkpoint and head for base.”

“Thank god,” says Pensley.

Davis lifts a handset to his ear. “That’s the call. Get ready to roll—we leave when the outer squad pulls in.”

He rounds the Bradley to prepare the platoon and Jesse suppresses his excitement.

“Watcha think about that,” Pensley asks. “Hot meal on a hot night. Sounds better than pussy.”

“Now isn’t that sad,” Jesse mocks. He calculates their drive—two hours to base and the sun already hovering over the western hills. “Let’s load up.”

Pensley climbs in as driver and Jesse mounts the turret. He watches the remaining marines pile in with Davis behind. The lieutenant hoists himself beside Jesse, standing at the turret, and the two watch a growing cloud of dust to the south. A train of beige Humvees stirs dry gravel. Slanted rays of afternoon light pierce the dusty haze, glinting off the metal hoods.

“That’s it,” Davis shouts, slamming a hand on the Bradley’s roof. “Move out!”

Their vehicle roars to a start, its tracked wheels stuttering, then surging forward. Jesse feels warm air combing the short hair on his neck. He shifts his shoulders to let dry wind leak under his helmet, tingling his suffocated scalp.

They watch the convoy align. Jesse’s platoon anchors, leading their four QRF vehicles. Soon sand from forward Humvees sprays upward, lashing his face. Jesse pulls on his goggles and settles his gaze before them. The sun glows white through a veil of dust, hovering like a hot, bright moon.

The world blends to beige haze and the steady roar of engines drowns out thought. Jesse kicks into an automatic, brain-numbing vigilance. He surveys with the turret optics, breaking the terrain into grids and searching, fighting the voice of his stomach.

The sun touches a row of hills to the West when their squad pulls through the checkpoint. They drop off the damaged Humvee with its convoy and continue their pursuit of the sun.

Their vehicle now leads. With his turret, Jesse scans the clear horizon looking for dead animals, tires, trash, broken concrete—anything different. They move faster alone, the sun fading behind a jagged, blinding horizon. Maybe an hour left to base if they push through dusk.

Jesse turns to Davis and catches him in a stoic trance, staring at the crescent sun. His face is dirty from the many days of patrol. The shadowed lines of his eye darken beneath angled light.

“You think we’ll make base?” Jesse shouts.

Davis shrugs, pulling out a box of Marlboros. “I’m plannin’ on it,” he says. Davis offers a cigarette to Jesse and the two ignite. Jesse feels the acidic warmth burn down his larynx, stimulating his entire body. The smoke is epinephrine on a dull day, antidote for exhaustion. “I figure we get in right after dusk and no one’ll give too much shit for us drivin’ late.”

Jesse feels a flutter in his gut like gratitude. It converts to a lurching growl.

“Ah shit,” Davis spits, throwing out his cigarette. Jesse follows with his optics and spots the Davis’ distress. A Route Clearance Team is scanning for IEDs, spraying dust as they inch painfully forward.

“They’d have to be an hour behind,” Jesse curses.

Davis sighs beside him. “Yeah, well they’re not gonna pack up for us.”

The Bradley slows to a halt and they hear Pensley from below. The curses float up in a creative stream... “fuckin’ son of a god damn mother-fuckin’ pickle-dick prick shit-on-my-face!”

Jesse fights a grin one moment, but groans the next. Their meal is at stake, and the whole platoon knows. Men grumble audibly behind him.

“Wait,” says Davis, squinting down the highway. “Check and see if that’s a bypass road. Up to the left.”

Jesse glimpses through the optics and nods.

“Call command,” says Davis. “See if we can’t get ’em to pause after the fork. We’ll get around ‘em.”

Jesse dials control and receives the go ahead moments later. The men all holler and clap to the news as they circumvent the bomb squad. The Bradley skids back onto the highway with Pensley’s eager maneuverings.

“Thank the sweet lord,” Jesse cries in victory. “We’d’ve been out all night!”

Davis grins in relief and their Humvee rolls smoothly in the darkening twilight.

“Let’s just hope that...”

Jesse. Davis leans over Jesse shaking his shoulders violently and bleeds on him with his cut face, yelling over empty noise in the silence. Jesse realizes he’s outside the vehicle lying on the ground. There’s light from a fire, flickering through a film of dust. A ringing, throbbing in his ear. Jesse lifts his head.

“Jess!” a muted voice calls, hands on his shoulder. Jesse tries to brush them off, to stand. “Jesse, you alright?” The words reach him like drifting waves.

Screams filter through the empty noise. Steam fills the air. Everything is on fire in the air but when he looks it’s too dark—just flickering silhouettes racing in the sun-like fire. He feels wet on his face, tastes the thick sweat like dirt and oil wetting his lips.

“IED,” Davis shouts, but Jesse can’t hear. There is ringing. And yells and gunfire and the silent throbbing in his ear.

“Screaming,” he mutters, tries to stand. “Stop the screaming...”

Gunshots pepper the air, sparking from M-16s. Someone yells to pull out the driver, pull out the driver. Jesse stands.

“Don’t!” someone yells. “Stop him!” Hands are pulling him back and he resists, charging the flames.

“My gun!”

“Jesse,” Davis shouts. “Jesse, stand down!”

“Someone get my fucking gun!!!”

Jesse sits with an orb like sun moving across his gaze.

“Broke your nose alright,” a voice tells him. Jesse feels the damp blood draining down his lip and chin. “Probably a concussion, too. Just stay seated, you hear? Evacs’ll be here soon.”

Gunshots and a whistle-blast of falling mortar.

“My gun,” Jesse mumbles, trying to stand. His muscles tremble with adrenaline, unsteady. Hands keep him down.

A group of soldiers are rocking the driver’s seat of the Bradley.

“One! Two! Heave!”

Jesse knows that Pensley is screaming. He catches a glimpse of metal pinning the kid's leg. Engine burst through the hood and landed on his lap. Jesse sees the mangled front of their Bradley, twisted and broken like silver glass. A group of soldiers rock the driver's seat of the Humvee. Pensley is screaming.

"You're gonna be okay, Jess," says Davis.

Fingers clog Jesse's nose as the flashlight asks him to follow with his eyes. It moves slowly or not at all.

The screams and everything is steaming. Gunshots fire at falling mortar but the blasts creep forward, breaking dunes of dust in their thunderous leaps. It is dark except for the occasional spark of mortar whistling in crescendo, shuddering against the cool earth.

Air presses down upon him. Jesse is lifted and guided to the Medevac, dazed and stumbling. Other men sit and lay with him but he looks out and up into the sky, glowing dark and starry like the sun had exploded into a thousand fragments of white light.

Cool desert air rushes through the rising chopper and Jesse thinks of summer camping in Texas. Hum of the chopper buzzes into a comfortable warmth and he pictures his father, his brother, hiking in Big Bend. The dusty earth dry. He wonders if they'll climb the South Rim tomorrow or see the Window at sunset. Hearing the crackle of Dad's campfire set and he breathes the rugged desert air, resting beneath a hollowed sky.

RIVERS OF BRONZE

Plaster crusted Ryan's shoulder blades, pressed against the intersection of a hallway entrance. Bullets sprayed dust and debris into his face, shrieking through the nearby air in a torrent of sharp cracks. Ryan watched as they peppered the back wall, splintering the cheap framework. Specialist Brown nodded at Ryan from the opposite side of the intersection. M16s in hand, they waited.

"GO, GO!!!" Brown roared, turning the corner at waist level. He fired consecutive shots as Ryan pushed forward, gun raised, eyes racing for movement.

"Clear!" he called. Brown joined him in the hall as Ryan studied the staggered apartment entrances, crowding the complex off Haifa Street. "Where the fuck'd he go?"

"It dead ends on this floor," Brown replied. "No stairs or exits. He's in one of the rooms."

Ryan sensed the implications. *Fuck.*

They approached the first of the staggered doorways. Brown kept his sights down the hall as Ryan approached the door. He reached out, one hand on the doorknob, the other training his M16 forward. The door swung open.

Ryan moved, the room opening before him with the gradual arch of the door. Corners clear. No furniture but a rusted toilet in the back. The room was vacant. Abandoned.

"Clear," he called.

They shifted to the next room to repeat. Carefully test the handle. Burst through the door, training weapons with practiced precision. Nothing.

At the fourth room Brown hesitated. There was a rustling within. A muffled yelp.

This was it.

Brown tried the door. Locked. A nod and Ryan counted down with his fingers. Three. Two. One.

The door splintered forward. Ryan followed through, sweeping from the left corner right. Flicker of movement and his finger tugged on the trigger, felt the tension of its resistance...

“GET ON THE GROUND!!!” he shouted.

A family of two women and three kids huddled in the corner like piled debris. One of the women shrieked and the baby wailed in reply. Ryan felt his chest heave, let his surrounding vision flood back and followed the course of his barrel to a child’s face. It was a boy, younger than seven. His expression was stoic, looking past the familiar weapon.

“Get down, get down!” Sergeant Brown called in Arabic. He moved forward and checked the women and children for weapons or grenades. Ryan kept his aim on the boy as he shifted to the far wall, fitting the doorway in his peripheral.

The family was cleared and their apartment, though tattered and crowded, was safe. Brown reassured them in broken Kurdish and Arabic; stay here—don’t leave. The incoherent noise allowed Ryan’s thoughts to drift.

Sergeant Lopez! he panicked. Ryan felt his chest tighten, felt the concern for his NCO flare inside him. *Breathe*, he reminded himself. *He’ll be alright*.

“Let’s go,” Brown gestured, moving forward to clear the hall. Ryan followed.

The next room was locked but vacant, and the following three abandoned. It came down to the last two rooms in the hall. One would be their portal to combat.

Locked.

Ryan felt his heart pounding. There was a complete silence but for the pulse in his ear, throbbing. He saw nothing but the door before him, heard nothing but the pounding and the creak

of the handle resisting. Brown's fingers flashed, his lips moving with the descending numbers. With the fingers dwindling to none, Ryan felt an anticipated, pervading calm. His hands were steady on the cool plastic of his weapon, his body moved forward fluidly as the door crashed in and his M16 swept the room to the middle where a silhouette by the window...

"DON'T FUCKING MOVE!!!" he roared.

A man stood at the back of the room, hands trembling in the air. Ryan raced forward and lifted the barrel of his M16 to the man's flinching face and tightly shut eyes. He shrunk into the wall, back and arms pressed flat, hands fully extended and quivering.

"Hands on your *fucking* head!" Ryan yelled. He let the cold tip of his M16 graze the Iraqi's stubbled cheek.

Brown was behind him, repeating instructions in Arabic. He kept his gun on the suspect from a yard back, scanning the room for threats.

Ryan glared at the shaded expression of the cowering insurgent. He was young. Still too young for the kind of facial hair worn by elders. But old enough to fuck in the States. Old enough for death row. Ryan paused. The man's shirt was a familiar beige, his stained clothing damp. His chest rose heavily and perspiration trickled down his neck.

"He's sweating," Ryan spat, realizing but already knowing that this was the same bastard that had wounded Lopez. "This haji's still *fuckin'* sweating!"

"Calm down, Ryan," said Brown.

"Fuck that. This muj bastard shot Lopez. He tried to kill us, too, man!"

"Lower your weapon, Private!" yelled Brown. "Now look around. You see a weapon? 'Cause unless we find a weapon, sweat and stains don't mean shit. Fuck, Ryan—they're all sweating and dirty!" Ryan hesitated. "Now find that damn weapon."

“Fuck,” he cursed, backing down. Ryan began emptying a closet in search for the gun. Then he checked under the bed. He tossed cushions from the couch, dust and plastic flakes spraying his face. He pulled out clothes from the dresser, threw back the bed sheets and pillows.

“Where is it,” Ryan muttered, lifting the mattress off its frame. He shifted the sweat-leaden pad and heard scraping of metal on wood. His pulse quickened and with a final heave Ryan threw back the mattress. A worn, rusted AK47 simmered against the wooden frame.

“It’s still hot,” he said, dropping the weapon at Brown’s feet. Ryan lifted his M16 and pushed the barrel into the man’s cheek.

“I’ma kill this bastard.”

“Ryan...” Brown coaxed. “Ryan, stand down!”

“Lemme waste him! Fuck, Brown... Sergeant’s bleedin’ out on the ground and this mother fucker wants a trial? They all pull the same shit, man. You know it. I know it. Now lemme waste ‘em.”

“Listen to me, Private,” said Brown. “You’re talking about shooting an unarmed prisoner of war. That kind of shit results in court-martial.”

“Not unarmed,” said Ryan, kicking the AK to the feet of the insurgent’s.

Brown glanced at the weapon and shook his head. “No, Ryan,” he said, his gut wrenching.

“They ambush us an then run around a fuckin corner. They toss their guns an stand in the open like cowards, claimin clemency! Not this bastard. Not this haji mother-fuckin bastard...”

“Ryan, you can’t... I won’t let you.”

“Fuck you, then.” And Ryan forced his weapon into the captive’s emaciated cheek.

“Stand down!” Brown shouted, whirling around. There was a startling authority in his voice.

“What the fuck are you doing?! You’re gonna kill me over this fuckin haji?”

“I will, dammit. Now put your gun on the fuckin ground!”

Ryan could hear the Specialist’s barrel hovering by his ear. He looked at the man cowering before them. Tears leaked from the Iraqi’s eyes, pleading for forgiveness and pity in frantic mumbles. Then Sergeant Lopez on the ground, clutching his leg and gut. Spiers rushing in with bandages. Lopez urging Brown and Ryan on—*get that bastard!* And this.

A damp stain ran down the insurgent’s leg and formed a puddle at their feet. *He’s practically a kid*, thought Ryan. *Hardly older than me...*

“Fuck,” he said and lowered his weapon.

Brown lashed out and disarmed him in a move, knocking him to the floor. Ryan felt a sharp pain in the back of his head and scuttled backward, leaning against the far wall to watch Brown bound the Haji in his own piss. Ryan felt angry and then sad as he thought about Lopez and the whole fucked-up war and the child staring back. He was furious and wanted to lash out, to strike down Brown and that Haji coward but then he was just sitting there, embarrassed and somehow relieved.

Brown kneeled back after securing the man and lifted up his handset. Ryan heard him call for help carrying the prisoner, and to escort Ryan. A voice complied and for a moment there was a drowning silence. Then Brown lifted the handset and, hesitating, requested a status on Lopez.

Ryan’s stomach dropped.

“We lost him, Specialist,” said the voice. “They nicked the femoral artery on his thigh. Bled out on the medevac.”

Ryan felt his neck and face flash with the heat of violet flames. Silence drowned the room and then he wanted to rise and kill them all. Every last one of those sorry bastards, those haji pricks and muj Muslim bastards. He wanted to put an end to the patrols and paranoia but his chest sank and he felt numb and frozen and burning all at once like despair. Then he started weeping into his hands, weeping uncontrollably and hysterically so that tears bled into the sand and dirt on his palm, streaking in lines, staining veins of murky bronze until the streams were clear and the tears ran smoothly down his dry, sandy hands.

FROM THE LAND OF GENESIS

Silver, portable railings border the mile long stretch of road. Wind channels through the street, cold. It rattles against thick jackets and leather gloves, whistling along the cold steel of metal railings.

An old woman and her daughter stand squeezed between crowds, miniature flags waving in their hands. The woman calls out, “Thank you; thank you,” in a tired tone. She holds a video camera, filming our caravan move. Another is crying. Her face is heavy and loose, tangled hair draping across her eyes.

A man stands on steps behind the tapering crowd. He wears a black jacket with a pair of medals pinned to his chest. He takes pictures with a camera. Another man waits further down with a motored bicycle. He looks weathered and homeless, but his wrinkled army uniform curls through the neck of his jacket.

The trailer in the middle of the parade stutters forward. A white banner on the side reads: “Vietnam Veterans: Our Unsung Heroes.” A dozen large-bellied men sit in chairs, grasping large flags supported by nodules in the floor. They wave and smile.

Our jeep rumbles along behind. I sit on the inside, hiding behind thin glass. In the passenger seat I scan rooftops and check for movement in doorways, trying to remember I’m home. But in the monotony I forget, regress to scanning.

Then the cheers, the occasional hollering and whooping that come to me like notes of a distant choir. The crowds thin as we make our way. The town is small, only a few blocks. But we have to drive an extra two after the crowds end to circumvent barricades. The jeep loops around to take us where our cars and families wait.

Hum of the engine down a cracked, Colorado back-road cradles me. I doze in the passenger seat, shifting comfortably in my uniform. Buildings drift by, cold empty streets and parked cars. Then, desert and plastered apartments and our caravan patrolling. I blink. Newspaper blows down an alleyway. A car brakes to parallel-park in a space before us. The jeep slows and I hold my breath, hear the thudding of my heart.

We reach base minutes later. Carson cuts the engine and the humming stops. I tense in the stillness.

There's Sarah but she does not see me. The door opens and I turn. She sees and runs and wraps me in an embrace like I had only just landed. We walk and she clasps my hand and I hold hers loosely, walking forward. Join the family, proud father and crying mother. Little brother standing awkward and sister pulls me into another hug.

We see the crowd gather and an old man climbs onto the stage.

He is thin and frail and I know he was Vietnam. His face is old and dry. He stands to speak but his words are mute. I see lips moving as those around me nod and smile. My head grows light, the air thin. I see him drawing near me, gliding across the crowd with that sad, old expression.

This wasn't your war, I say to him.

A tear falls, brushing the length of his cheek and the grainy texture of his skin falls away, pouring upon the earth. There it spreads. First like sand at the bottom of an hour glass, but then into rolling dunes, lashing for miles beyond our horizon. I look abroad and witness the barren landscape inhabit my home, consuming it.

The old man smiles on stage, weeping thanks.

I turn to Sarah. *Will you drive?* She nods. The car trembles and I doze in the passenger seat, comforted by magnified rays of desert light.

Time passes. Darkness and light shift in their various hues. Scenes move with regular consistency and I am home. Sarah comforts me. She is tired, but she talks when I don't. We wait for my next deployment in restless anticipation.

Sometimes we'll go to the store. Enter Sarah, me. A cashier stands behind the register. She is young and dark skinned, and surrounding her are empty registers. A line builds behind her first customer, but she is calm and shuffles money into files. Paper sorted by design into cubbies in a drawer that shuts and locks and then opens.

Sarah grabs my hand and we walk down lighted isles. She spends time selecting brands. Shelves of Ragu, Classico, Prego, rows and rows of Tomato and Alfredo.

Grab the hamburgers? she asks.

I find the ground beef and stare at the various sized patties, all perfectly round in fat, short cylinders. The beef is patterned like little worms, moving beneath a plastic glass. The freezers hum and I stare at meat in the bright light. The worms squirm in their plastic wrapping and I reach down to pick them it up, pinching the meat with my thumb. I see the blood ooze against my hand, warm.

My forehead burns and I lean over. Hand presses against my head in the cool air and condensation runs into my brow. I lean over and air from the freezer blows in my face. I gaze and see the desert, then blink and bright lights like the sun in Iraq. I glance about and everything is pale and beige.

A child runs by, brown and laughing and I realize that I am alone: unarmed. I move to run, to escape, but the blinding hot light falls upon me like weights and the ground is thick and grainy and the sand creeps into my shoes, my socks, my uniform so that I unzip my jacket and try to remove my vest.

Sarah drifts and touches my hand. Her wrist runs along my forehead and she feels the heat and wipes away sweat and whispers until I see the freezers and stacks of ground beef and frozen meat. Brightly lit isles line the side of my vision.

She anchors my reality until we arrive at the pharmacy. A young man behind the counter smiles. He wears a white coat and stands with his hand behind his back, patient. He nods and receives the prescription when I give it, passing back the Prazosin and Prozac. Sarah places them in her purse and smiles. *You want a coffee?* and she laughs and kisses my hand, staring at me with her sapphire eyes. We visit the café and I take two of my pills with a black.

Do they help?

I nod. *Sometimes*, I say after.

I take the pills and the fear recedes like peeled skin. Sarah grows restless in the silence. But it takes away some things.

We get home and watch television because there's no work between tours. We count the days that pass, accelerating. The couch is leather and cool and the noise of the television blends behind me to a gentle humming.

The television drones and colors change. Animals and green in the wild jungle but eventually it's all dull and beige and I see that arid land behind the screen and wonder that it was once alive. I try to picture green, but the light of the screen is blinding and pains my eyes. So I close them to see the ruin of that biblical land.

A pot on the stove boils. Bubbles build beneath, tremulously rising. The rattling of metal and glass and sputter of water catches Sarah's attention and she turns to remove the cover.

Steam rises, spilling on the filter and leaking out to the ceiling. The fan hums while blowing hot, humid air in her face and hair. She sighs and pours in pasta, forgetting to break it, then reaches to swirl the *Prego* sauce. Chicken sizzles on a pan across from her.

I marvel at her balance. She shifts on one leg, then another. Her shorts fall before the curve of her leg and I see the thin fabric ripple, waving.

Will you hand me the tongs? She extends a hand.

Her statement lingers in the steam, drifting with a breeze from the fan. I lend the utensil to her outstretched palm. She breaks the spaghetti with violent thrusts.

When do you go back? she asks, her tone is flat.

Morning of the 17th, I say.

And where is your post? Her voice tremors.

Baghdad.

Her back quakes, but her hands are steady on the tongs, stirring the broken pasta. She sees the destruction of Sodom and the television hums in the background.

Why do you have to go? she pleads. *Don't go.*

My gut tightens at the whimper in her voice.

I have to.

She turns around and faces me. I see streams where rivers carved the blush on her cheeks. Chicken sizzles on the stove.

Please, she says.

Sarah presses her damp cheek against my chest. I look out, feeling the warmth of her embrace, smell of her hair against my neck. I try to respond—kiss her head and run my fingers through her hair—but my arms droop, unresponsive. I see myself through a glaze of burnt sand.

I can't lose you. She lifts a hand to choke the sob in her throat. *Not after all this.*

She pulls my hand against her, stepping back.

Won't you look at me?

Her hand clutching mine. I want to squeeze but bloodless fingers can't.

I'm sorry, I say. But the words come out dry as air and I slump in exhaustion.

She stares at me. Her hands shake in mine, whole body trembling. Moisture leaks between her smeared mascara and lowered head, nodding. My gut screams at me to speak, to lift her gaze and kiss the tears from her chin: but I am locked forward. Blood pulses sluggish through my veins. Dim light seeps from the kitchen window and I wait.

Sarah wipes the wetness from her face and turns. Chicken scalds on the stove and sauce builds to a boiling foam.

So you'll leave, she says, dropping a pan on the counter. I flinch and the chicken sizzles. The plastic counter hisses, burning gold and then black. *You'll leave, and what? Come back in a year, to me here waiting, expecting that good fuck you've been wanting.*

She throws the tongs in the sink. They ricochet and I cringe with each clang.

That's what you want, isn't it?

No, I can't move. Blood is hot now, pulsing sluggishly in dry clumps. A violet fire has spread to my eyes and glare of the stove blurs my vision. The kitchen is empty and Sarah and I stand alone.

I... I don't know, I say. The heat is too much, mouth dry.

Sarah shakes her head, moves to the cutting board. Poultry crunches beneath the pressure of her knife.

Damn you, she whispers. Tears fall on the burnt chicken.

Despair weakens me. I lean against a hard surface but now I'm standing and grains beneath my feet spill between each toe. The floor is hot and the desert sun shines. The white heat rising above us.

I look around at dull space. Around us is nothing and I feel vulnerable and empty. I check for my helmet, armor, weapon.

Someone shouts. Adrenaline bursts, blinding. *Sarah*. I try to hold on to her, but now see blackness and the white desert. Drone of the Humvee.

Won't you listen?!

A pan clangs against the counter. *We're hit!*

I duck and turn. Shower of sparks flares in the distance. Blood spills into my eyes in a great flood and everything burns hot white. My arms clench, heart pounds. I smell shouting and fear and dissolved sweat.

Fire blurs my vision and I stumble for cover. Unarmed, naked, alone. Sand grinds beneath my knees and blood shoots to my head. Pulse races sweet and the desert sun blinds my vision so all I see is the sound of my own spittle, the suffocating fear in my throat. I am vulnerable. Exposed. And I am drowning.

Head is light and thin hot air, vision black. *I see darkness*. The fire recedes. Then the lax support of my limbs as blood leaves and I collapse. Medic above me, shouting. The smell of Sarah's hair in the heat. Calling my name.

I am hit, I realize.

I am dying.

DAYS UNDER THE SUN

Roth and Midgely were sweating their asses off. 110-degree heat and standing bored in full gear only amplified their agitation.

“When’s this terp gone’ah wrap it up?” whined Roth, shifting his collar to let the dead air leak in. His Chicagoan blood suffered in the desert heat.

Their platoon had been clearing a village an hour outside of Mosul for the past week, taking rockets, guns and ammunition from various buildings. Today they were called to clear out a public school. Only, a town official was now trying to delay their efforts.

“Wha da hell’re we doin at a elementary school, anyway?”

“Calm your panties,” said Midgely. He stood more stoically, absorbing the heat with complacence.

Roth was a rookie and had missed the initial invasion, so he often bitched about their endless ‘police work.’ But Midgely liked Roth, despite his restless behavior and 18 year-old naiveté. They were bunkmates and Midgely had taken him under his wing.

“Haven’t you figured it out?”

Roth raised his eyebrows and Midgely sighed, shaking his head.

“Listen up, Cherry. Iraqis went and hid their ammo stores in places they knew our military wouldn’t blow up. So this here school, as it turns out, was a damn smart place to store shit.”

“Shit.” Roth said. “Well it’s not like deir effort made a fuggin difference. ‘Dey coulda saved us da trouble and put it all in da open, mahked with a fuggin X.”

Midgely smirked. The men in their platoon from Texas and California would often ask Roth to say where he's from. He would answer back, "She-KAH-guh," and the men would erupt in mimicry and laughter. "Ah, fug you guys," he'd smirk.

Suarez joined them from the side, gesturing at their interpreter.

"What's taking them so long?"

Midgely shrugged, twisting the gold band on his ring finger out of habit. A few paces before them their Iraqi interpreter, Ali, was verbally sparring with the city official. They'd been arguing for twenty minutes with the Sergeant checking for updates. Meanwhile the men waited, idle and amused.

"Looks muj tah me," Suarez spat. The saliva hit dry earth, rolling in dust until it became a sandy ball of mucus.

"They're all fuckin muj, Marty," said Midgely.

"Ah, come ahn. Dis guy's prahbably just da principle or somethin."

"Yeah shit," said Suarez. "And I'm Ali's genie elephant."

They all enjoyed the platoon's pseudonym for their interpreter. On base they occasionally burst into song when they saw him, crying out in Disney fashion—"Prince Ali, hawdy ah-see, simby abahhh-bwa..." Naturally, none of them knew the lyrics.

Several minutes passed. Roth cursed, squirming under the sweltering heat. The rest of the men were numbly comfortable, having adjusted to the ridiculous desert heat. Sweat stained shirts had gone rigid in their laundry. They didn't bother wiping the sweat from their brow anymore—their eyebrows had grown to keep the dripping out. Though they still gave an occasional shake to let the wet drops refresh the sand.

“Jus be glad you’re not Ginge,” Suarez smirked to Roth’s complaint. “Hey, Sully,” he called to the platoon ginger. “How you takin the sun? Should’n your skin be ash by now?”

Sully turned from a few yards down. “SPF 250,” he shrugged.

The men turned to see Sergeant Davis snap at the Iraqi official. He had Ali give one last translation and then led him over to the cargo line.

At the same moment a LMTV (Light Mobility Tactile Vehicle) approached on the road from Mosul, braking behind Midgely’s Humvee. Lieutenant Jackson hopped out of the passenger seat and Sergeant Davis moved to greet him.

“I need a squad to help clear out a civilian’s farmhouse,” Jackson called to the platoon.

“We can do that,” Midgely offered.

“Good. Load up your vehicle and get ready to roll.” Then turning to the Davis, “Sergeant, I need to mobilize this Humvee for another cleanup. Some civilian or other wants to clear out his farm.”

Midgely called the members of his HMMWV together. Meanwhile, Davis and the Lieutenant discussed the Iraqi’s refusal to evacuate the school. Midgely slid into the driver’s seat, Suarez settling beside him as Sully clambered onto the turret. The rest of the squad moved in and Midgely listened to the non-coms discussion.

“We gave an ultimatum, Sir. If they don’t clear out of the school in five minutes, we’re gonna start emptying it.”

“Good,” Jackson acknowledged.

Already the Iraqi negotiator was returning to the school, presumably to announce an evacuation.

“Have fun, Cherry,” Midgely laughed, comparing the large school with their shrinking platoon. Farms were usually no bigger than half a room in that school.

“Ah, fug you,” said Roth.

Midgely pulled out behind the cargo truck and let the moving air dry his sweat to a crust. The steady humming of the vehicle and beige haze created by the truck ahead left Suarez dozing beside him. Midgely struggled to keep his eyes scanning the gap of road before them.

In ten minutes they reached an isolated home that only passed as a farm in Iraq. The plastered hut was hardly larger than the adjacent chicken coop, which happened to be boarded up. Midgely parked as the Lieutenant had his driver rotate the bed toward the coop. Chicken’s darted lazily about the dusted earth, narrowly dodging wheels and men as they pecked at the fruitless soil.

Midgely stepped out of his Humvee into the late morning heat and immediately smelt shit. Looking down he found a layer of grim covering the enclosed pen. Every step he took spread the white pellets on hard earth and into the traction on his boots.

“Fucking chicken-shit!?” Suarez cursed.

“Who you callin chickenshit?” asked Sully from the turret.

Midgely was scuffing dust-crusting shit off the bottom of his boot when an Iraqi emerged from behind the house, calling in Arabic as he approached. Midgely happened to be closest and realized the words, and the man’s eyes, were directed at him.

“Salam wa aleikum,” the man said. “Shoo beddak menni?”

Midgely raised his hands in surprise. “Whoa man, No—speak-ah—Arabic.” This, however, served only to induce a longer stream of phrases. Midgely tried to understand but the man spoke faster, the words blending in Midgely’s ear to an almost pleasant humming. He

strained to remember a few phrases from his training, but was distracted by the frail, bent frame of the middle-aged Iraqi beside his comparatively giant form.

“Wa aleikum ah salam,” Jackson called, relieving the dumb Midgely. “Kaifa haloka?”

The Iraqi paused and turned to the Lieutenant. “’Aadee,” he nodded. Then redirected his rant to the Lieutenant. Midgely grinned as Jackson’s face tightened.

“Takalam bebot’ men fadlek,” he pleaded, asking the Iraqi to slow down. This still seemed to quicken the man’s drive. After another few seconds of visible strain, the Lieutenant threw up his arms.

“Sullivan!” he called, interrupting the farmer. Sully stepped forward with a sigh. “Tell this damn civilian that we’re here to clear his farm.”

Sully flushed, looking Ginger as ever. A couple of the grunts snickered as the lambasting shifted again, now to the orange-haired specialist.

“Fuck, uhh...” Sully stuttered. He froze for a moment in embarrassment twisting his fingers in his hands. But with a strained expression and broken phrases he managed to convey something of why the men were there.

The farmer’s face brightened a little. “Li, li,” he nodded, leading them to the chicken coop. He talked frantically as they walked with Sully leaning over his shoulder, adopting a pained expression in his attempt to listen.

“What’s he saying?” the Lieutenant asked.

“Shit if I know,” Sully shrugged. The farmer was gesturing at the coop’s wall.

Midgely approached the coop. The entrance was boarded up to the top windows. Peering through a crack he realized that the coop was loaded with ammunition.

“Shit, this thing is full,” he gaped.

The farmer nodded enthusiastically. In an obvious charade, he motioned at the front entrance of the coop and threw his arms down.

“I think he wants us to tear down the wall,” Sully interpreted.

“Well thanks, Professor Hawking,” scoffed Suarez. “What the hell’d we do without you?”

Midgely and the other men erupted in laughter. They struggled to regain control as the ridiculous nature of their scenario settled, but Midgely saw the Iraqi farmer shifting with a confused grin, awkward and insecure amidst the unusual display. The image didn’t help.

Lieutenant Jackson finally got them to shut the hell up and the men gathered around the coop. With careful design, and apparent instruction by the chattering farmer, they tore down the front wall of the coop to expose an office-sized henhouse filled to the roof with massive artillery rounds.

The Lieutenant planned a careful loading process and each man buddied up. The pairs would hoist a heavy shell onto the open bed of the LMTV in cycles. Midgely worked with Suarez and the men labored for three hours, stretching short breaks as they waited to carry the next shell.

It wasn’t terrible work, but the sun and day were only getting hotter. Midgely found himself drinking heavily from his canteen between lifts. And as the hours crept by he felt his stomach growling.

The Lieutenant called for a break when they were halfway done. A long lunch still put them finished before dark, so Midgely was satisfied with their work. The men all pulled out an MRE from their packs and huddled in little circles. There were seven total, and Midgely, Suarez,

and Sully sat in line against a wall of the house. They tried to find an area that wasn't covered in chicken shit, and the shaded side of the hut was fortunately clear.

“Y'all got somethin other than chicken fajita or beefsteak?” Suarez asked.

Sully shook his head and Midgely tossed through his pack.

“Looks like another day of shitting bricks,” he sighed.

Sully stared at the surrounding crust of brown and white chicken turds that layered the patched earth. “I'm starting to think this country could go with a little less shit,” he said.

Midgely grunted with amusement and bit into his beefsteak, tasting the dry, strong tang of sodium. It wasn't bad, really—just bland. This was his third afternoon in a row of the beefsteak MRE, and at this point they might as well be plastic. Their base was trying to finish off the less popular MREs that had piled up over the past several months. This meant a lot of fajitas and beefsteak.

The three ate in a muted silence until a white hen with a red, shriveled comb crept forward. She stepped forward with slender legs, jerking her head in curious, spastic movements.

“Scrawniest chicken I've seen,” said Midgely, flicking the hen some rice. It dodged backward, then returned to jab at the brown grains.

“You know,” said Sully, “chicken's are supposed to be closest living things to Raptors or some shit.” The men watched the hen lift its head, tilting to a profile so that the side eye faced them. The behavior eerily resembled the creatures in *Jurassic Park*.

“Bet you won't catch one,” Suarez taunted.

“Shit, what's so hard about catchin a chicken?”

Suarez grinned. “I dunno, why don't you find out?”

“Alright.”

Sully strode over to the scrawny hen. The bird eyed him casually, then darted away as Sully leaned down.

Midgely chuckled and jeered after him. “You’re gonna have to move faster, Gingly!”

“I’ll get em,” Sully called, already creeping after the hen. With a lunge he snatched at the fowl, but it squawked in terror and fluttered a few feet off. Sully held up a loose feather.

“Ha HA!” cried Midgely. Suarez was continuing his taunts as other grunts drew toward the scene. Watching Sully scrape through the dust and shit in an attempt to catch the white hen was surprisingly hilarious. The farmer was also drawn outside, finished with his brief lunch. He wasn’t as amused, but watched with apprehension at his house entrance.

“You gotta *dive* for ‘em!” Suarez yelled. At this point, Sully was going after any of the hens, burning red and panting in the 130-degree heat.

Lieutenant Jackson was grinning as well but, seeing the stressed expression of the farmer, called him off.

“Too late!” Midgely howled. Sully had crawled a few inches behind the white hen. The chicken was watching him warily, taking slow and cautious steps. Then Sully dove.

He grasped the hen around its wings and tumbled over the earth. A pile of dust rose up around him as Sully stood, startled by his own victory. With exhilaration and Lion King inspiration, he lifted the startled bird into the air.

“Got ‘em!” he cried, armor smeared with dust and clumps of brown shit. The squad erupted in cheers and violent laughter.

“Alright, alright, give him back the damn bird.”

Sully beamed as he walked over to the farmer, extending the bird.

“Call this one Moby Dick,” he said, gesturing at the hen. “Moby—Dick.”

The farmer grasped the hen from Sully and replied with a confused glare. Then he set the hen down and nudged it off. The chicken stepped away, pecking at the earth in casual disregard.

“Alright, back to it,” Jackson called.

A couple of the men groaned but most were in good spirits, Sully in particular (he didn’t seem to notice his stained and dirty uniform). Midgely wondered aloud how the rest of the platoon was faring back at the elementary school.

“They’re not chasin chickens,” said Suarez, hoisting a box into his hands.

“Poor Roth,” Midgely chuckled.

The rest of the day passed without much excitement. Just speculation on which predators existed in the wasteland that is Iraq, whether there was anything worth hiding chickens from (other than the sun), and how Iraqis managed to make even chickens to survive in that hellhole.

They finished clearing out the coop over an hour before sunset and moved to board their trucks and leave. The farmer gave an apathetic wave as they loaded, generally recognized as a half good-bye and half ‘good-riddance.’ But Midgely didn’t mind too much. It had been a good day and, as they drove home behind the loaded LMTV, he watched the setting sun color peaks of the eastern mountains a fiery orange.

Back on base, Midgely managed to shower and rub one out before chow. Then he got a hot meal and took a solid shit. His piss was dark yellow and burned hot as it came, but he drank enough to piss again after dinner. Midgely was grateful as ever that he hadn’t been left at the school with Roth. He wondered where they were, speculating they had worked through dinner. At last he laid on his bunk and thought dreamily about his wife, rereading a letter he’d received only two days before.

Then the door to the barracks opened and Roth burst in.

“Holy shit, you guyz,” he exclaimed. His face was lit up with an excited brilliance and he spoke fast. “You would’n believe whad happened!”

“What’s up, Cherry?” Roth was grinning wide enough for Midge to see his molars.

“We had a feast!”

Midge paused. “A what?”

“A *feast*, man,” he said. “Aftah we finished clearin out da school, boxes and boxes ah shells, 1.52 milimeter shells, artillery shells for IEDs, and 7.62 rounds and RPGs... this was shit dat kids wah *learnin* next to, mind you. Like desks and cheays right beside dese boxes ah rockets. But aftah we finished, da town Sheik comes up tah t’ank us. And he’s cryin, Midge. He’s so happy, standin dere in front ah us, that he jus stahts tah cry...”

Roth’s words jumbled together in excitement. Midge felt the growing sincerity of his words, was almost shocked by the emotion.

“He took us tah have dinnah,” Roth continued. “Dere were more’n twenty of us, almost a platoon, and he gave us a *feast*. Dey’d slaughtered a goat for us.” His voice started trembling. “There were these Iraqi Dolmas, like a thing’ah rice all wrapped in foil, veggies stuffed with lamb’n shit. An’ there was dis chai tea, and some kinda weird pastry thing at the end. It was the whole fuggin shebang, man. An we feasted! In da courtyard ah his home, he fed each ah us.”

Roth finish and Midge watched with a mild surprise. He felt himself forcing an instinctive amusement, but the private’s eyes glistened with candor. He was waiting, gleeful and expectant.

“Wow,” Midge said, startled by the sincerity of his own voice. “Cherry, that’s incredible.”

“I know, id’n it?” Roth laughed, collapsing on his cot.

“Yeah, it really is...”

They undressed and prepared for bed. Other men in their platoon entered with the same tale, all of them high off their experience with the Sheik. Roth asked how the farm trip went as the others shared stories. Midgely considered telling him about the hens, about Sully rolling in the chicken shit, but it felt strangely flippant. He shrugged him off with a ‘same-old.’

The rest got ready for bed and someone switched off the lights. As they lay in bed, Midgely heard Roth whisper above.

“Hey, Midge. You awake?”

Midgely sighed, rolling his eyes. “Whatcha want, Cherry?”

“I was jus thinking, you know,” he muttered, “jus how shit id’n all dat bad.”

“What the hell’s that mean?” asked Midgely.

“I don know. Like shit in books and movies, da ones that’re dahk and mean so people jus assume dey’re true. Ya know, how in those stories some guy’s always carryin his wounded buddy, but he dies jus before dey get to base. Or like how it’s always the religious kid who gets it.”

“Sure, I guess,” said Midgely, propping himself up.

“Well, I was jus thinkin, if dat were me or any ah this lot here, I bet we’d be alright. I bet we’d make it tah base, carryin our buddy that long-ass trip. I think we’d make it, ya know?”

Midgely wanted to deride the rookie, tell him how he’d learn soon enough. But then he realized, with a painful shock, that he was jealous. He envied the rest of the platoon’s experience with the Sheik—their mission of cleaning out the school, doing something meaningful to help the kids. He remembered then his volunteering for the farm project and felt suddenly embarrassed—sick, almost.

“Sure, kid,” Midgey said, leaning back in his bed.

“You’re a good guy, Midge.”

Midgey sighed and closed his eyes. He could picture Roth grinning stupidly in the bunk above and it left him strangely depressed.

“Whatever you say, Cherry,” he muttered, pulling up his sheets. “Whatever you say.”

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