

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE FINGER OF GOD

The Army attracts clueless video game nerds. Particularly the infantry; I see it all the time. I never played video games. I guess I liked computer strategy games like Civilization or StarCraft, the ones my friends played in high school. The hours that I worked in the restaurant kept me from being able to mess around a lot in my spare time or get into things like those online RPGs. I liked to read science fiction books, though, and sometimes when I was in the delivery truck waiting for my dad to pay the distributors, or when I had finished prep work and there weren't any customers, I could find the time to read a book. I mostly stuck to the well-known names: I read Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, Frank Herbert, Isaac Asimov, Orson Scott Card, everything by them I could get my hands on. I remember feeling really jealous when I read about the pig creature from "Beyond Lies the Wub" being able to read people's brain waves and immediately acquire their language. I still had an accent; I wanted to be able to speak English as well as the wub did. Of course, the spaceship crew eats the wub at the end, but that was beside the point.

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I didn't join the Army because I wanted to live in a video game or have real bullets fly by me. I wasn't doing anything meaningful back in Chamblee, Georgia. I was nineteen and working in my parents' restaurant. I joined the Army so that I could go to college afterward, and so that I could have a job. When I first got to Afghanistan, I was curious about the place—about its crazy history and all the violence. But after the first time rockets hit the base, I was perfectly fine with staying on the FOB. I did my job. That was all I really cared about. We ordered supplies and then picked them up from SSA—supply support activity—when they arrived by air. I'd get the Blackhorse company guys the stuff they needed. I didn't tell any scary stories about killing the enemy. I didn't pretend to be a war hero. Honestly, I just wanted to make it home and get the fuck out of the military in one piece.

Science fiction books are perfect for kids like I was: a weirdo, an outsider, a kid whose name sounds stupid and who's way too skinny and short to play football. With a name like Pairote Sasomsub, you can imagine that I didn't fit in; I only moved to America when I was ten. Kids in elementary school called me "pirate" because of my name, and then "butt pirate" in middle

school. It wasn't like I really had anyone to talk to until I was about sixteen. Kids in Thailand are terrified of their teachers. Kids in America don't give a fuck about anything. I would have loved to have been that carefree, but I was already in high school and working in the restaurant before I realized that I had the right to not be a good kid after all. That's the purpose the science fiction books served—well, that and teaching me how to speak English. I tried to read fantasy books, too, like *Redwall* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but I really couldn't get into them. I didn't want to read about a bunch of fucking wizards or talking badgers, little mice running around being British and eating feasts all day long. For me, it was all about the atmosphere of the stories. When I'd read about post-apocalyptic badasses and anti-heroes, I wanted that to be me. I wanted to have that experience.

And you know what? My life basically became a science fiction story back when my company set up a checkpoint at Mest Malakh. A shitty and terrifying science fiction story. If I hadn't read those books, I don't know if I would've been able to handle it. I just look at it like this: we were in a different dimension. We were in Mos Eisley or on Planet X. Maybe it didn't happen. Maybe it was a vision from an alternate reality, or maybe I'm actually dead, and maybe this is just a dream I'm having in cold-pac. Someone must really hate me to have invented this one.

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They made me be a turret gunner. I absolutely hated it. It was exactly what I enlisted as a 92 Yankee to avoid doing. I thought I was going to die the first time I went out. I got more and more used to it, but I didn't want to be there. I knew how to set the headspace and timing on the M2 .50-caliber machine gun after a barrel change. I knew how to correct malfunctions, and during the first couple of missions, we'd go out to the wasteland by the Band E Sardeh Dam and test fire. The fifty-cal was way too loud, but even though I hated it, I wasn't afraid of it. I just dealt with it and hoped that things would get easier with time. I hoped I'd never actually have to fire it at a human being.

With the schedule we were keeping, it was normal to spend the whole day out on missions. Sometimes we'd get called up at night, too. We'd have to go down to a smaller base down the road and pick up a bunch of Afghan police and take them out to a site. If we were pissed off about being there, they were pretty much in revolt. Most of the time they were high, just blazed on hash, and it was at least ninety minutes from when we called them to when they were actually ready to go.

A lot of times it was the guys from Cherokee Platoon that would escort them. Captain Levinson was always out with Cherokee Platoon, even though they had a platoon leader. He had it so that whenever someone got a report about a bomb somewhere, he would jump on the radio and basically say, "Send us!" Those guys were always out looking for IEDs. Then, one night in May, we were all called out. Cherokee had been sent out to the site of a reported IED, and then there was an Afghan police truck that had hit a mine and was getting shot at. So, Cherokee had to pick up and move to the site of the shooting. Battalion woke us up and made us drive down to the police compound in the middle of the night to pick up more police and American EOD—explosive ordnance disposal—and escort them to where the supposed IED was lying in a culvert. Which is funny, because most people know EOD from the movie *The Hurt Locker*, and they don't know that we actually have to escort those guys around because they're not allowed to go out by themselves. Us, a sixteen-man detachment of supply guys, radio fixers, mechanics, and cooks. Total pogues. A lesbian parachute rigger is the gunner of my company first sergeant's vehicle. The supply sergeant for my company is the commander of my truck. I'm a supply clerk up in the turret and behind the gun. Our driver is another supply clerk, an illegal immigrant from Poland who enlisted in Chicago and barely speaks English. In the commander's truck is a brand-new guy, Dahlbeck, as the gunner. We're escorting EOD to go detonate bombs, and this is after a full day at work doing the administrative stuff that we do for jobs. Picking up boxes at the supply yard, delivering mail, refueling vehicles, building pallets on the flight line that will get airlifted to Mest.

That night, the Afghan police were ready to go when we got there, which was definitely not normal. We only had a map grid to where the IED was supposed to be, but the Afghan National Police had seen the place and were able to guide us there. It was along a roadbed under construction east of Sar Hawza. There was a bomb in a culvert. EOD took about two hours to set a charge and detonate it. When they called it over the radio, we were expecting a big blast, but it was pretty weak. They cut in again and said that they hadn't fully destroyed it. So we thought we were going home, but they had to keep working. It was pitch-black outside, and it was really hard to keep my eyes open up in the turret. It was starting to get cold. The stars were all out, and there were no artificial lights anywhere, aside from the ones on our vehicles. They called "Fire in the hole!" again, and this time it sounded like a volcano erupting. It blew a hole in the road where the culvert had been. I looked at it

through my night vision, and I could see rocks and asphalt scattered all over. The Afghans were going to be pissed when they saw the road the next day, but we just wanted to get home and go to bed. We were all tired. Besides, they're the assholes who set the bomb in the road in the first place.

Battalion cleared us to come home. The drive back to the gate was a little bit scary. In a couple of places it looked like someone had pissed in the middle of the road. A lot of times, the insurgents pour water onto the dirt to make it easier to shovel out when they are putting in a bomb. Or, that's what I had been told. I tensed up a few times crossing culverts, but nothing happened. We made it back to Sharana, and EOD drove off back to their little compound. It had been a long mission; it was a little past midnight when we got to the place where we normally parked our trucks.

We started to remove the machine guns from their mounts on the vehicles. We couldn't go to sleep until we had packed up everything valuable and locked it in our rooms. I was standing on the top of the truck, helping to unmount a fifty-cal. I could see all of the plains around the base, and there were only a few artificial lights in the distance, some of them green, some of them orange. Most of them were from government buildings in downtown Sharana. None of the regular people have electricity. And then, from the same city, huge orange tracers started flying. People were shooting into the air, and I could see the light streaking into the sky. These little Roman candle explosions popped off in the distance. The sound came a few seconds later, this sharp *boom*. And then they got closer to us—they were shooting mortars. They were attacking our base, and they were attacking the government compound downtown. The air-raid sirens started blaring on base. I could see the panic in fat, sloppy people rushing to bunkers outside of their barracks. The big voice on the loudspeaker was some Mississippi National Guard redneck, saying, "Thissus notta dreel! Thissus notta dreel. Awl pursoneel moove ta sheelters at this taahm! Ah sayageeyn, thissus notta dreel!" I could barely understand him.

We remounted the trucks and started the engines. Our company commander ran out of the TOC and told us to move out. We were going to drive back to Rushmore, the FOB in Sharana city, to link up with Cherokee Platoon. We were going to chase these assholes down. It couldn't have been more than ten minutes later that we were outside the gates of Rushmore. We were back on mission, and the tracers were still everywhere in the sky. I

heard over the radio that the contact was coming from Zareh Sharan, which was this village only maybe a kilometer south of Rushmore.

I was really scared. We were driving through the city, and I was looking out through the green lens of my night vision. I'd see human shadows, guys moving to get away from our vehicles, and who knows if they were armed. They were just anonymous monsters in the night trying to get away from us, or, even scarier, moving toward us. I couldn't shoot until they did. I'd wonder if they were going to shoot at us. Could they shoot well? And the roads might explode. A guy might start lobbing rockets at us. Someone might detonate a car bomb. My mind was racing, and I could only look in one direction—everyone's got their piece of the clock to watch, their sector of the convoy—and I'd think, "What if he's behind me? What if the next gunner doesn't see him?" My back was turned. What's behind me? Is my buddy really watching for me?

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Suddenly a rocket shot right past my head. It was over before I knew what was even happening, but I felt the heat, the wind, and of course I heard the noise. It sounded like a jet engine, but moving crazy through the sky, like a balloon deflating, like a bottle rocket when it hits the ground. This insane piece of metal chasing me down. It was as loud as a train, and it went right over us. Probably like an 82mm. Had it hit the truck, I would have died. I had no idea where it came from. Everyone said, "Oh, shit" over the intercom, but we kept blazing ahead.

It was just the few people from our headquarters section—we weren't a full-sized platoon—but at least we had MRAPS. Most of Cherokee's vehicles were Humvees. The new Humvees, the M1151s, are at the outer limits of what you can stick onto the original vehicle chassis without it just falling apart, but if you're driving one and you hit an IED in this part of the country, you're going to die. They cost the U.S. government three hundred thousand dollars—I work in supply, remember?—but you can't use them anymore. They're too dangerous.

So, we're driving at the front of this convoy, and I'm the gunner on a vehicle facing to the right, to the three o'clock position, and I'm wearing a headset. I can hear all the traffic coming over the radio. People are talking back and forth, and Captain Levinson is saying all this shit about "Be advised, all Bravo elements, you are task-organized to me, take orders from my command," and the guys in my vehicle are talking over our internal intercom, saying, "What is this guy's problem?" And then, of course, I see it.

It looked like something out of an alien invasion movie like *Independence Day*. Through my night-vision lens, I see this fucking beam shining out of the sky, a massive infrared spotlight illuminating the last vehicle in our convoy. I had never seen anything like it in my life. Imagine this gigantic green column of light, like in the movies when God is saying something and there's a perfect stage-light beam shining down from the sky, only visible through the green light of night vision. It looked like the finger of God reaching out to crush whatever it could touch. Then we get this frantic call over the radio.

"Cherokee Six, this is One-Geronimo TOC, be advised that there is an A-10 on station that's talking to us, they say they have a target identified near your convoy, do you see their IR beacon, over?"

It was an A-10 Warthog gunship. They were about to destroy that Humvee. Back then, Cherokee Six was a lieutenant from South Carolina, and I heard his accent and voice over the radio. He said, "All Cherokee elements halt," and then called up to battalion in an agitated voice: "Hold your fire, hold your fire. One-Geronimo TOC, tell them to hold their fire, that is a friendly vehicle, how copy, over?"

I couldn't believe what they were saying. The TOC responded, "Roger, we'll let them know."

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"Tell them to talk to me, One-Geronimo TOC," Cherokee Six said. "Tell them to drop to my net and talk to me, so I can tell them what they're aiming at. Tell them to hold their fire!" The finger of God disappeared.

"Well," Captain Levinson broke in, "they're probably not authorized to talk to an out-of-task-force element without higher clearance. Technically, they're task-organized as a CJSOTF-A element, which is more than a few echelons above a company patrol." Inside the truck, all my guys are like, "Holy shit, sir, shut the fuck up!"

The TOC calls back: "Cherokee Six, be advised, they're not allowed to talk on your net, so we'll relay to you."

"One-Geronimo TOC, this is Cherokee Six, are you fucking kidding me? They almost shot us. They may want to maybe consider changing the rules a little." There was silence.

"Uh, Cherokee Six, this is Hatchet Six," Captain Levinson said. "I'm going to need to talk to you about proper radio etiquette when we get back." Nobody said anything. People laughed inside our truck. It was becoming absurd.

Suddenly, the mothership sent another cosmic beam from the sky. It was a huge cone, another green column shining on the lead truck in the convoy; this time, they were going to obliterate my commander. I called it over the radio. "Blackhorse Six, be advised, the light's on your truck now." Cherokee Six called our battalion immediately.

"One-Geronimo TOC, this is Cherokee Six, tell them to hold their fire! Tell them to hold their fire! That is a friendly vehicle!"

The green beam was still shining on the MRAP as if it were going to vaporize it. I thought they were going to smoke my commander. I kept thinking, "Are they going to shoot?" but I had to scan my sector. I could only see it if I was looking through my night vision.

Finally, they said over the radio, "Cherokee Six, be advised, the Warthog pilots are going to scan the fields near you for any dismounted enemy personnel." The light turned off, and we got word to keep driving. I couldn't remember where we were supposed to be going. I guess Cherokee Six or our commander did. We only made it about ten more minutes before they started shooting at us again. I heard the rounds coming by me; they made this noisemaker zip-crack sound, and then another runaway train when a rocket came over us. I wanted to duck inside the vehicle, but I couldn't. I called out "contact" over the intercom, and the truck commander called it over the radio. He was our company supply sergeant, Staff Sergeant Boyce. "This is Blackhorse Three: Contact left! Contact left! Small arms and rockets coming right at us!"

"Where the fuck is it coming from?" Cherokee Six asked.

"From the fucking left!" Sergeant Boyce said.

"Well, fucking return fire, then!" Cherokee Six said. I couldn't see any muzzle flashes or distant lights. I had no idea where they were shooting from. The bursts were happening at random. There was only one rocket, but whoever was shooting was trying to lead us, and they were getting really close. Rounds pinged off the vehicle and made Looney Tunes ricochet sounds.

"Uh, Blackhorse Three, this is Hatchet Six." It was Captain Levinson. "Are you saying you can't identify the point of origin on those rounds?"

"Why the fuck is he talking to us?" Sergeant Boyce screamed over the intercom.

"Blackhorse Three, Blackhorse Three, this is Hatchet Six, do you read me?"

"Hatchet Six, this is Blackhorse Three, roger, I read you."

“Okay, Blackhorse Three, where is the point of origin on those rounds? Can you identify so that we can scan our sectors? I’m not hearing any incoming rounds at this time.”

“Hatchet Six, this is Blackhorse Three, I’m gonna let you talk to my gunner, over.” Boyce told me to flip the intercom switch the other way, to hold it down when I talked.

I sounded like an idiot. “Uh, sir, this is, uh, Blackhorse Three gunner. Uh, we had a rocket come right over us from the left side, and they’re shooting at my turret. They’ve been hitting it, sir. I don’t know if you can hear the sounds. They’re, uh, shooting right now.”

I was hoping that my commander would tell him to shut the fuck up. If I hadn’t heard his reply with my own ears, there’s no way in hell I would’ve believed it.

“Okay, all Cherokee elements, this is Hatchet Six—be advised,” Captain Levinson began, “Blackhorse elements are taking contact left from these open fields, probably somewhere down by those qalats.” As if they couldn’t hear that from over the radio net.

“Be advised,” he continued, “we’re going to dismount and clear through this field until we can close with them and kill them.” The field was more of an open area, and it was huge—it probably stretched for at least a mile, and there was nothing out there besides maybe some ravines and drainage lines. They would have been pretty obvious targets.

“Hatchet Six, this is Cherokee Six, that A-10 is still on station, scanning for dismounts in that open area, over.”

“Cherokee Six, this is Hatchet Six, roger, all dismounts need to turn on their fireflies for friendly identification.” He meant the little infrared beacons. If we were lucky, the gunship pilots would see them from the air. If not, they would pretty much instantly kill all of them, even though they were Americans. “All Cherokee elements, dismount at this time.”

“All Cherokee elements stand fast,” the platoon leader said. “One Geronimo TOC, this is Cherokee Six, do you still have communication with that A-10?”

“Break, break, break,” Captain Levinson said. “Disregard, One-Geronimo TOC. Cherokee Six, dismount and move to my vehicle.”

“One-Geronimo TOC, this is Cherokee Six,” he tried again. “Do you have communications with that A-10?”

A crackling radio voice came through. “This is One-Geronimo TOC, roger, we have positive comms with them at this time.”

“Okay, One-Geronimo TOC, let them know that there are friendly dismounts on the ground. I say again, let them know there are friendly dismounts on the ground with firefly IR beacons. How copy?”

“This is One-Geronimo TOC, roger, we copy friendly dismounts in the field with IR beacons. Will relay.”

Whatever conversation happened between Captain Levinson and Cherokee Six, I didn’t hear it. Cherokee Six didn’t sound like he was in the mood for a dick-measuring contest on a night like this one, and Captain Levinson was a fucking idiot even in the best of times. The soldiers from the platoon all dismounted and stood next to their trucks, wondering whether they were actually going to do this. Their backs were pressed firmly against the metal for fear of exposing a limb to the bullets that were still zipping by. They turned on their infrared beacons and checked them over and over again, as if they were talismans that could protect against gunshot wounds. Everyone was talking on the intercom in my vehicle. Once we had stopped moving, the bullets started impacting on the armor plating. They couldn’t penetrate the armor, but it sounded like we were standing inside a giant soda can and someone was hitting it with a hammer. As soon as Cherokee stepped out from behind their trucks, they were going to get shot. The gunners in the trucks started shooting back. They laced up the fields near the qalats in the distance. I watched the tracers moving on the horizon, the little orange dots streaking into the sky. They’d hit the ground and bounce before burning out. Who knew where they’d land. Somewhere distant and calm. I never fired a shot. I wasn’t going to shoot at something I couldn’t see or identify.

Captain Levinson told the dismounts to start walking. They moved slowly, like the tactical wedge that drill sergeants talk about in basic training. One group stood their ground and covered the other group. As soon as the trucks stopped shooting, the bullets would start pinging around us again. Our gunners kept blasting in that direction, not knowing what they were hitting. Maybe they were shredding up an Afghan family, or some farm animals, or a pile of shit at the base of the qalat tower toilets. I was sweating, watching the guys walking out there with Captain Levinson. I kept crossing my fingers that they weren’t going to get hit. I could see it happen in front of my eyes—a body crumpling, green mist lit up in the green light of my night vision, and then everything would get so much worse.

The TOC broke in on the radio: “Cherokee Six, Cherokee Six, be advised, aircraft has positive ID on approximately fifteen armed dismounts in your vicinity. They are preparing to engage.”

Cherokee Six heard this and immediately started talking: “One-Geronimo TOC, this is Cherokee Six, do they acknowledge the IR strobes? We have our IR strobes on. Do they see us?”

The TOC didn’t respond. Cherokee Six was talking on his MBITR radio, and it wasn’t strong enough to reach back to Sharana.

The finger of God was touching the dismounted Cherokee soldiers. The A-10 was about to shred them apart. Thankfully, my commander finally jumped in, not even waiting for them to respond. “One-Geronimo TOC,” he said. “This is Blackhorse Six, cease fire, cease fire, cease fire, tell them do not engage, those are friendly soldiers. I say again, cease fire, cease fire, cease fire. How copy, over?”

Silence. The Cherokee soldiers held perfectly still, like they were hiding from a tyrannosaur. They were about to die. “Holy fuck,” Sergeant Boyce said. “Talk to us!”

“This is One-Geronimo TOC, roger, they waved off, over.”

“Hey, this is Cherokee Six, all Cherokee elements remount in the trucks.”

“This is Hatchet Six, disregard,” Captain Levinson said.

“This is Cherokee Six, get in the fucking trucks, time now. Move.”

Before Captain Levinson could say anything, we heard a punting noise and saw a flash near the houses in the distance. It was a mortar; it came crashing down within twenty seconds and exploded less than a hundred meters from us. Everyone ran to the trucks, and we dropped the back doors so the soldiers could get inside. The radio started buzzing.

“Cherokee Elements, be advised, this is One-Geronimo TOC, aircraft has positive ID on a mortar team about one click to your west, they’re engaging at this time.”

The best way to describe the sound is as a weed eater in the sky. Imagine this: you hear a noise like a jet engine, but it’s clearly moving, whizzing in the air. Then you hear this machine-gun thudding on the ground. Then, a half-second later, you hear the weed eater, buzzing for an instant. Some people say it sounds like a warthog grunting. It’s because you hear the bullets’ movement first, then the impact, then the sound of them being fired from the air. Except they’re not bullets. They’re 30mm exploding shells. The A-10

made multiple passes and blasted the mortar team on seven or eight strafing runs. We were cheering inside the truck like it was a dodgeball game.

We raced our trucks in the direction of the impact. That was our whole reason for being out there, the whole point of this train-wreck mission—to stop these guys from mortaring us.

As we got closer to the qalats, there was a thick cloud of dust. We stopped just short of a ravine. The first truck actually fell in, and the second truck had to hook up its tow ropes and start pulling it out. That was when the zombies emerged.

An old man, a really skinny guy with a straight white beard that hung past his sternum, came out into the glow of the first truck's headlights. He was wearing a baggy shirt and pants, plus a woven vest and yellow foam sandals. He was covered in blood, and in his arms was what looked like a three- or four-year-old male child who'd been split in half. You could see his guts dangling, the body no longer moving, no longer attached to itself. The guts were blue and red, and the kid's skin looked gray. Shrapnel had torn chunks from his face—they would have been superficial wounds on an adult, but on him they were monstrous. It was like that picture from Oklahoma City, but this guy wasn't a fireman, and his mouth was moving—he was mumbling to himself, maybe praying, trying to make sense of this moment, or maybe he was walking into the light, thinking he was next. His eyes looked straight ahead and never moved. My commander saw him and got out of the truck with his interpreter. The man talked to them, but he wasn't making eye contact—he was just staring into the light, rocking back and forth with the cloven child. I was still in the gunner's seat, trying to scan my sector, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. My commander started talking into the hand mic of his MBITR.

“Any Blackhorse element, check with One-Geronimo TOC and identify whether or not that aircraft is tracking having strafed civilians.” Sergeant Boyce called it up for him. Seconds passed, and then an answer: “Blackhorse Three, this is One-Geronimo TOC, that's a roger. They said one of the strafing runs was off, and that they hit a qalat. One-Geronimo Six says to conduct BDA on the scene and stand by for the TAC to relieve you.”

BDA. Battle damage assessment. Take pictures of what we killed, of what we fucked up. The fact that the TAC was coming out meant that the battalion commander himself was going to be out there to take care of it. We just

had to see what had happened. We had to make note of things so that they could sort it out.

My commander and his interpreter disappeared into the night, leading the old man back to the qalat. None of us had any idea what had happened. Nothing came over the radio. We just stayed put, although Captain Levinson made the Cherokee elements move into some kind of formation, and so they were busy backing up and turning their vehicles. We were solemn, whereas you could hear them swearing at each other as they were trying to ground-guide the trucks into the parking formation that their commander wanted. They used to call Captain Levinson “Tango Golf,” an abbreviation for “That Guy,” because they hated him so much.

Suddenly, my commander spoke on the radio: “This is Blackhorse Six, send me one CLS-qualified guy at this time, over.” CLS is combat lifesaver—basically, an EMT—a medic who’s not a medic but is trained to do medic stuff until a real medic arrives. Classic Army logic.

I had done the training before we deployed. I said so over the intercom, and Sergeant Boyce told me to get down and run out there; he would replace me on the gun. I disconnected the harness that held me in place, moved through the back cabin of the MRAP, dropped the back gate, and ran toward where I had seen my commander move. I took a bag of medical supplies from the back of our truck. My commander was waiting for me outside of the building. If I’d wanted to, I could have kept quiet and someone else would have gone.

“Listen, Sasomsub,” he said. “When you get in there, you need to focus on patching up the wounded people, okay? There’s an old man in there. He’s dead, so don’t worry about him. There are four little kids that are hurt. They’re going to need bandages, and one is going to need a tourniquet. Do not get distracted. When you need help, or you need someone to hold something or do something, you just say so. We may need to give the older girl an IV. You have to stop the bleeding. You understand?” “Roger, sir,” I said. I was going through the process for doing what he had asked in my head.

“No, Sasomsub, seriously,” he said, looking right into my face. His eyes were illuminated by the headlights in the distance. “They fucked up bad. You cannot lose your mind in there. We have to do this right. You understand?”

“Roger, sir,” I repeated.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s move.” We jogged into the darkness.

The inside of the room was full of dust and smelled like wet mud, straw, and piss. The ceiling looked like it had been hit with a giant pickaxe. I could see stars through it. I heard sobbing in unison. Multiple kids crying. I turned on the Surefire lamp that I had attached to my helmet. There were four of them: a boy and three girls. The rounds had exploded next to the bedroll on the floor where they'd all been sleeping. The boy was about six; the girls about two, eight, and fourteen. Their legs and feet were pulverized into sloppy red strips, the flesh burned and the chunky, chipped bones exposed in places. The oldest girl had lost everything below her shins and was in shock. The boy was rolling back and forth, crying, screaming something like "plar, plar, plar." He had wet his pants, and the dark piss spot emanated out from the cloth around his groin. As soon as I approached them, I caught the odor of blood, that disgusting iron smell. There was a young man in the room yelling at us. The interpreter was yelling back. I tried to put tourniquets on the legs of the oldest girl, but the man ran toward me, shoved me backward really hard, and started yelling at me in Pashto. I fell onto the floor and had to roll onto my side to get back up. My commander, who was only about five-foot-six and might be the angriest Filipino I've ever met, grabbed this guy by the shirt collar and started yelling right into his eyes.

"If you fucking touch him one more time, I will put a bullet in your fucking face! Do not fucking touch him!"

It was all noise. The interpreter was yelling. The man, now chastened, was still yelling. My commander was yelling, "Tell him to shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up!" He pointed the barrel of his M4 into the man's face. "Shut the fuck up!" The man kept yelling. My commander charged the bolt of the weapon, ejecting a round onto the floor, making a horrible metallic noise. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Suddenly, it was quiet in the room. My commander talked sternly.

"Tell him that if he wants us to save these kids' lives, he needs to calm down. Tell him all we're going to do is stop the bleeding so we can take them to the hospital."

There was chatter in Pashto. The interpreter spoke.

"He doesn't want you to touch his wife, sir," he said, gesturing toward me. "He does not want you to see her face." I'd thought she was his daughter, not his wife.

"Well, does he want me to save her?" I asked. "Does he want me to try and stop the bleeding?"

“He said that no man may touch his wife. No other man but him.”

I started working on the boy, and then the little girls. My hands got soaked in blood, and also my knees, because I had to prop their destroyed little feet on my own legs while I was working on them. Turning my head, I saw a bloody pair of the little boy’s shoes that had been blown to the corner of the room. They were knockoff Pumas with a logo that read “Cheetah.” There wasn’t much that I could do besides pack quick-clot and gauze into the wounds, wrap them up, and elevate them. The little boy calmed down and became still, as if drugged. The toddler had been in shock since I arrived and only sobbed from time to time, like she was hiccuping. They were going to need a lot of surgery. Last was the skinny, fourteen-year-old girl, the man’s wife.

“Does he want me to help her?” I asked. “She’s going to die if I don’t.”

My commander looked sharply at the Afghan man. The interpreter chattered.

“He says to wait.” We all stood there in disbelief. The girl had a thousand-yard stare and was talking slowly to herself, biting her lip as if to emphasize the words. She had a white complexion, but her skin was turning the color of wax.

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The man walked to the doorway, grabbed a clean blanket, and returned. He covered the girl’s face with the blanket so we couldn’t see it. He said something in Pashto, quickly and angrily.

“Now,” the interpreter said. “Now you can help her.”

The room was quiet again, except for the sounds of the old man, who had entered with the cloven child in his arms and was speaking to himself in a crying way, over and over again, saying something I couldn’t recognize, something that maybe he couldn’t, either—some testimony or prayer, some words for desperate moments, some consolation or ritual—the split boy still tenderly cradled as if still living, as if still needing warmth and protection, cradled as if being comforted back to sleep after this night terror. As if it hadn’t happened. And maybe, who knows, maybe someone can go back in time and step off the marked path that the archeologists and paleontologists created, or maybe the big-shot executives hunting dinosaurs can have a negligent discharge, accidentally shoot a mosquito or blast a blade of grass, and maybe it wouldn’t have happened. Maybe I dreamt it. I certainly dream it now.