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EMPTY SKIES

by

DAVID GAMBINO

A THESIS

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in
the Department of English
to
The School of Graduate Studies
of
The University of Alabama in Huntsville**

**HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA
2020**

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Submitted by David Gambino in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis committee.

We, the undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, certify that we have advised and/or supervised the candidate on the work in this thesis. We further certify that we have reviewed the thesis manuscript and approve it in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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PROLOGUE

We stood outside the training auditorium in a parade-rest blob of BDU'd-youth. Behind, the San Antonio sun was beginning to set and lingering heat moved in the dry gaps of air between our ranks. Everything was concrete, or brick, or painted steel: a pasteurizing-facility designed to wash away any undesirable qualities with heat, or with screaming and exercise and repetition—a method for a would-be airman of every type so that we came out more-or-less the same in the end, neatly-packaged and amenable to the needs of the Air Force.

I kept my eyes forward. Our squadron leader stood opposite us near the entrance. His boots were shoulder-width apart, hands folded behind his back, eyes nervously scanning left to right in case an officer or a drill sergeant came around, in which case he'd snap to attention and rehearse a phrase, a salute, or else be scolded and humiliated in some way. Baby blonde hairs grew underneath his cap, his head having been shaved in week one, and a bead of sweat worked its way down his temple like a plinko puck.

Inside the auditorium, through a hallway decorated with portraits of Bush and the commanding general, we filed asses and elbows into the main congregation and joined the other squadrons, uniformed bodies now numbering over a thousand. Drill sergeants hovered and searched for a target, anyone who might dare make eye contact, or slouch, or, worst of all, speak out of turn. In one corner, teeth and eyes and nests of bulging neck

veins screamed and spat over a hint of stubble. Like the trainees, the sergeants were personless, just black angled hats and parental fury, the kind that was purportedly good for you. They wore metal spurs on their boots that click-clacked wherever they went and the sound, designed to strike fear, circled beyond the peripheral vision of perpetually forward-facing newbies like the audial equivalent of a shark's fin above water, ready to tear, bite, devour. I stared at the ground, always, or the ass of the person in front of me.

The remaining training squadrons shuffled in. White, black, brown faces; indifferent, tired, eager, angry. Eyes always downcast, broken-in. Worthless worms. Maggots. Dirtbags. Airmen leaders—bravo foxtrots, buddy fuckers, the types that stepped on and stabbed for the chance at early promotion—hushed and scowled at their comrades. When the group commander entered, everyone, even the drill sergeants, went rigid as an airman let loose an ear-splitting scream of a command, one that had been a word, once, but had morphed with military tradition over the years into something that sounded like *TEN-YHUT*.

“At ease,” the commander said.

There was something soft about officers. Especially Air Force ones. He stood at the front on a raised stage and looked at us with a degree of detachment, like he didn't quite understand what he was looking at, this not-yet-fully tamed mass of America's youth, low-class and dirty and without purpose. Of course, that was his job, what he'd been trained to do at the Academy: to shape us into a tool for the country's nebulous interests. To make us not only comfortable with the real business of the military, but enthusiastic about it. Which, really, wasn't hard. 9/11 was still fresh, and if you asked

some young soldiers or airmen why they joined, at least some would tell you because they wanted to kill some fucking terrorists. Iraq or Afghanistan, didn't matter.

The commander appealed to this sentiment now, his speech gradually climbing in gravity and cadence. We had signed up in a time of war, he reminded us. People wanted to hurt us because of the uniform. Because we were freedom, we were the eagle, we were the god-damned beacon of all that is good in the world. And you bet we believed it. Our chests swelled with pride as the commander shifted focus to the enemy, the unnamed and omnipresent boogeyman of this Global War on Terror.

“Make no mistake,” the commander said, “your job is to kill. If you aren't ready to kill, you don't belong in my Air Force. Are you ready to kill?”

“HOOAH!” we thundered and stomped our feet. Eyes lifted off the floor for the first time, pupils dilated under the violent hypnotism, cocks hardened, I'm sure of it. The energy vibrated, hung in the air, a miasma of testosterone, sweat and boot polish. We salivated, and even the most docile in uniform felt a sudden urge to smash something, to become the hand of god, don the reaper's robes. The speech ended with a video montage of strikes, bombings, kills, to the tune of that Toby Keith cash-in, the Statue of Liberty shakin' her fist as we watched pixelated men and boys in the viewfinders of A-10s, AC-130s, F-16s, Predators, etc., transform with a flash of light into digital smoke and smaller pixels, and sometimes into shapes that moved unnaturally until, at another turn, they were finally indistinguishable from the ruined earth.

CHAPTER ONE

“Did we fuck up?” I asked Steve.

He had plenty of time to consider the question. The In-N-Out queue stretched, as always, to the double glass doors. Children ran shrieking in circles around the ketchup dispenser, order numbers were called over the PA, some repeated with incremental upticks in volume and, I suspected, annoyance. A homeless man in a military-green jacket cradled a much overused branded paper cup and spoke loudly to himself in a corner. At another table, a group of teenagers freestyled and beat-boxed over fries.

Overpowering all sensations, though, was the smell: fresh beef on the grill. Patty after patty with no slowdown in traffic, the kitchen a window into a past world, the world the first McDonald’s sprang from with high schoolers in the parking lot wearing varsity jackets or white t-shirts and greased hairdos, doo-wop or rockabilly coming from car radios. The uniforms and caps and demeanor of the staff were from a time and place that may or may not have ever really existed. The idea, though, was that this was a quintessentially American experience. The hamburger. The town hang out. The *Leave it to Beaver*-customer service. Fitting, then, that this was our last stateside meal.

“The wife thinks so,” Steve shrugged. “Still. At least we’re doing something. This is what we signed up for, isn’t it?”

A few months ago, our squadron had been called on to lend some bodies to a special operations unit based out of Florida. The unit was up to some new type of

mission, though none of us in Tucson had a particularly clear picture of what this was. We knew there would be air medals. There would be a chance at new ribbons and prestige. A chance to go to war which, despite ourselves, seemed at least a little romantic. I'd devoured first-hand accounts of World War II as a teenager, and the horrors within did little to blunt what I perceived was a great glory. Not that I was ever terribly patriotic. No, the glory was one of brotherhood, not nation.

These vague notions of virtue, combined with a fear that we might go our entire enlistments—mine would be up immediately after the deployment—without actually doing something, were enough for Steve and me to convince each other to volunteer for the assignment. It was June, and our orders coincided with Obama's surge.

I tried to trace it. In eleventh grade, Mrs. Trinker rolled the old tube-TV in on a cart just in time for us to see the second plane hit the tower. It was the first time the class had paid attention to anything all semester, though not for a lack of trying on her part. She didn't try afterward. She seemed pained in a way that was beyond our capacity as teenagers. That day was a fulcrum for her, maybe, the Georgia public school history teacher—she didn't know anyone in New York, had never even been there—childless except for her students, and now she didn't even have those anymore. She belonged to the America before 9/11. The students after that were of a different nation. How could she teach them? And this we read on her face for the rest of the semester; we stopped pushing the prospect of after-school detention, stopped the spit wads and paper footballs, the notes making plans to skip school and smoke cigarettes or steal from a parent's liquor cabinet, for she was no longer interested in filling out the paper slip that was both a badge

of honor and an inconvenience. Nor was she much enthusiastic about teaching. After all, the history she taught saw those dark shapes leaping from burning towers.

"Double-double animal style. Thanks."

There were eyes on us as we moved to find a table. Something captivating about our green, one-piece flight suits. People thought we were either fighter pilots or car mechanics. I preferred the former, and rarely corrected the civilians that sometimes came up to us and asked what it was like to fly an F-16. Sometimes people even paid for our lunch, and these moments made me consider America's military history and my part in it and, sure, I hadn't deployed yet, but I was a descendant, in a way, of all those little white markers in Arlington, because we were at war, right? War is what everyone was calling it, anyway.

A small boy came to our table. "Army?" he asked.

"Hey little man," Steve said. "We're airmen. Air Force."

"What do you do?"

The boy's mother caught up and knelt next to him. "Honey, what do their patches say? Can you read it?"

"Air Com-, Com-bat?"

"Air Combat Command. Do you know what combat means?"

The boy shook his head.

"It means they bomb people," she said. "They're killers."

The cargo bay of the C-17 was cold and windowless. Steve and I sat near the front with dozens of other soldiers and airmen; the rear was occupied by two Humvees. Four

large engines constantly hummed, and their vibrations translated every adjustment in throttle, every pocket of choppy air, until it felt like the vibrations came from us and not the machine. A constant whistle of pressurized air circulated the perimeter of the space, and voices came from far away.

At cruising altitude the crew allowed us to forgo the tight rack seating in favor of the cold floor. People slept between giant tires and palettes of various military hardware. We used our duffel bags as pillows.

Mom cried when I told her about the deployment.

“Jesus, babe,” Dad said to her. “Don’t be so dramatic. He’ll be in an airplane. He’ll be fine.” He was tall, dark, the kind of guy who liked motorcycles and guns and weightlifting in his late forties, a subscriber to an old-world idea of masculinity, one of scowls and cigars and protein shakes, a preacher of reputation-is-everything, a man who made sure to voice his displeasure at two men kissing on television before changing the channel so there could be no doubt of his sexual allegiance, a man who came right up to the line of being abusive—you could see it in his eyes—the animal impulse there, raging against his domestic captivity, life’s unfulfilled promises, yes, it must be his wife’s fault. Or his children’s.

“How’d the kids take it?” I asked Steve.

“What?” Steve asked.

“The deployment.”

He studied the grooves in the metal railing. “They’re too young to understand. They can’t grasp how long I’ll be gone. Tiff is staying with them at her mom’s until we get back.”

I pretended to be floating on waves instead of air.

Sleep brought me to my childhood home in Georgia. It was a white trailer with green shutters, wood paneling on the inside, orange shag carpet from the seventies. It smelled like dog and cigarettes. Our home was at the edge of the park. A red clay embankment ran behind, a favored staging ground for various forms of play among the local youths. We saw a vast Martian landscape from the perspective of our toys, GI Joes and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, sometimes an illegally-procured Barbie, warring factions seeking control of the territory.

I made my way to the embankment with my friend Matt in tow, partner-in-crime, hot Georgia sun beaming through breaks in the canopy above. Grandpa had given me a new toy for my birthday, a hard-styrofoam glider. The box said it could fly fifty yards, and it was time to test it.

“Set them up on top of the cliff there. Make them close together, though,” I told Matt. Some of the figures took two or three tries before they could stand unassisted on the uneven clay. Many had been gathered from under my little brother’s bed while he was napping. The glider had a large wingspan, and I wanted to make sure there were plenty of targets. “Okay, that looks good. I’ll go first, then you can try. We’ll stand farther back each time.”

I motioned Matt to the side with my left arm as I prepared to launch the aircraft. The glider flew straight as an arrow, but my aim was off; the left wing only barely clipped He-Man, the nose kicking up red dirt.

“Damn.” I walked over to the embankment and brushed off the glider.

Matt's aim was better. The glider impacted center mass of the group: Michelangelo and Donatello went airborne; Snake Eyes tumbled down head-over-katana; He-Man returned to Eternia, maybe, or he was lost in the grass.

Matt's gloating was interrupted by a high-pitched shriek. My little brother, Charlie, snot dripping down his face, surveyed the damage.

"Stop crying," I shushed him. "Why are you crying? Stop." I didn't want him to attract the attention of Mom, who, by this hour, was probably drunk and volatile.

"You're hurting them," he cried. "Where's He-Man? Where is he?"

I kneeled down. "We can't hurt them. They aren't real. Do you understand?" He nodded, the flow of tears beginning to subside. "I'll find him. I promise."

Bagram Airfield was a small city. It had all the trappings: roads, restaurants, a hospital and firehouse, a makeshift movie theater, gymnasiums. A few of these buildings were made of concrete, repurposed, like the runway, from Soviet leftovers. Most were made of various grades of plywood or converted metal shipping containers, or a combination of both. Some, like many of the gyms and housing units, weren't buildings at all, but tents. Gyms outnumbered everything else, and they were packed twenty-four-seven. If a person was suddenly transported to Bagram with no outside knowledge, they might think themselves at a sort of rugged fitness camp, its devotees cult members, worshippers at the bench press altar to god Creatine. That is, until they were bombarded, relentlessly, by the sounds of aircraft taking off and landing, combat descents, F-16 afterburners at max rate of climb—C-17s, like the one I would soon be landing with, so

large that you know their flight is an impossibility, a signifier of a false reality, it can't be true. Busiest airfield on the planet.

The Special Intelligence Detachment's Tactical Operations Center was a plywood building in a camp south of the runway. Camp Lima was a base inside the base, with its own fences and gate guards, TOCs for various other units, plywood housing (called B-Huts), communal latrines made out of shipping containers, a Morale, Welfare, and Recreation center (also plywood), a post office, and, of course, a gym. There was a secrecy about the place, and most who lived and worked there believed it was their duty to perpetuate a sense of hush-hush, to uphold their self-importance over the rest of the base-dwellers. No cell phones were allowed.

It was Sharon's job to take the unit's crew transport, a white stick-shift Toyota van, out to the flight line every time a new batch of personnel came in. She, a newly-minted staff sergeant with a corresponding thirst for responsibility, relished being the first-impression of virgin deployees, a face that marked the border between the world that was and the world that is.

"Good thing y'all didn't come this time yesterday," she greeted us as we stepped off the folding cargo ramp onto the flight line. "Rocket hit our camp dead on, killed a guard. Welcome to Afghanistan."

We waited in a gravel cranny off to the side of a white concrete building marked passenger terminal for the loadmasters to come around with all of our gear. Four large canvas bags for each of us. One was dedicated to body armor that we would never wear. The others held extra uniforms, MOPP gear for chemical attacks that would never come,

anti-malaria meds, various toiletries, extra pillows/blankets/bedsheets, books, magazines, etc.

Steve leaned against the building and lit up a Marlboro Red. Sharon lit up a Newport. And I thought of war movies where everyone smoked, and figured it was the thing to do, and so I bummed one from Steve. It was roughly six am local, mid-April, and surprisingly cool. I'd assumed Afghanistan would be a sweltering sandbox of swirling beiges and browns, but was surprised by a dotting of green here and there. Off past our busy C-17, beyond the taxiway and the borders of the base, was a beautiful mountain range, the Hindu Kush, the sky above cloudless and so blue that I thought maybe the atmospheric gasses were different here, half a world away.

CHAPTER TWO

My alarm went off at midnight. I expected to wake in my own bed, sense the physical space of my one-bedroom apartment, squint into the rising Tucson sun spraying through plastic blinders. I saw nothing save for the digitized red numbers of my cheap plastic clock, a sinister thing, the harshness of its glow outmatched only by its noise. I batted at it and sat up. An exposed spring bit my ass. Somewhere in the space another noise: snoring. My feet touched wood and dust, and I remembered.

The line for the chow hall reached outside. Steam from the kitchens wafted upward, illuminated by floodlights that turned Bagram's night into almost-day. Port-a-Johns lined the waiting area opposite the entrance, and piss and shit mingled with the smell of chili-mac.

Inside, I shuffled along the queue with my tray out held out. Midnight chow offered breakfast food and leftover dinner items. The kitchen staff were mostly a mix of American contractors and Filipino migrant workers, from whom I accepted, somewhat reluctantly, various slop dropped haphazardly onto my tray at the metallic click of a scooper release.

Self-serve stations flanked the entrance to the dining room. Salads, bagels, French toast, oatmeal, various fruits, soups, pre-packaged muffins and cereal bars were on offer. Beyond, the floor opened into a sprawl of cafeteria bench tables. Uniformed bodies came and went in all directions with purpose. Locals were employed to keep the dining area

clean, and they weaved in and out of the traffic with white dish towels or brooms and mops, and they were ignored, otherwise, by the Westerners. Several televisions were mounted along the ceiling. These broadcast the Armed Forces Network, a bizarro-channel that was similar enough to stateside TV—it showed the same news programs and sporting events—but with strange, low-budget, military-focused messages in place of regular advertisements: how to report sexual assault, the dangers of binge drinking, benefits of reenlisting, etc. These contributed to a dystopian atmosphere, one absent the comfort of consumerism, and I found myself vowing to never take the GEICO Gecko for granted ever again.

Steve and I walked the airfield. We had a scheduled mission briefing at the TOC belonging to a company called L-3, which employed the pilots and maintainers for the mission. The small makeshift building was at the far end of the taxiway; canvas hangars towered on the left, each large enough to house four-engine aircraft. Maintainers were always working on engines, the sounds of drills and wrenches a constant in between aircraft takeoffs, and whenever the drills stopped, the space was filled with the shrieking of thousands of black Afghan birds who loved to live in the rafters and tell you about it.

A ramp stretched along the right of the taxiway. Here sat the majority of the aircraft, the ones that weren't in maintenance phase. Rows upon rows of small twin-props, innocuous looking things, planes that might've been charter aircraft back home before they were conscripted, modified, and turned into hunters. Some had military paint schemes—black and grey—and others had been pressed into service so quickly that they

still wore colorful civilian shades: white-and-blue, or white-and-green, or white-and-brown, etc.

At the very end, next to the TOC, sat a group of larger, four-engine aircraft. These were modified C-130s, and their noses wore grim reapers or shark mouths; their vertical stabilizers were decorated with rows of small, black stars. Each star represented a kill, and each plane had dozens. Long, black gun barrels protruded from under their wings.

Inside the TOC, the smell of jet fuel was replaced by cheap coffee. A mission coordinator sat at a desk on the right. Above him, six large LCDs relayed video feed from L-3's aircraft, and a stack of radios were tuned to frequencies belonging to various units. Next to these, a baseball game played out on his laptop.

He lifted the bill of his cap. "Hey," he pointed. "Zero one-hundred?"

"Yeah," we replied in unison.

"Mundy," he reached out a hand. With his other, he brought a paper cup up to his mouth and spit. "Welcome. You guys are with George and the Colonel." He gestured toward the back right of the building, one of two briefing rooms.

"TOC, this is seven-three. Radio check," a digitized voice squawked. Mundy turned away to answer.

Sharon, George and the Colonel sat around a wooden table in the briefing room. A screen in the upper left displayed the latest surface-to-air threats; the tabletop was obscured by haphazard sheets of paper—weather reports, briefing checklists, survival checklists—that sat carelessly underneath coffee cups and spit bottles. We took our seats and exchanged brief introductions.

“Okay. Latest threats,” George started skipping through the PowerPoint, “looks like the usual: don’t be a helicopter. Weather looks good tonight. Some buildup coming in from the southeast but we should be gone before it becomes an issue. Scattered clouds at seven thousand feet. What else? Give us a heads up if the target starts moving so we can be ready to adjust orbit. Sterile cockpit below ten. I’ll be left seat; the Colonel’s right. What do you got?”

“I’m observing these two today,” Sharon said with a gesture toward us. “It’s their first mission in theater, so we might need a little extra time on the ground setting up. I’ll be moving around the cabin between the two. You might want to isolate comms in the cockpit because we’ll be going over training items and that sort of stuff; you know the drill. Target is same as last night. Small, L-shaped compound. I’m not expecting anything exciting. He never moves until morning. You guys got anything? Questions?” she looked at us.

“Nothing really,” I said. “Steve, just pass me a geolocation grid whenever you get a signal and I’ll plug it into my system, check if it lands on the compound.”

“You got it,” he said.

George looked at his watch. “Okay, let’s aim for engine start in forty-five. That work?”

“Airspeed’s alive,” the Colonel’s voice came over intercom. The cabin vibrated as we barreled down the runway with our lights off. A line of a dozen or so aircraft waiting on the taxiway streamed past my left window, and as our twin prop engines cut through the thin, high-altitude air, I could feel the thrust deep in my gut.

“V-R. V-One. Rotate.”

The feeling of forward movement was replaced by a sensation of teetering, as though our plane might fall out of the sky at any given moment. We were at max rate and angle of climb, and the stall warning horn went off as we hit the odd pocket of air.

I kept my face glued to the window on my left, scanning for tracer rounds. The base grew smaller, its perimeter lined with floodlights facing outward. It was more or less the shape of the US on a map and, for a moment, I wondered if that was intentional. The valley outside the base was pitch black. Nobody shot at us. Nobody ever would.

“Go ahead and cover your window before you turn your monitors on,” Sharon said. “Haji will see us coming a mile away otherwise. Light carries.”

I opened my in-flight guide and began going through the after-takeoff checklist. Infrared calibration: check. Moving map: check. My station consisted of two monitors, a keyboard and trackball, and a hand-controller. The controller was used to manipulate the high-powered gimbal camera mounted underneath the aircraft. It housed three IR lenses for different levels of zoom and two electro-optical for daytime.

Another equipment rack sat on my right. Three radios were mounted at the front, and I manipulated these whenever I needed to change frequency. The rack stretched back to Steve and otherwise housed his signals equipment, top-secret black boxes that blinked green and red.

“Ares One-Six, this is Raven Seven-Two,” I said into the radio. “We are on station at flight level two-two-zero; have eyes on target compound.”

“Copy. Report any movement,” a digitized voice responded. He sounded bored. Tired.

“That’s Julio,” Sharon said. “He’s been on this shift every night since I got here. He’s good shit. Based at the J-bad FOB—Jalalabad. Show me where it is on your map.” I manipulated my moving map with the trackball and tried to read the small town names. “Zoom out,” she told me. “More.” Finally, in the bottom right of the map, the town’s name appeared. “How far away is it?”

“About twenty clicks. Southeast.”

“Good. Always know where your aircraft is. See your radios?” I nodded. “They have about fifteen minutes worth of battery life. If everything goes to shit on the plane, you’re going to be the only one making a mayday call. Always know what grid you’re in. Had a crew back in January accidentally fly over the Pakistan border. Pilots weren’t the only ones punished. Always back up your pilots. Goes for you too, Steve. You got that?”

“Roger that,” Steve’s voice came over.

“Good,” Sharon said. “I’m going to squeeze back and run Steve through his system. Don’t take your eyes off the compound.”

I turned and gave her a thumbs up. She had to contort herself past the rear equipment rack to make it to Steve. I leaned to the right and looked ahead: the cockpit was just a few feet forward. One of the pilots was playing a crossword game on his iPad.

The compound on my screen was starting to drift off-center, so I manipulated the camera to keep it in view. Our aircraft operated in orbits around a given target, and I could trace our perfectly circular tracks on my moving map. This also meant that the ground on my screen was constantly turning, slowly, so that I saw the ground from all

angles. On the roof of the building, the heat from a chimney still glowed black-hot under infrared. Everything else in the scene was a cooled-down shade of grey, and it was difficult to make out much detail. There was a line of laundry hanging across the courtyard and what looked like a bicycle or motorcycle leaning against the north wall. No other homes were visible in the immediate vicinity, although I knew from the mission briefing there was a small village about a half-kilometer to the south.

“What would you do if someone left the compound right now?” Sharon asked.

“Asking both of you.”

“Track his signal,” Steve said. “If I had him locked.”

“Tell the ground controller we have departure. Follow him unless told otherwise,”

I answered.

“Right,” Sharon said. “Then?”

“Take grids from Steve, plug them in. See if they’re trending with the guy I’m looking at.”

“Good. Signal correlation is the last link in the kill chain, our bread and butter. You guys are it.”

“How often you guys strike a target?” Steve asked.

“Depends,” Sharon answered. She explained the myriad factors, shit we already mostly knew, that dictated death, e.g. Was the target planning an attack and so his death was time-sensitive? What other nefarious things had he been up to? Downed a helicopter? There was PR involved, you see. How was Karzai feeling on any given day about the pace of strikes? Most important though, she said, was the quality of the crew: If they were good

at nailing down a body with a signal—if they were “hot shit”—they could expect plenty of action.

“No worries there,” I said. “Steve’s the hottest. Top signals guy in our class.”

“Stop,” Steve said. “You’ll make me blush.”

After a couple of hours exhausting all training scenarios, Sharon retreated into her notes and left us to it. My screens were the only sources of light, and the compound was a hypnotizing image: it was easy to get lost in its moving angles, its infrared shapes like dark smears on a retina after staring into the sun. Sometimes I saw people or animals and I would lean forward, pulled toward the scene by an unseen force, until the figures proved to be imagery artifacts, digital ghosts.

“I got movement,” I said to the crew. “Looks like one military-aged male walking east from compound. Should I call it down?”

“Wait and see if he keeps moving,” Sharon said. “He’s probably just taking a piss.” The figure stopped about five meters outside the compound walls. A black-hot puddle grew at his feet. “See?”

The sun began to rise during our last hour on station. By this point, the cabin was quiet and still, the sensation of movement and the hum of the engines almost imperceptible. Aircraft heating had to be constantly adjusted—all the insulation had been torn out to save weight—and the warmth had a soporific effect. We fought against it with Rip-It energy drinks and dipping tobacco.

“It’s probably bright enough for E-O now,” Sharon suggested.

I flipped a switch on my hand controller. At first, the scene didn’t look much different than in infrared. Everything was washed out and dawn-gray, with a hint of beige.

As the image rotated, shadows began to shift with the rising sun. A woman wearing a dark burka entered the courtyard.

“What is that?” Sharon asked.

“Looks like a woman,” I said. “A feather.”

“How can you tell?”

“She’s taking laundry off the line. Wearing dark clothing. Moves in a kind of way that’s different from the men, somehow. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“OK. Good. You’ll come to find that males typically wear lighter colored clothing. I don’t know why that is, but they do. Sometimes they’ll wear a black vest over white robes. Not a lot of variety in wardrobe, to be honest. No fucking Macy’s here, you know what I’m saying? Women wear the dark colors. You’ll never see them wearing white.”

“Got it.”

“What else? What do you call children over the radio?”

“Chargers. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do we use cover terms for women and children?”

“I don’t know. Just the way the radio is.”

Another woman entered the courtyard with a broom. The bristles kicked up dust clouds thick enough to be seen on camera. As the sun continued to climb, colors became more defined. There was a green rug arranged on the roof of the longer part of the building, and the sweeper was up there now, pausing to shake it out. Other, smaller rugs were arranged on the floor of the courtyard, yellows and blues and oranges. Two children, one in white and one in purple, ran up to the woman at the fire.

“Got two chargers leaving the compound,” I told Sharon. “Do I bother sending that down?”

“I wouldn’t. Just be aware of the compound’s slant at any given time.”

After the fourth hour on station, another L-3 aircraft showed up to relieve us. They would watch the target for another four hours, until their relief came, and so on, until it passed full circle back to me. And this would continue for days, or weeks, until the powers-that-be decided the target’s fate, whereupon we’d be given a new target to watch, and then another, and then another, until the cycle stretched and disappeared into the future, its end beyond my imagination.

CHAPTER THREE

Later that morning, a memorial service for the gate guard was held underneath Camp Lima's flag post. Sharon, Steve and I shuffled in behind a group of fifty or so soldiers and airmen. Below the half-mast fabric was a battlefield cross: an M-16 stood barrel down between the dead soldier's boots, its stock topped with a helmet, dog tags draped around the receiver. The camp chaplain stood on the right, his uniform indistinguishable from the rest except for a small cross insignia above his name tape, and I was able to make out bits and pieces of his religious platitudes whenever there was a lull in airfield activity.

Sharon had been adamant about skipping post-flight chow for the service. I suspect it wasn't because she mourned the dead soldier—in fact, she seemed somehow excited by the whole thing. The death of someone so proximally close to her was an ego boost, a justification for calling this a war. She might say now, after she returns home, and her friends ask her what it was like, she might say that it was dangerous, and that she'd been through the shit, and that she could've been blown up—it was a close call, really—and the story, like every story, would morph over time, bringing her ever closer to the danger, to the point of impact, until shrapnel had actually pierced the roof of her B-hut, and she was saved only by the grace of God.

“Please join me in prayer,” the chaplain said.

I bowed my head with the others in pious mimicry, my mouth noiselessly alternating between closed and open, the words having lost all meaning long ago. That afternoon, as I lay in my B-hut and stared at the plywood ceiling, the prayer resurfaced, unwelcome, in a single phrase: *Forgive us our trespasses*.

Lima's gym was a large clamshell tent. It housed state-of-the-art weight machines, treadmills, bikes, rowing machines, ellipticals, free weights. Any workout equipment you can think of. Such was the military budget. Huge, expensive LCD screens everywhere too. Herman Miller chairs inside buildings made of wood scrap.

I hit the treadmill most days before sleep. Sometimes I'd do a few sit-ups, pushups. The odd bench press. Women in the gym held a primal power over the men. The pecking order became one of physicality. Rank didn't matter. It only mattered how much you could dead lift or squat. Or that's what the guys thought, anyway. You could tell from their guttural groans every time they dropped the weights. Ritualistic mating dances. Some women were indifferent; others ate it up. Some roamed the gym with their own harems, groups of men who offered advice, welcomed or not, on proper technique when using the butterfly machine.

Truth is, I was never much one for fitness. Being at Bagram though, outside of flying, it was a real struggle to fill the extra hours. There was chow hall, fly, chow hall, gym, sleep. Repeat. Until the seventh day—we had to have a break from flying every seventh day. Seventh days seemed to last a whole week. I'd go to the bazaar at the south end of the base where they let locals come through the checkpoint and hawk their wares.

They sold scarves, jewelry made from lapis lazuli, bootleg DVDs, hookahs, Soviet souvenirs: knives, knapsacks, canteens, etc. Most of their shit was actually made in China, though. I bought a couple of scarves, the kind terrorists wore whenever they used a dull blade to decapitate some poor bastard on the internet. Proof that I was over there. Proof for myself as much as anyone.

Sometimes I hit the Morale, Welfare and Recreation center, a room above Lima's common-use laundry that offered cubicles with phones or old Dell desktops. There was always a wait, somehow, and I'd marvel at the amount of free time the support personnel seemed to have.

During those first few weeks, I checked Facebook as often as I could. It seemed somehow impossible that my world had changed so drastically but my news feed stayed the same. Baby pictures. Vacations. Political vitriol. My mother finding every opportunity to re-share some banal, troop-worshipping image, a reminder to her friends that her son was deployed, a look-at-me badge of honor.

Mostly, though, I checked for messages from a girl I'd met during stateside training. She was everything this place wasn't: safe and soft and beautiful. I clicked through her pictures and closed my eyes and tried to remember what she smelled like, which was difficult, since Bagram's smells only alternated between piss and jet fuel. Well, and sometimes shit. The more details I forgot about her, as the days ran on, the more I thought maybe I loved her. I started fantasizing, at night, images of our life together like a stop-motion movie projected onto the plywood ceiling.

One day, she just stopped responding. A name I didn't recognize popped up in my inbox: *Stop trying to talk to my girlfriend you stupid motherfucker.*

The nights came and went. The seconds of the digital clock in the upper left of my screen ticked with the movement of the plane, with the spinning of the image. Sometimes, when it felt like we were suspended in air, a child's toy in a Jell-O mold, the video stopped too. The numbers stalled for a beat longer than normal. Was this meditation?

As the weeks passed, *09APR09* turned to *09MAY09* and then *09JUN09*. Nothing changed but those three letters. I ate the same food, ran the same distance, slept in the same bunk. Ground teams came and went, snatched guys up, brought them somewhere, did whatever they do. I didn't know and didn't care as long as I was back in time for breakfast chow. Figures moved: in that first bit of light before we returned to base, the women—shadowy dots dressed, always, like the Virgin Mary—stirred first. Then, the children. I could make out their play: it was soccer or tag or hide and seek. Sometimes, they had a single chore: collecting water from the village well. Their movement, though, was always markedly different from the adults. It was unburdened. They did not know the world, and they were happy. I could see it from twenty-thousand feet.

The men woke last. They held conferences with men from neighboring compounds, sat on rugs and drank tea; it seemed important. And even though their movement was more deliberate, the only difference, really, between them and the children was a few pixels.

In late July, a dozen locals were hired to build out a new bathroom in a converted shipping container. I was tasked with escorting them on my down day.

They were washing their feet from a hose when I approached. The air was thin and cool and threatened winter, and I imagined I heard the exotic call to prayer that played from the loudspeakers I'd seen on rooftops of mosques. Watching this ritual, I realized there was an ancient power here, in the land, the people, the religion. Something older than the idea of America, and strong enough to compel people to take their shoes and socks off three times a day.

The smell was pungent. It was a week of survival school: running around the woods outside Spokane, evading fake enemies with eighty pounds on my back, never stopping to change clothes, body reabsorbing its own filth and sweat, captured and confined and released, mercifully, to a room with a shower; and it was in that moment I dared, after peeling—yes peeling like plastic wrap from the deli meat you forgot in the fridge—my shirt off, to look down and to the left and take one deep breath through the nose to know what my wild body actually smelled like. I'd almost forgotten it. In front of me, now, it was magnified.

I led them through Lima's gate, single file, over the uneven gravel. They carried black plastic trash bags and shovels and tool boxes. Some looked down and downcast, others smiled at me in ways that seemed too enthusiastic to be real. I wore my flight suit—it was more comfortable than BDUs—and a pistol in a shoulder harness. Some of them looked at the weapon with scowls and suspicion. I wanted to apologize for wearing it, explain that I had no choice, but I didn't know how.

One of them, taller and older than the rest, spoke a few words of broken English. He introduced himself as Aarash, and held out his right hand. My eyes moved, quite on their own accord, from his hand to his face and back again. There was a thin layer of

grime, or dust—the kind that covers everything in your home while you’re away on deployment, insidious material—over his body, face and clothes. He wore a black vest, which otherwise hid the dirt, but his formerly white, long-sleeved shirt underneath was a yellowish-brown. I imagined him shitting in a hole somewhere with no toilet paper. I shook his hand anyway.

I spent most of the early morning leaning against the conex box and smoking the Marlboro Reds that I was now addicted to. My mouth tried to be creative with the smoke. The exhailes never amounted to anything, though. Just shapeless gray.

“You gotta shrink your mouth more,” Steve told me. “Shrink your mouth and put your tongue like this.” He blew a ring.

“How did I get stuck with this and not you?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Not like you’re missing anything. What else would you be doing?”

“You come from the MWR?”

He nodded.

“The kids?”

“Brandon started kindergarten. Allie won’t start preschool ‘til next year.”

“They miss dad?”

Steve rolled the cherry between his thumb and forefinger until it separated and fell onto the gravel. He flicked the remaining butt in no particular direction. “Brandon bit another kid. A girl. Tiff is freaking out, says he needs a child psychologist. I can’t deal with that shit over here, man. She brings up every little thing with the kids like she wants me to handle it. What am I supposed to do? Me being there doesn’t stop him from biting. Kids bite. It’s what they do.”

“I bit kids all the time,” I lied.

“Right?” Steve lit another cigarette and smoked it in silence, his eyes watching smoke rings climb until they merged with never-ending contrails in the Bagram sky.

“Want anything from chow?” he asked.

“No, thanks. We’re getting a food break here soon,” I gestured in the direction of the bathroom.

After chow, I returned to the bathroom cradling a dozen cans of Rip-It. Rip-Its were disgusting, really. They tasted like knock-off Monster mixed with battery acid. I only drank it when I was in serious danger of nodding off on a mission. The locals, though—they loved the shit, coveted it. It was America’s most prized export as far as they were concerned.

“Friend,” Aarash pointed at me, smiling. He divvied up the cans in order of age or whatever custom demanded varying degrees of respect. He, of course, kept two cans for himself. The men resumed their work with an almost methamphetamine-induced zeal. I returned to my post, back and hips resting against the metal, bottom lip holding on, barely, to a cig, eyes staring at the sun and willing it to move faster.

Aarash joined me and mimicked my Western lassitude. We stayed there for a beat, pondering the weariness of our current existence, me wondering somewhere in the direction of the next chow, and then wishing a silent prayer that the round-gutted guy who slept at the other side of our shared B-Hut—which housed eight in all—would be on a different shift when I returned, that he would be awake and away and not snoring the

snore of an earthen god who trembled the ground whenever air rippled through his sinuses. Aarash's ruminations, I can only guess.

I gave him a sideways look, and he returned it.

"Children?" he pointed at me.

"Me? God, no," I answered.

He reached into a shirt pocket somewhere and pulled out a creased photograph. "Children," he pointed at it. I took the photo and looked closer. There he was, beard slightly shorter, standing behind four small children, a boy and three girls. Next to him was a woman in a dark blue hijab. In the background, an early-nineties style Toyota sedan parked outside beige compound walls. They looked proud. "Children," he said again and nodded. "I work."

I nodded my understanding.

"You?" he pointed at my uniform. "You," and then he pointed at the sky and made a bird's wings with his hands.

I nodded. "Yeah."

He lifted his back off the wall and faced me. He was close, uncomfortably so—I could see the grime that lived in his unwashed beard, his body odor intensified. He had long, black hairs that protruded well out of his nostrils. I also noticed, for the first time, that he had blue eyes. Strange. They searched mine.

"Why?" he asked.

I looked at the ground and back and his eyes were still there. I thought about his question, tried really hard to think of an answer.

"I don't know."

CHAPTER FOUR

“Eighty-six this next one coming through,” Gary said. “Supposed to have no cheese.”

“Got it,” I shouted back over the din of the kitchen. Two halves of a bun rolled down my end of the conveyer, one-half covered in melted cheddar, the other mozzarella. I nudged them into a trashcan that sat underneath my cutting board with the blunt edge of my knife. In front of the cutting board was a dressing station that housed lettuce, onions, tomatoes, pickles, peppers, and condiments.

“Save the meat.” He glared at the new girl, Ginny, who was not suited to admonishment or fast food. The turkey rolled through next, sliced and slightly sizzling on a precut sheet of tin foil. I guided it onto the cutting board and waited for un-cheesed bread, checked the white ticket hanging above the dressing station, *add onion* it said below *med Turk*. It was still slow—a quarter ‘til eleven—the calm before the storm, before the lunch rush that would bring a deluge of white tickets, too many to hang on the metal railing. They would scatter everywhere, cutting board, floor, maybe even into the bleach-water bucket tucked below the conveyer oven. There would be variations on variations, *no tomato, xtra pickle, lite mayo, med Orig, SantFe Chik, Sm Past, Lg Reub*, uncountable combinations of sandwiches and toppings, while the customers would stand a few feet away, behind the counter, occasionally barking orders and further demands for customization that somehow didn’t make it onto the ticket, scrutinizing everything, the way I wiped the knife clean before cutting their sandwich in half, the amount of mayo I

gave them—the proper amount being something that everyone has a different stance on—the way I spread the warmed deli meat across the bottom bun.

Gary told me I had a real skill here. Said I was the fastest sandwich maker in the tristate area, something to be proud of. Proud of being good at a “real-life” thing. He thought me leaving for the Air Force might seriously disrupt the greased wheels of his money-making lunch rush machine.

One time, just before lunch rush hit, I shared a roach with one of the assistant managers behind the dumpster.

“Nah, take the rest,” Michael coughed and waved it away when I tried to hand it to him. I shrugged. “Just a lil’ something to get me through is all I need. Gary be all up in my grill later, watch.” He pulled out a vial of Visine and put a drop in each eye like an experienced optometrist.

“He thinks I should stay,” I took another hit, the cherry burning my fingertips. “What do you think?”

“Man, fuck Gary,” Michael headed to the back door, paused a beat, and looked over his shoulder: “Get out while you can. Don’t be me.”

The path from the dumpster to the kitchen seemed twice as long on the return trip. My extremities tingled, my blood vessels trying to remind me I had arms and legs; the placement of my tongue in my oral cavity was now something I had to consciously consider, and I was worried others would be able to see tiny flames flickering along the edges of my earlobes. I tried to put them out in the walk-in fridge, but they flared up when I bumped into Ginny.

“Hey,” she said. Her voice sounded digitized and far away. “Have you seen the ranch? Can’t find it.”

“What?” My tongue felt stiff and useless but the word still came out, or it must have since I heard it bounce between cold metal walls. It sounded distant.

“The ranch,” she bent back down to rummage through the shelf. “Well? Need it for a turkey smokecheesy.”

“Did you check under the prep station?” I managed to get out.

“Oh,” she said.

I had to back out of the fridge to give her room to exit and couldn’t think of another reason to go back inside. My plan on hunkering down with the romaine to weather the initial sativa-induced stupor was ruined. And even if I had come up with another excuse to hide there, it would have been ruined anyway upon bumping ass-first into Gary.

“Go help Ginny finish that sandwich,” he ordered. “She’s never made one of those before. Rush is about to hit, anyway—I need you on the line. You stocked up there? What about knives, bleach towels? Alright. Hey,” he lowered his voice and bifocals and studied me. “Ginny make you nervous?”

“What?”

The ticket machine above the line began its oppressive overture and didn’t stop for the next two hours. Like a dog whistle for minimum-wage workers it could be heard above everything else, that tiny little beige plastic monster. Gary, at the front end of the conveyer oven, tore the ticket and began shouting at no one in particular: “Medium original no onion small turkey bacon medium pastrami on rye mustard on side all day!”

This was enough to summon Michael from some back corner of the restaurant. He winked at me as he took his place next to Gary. I picked up a squirt bottle of mayo and began tossing it around like a cheap teppanyaki chef, but only made it four or so tosses before dropping it onto the cutting board.

“This for here or to go?” Ginny asked me. It said it on the ticket, but Gary hadn’t moved it to our side of the line yet.

“For here or to go?!” I yelled at Gary. He liked it when people shouted in the kitchen. Probably reminded him of glory days working in a real restaurant.

“To go!”

Copy.

“How copy?” a voice said. “Raven seven-two, how copy?”

“You going to get that?” another voice.

“Copy,” I blurted out with the press of a button on my headset cord.

“You alright?” the second voice asked. It was Steve. I turned in my seat and glanced back at him.

“Yeah, just,” I paused. “Zoned out, I guess.”

“I hear ya. One more hour.”

The warmth and vibration of the cabin had lulled me into an almost-sleep. Next to me, scattered along the metal floor of the cabin, were two cans of Rip-It—one empty, one unopened—a spit bottle with about two fingers worth of brown liquid, and a Cliff bar wrapper, all piled atop several mission documents. I foraged for the sheet that described the target military-aged male; the sun was coming up and I wanted to be ready in case he left the compound. Abu-Fahid was the name. His sheet, atypically, actually had a blurry

photo taken from ground level. *Mid-level Taliban Cmdr. Activity: 4x IED attacks IVO JBAD.* He looked like you'd imagine: white robes, black vest, long brown-gray beard. He was otherwise too blurry to make out anything else. *Description: White trad w/ black vest. White cap. White shoes. Walks with limp on left leg from strike in 2006.*

“How do they know this guy has a limp?” I asked Steve.

“Who?” he said.

“This guy,” I waved the sheet of paper. “Abu-Fuckstick.”

“Probably got someone on the ground.”

“Hey,” George broke in. “We were thinking of staying awake until lunch to make Aziz’s. You guys in?”

Two men emerged from the compound’s south wall. I zoomed in as far as I could, spun a dial on my hand controller to focus the image. At max zoom, there were still details I couldn’t parse. I could generally determine if a figure was a man, woman or child—though sometimes this was based on movement and behavior as much as size. When it came to adolescents, it was trickier. Facial details, mouths closed or open in conversation, beards, individual fingers were all impossible to determine from altitude. The men were, literally and figuratively, faceless.

“I got movement,” I told the crew. “Don’t lock the signal yet. They’re just standing outside the compound.”

“Roger,” Steve said. “Match description?”

“Not sure. One is wearing white, the other tan. No black vests.”

“Limp?”

“I need to see them move again. Although I’m not convinced I can—OK, they’re walking away now. Southbound.”

“Ares One-Six,” I switched to my external mic. “Have two military-aged males leaving target compound on foot. Southbound.”

“Copy,” Julio responded. He sounded like he’d just woken from a nap. “Do either of them match target description?”

“Unable to make out a limp at this time. Request a lower altitude to get a better look.”

“Roger. Approved descent: flight level one-eight-zero. Go ahead and lock signal and work correlation.”

“Wilco.” My stomach went into my chest for a moment as our plane began descending. The men on my screen began to increase in size ever so slightly, and I studied the space in-between their legs as they moved along the dirt road. Problem was the road was uneven, scarred by motorcycle tire tracks and potholes, rocks and other debris, so that, limp or no limp, each step necessarily carried a different weight. “New flight level established.”

“I got a grid,” Steven said. “Looks more or less on the original compound still.”

“Signal maybe hasn’t caught up yet,” I replied. “See if it starts trending south.”

“You think this guy has a limp?” George asked. “The one on the right—kind of looks like a limp, what do you think?”

“Hard to tell—”

“Raven Seven-Two, can I get an update? Do you have correlation?” Julio broke in.

“Standby. Still working correlation,” I responded.

“Copy. Do either of the MAMs have a limp?”

I put my face closer to the screen and tried to convince myself one way or the other, tried to force one of them via telekinesis to prove their limp, but it was no use.

“Looks like a possible limp.”

“Copy—break, break—Zeus Six-Two confirm eyes on target.”

“This is Zeus, have eyes on two MAMs walking south,” a voice broken by static came over the satellite net from a trailer in Nevada. Zeus was a predator.

“Copy.”

“Oh shit,” George said. “They’re about to hit this guy?”

“It’s about time we got some action,” said the Colonel.

“We’re not sure it’s him yet,” said Steve.

“It’s probably him,” I said. “You got an updated grid?”

“Yeah. Victor-Charlie, six-seven-two-four, seven-nine-five-one.”

“Got it. It’s south of compound. About forty meters. I think it’s him.”

“How far away are they now?”

“About two-fifty. There’s no one else out here. The signal lags behind, doesn’t it?”

“Well, yeah. A little bit.”

“I think we have enough. I’m going to call it down.” I pushed a button to switch back to the external mic. “Ares One-Six, have positive correlation on target, how copy?”

“Copy, positive correlation,” answered Julio. “Standby.”

I tapped my foot in anticipation, reached into the leg pocket on my flight suit and pulled out a tin of Kodiak. The fat plug made my already-racing heart beat faster. I wiped the brown residue on my ankle.

“All players, all players,” said Julio. “Expect kinetic strike on target. Raven, begin calling out collateral damage concerns every ten seconds this net. How copy?”

“Copy.”

“Copy.”

The two men were passing a small compound on the east side of the road. A small hedge line ran north and south, the foliage partially obscuring the men whenever our plane was at a two-seventy or ninety degree angle to the target. “Small compound in vicinity of target,” I counted ten-Mississippi. “Targets passing compound.”

“Copy,” said Julio. “Scan ahead and look for any other compounds or vehicles along this road.”

“Wilco.” I zoomed out and manipulated the hand-controller so that the two men were now small black dots at the edge of my screen. The next nearest building was almost half a kilometer away. There were no vehicles and no other pedestrians. “Next compound is half a click south. Nothing on the road.”

“Copy—break, break—Zeus, confirm eyes still on target.”

“Eyes on,” Zeus said.

The men were now well clear of the eastern compound. It was dawn, and the shifting temperatures were starting to muddy the clarity of my camera. The ambient warmth made the men’s dark bodies less distinctive from the pockmarked terrain.

“Rifle,” Julio commanded.

“Rifle,” responded Zeus. “Time of flight: thirty seconds.”

I zoomed back in on the men and waited. The pixels gave no indication that they were aware of an object falling toward them. I reached for my bottle without taking my eyes from the screen and spit. Then—the screen was a cloud, my entire field-of-view obscured, nothing visible save dust and displaced dirt, dark pixels scattered in all directions, hot shrapnel in the infrared camera, or glowing earth, or pieces of flesh, or all of the above.

As the dust cleared, as the debris settled into a newly-formed crater and the pulse in my head began to subside, the sounds of a locker room celebration filtered through the noise cancellation of my headset, and I’m not sure if some of it didn’t come from me.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Bowe Bergdahl walked off base and went missing, all ISR aircraft in the country went looking for him. There were several rumors at the time. Some people claimed he'd simply grown tired of General Order Number One, and so snuck off base and met some Afghan police acquaintances at a bar where, after two beers, he was inebriated enough to be kidnapped and sold to the Taliban. Others speculated that he hadn't left of his own accord at all, but that an especially skilled and covert wing of the Haqqani network had infiltrated his base, cut a hole in his tent, and hauled him away, sleeping bag and all. Still others said that he had simply wandered too far away during a convoy mission and got lost.

We flew in large orbits down near Kandahar, shifting our start point each night. Finding him was up to Steve, really. Or any of the other signals guys in the dozen or so aircraft in the sky at any given time, not counting the drones. Without a positive signal, there was nothing in particular for me to watch with my camera.

When I was bored of resting my eyes or reading the *Stars and Stripes*, I studied the world below. Nothing moved for hours at a time. Everything was in limbo, including us. It was peaceful, and I found myself secretly wishing I could stay like this, weightless and warm and swaddled in the belly of the plane, propeller-lullabies and gentle rock-a-bye vibrations, no room for thoughts of violence.

I watched goats.

I watched men with overactive bladders or upset stomachs emerge from buildings made of mud and straw. I watched them go back inside.

Do the sleeping villagers know that somebody is watching them? Do they dream about it? Do they dream?

Morning came, and from the tiny dwellings spilled more people than seemed possible. The village activity was accompanied by the return of color. Blues, greens, pinks and purples for the women and children, who set about on various chores: lighting fires, collecting water, taking down laundry, sweeping the dust that had settled over everything in the night. The men, meanwhile, moved in a white migratory mass toward the center of town where the mosque stood. I tried to count them, but gave up after eighty-two.

From watching, I'd come to learn that most homes housed multiple generations. I learned age was respected -- although I couldn't see wrinkles or graying hair, I could tell who was older based on body language. For example, older men, when not at the mosque, generally lounged in shaded areas of courtyards on colorful rugs, and outstretched arms brought them tea and dates and other things. Younger men visited and timidly sat on rugs that were slightly less colorful, or in spots that were only partially covered in shade. The younger they were, the longer they had to wait for tea. They seemed not to speak, but to listen. Not that I could hear anything, of course, but the small pixelated bodies gave off the subtlest of hints of conversation -- a hand movement, or an arched back, or a deep breath that I imagined I could see.

Deference was given to women, too. It seemed every home came with a mother-in-law. And, although the older women still joined in household chores, the sons moved

cautiously around them, so as not to disturb their sweeping or cooking. Sometimes, men even approached them for counsel, or so it appeared, sons' heads bent slightly forward, nodding their understanding after receiving a bit of wisdom.

Life was enviously uncomplicated here. I tried to imagine what it would be like to grow up in a village and marry and settle down and have kids that would grow up in the same village and continue the cycle. To have a strong family connection. To know your neighbors. To not be so alone. I tried, but I couldn't. And I thought maybe there was something deeply wrong with America. Maybe that's why Bergdahl walked away.

After two weeks, command called off the search. He was probably in Pakistan, they figured. There was no hope in finding him.

Thanksgiving rolled around, but I wouldn't have noticed if not for the chow hall's change in décor. Colorful construction paper-turkeys decorated the walls beyond the self-serve stations. A hand-drawn Mayflower pretended to float above a sea of bottled water stacked near the exits, and a life-sized paper-machete pilgrim stood underneath a television that alternated between Fox News and CNN.

More surreal, and slightly disturbing, were the getups worn by the dining facility staff. The guys on the line—KBR contractors and junior enlisted Air Force—wore cheap costumes made of cardboard and cloth and lurid colors that suggested, I can only guess, some autumnal pagan deity. Others costumes were more traditional: black puritan hats, white collars and vaguely prudish faces.

No Indians, though. Not near the food. They were the locals, relegated to janitorial duties in the main dining area, and their costumes mostly consisted of a cheap

plastic headband with a feather or two. They roamed in packs between the cafeteria benches and eyeballed the eating progress of hungry soldiers, eager to wipe a bit of spilled cranberry here, or mop up some gravy there.

“Turkey’s a bit dry,” Steve said with a labored swallow. He tried to cut another piece of breast but it resisted, and his plastic fork broke in two.

“It’s the thought that counts, I guess,” I offered.

“I guess,” he sighed and rested his chin between both palms and stared at his half-eaten tray. “Or it just makes it worse. I’m sick of this shithole, man. And we’re not even halfway done. I can’t—I can’t remember what my kids smell like. You know what I’m saying? I’ve gotten used to it. This. And it scares the shit out of me.”

I knew what he meant, minus the kids. It was easier this way, though, to be fully accustomed to the deployment. To forget that there was a life away from this place, or that we would ever go home one day. To accept the cycle of wake up, eat, fly, gym, sleep, repeat. To let the missions all blend into one long night and to forget that the shapes we hunted were people, if we ever thought of them that way to begin with. The kills were starting to blend together. We no longer cheered when the pixelated bodies turned to dust, but not out of any kind of empathy—it just wasn’t exciting anymore. We stopped learning their names, too, because they were all so similar by now. They were just numbers. Numbers on a list of things the military wanted to destroy. As if crossing any of the names off the list made a difference, made America or Afghanistan any safer. No, every time a target was killed, they just added more.

“Come on,” I stood up with my tray. “We got time for the MWR before mission brief. Call the wife.”

“You never call. Are you alright?” my mom’s voice came from the receiver.
“What time is it over there? Did they feed you a nice Thanksgiving meal? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Mom. The food was very good. Ham and turkey and stuffing, all the trimmings.”

“I worry about you, you’re always so skinny. You need to eat more. Promise me you’re eating—”

“Mom, I’m eating.”

“We had turkey ourselves. Well, just your father and me. Your brother said he couldn’t come home from school. Said school’s real busy this time of the year. You talk to him? Have you talked to him today? You should call him.”

“I haven’t yet. I’ll call him next,” I lied.

“Promise? Promise me you’ll call him. He never comes home. I worry about him, too. They’re feeding you enough? Are you sure? I can send you a care package—”

“Mom I’m *fine*.”

“Who is that?” my father’s voice sounded in the background. “Let me talk to him.”

“Hey Dad. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving to you. You never call. What’s going on over there? You guys kicking some terrorist ass or what? Tell me what’s going on over there.”

“You know I can’t talk about that stuff. They monitor these calls.”

“Alright, alright. Well you’ll have to tell me all the war stories when you get back. Maybe over a beer or twelve,” he chuckled.

“Sure.”

“Listen, the game’s on. I got to go. Give your mother a call more often if you can. I know you’re busy, but you know how she gets—”

“Tell him to eat!” Mom shrieked in the background.

“Anyway, you take care of yourself over there, alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I am. Don’t worry.”

“Alright pal. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Raven Seven-Two, what’s your bingo fuel?” Julio asked.

“Standby,” I replied.

“Fuck,” George said on intercom. “I’m starving.”

“How much gas do we have?” I asked him.

“Hold on, hold on. We’re checking the numbers.”

We were on our way back from an uneventful mission near Kunduz. Our aircraft always carried more fuel than it needed for a four-hour mission to allow for certain contingencies: bad weather, ongoing ground operations, airfield emergencies, etc.

“Got about an hour before we’re running on fumes,” George said.

“Ares, this is Raven. We have about six-zero mins of playtime,” I passed.

“Copy. Break,” the radio cut out for a beat. “Standby to copy grid.”

“Ready to copy.” I plugged the eight-digit grid into my computer and centered my map on the location. “Weird,” I said to the crew. “This is practically on top of Bagram. Maybe two clicks east of the runway.” I repeated the grid back to Julio and asked him to confirm.

“That’s a-firm,” he responded. “Aircraft went down on approach. Recovery team is en route; need you to scan wreckage for survivors and provide overwatch until bingo. How copy?”

“Copy.”

“Holy shit,” George said. I felt him increase the throttle.

“What?” Steve asked. “A helicopter?”

“Unlikely,” the Colonel chimed in. “Two kilometers east of the runway . . . that sounds like fixed-wing. Why don’t you ask our TOC what’s going on? We should be in radio range. Looking at a twelve-minute transit.”

“Right. Standby.” I punched the L-3-owned frequency into a numpad on one of my radios. “TOC, this is Seven-Two. Come in.”

“Go for TOC,” Mundy’s voice, broken by static, returned.

“Be advised: they’re keeping us until bingo fuel. Something about a downed aircraft. You guys know anything about that?”

“Roger,” he paused. “It’s an ISR bird. Not one of ours. Regular Air Force.”

“Copy,” I responded. “We’ll let you know when we’re RTB.”

“Holy shit,” George said again on intercom.

“You don’t think,” Steve began. “They didn’t get shot down? They didn’t get shot down. Right?”

“They’d be low enough,” the Colonel said. “On approach. They’d be in range. Probably something else—catastrophic engine failure, jet wash, maybe.”

“First time for everything,” George said. “We know they got portable surface-to-air. And they know who’s been hunting them.”

As the crew continued to speculate, I focused on my video. My camera, trained on the crash grid, began to slowly move from the horizon toward the ground as we got closer. The voices in my headset receded to an indecipherable murmur; the noise of the engines suddenly there again, deafening, a constant and unbearable buzzing. At the edge of my screen, the black-hot wreckage came into view. It was just a small, billowing black dot. I checked my map: we were still ten miles out.

Truth is, I’d never really considered the possibility of going down. I was young, invincible. We’d experienced some shit weather, sure. Some straight-up scary weather, even. An F-15 had crashed into the side of a mountain a couple of months ago. Helicopters went down from time to time. We never lost ISR aircraft though. It just didn’t happen to us. Hell, even on that first day—the day with the gate guard—the threat was always for someone else. Rockets came in the night, at least once a week, and the sirens would blare and tell us to take cover, but we were never bothered. No, we’d look up into the clear sky and try and pick out the projectile, guess where it might land. It was a game, and it was mildly exhilarating.

“Raven Seven-Two is established on new orbit; scanning for survivors,” I told Julio. It was a formality, though. Now, with the crash just below us and with a clear picture of the wreckage, it was obvious no one could have survived. The debris was concentrated as if the plane had hit with an incredible amount of force. In infrared, all I

could make out was a single, pulsing circle of darkness. I switched to electro-optical and it wasn't much better. Just a column of dark smoke climbing, fed by burning jet fuel, so tall that it seemed it could grow to our altitude. I kept scanning anyway, used my thumb on the hand-controller to manipulate the camera in small circles around the site.

“Do you have a damage assessment?” Julio asked.

I didn't want to say the words. I didn't want to make it true.

CHAPTER SIX

My brother and I were in a youth soccer league growing up. Mom usually took us to practice if she was sober enough, and sometimes she'd take us even if she wasn't. Other times, we'd ride our bikes through neighborhoods full of dilapidated ranch houses and plastic playgrounds overgrown with weeds. Bill Clinton was on tv every night, and when my brother asked what a blowjob was, I told him it was a kind of lollipop.

I wanted him to stay a kid. Felt like it was my responsibility to guard his innocence—I'd take him on adventures when the sun went down, when Mom was drunk in case Dad came home angry. We'd go into the woods at the end of the cul-de-sac and forage for old Indian arrowheads. Sometimes, we'd look for perfectly-shaped sticks for hiking, or sword fighting, or lightsaber battles. I'd let him win.

Once, on the way to soccer, he wrecked his bike trying to go up a curb. He broke the fall with his elbow—when I rushed up to check on him, it looked like something had taken a substantial bite out of his arm. There was meat missing. I'd never seen so much blood. He didn't cry, though. He just looked scared. Or maybe I just remember it that way because I was the scared one.

“Can I get an update on compound slant?” Julio asked.

“Two chargers. No other activity,” I passed.

They were taking turns kicking a soccer ball against the outer wall of the compound. The smaller one was the more skilled of the two. He had dark hair and wore a

light blue tunic; he moved with an athletic grace, the kind Dad always insisted my little brother was born with. It's the only time I can remember him being proud of anything, the one game of the season he'd showed up for, late, just in time to see Charlie score a goal. I remember feeling jealous.

We got older, and Charlie traded soccer for football. Dad said it was more American, and so more manly, even though Charlie was only a kicker. He made first string the year I left for basic. He didn't want me to go. By the end of the season we'd stopped talking. I never went back home. Never watched him play.

The older boy was chasing the tiny athlete now, the latter running with the ball tucked between his waist and elbow.

Sometimes I wished we could go back to Georgia. To the red clay, the dirt. I wanted to bury myself there, in the side of the cliff. I wanted to become earth and peer out at the trailer park, watch my brother play with ninja turtles while Mom calls him in for dinner and Dad comes home from a good day at work. I wanted to fill my lungs with dust and time until everything was perfectly still, until the world was just a snapshot, a two-dimensional image. I wanted to swallow mud until it filled my veins and I couldn't hurt people anymore. I wanted to find He-Man.

A man dressed in white gestured at the children in order to call them back inside the compound walls. A woman, dressed in a black burqa, knelt to light a fire in the courtyard.

“Confirm MAM matches description,” Julio said.

“MAM is wearing white trad,” I said.

“Confirm signal still tracks to this compound.”

“A-firm,” Steve replied.

“Copy. Be advised, we have Vulture coming on station,” Julio said.

“Copy.”

“Vulture?” Steve said on intercom. “Isn’t that a gunship?”

“They must really want this guy,” the Colonel said.

“Eyes on target compound,” Vulture said. “Standing by.”

“There are fucking kids down there,” Steve said. He jumped on the radio: “Ares, this is Raven. There are two chargers I-V-O target compound. I say again—two chargers. How copy?”

“Copy—break, break—Vulture, you are cleared hot.”

“Vulture copies, cleared hot.”

“There are children!” Steve shouted into the mic.

“Raven, stay off the net,” Julio said. “That’s an order.”

“Splash,” Vulture said.

“Goddamn it.”

“Re-attack,” Julio commanded.

“Goddamn it!”

“Splash.”

“Re-attack.”

“Splash.”

“Raven, do you have damage assessment on target?”

“It’s gone,” I said. “There’s nothing left.”