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“Hey, Sergeant, commander is looking for some extra guns for the convoy later. Group leaves in an hour if you can spare anyone.”

It was an odd statement. We were two weeks from the deployment being over and no one in their right mind was looking to take any more risks than we had to. Under usual circumstances, I would have rejected the mission outright this close to deployment being over, but convoy missions were usually pretty easy and offered the opportunity to take a quick jaunt over to the relative luxury of Baghdad International and hang out while the VIPs got settled before heading back to base. “Worse ways to kill an afternoon,” was the prevailing thought at the time.

Twenty minutes later I had rounded up the section. I had asked for volunteers, but since everyone wanted to go, cuts had to be made. I settled on four of us: our medic SPC Dunn, our radioman “Skips,” Bravo Team Leader, SPC Lukasevich, and myself. It was a relatively simple mission. The four of us would go with second platoon to the airport, pick up some NATO officer, sample how the other half lived in the comfort afforded by the United States Air Force, then head on back for movie night. Skips had gotten a bootleg copy of *Batman vs Superman* from one of the locals so while we were out everyone else was responsible for snack and beverage liberation. Meanwhile, Doc and I were on the hunt for a set of speakers the Air Force wouldn’t miss too much. Ours had been damaged a few weeks prior in what was described to me as a “dubstep” incident. Whatever the case, audio would only be played from one side of the speakers on the TV and bootleg copy or not, *Batman vs Superman* demanded both audio channels in as high a quality as we could provide.

We arrived at the motor pool well in advance of second platoon to start getting ready. Our Humvee sat exactly where it had been since the last mission. In some long-ago motor pool,

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someone had the bright idea to designate our truck as number “034TH” or on a much more cursory glance now that the paint was worn and chipped away, “DEATH.” Naturally, it didn’t take long for the name “Death Wagon” to stick and in the superstitious world of the infantry, no one else but us were going near it. Additionally, as fitting our special assignment to reconnaissance, we had been gifted with a lot of extra equipment including advanced communications gear, medical and trauma equipment, and, miraculously, a sound system that would play CDs that no one outside of the section wanted to be responsible for damaging. We were further augmented with the comforts of home by a Yeti cooler we had mysteriously “reappropriated.”

We were fully settled with the engine running when second platoon finally arrived and began mounting up. First squad would be the lead vehicle on the way there and back with us second in line. Mission was to pick up a British Royal Air Force Major and his escort and they would be sandwiched in between our lead and rear elements. All total we were six vehicles, plus whatever we would be picking up at the airport. Skips was driving, with me in the passenger seat, Doc in the back seat, and Lukasevich on the gun. Assuming we followed posted traffic laws it was a twenty-five-minute drive one-way to Baghdad International. We would be there in ten, a milk run if ever there was one and everybody knew it. As we started pulling out I felt a tap on my shoulder and Doc handed me a CD, the section mixtape. Everyone had been allowed to pick two songs to have included on the CD. True to form in the military it was the most outrageous thing any of us had ever listened to. I gave a slight chuckle as the Humvee’s speakers crackled to life and Megadeath’s “High-Speed Dirt” filled the interior.

The ride over was thankfully quiet like we all knew it would be. If anything was going to happen it would be on the way back after the pickup and the miles passed without incident. The

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route was relatively nondescript. Iraq as a nation is little more than flat desert connected by highways and the usual buildings, houses, and roadways around Baghdad weaved around like any major highway. We arrived right as Old Crow Medicine Show was finishing “Wagon Wheel” to find out the major we were picking up had his flight delayed by twenty minutes and he was bringing a unit of Royal Marines with him. Suddenly questioning why we were here when the UK had already sent a unit of commandos with him we parked next to second platoon and everyone got to work. Lukasevich went over to mill about with second platoon while they were getting vehicles ready for the British, while Doc and I set off to find some quality speakers. Skips cracked open a cold Gatorade from the cooler and stayed with the truck to make sure none of our gear and more importantly snacks went missing.

Fifteen minutes later I emerged back into the heat of the airstrip. The relative calm that had been present when we arrived had been shattered with the arrival of a C-17 Globemaster, the red and blue fin flashes of the Royal Air Force immediately recognizable on its otherwise grey exterior. Royal Marines in their green berets shuffled back and forth unloading equipment into the waiting trucks with mechanical efficiency. In the middle of it, a British major was talking to second platoon’s platoon leader and platoon sergeant. I quickly found my way back to the scout section’s Humvee. My look through had been uneventful as the Air Force was being rather stingy with their supply of sound gear and I hoped Doc had better luck.

Already waiting for me at the Humvee, Doc took one look and flashed a smile like he knew a joke that he couldn’t wait to tell me as he held up a small box in his right hand. In it was a full set of speakers and a subwoofer. “You wouldn’t believe it, Sergeant. You remember that airmen from Wyoming I was trying to ask out after we rotated back? Well, she is a technical sergeant now and ...”

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Doc's explanation, though riveting, was suddenly drowned out by the roar of four F117 turbofan engines from the C-17 as it began idling away. We then got the word, mount up, we were leaving in two minutes, Doc's story would have to wait. He tucked the speakers next to him in an empty seat as we all mounted up into the Death Wagon. "Woody's Roundup" from the *Toy Story 2* soundtrack played as we left.

The ride back on VIP detail was always more stressful than the ride over. The reason being no matter who the VIPs were, it was always going to be a big deal if something happened to them on the way back to the Green Zone. None of the higher-ups wanted to have to explain to NATO or the general staff that there had been an incident involving a foreign national. The conversation with Her Majesty's Royal Air Force that the major they had sent over had been killed on our watch especially was bound to go over terribly. As such, everyone was understandably a little on edge. Everyone had their own way of dealing with it. Lukasevich was doing his best to eat a can of Skyline Chili he had somehow acquired before we got too far out and the dust made that task all but impossible, while Skips and Doc made guesses about how *Batman vs Superman* was going to end. Doc had given up regaling us with the story of how he got the speakers from the blonde airman from Wyoming and thankfully didn't seem to be in much of a hurry to circle back to that. We were two miles out from the Al-Amariya Bridge when everything fell apart.

Traffic was forcing us to find an alternate route through the side streets back to the Green Zone. Skips being our local expert noticed it first. The streets usually busy with midday activity were oddly quiet and no foot traffic was out. Call went out over the radio to be on the lookout for small arms and roadblocks. I motioned for Lukasevich to drop off the turret for a word, unaware that this small action would save his life ten seconds from now. Doc's contribution to the

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mixtape, “Seek and Destroy” by Metallica, droned on in the background a world away while Lukasevich took a seat in the back of the Humvee.

An instant after the gun hatch closed a warhead from an RPG streaked across the road in front of us like a malevolent star come to Earth and collided with the road almost directly in front of us, cratering the street with the sudden volume of a cannonade. Time passed in slow motion as everything happened at a fraction of its speed. Skips frantically tried to correct our course and avoid the new gap in the road from the rocket, as well as account for the change in travel from the lead vehicle. The high speed and low maneuverability of the Humvee was having none of it as we shifted left on the roadway. It was all for naught, though. On the right side, another explosion detonated and sent a shock wave through the truck causing the windows to spiderweb and the truck to lurch suddenly to one side. The last thing I heard clearly was Doc yelling “BRACE.” An instant later I heard no sound, as everything went black.

In my dream, I smell barbeque. A great warmth washes over me. I think the sky is on fire. I feel an impossible combination of being weightless but also impossibly heavy. I see someone I knew or maybe that I don’t know yet. They have the same colored hair as someone I want to see again, but whose name I’m too sad to speak aloud. The figure calls to me. I don’t answer. My thoughts scatter like ash on the wind as I move by roaring engine on the other side of the universe. An indeterminate amount of time later I think I’m flying. In that other universe, I hear screaming and the clash of metal on metal. Death at the gates again. I think. I hear someone howling my name. I try to reach a hand out in the dark toward a figure in the distance I think I recognize. The figure turns to me. It has no face, yet it smiled at me and shakes its head.

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I woke up. My vision swam as I opened my eyes to see the sky for what seems like the first time. I realize I'm being dragged somewhere. I looked up and recognized the two men pulling me away from the Humvee but couldn't speak their names into existence. They spoke to me but the ringing in my ears drowned out all other sounds. I felt like I was going to throw up food I had not even eaten yet. The strong taste of bile in my mouth made me think I already had. As I looked down, I could see both my arms and legs were still attached and where they should be but they weighed twenty tons each. My face felt fuzzy and I thought I was bleeding but couldn't say from where. Still looking down I was suddenly terrified at the sight that my brain finally gets around to processing. Large metal shards and unknown fragments stick out from my chest at odd angles covered in red, bits of meat all over them. I wanted to grab them and pull them out but my hands wouldn't cooperate. I thought I screamed. An instant later Doc was by my side. I hoped he said I'm gonna be ok, but I can't tell for sure. The world goes dark again as everything overwhelms me.

I jolt awake again to the sound of gunfire like a drowning man breaking the surface as I thrash in place against the ground. Around me, friendly faces go about the business of war. Adrenaline starts to force the clouds away from my mind but I still feel a thousand miles away.

I tried to stand but my legs gave out halfway through the effort, sending me crashing back down. Whatever gods governed the infantry had sensed my hubris and sent their greatest assassin "Murphy" after me. It was never going to be easy. I was now being taught a lesson in true cruelty. I was in the middle of an epic bout of internal berating for taking such a risk when a familiar tap on my shoulder brought me back to life and I looked over to see Doc. He gave me a bit too cheery smile and offered me some water. I looked down. The metal was gone from my chest and nothing seemed to be missing.

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“How?” was all I could manage under the circumstances.

Doc looked down at me like he had borne the cares of the world for a millennium. “RPG hit the passenger side. Looked like a bad detonation, though, and that’s why we are all still here. Best I can tell, force from the blast made you black out. You were out for a few minutes,” Doc replies. “Oh and your body armor is toast. Looks like the plates and inserts shattered but it kept your chest from collapsing, so there’s that. Other than you throwing up and a bloody nose you should live.”

“What about the meat on my chest I saw?”

Doc gave a grin like the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland and produced the remains of a can of Skyline Chili from somewhere next to me. “You can thank Lukasevich for that. Got all over you and the rest of the interior.”

I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. I started to ask Doc where the rest of the section was, but before I could complete the sentence Skips and Lukasevich arrived as if summoned from the beyond. They looked battered and bruised but otherwise unharmed as well.

“Boss.” Skips handed me my rifle.

“How are we doing?”

“Command is trying to get us some air support, but higher-ups are having none of it this close to the air traffic from the terminal. Second platoon is holding around the VIP. First squad is around the corner, that shooting is mostly them. Last count was four hostiles up the street in a two-story structure. What’s the play?”

“Well,” I started as I unsteadily got to my feet with no small bit of help from Doc, “not really a fan of people who try and blow me up, let alone my truck or you guys. Long as Doc

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doesn't mind violating the Geneva Convention, we got a fireteam. What say we introduce ourselves?"

"Hey, convention says I can defend myself and they did shoot first." Doc picked up his rifle and cleared off some dust.

The situation hadn't changed much by the time we reached first squad. I motioned for the team to hang back and moved up to assess in person while Skips got back on the radio to try for some air support. First squad thankfully had some machine guns with them and were laying down an impressive amount of fire onto the building we were getting shot from. It was an unimpressive structure, to begin with. Slightly smaller than a single family home and the fusillade from first squad had done little to improve its structural integrity. Having four guys was technically enough to clear the house but it was by no means ideal. I was nowhere close to being ready to fight after having my head rattled, not to mention whatever was ailing everyone else. Further we had no idea what the inside of the building was like. Closets, crawl spaces, as well as long hallways, could spell disaster, especially in close quarters with so few of us but there was little choice.

Assessment complete, I went back to go over the plan with the rest of the team. Skips was buried in conversation with someone on the radio and judging by the look it was important enough to not interrupt. In the meantime, I looked over to Doc. "Didn't you say the blonde girl was a technical sergeant? Call her up to see if she can re-task us something." Lukasevich laughed. Doc looked like he wanted to punch me but his face cracked an instant later into a smile. A second later Skips finished his conversation and joined us.

"So, how's it looking, Skips?" Lukasevich ventured as he joined the group.

"Give it thirty seconds and we'll know," was all Skips offered in return.

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With thirty seconds to kill, I went over the plan of action. It was a simple but pretty much the best we could do under the circumstances. All of us were going to advance up under cover from first squad. Once we reached the door, breach and clear, then room to room. All targets inside to be considered hostile. If need be, we could split into two teams of myself and Doc, and Lukasevich and Skips.

I was asking for questions from anyone when Skips' thirty seconds elapsed. As if on cue we felt the ground shake from the approach of aircraft. We turned around to the sight of two AH-64 Apache Attack Helicopters flying up the street toward us. From behind me, all I heard was, "Just wanted to make sure you had a plan, sergeant," before the sound of two autocannons tore the building to shreds behind us and drowned out all other sounds. Hell of a milk run, was all that came to mind.