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Into Malbolge

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Willy had prepared his HMMV better than anyone. He draped old Vietnam-era flak jackets on the roof and it was time to step off. Willy had seen the bombardment throughout the last few days. It was going to be a nasty fight. The motivational speeches had been given. From the general to the battalion commander to the company commander to the first lieutenant.

The leaflets had been dropped telling civilians to exodus from Fallujah. They had a week. Willy was on the feint mission two days ago and witnessed their resolve. A white SUV slammed into a seven-ton truck and blew up eight marines in a quick fashion. Willy had only been in Iraq for two weeks and already knew what was in store.

It was raining that morning and Willy woke up soaking wet. It didn't matter to him. Ready for the fight most marines dream of. A city full of insurgents, Al-Qaeda, and vagrants. There was no denying it, this was the headquarters of evil men. The mass killings and beheadings and people being strung from bridges and burned alive on camera. Willy had seen a video of a well-known journalist being decapitated on film in this city just down the road and in his left front chest pocket kept one round of 9-mm and one round of .556 for his own suicide. It was getting real now. How many know what it is like to write a last will and testament at the age of twenty-one? That was standard paperwork; he looked at the four body bags in the back of his truck. They were still in the plastic wrap, ready for use. The men were all congregating and sharing what they had. Energy drinks, Copenhagen, and cigarettes were being consumed fast. The low thunder of bombs exploded in the distance, calling to him. Soon he'd be close to the origin of the destruction. He knew the sound of incoming rockets and mortars. The "whsssssh, thump" of a rocket had a quick learning curve.

Willy let out a loud laugh as he saw his friend Johnson doing the safety dance. It was time to get all the fears of death out and this was welcome humor. Willy joined Johnson right

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away and started doing the running man. Lance Corporal Hirsch joined in with his ISO mat and started breakdancing! All of the marines were laughing, whistling, and shouting at the impromptu dance-off. In the slight rain, in a desert, they knew how to entertain themselves with little to work with. No one knew that the company first sergeant was standing off to the side. He waited until it was over and stomped toward the marines. "Get your shit together and quit this monkey bullshit!" Someone turned off the boom box.

Countdown to D-Day, as the marines called it. Willy and his driver Lance Corporal Parker started their vehicle, a piece of junk. A bungee cord held his door closed and kept it from swinging out. A long line of trucks, LAVs, and Amtracks stretched out as far as he could see. They slowly started to roll on and follow the ambulance Humvees. Willy didn't recognize the route. They were driving on no road; the engineers had cut a hole in the berm to be their exit out of camp Fallujah. It was a giant symphony of coordinated forces. The marines and the army rolling out on an assembly line of killing machines ready for a fight.

The convoy ran slowly. Stopping and going as if they were in 5 o'clock rush hour. Willy kept his M-16 pointed outward to the right. Parker mumbled about the slow pace. Marines were shooting up ahead. The LAVs fired randomly towards the city from the top of the hill. The 20-mm Bushmaster had a slow loud rhythm. Smoke columns rose over the highway above Willy. He stared into the fields. Out of nowhere a big puff of dust erupted ten feet to the right of his truck; Willy flinched in horror.

"Holy shit, Parker!" he yelled. "What is it?"

Parker responded. "A mortar almost hit us! I think it was a dud!" Willy stuck his head out of the window and looked back. The fins of the mortar stuck out of the ground. The turret gunner behind him waved and pointed at it. That was strange. Parker never even saw it. The convoy had

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reached its position on the line north of the city. The breach had already begun. The cobra gunship helicopters buzzed overhead, doing damage. The tanks rumbled across the railroad tracks, blowing holes into houses. The Amtracks were ferrying infantry into the breach and marines shot anything that moved. Willy paused to look at his map. The area he would soon be in was designated the Manhattan district, mostly upper scale houses tightly packed together. A maze in the form of an urban neighborhood.

“Here we go,” Willy mumbled. The back door of the Amtrack closed and he jumped up to stick his head out of the top opening. He was the only one in the back of the armored vehicle. This was his first “thunder run” into the city of mosques. He was to fix an M203 grenade launcher and deliver ammo and water to Bravo Company. A wave of excitement flowed through Willy; he pointed his weapon to cover behind the bulky tracked vehicle, a dusty and a very bumpy ride. The damage in the buildings on every side of him was catastrophic. A maelstrom! Every house was destroyed. The constant bombardment was devastating. The Amtrack came to a roadblock hastily made of midsize sedans. The driver never even slowed down, he rolled over the cars, crushing like a monster truck, like Gravedigger. “Whoohoo!” Willy yelled, covered in dust and having fun. The trip didn’t take very long as they arrived at Bravo’s position at the Fallujah teaching hospital. The ramp lowered and Willy stepped out of the vehicle. There was a horrible sight to greet him as he walked out. “Oh my God,” he muttered.

A long row of bodies lay before him; a rough count was thirty dead insurgent fighters. Some still had their ammo pouches on. Flies landed on their eyeballs and the smell burned into Willy’s memory. It was real now. It’s a real war, and it’s going to be here every day. A marine ran up with his weapon to be fixed. “What’s wrong with it?” Willy asked. “Damn 203 won’t close.” Willy, his squad’s armorer, grabbed a punch out of his tool bag and stuck it into the firing

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pin hole to reset the firing pin. An easy fix, all of ten seconds. “Okay, you’re good to go.”

“Thanks man.” They unloaded quickly and had to get back to the rear in a hurry. They just had to load a morbid cargo.

Iraqi soldiers swiftly brought two body bags and laid them gently down into the Amtrack. Two more wounded Iraqi soldiers joined Willy in the back. One bled from his hand and the other had a bandage around his knee cap. The last and final passenger was an uninjured Iraqi officer who Willy accessed was supervising his men, both dead and alive.

They were heading back to the rear now and taking a different route, zigzagging through tight alleyways.

Willy kept vigil over the rear, over corpses littering the streets, some burned beyond recognition. All of a sudden “ping ping ping ping,” bullets ricocheted off the side of the track! “Contact right!” yelled the gunner in the up-gunned weapon station mounted in the front. The vehicle stopped. “Ping, ping, ping.” On Willy’s right, a muzzle flashed. He shot two bursts from his rifle and immediately the gunner opened up with the .50 caliber machine gun. Willy followed up with bursts from the Mk 19 grenade launcher. “Clack, clack, clack, clack,” “boom, boom, boom, boom!” Willy kept firing bursts at the house where he’d seen the muzzle flash, but now nothing moved there. The firing ceased in under a minute. It was his first time shooting his weapon in combat and he felt hyper vigilant. It was time to keep moving, there were wounded in the back and the driver stepped on it with a plume of smoke spitting out of the exhaust. The Iraqi passengers had fear in their eyes. They just wanted to leave the storm. So did Willy. He knew it was only the beginning, a hell of a first day. There would be no time for rest as he checked his ammo and the grenades strapped to his chest. He sat in the relative safety of the Humvee’s

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interior beside the black bags, wiping dust and sweat from his face. Back over to the better side of the railroad tracks.