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Welcome Home Jack

I prayed silently for the people in the city as the dark silhouette of Mahraj loomed in the distance. The only noises filling the air was the far-off howling of a few dogs and the quiet chatter from the coms as the Captain got our orders. A moment later the coms went quiet as the Captain stood and looked to us.

“Colonel Barret says move in. The target’s a small airport on the North edge of the city. We move in, secure it, and wait for the birds. I want two teams. Insert from the East and West via the main highway using the trucks. The Guns are firing on the complexes South of us to cut off the T-Man reinforcements. Weapons check and move out in 5.”

I nodded along with the rest of the detachment as everyone began to make their way towards the two, old, sand-blasted trucks we’d “acquired” from a few hostiles.

“This is one of the most kinetic target’s we’ve hit, and these bastards like using civis as shields. So, check your targets. De Oppresso Liber. Now, ya’ll watch your six,” I said as I climbed into the back of the truck and began checking over the Fitty mounted on it.

“You too Master Sergeant,” and “Copy that,” filled the air from the rest of the men.

“Hey Master Sergeant.”

I looked over to see Cpt. Gibson approaching. He was new to the position, but he’d earned his stripes over the deployment. When I got assigned to this detachment I was a First Sergeant, and it was under the command of my best friend, Captain Barret; the same Colonel Barret now

giving us orders. He'd been promoted, and since then our detachment had changed from one Captain to the next.

"It'll be a shame to see you go. I'm going to hate having to replace you, but it's been an honor serving with you. I just wanted to wish you good luck with retirement," he said as he held out his hand.

I smiled and took it, giving him a firm handshake and a pat on the shoulder.

"You too Captain. Don't let these goobs push you around. They do, and you tell 'em I'll be back to kick their asses," I said with a light laugh.

He turned to go before hesitating.

"Oh, the Colonel said for you to watch your ass. He said he's counting on you to keep his little girl out of trouble while she's at college. I don't envy you there Serge. I'd rather stay here and fight the Taliban than deal with a moody, Colonel's daughter going off to college. You sure you don't want to stay and fight?" added the Captain with a chuckle.

I laughed. "Yeah, well just trading one war zone for another right? Besides she's my god-daughter. Somebody's gotta keep that girl on the straight and narrow."

The two trucks set out, kicking up moon dust as they drove across the sandy, scrub-lined roads that led to Mahraj. I watched as the other one disappeared steadily before looking towards the city. In the darkness it was hard to see anything. Sharp whistling suddenly broke the night, followed by an explosion then a boom in the distance. The siege began, and chaos broke out as our covert unit sped towards the city along the deserted road. Dressed as Taliban soldiers and driving in one of their trucks made it easy to get inside. The city looked post-apocalyptic,

especially bathed in the light of explosions and fires. The truck turned a corner towards the LZ and suddenly I was flying through the air as nearby pile of debris exploded.

The truck was on it's side smoking, and my ears were ringing so loud I couldn't hear a thing. The front of the truck had been nearly ripped off and flames were shooting up through the cab, engulfing two of my brothers.

I could see two other men laying on the ground about ten feet from the truck. One had blood pooling around his head, and his neck was at an odd angle from where he was laying against the wall he'd obviously hit. The other was rolling from side to side, blood covering his face. I tried to stand but my leg gave out, and I crumpled to the ground as a red-hot pain shot through my body from my right hip. I clawed at the loose dirt, dragging myself towards the wreck of the truck to try and help my brothers as my vision tunneled and everything went black.

I took heavy breaths, struggling with each step as the muscles in my hip refused to react and support my weight forcing me to lean on the cold, collapsible cane I gripped tightly in my right hand. The groceries tucked into the plastic bag held tightly in my left hand shifted from side to side throwing off each step just a bit further and making me struggle a bit more. My legs and thighs ached, even after traveling such a short distance from my apartment to the corner store just to grab a few things.

Six months ago, I was healthy and strong, and even though I was in hell I had my brothers; I had respect. I was so close to retirement too. Now, I don't even respect myself, and here I was back at home, the place I'd fought to get to, and I felt more alone now than at any point over in the

Sandbox. Hell, I can barely make it out my front door and down to the Dollar General for smokes and beers.

Of course, everyone said how “very brave” I was, and that a “medical discharge was nothing to be ashamed of.” Still, I am ashamed. My hip hurts all the time, as does most of my right leg. I can still feel people staring at me with a look of “What’s wrong with him?”, “What happened to him?”, or even worse “That poor guy.” But, at least I’m home I guess.

I can't believe how shitty this neighborhood's become since I got deployed last time.

My mind drifted back to my arrival home from the military hospital four days ago.

I stepped off the plane and had to be assisted up the ramp by a flight attendant up. Waiting for me was one of those airport shuttle carts. So, I made short-talk with the driver and thanked him for welcoming me home from Afghanistan as we whizzed through the airport, passing by other soldiers lugging their bags while I sat on an electrical cart. I’d been dreading my return home. I figured nobody would be waiting for me since Dad had passed away just before I got deployed. I knew it was coming because Mom had died only a few years before. It was sweet in a way. Thankfully, waiting for me at the end of the terminal was Kassandra, my god-daughter. She was 18 now and a Freshman in college at A&M.

She was taller than I remembered; damn near six feet now. She was slender but had an athletic build from her years in cheerleading, and was dressed in a black, leather jacket, a pink t-shirt, jeans, and old combat boots. Her short, dark bob bounced as she charged me and nearly took me off my feet with a tackle as she took me into a hug.

“Hey Uncle Jack! Welcome home! I brought you a present,” she said as he held out a large cigar wrapped in cellophane that had bold, Cyrillic writing emblazoned across it.

“The doctor wouldn’t let me give it to ya in the hospital. Oh, and I brought your Jeep so you can drive it home.”

Kassi began to talk my ear off, telling me all about her dorm room, what classes she was taking, and everything else going on in her life as we made our way to the parking garage. Her tirade of chatter continued on the drive home while I puffed on one of my favorite, Russian cigars. Most of it what she said was a blur. It kept my mind off my troubles, but even with her there I felt alone. She’d always been like a daughter to me, but I felt disconnected from everything now.

We finished up the night with pizza and wings from Craig O’s Pizza and watched my favorite movie, Enter the Dragon, before I wished Kassi a good night as I hobbled along with her to her car before watching her drive off, then headed back to my apartment to take a shower, and be alone.

Two people were arguing outside. It was probably just the couple across the alley and I’d seen them at it before. So, I tried to ignore it. I turned the shower on just as I heard a scream. Immediately I rushed to the window and wrestled it open.

On the other side of the window a brunette, somewhere in her 30’s, dressed in a smart, blue coat, white blouse, and jeans tugged frantically at her purse.

“Let go of my purse asshole!” she screamed.

A man dressed in a black hoodie with a small skull imprinted on the front, and “Zero” written over it, along with a pair of tattered jeans grasped the strap of her purse tightly and struggled to snatch it away.

She reached up and clawed at his face, leaving deep, oozing gashes across his right cheek; forcing him to cry out in anguish.

“Ahhh! No mames puta.” he shouted before grasping one of her wrists with a hand as his other wrenched at the strap on the purse. “Ayudame cabrone.” He shouted frantically to someone out of view.

It was then I noticed another guy running up on her from behind. He must have been hiding somewhere because I couldn’t see him before from my narrow view through the window. He had on a green and white leather jacket and blue jeans with a matching green ballcap pulled low so I couldn’t make out anything else.

“Let go of the purse crazy bitch!” he shouted as he came up behind her.

I was already scrambling for my phone, which I’d left on the coffee table in my tiny, apartment living room along with something else I had stashed away. In my haste I fell and swore as I hit the beige, carpeted floor before pushing myself up, snatching my phone from the table-top, and pulling my .45 pistol from its magnetic holster under the table. In an instant I was dialing 9-1-1 and hobbling my way back into the bathroom.

“9-1-1. What’s your emergency?” came a female voice from the other end of the line.

The woman’s frantic cries for help continued from outside along with a mix of swearing from the two men.

“Yes. I’d like to report a crime in progress. There’s two guys robbing a girl outside my apartment. I’m at La Hacienda Estates. I’ve got my gun, and I’m gonna stop them. My name is

Master Sergeant Jackson Sinclair Majors. Ya'll better hurry the hell up." I said flatly before hanging up the phone.

"Hey shitheads! Leave her alone!" I shouted as I rounded the corner.

The barrel of my gun came up as I leveled it towards Hoodie and squeezed the trigger. The report of gunfire filled the bathroom, echoing off the teal tiled floor, partially deafening me as the stink of cordite filled the air. My round caught him high and to the right, clipping his shoulder and spinning him to the ground out of view.

Jacket already had his gun out, a sleek, black 9mm, and he was quickly raising it and leveling it towards the window. All hell broke loose as he pulled the trigger over and over peppering the brick wall, around the window, and the bathroom; filling the air with dust as he let loose the chaotic barrage. I dropped to the floor a second before the bathroom mirror behind me shattered, and as I did a short, animal-like yelp filled the air outside as he emptied the magazine.

Everything went quiet again except for a few muffled voices outside the window. I stood and looked out, leaning awkwardly over the toilet. I could see both men retreating down the alley. Hoodie was leaving a trail of crimson droplets on the ground as he gripped his right shoulder tightly with his left hand while Jacket held him around the waist and helped him run. Both men rounded the corner and disappeared out of view quickly. I looked about and called out for the woman to see if she was alright.

"Hey, lady. Lady! You okay?" I shouted, but there was no response.

I leaned out a bit further, nearly slipping on the toilet and making my hip scream at me. There she was. Laid out beside the long line of dumpsters that butted up against the wall. Blood pooling around her on the ground as she stared blankly at the opposing wall of the alley.

I was used to death. I'd seen plenty of my men die in the I.E.D that got me medically discharged, and even before that. But this was different. She was home, she should have been safe, this shouldn't have happened. She didn't sign up to give her life.

Of course, I had to go through the whole rigmarole when the police arrived. Hours of questions and a night down at the local precinct, along with many follow-up questions over the next several days. I'd seen her obituary in the paper a day or two later, along with an article about it on page 2. Her name was Jenny Tillinghast, she was an elementary school teacher, had a fiancée, and was only four months from getting married; she was only 28. Her parents and fiancée had called to talk to me, but the police had told me to wait to speak with anyone, and with as broken up as I was over it I didn't wanna hear their teary-eyed thank you's; I didn't deserve it. I'd failed them, I'd failed her, I'd failed myself, and I failed to uphold the oath I took; just like I'd failed to save my brothers that died.

Now, I gotta appear in court to testify Monday. I hope that piece of shit gets the chair, and I hope they catch that guy in the jacket and do the same to him. I thought as I neared my apartment building. The police tape had been taken down and the street scrubbed, but I could still hear that girl's cries for help echoing out from my subconscious.

Damn it, that poor girl. I still can't believe they shot her over a purse and a few stupid bucks. This ain't the Austin I knew growing up. This ain't the Austin I love. What the fuck is wrong with this world?

The screech of tires on the pavement behind me broke my train of thought and snapped me from my moment of self-loathing and reflection long enough for me to look back. A dark-green SUV fishtailed slightly as it completed the quick turn, making the rear-shocks groan.

“Slow down man. Kids live around here. You ain’t drag racing or four-wheelin’.” I shouted angrily.

Don’t I know that guy? I wondered as I looked at the driver of the vehicle.

A second later I realized who it was. It was Jacket. That was when I noticed both windows on the passenger side roll down and two men leaned out. Jacket had his hat pulled low like before, and the other two had hats on with their hoodies pulled up over them, and each had a pair of sunglasses on. I’d never seen the other two before, but I knew the driver by that ugly, green and white leather jacket, and his matching hat.

Cold metal flashed in the sun as they raised their guns. I knew just how screwed I was right away. The one in the passenger seat leveled a MAC-10 out the window as the one in the back hoisted up a sawed-off Mossberg 500 with a pistol grip in one hand. I just prayed both of them had Jacket’s aim, that the one with the SMG chewed through his ammo before he hit me, and that the idiot with the shotgun broke his damn wrist when he pulled the trigger. That was a last-ditch prayer though. With them coming up on me fast, and such a short distance between myself and them I barely had time to react at all.

My atrophied hip and right leg were useless, reducing my reaction time so all I could get out before all hell broke loose was a short two words as I dropped the groceries and turned to the side to pushing a few nearby pedestrians out of the line of fire.

“Get down!” was what I said, but all that went through my mind as I found myself staring down those three barrels was, *Oh shit!*

“Bienvenidos culo!” cried the one with the MAC 10 as both men opened fire.

I felt hot, searing pain as my ears rang, my vision went white around the edges, making it difficult to see. The ringing *Crack* of gunfire filled the air. Suddenly, I was on the ground. I could hear screaming and smelled hot grease and metal, along with the smell of smoke and rotten eggs. There was something hot and wet on the ground around me. I couldn't move, couldn't think. I just wanted to go home.