

Prologue

Mustafa Muhammad was cold. Night in the mountains near Bamiyan, Afghanistan, chilled the Taliban warrior. His robes were not enough to block mountain winds that slithered as he squatted, watching the trails that led to his master's encampment at the top of the hill.

No enemy will come, not even the infidel's Special Forces, but the Sheikh would have my head removed if I left this post. Eight of us guard the Sheikh's tent. If I have to piss, I can only go three meters away to a tin bucket, and I have to smell it until my relief comes at four in the morning. Then I have to take away the bucket, empty it, and bring it back for the next man.

My sergeant is sleeping in a comfortable bag inside a big, warm tent while I freeze.

A sound, like great wings above him, made Mustafa look to the stars and lift the barrel of his AK-47.

Nothing.

Then he was there, coming up the hill. A slim man in a black uniform, an American. He approached Mustafa without speaking. In the bare light of the sickle moon, the man seemed to smile. Before the Taliban guard could bring his weapon around, the stranger had grabbed the gun barrel. He was smiling, though there was a strange look to his mouth.

The intruder wore curved sunglasses and pulled them aside as he came ever closer. The eyes were red and glowed as fiery as the burning coals they mimicked. Mustafa released his grip on the weapon and turned to run. He opened his mouth to yell an alarm, but a hand as cold and hard as a knife's blade covered his mouth and spun him around, drawing him against a body hard as dragon's scales. The mouth the Taliban soldier thought was eerie, opened. Fangs, like those of a viper, glittered in the moonlight.

The only sound at the guard post was a slight drumming as the dead guard's feet trembled in the dirt.

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It started with a routine complaint from an Afghan farmer, and then changed.

“Sir, there’s a local man who says that someone from my company has been stealing his sheep. One of my troops says he knows who did it.”

The baby-faced captain had come to Major Vic Russell, reporting a problem that could adversely affect the unit’s relations with the local community. Russell was the commander of the 3rd Battalion of the 54th Sustainment Brigade. His unit was a bullets and beans command, providing supplies for combat forces. The unit was headquartered near Kabul, distant from areas normally infested with active Taliban.

“Have you had the Civil Affairs Officer look into the problem?” Russell said.

“Yes, sir. He’s with the farmer now. We were hoping that you could spare a minute to let the farmer know we’re concerned from the top down. Good Hearts and Minds stuff.”

The major levered himself out of his big swivel chair, pausing a couple of heartbeats, establishing his balance.

“Okay, Captain, I’ll speak to the farmer. Go with me. Who said he knew who did this?

“My Food Service Sergeant said one of his cooks, a private, saw a man carrying a sheep to an abandoned house at the edge of the Village. The man was an American soldier.”

“Tell me the whole story when we get back from our Hearts and Minds visit with the farmer. We’ll call in your Sergeant and the cook, if necessary.”

Russell, two captains and an interpreter met with the Afghan just outside the compound gates and listened as he told his story. Anyone within fifty yards could have heard the bitching. The American officers listened to the man’s complaints through the interpreter.

“What would two decent sheep be worth?” Russell said

“About a thousand Afghans, sir,” the interpreter said.

The Major turned to the Civil Affairs Officer.

“Give him a little more, give him about \$25.00 worth and he’ll have nothing to gripe about. I’ll sign the voucher for it.”

When the interpreter explained the cash windfall, the farmer was ecstatic and covered it poorly. The sheep he’d lost must’ve been skanky.

In the meeting with Civil Affairs captain, the Food Services Sergeant and the cook, the private said the man he’d seen carrying a sheep into the broken house was a sergeant named Boyd.

“There could be legal proceedings, so don’t talk about this with anyone. It could bite you in the ass. I’ll call you in when I need more information,” Russell said.

When the troops were gone, Russell called in his battalion Sergeant Major, a veteran of several wars, Bobby Flynn. He was a thickset man with dark, wavy hair and wild eyebrows. He wore Master Parachutist’s Wings and a Combat Infantryman’s Badge, uniform; decorations Russell also wore. Flynn had a leg-lift brace from a wound he suffered while assigned to a Ranger unit in Iraq.

When Flynn came through the door, Russell nodded for him to close it behind him and motioned to one of the visitors' chairs.

"Who is this Sergeant Boyd, Bobby? I don't recall meeting him," Russell said

"Hasn't been here long. He's an MP with the security detachment. He's been attached to us less than two weeks. You haven't met him, because he pulls night duty. The new men usually pull those shifts. It's a special courtesy."

"Bring him to meet me. Stay close. I may need to call you in to witness."

An hour later, Flynn escorted Boyd into the Battalion Commander's office, stepped back outside and closed the door. The sergeant reported to Russell formally, coming to attention and saluting. He was blonde and lithe as a whip. He touched his heels at the same second his fingers touched his forehead in a salute.

"Stand at ease, Sergeant. Someone has accused you of stealing two sheep from a local farmer. Tell me your version of the story," Russell said.

Boyd relaxed his posture to a parade-ground position, which wasn't at all relaxed. His response came, respectful and quiet.

"Sir, I did it. I stole the sheep. I killed them," Boyd said.

The direct admission caused Russell to pause and fall back on military formalisms until he could assess the sergeant.

"Sergeant Boyd, as your commander, I have the duty to inform you that court martial or punishment under Article 15 may result if what you say is true," Russell said.

"Yes, sir."

"Boyd, you are admitting an offense that could get you into deep shit. Do you know that?" Russell said.

"Yes, sir. I wanted to clear the air. Major, can I ask for someone from the surgeon's office to check me?"

"Why?"

"Sir, I've got a problem."

"Tell me about your problem," Russell said.

"Sir, this is going to take a few minutes. May I sit down and talk to you openly?" Boyd said.

"Sure, sit."

Russell leaned forward, elbows on his desk.

"Major, I may be a vampire," Boyd said.