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Ghost Patrol

CALEB S. CAGE

HE TURNED AT THE DOORWAY to his new room as he exited, checking first to make sure that he had all he needed. He patted the chest of his body armor for his glasses, darted his eyes upward to make sure he was wearing his helmet, and slapped his ammo pouch to make sure he had all seven of his loaded magazines. Then he took a deep breath and walked to his line of vehicles where his guys were waiting for him.

He was nervous, partly because he was addressing his platoon as their platoon leader for the first time in country and partly because he was about to lead his first patrol in sector. He could feel it in his chest. It made his saliva heavy, ruining the Copenhagen he had packed into his lip, making him wish he had filled the Camelback that his commander had made everyone zip tie to the back of their green flak vests.

He quietly cursed how the gravel shifted under his feet and his new full weight, complete with more gear than he had ever worn before. He could hear generators running and he could smell their fuel, but he still had no idea where they were on the base. Before he rounded the last corner between him and his guys he stopped in his tracks, realizing that he left his can of dip sitting on the small wooden box he was using as his nightstand. He hit the illumination button on his watch—0300: he had plenty of time to head back to his room before their patrol. He cursed his lack of rituals, his total lack of perspective as he walked back to his room.

By the time he got back to his line, his guys were waiting for him, dressed in their mismatched desert and woodland camo, weighted down with all of the gear they had been issued over the last six months, and roughly arranged by squad. A few of them were leaning quietly against their trucks, and a couple of the younger guys were horsing around and laughing loudly. He recognized both as postures of anxiety, and wondered briefly how it was manifesting in him. His platoon sergeant, Clemens, a young sergeant from Kentucky, walked up to him to hand him the paperwork: 0415, three-hour patrol in Ehstadt, 4 vehicles, 20 troops. He signed it and Clemens sent a runner from the platoon to the battalion TOC to turn it in.

HE RECOGNIZED BOTH AS POSTURES OF ANXIETY, AND WONDERED BRIEFLY HOW IT WAS MANIFESTING IN HIM.

He headed towards his truck, a M1114 up-armored humvee that carried five—two soldiers in the back passenger seats, a gunner sticking out the top, and him and his driver in the front seats. The trunk space was packed with body bags, stretchers, and everything needed to shut down traffic in a heavily populated city. The space between the back seats was filled with crates and cases of ammo. Each of the four trucks in his platoon, the Ghost Platoon, was wrapped in armor and armored glass.

IT SEEMED MORE PERSONAL NOW, BUT THAT DIDN'T MEAN HE COULD MAKE ANY MORE SENSE OF THEM.

"Talon X-ray, Talon X-ray, this is Ghost 6, radio check, over," he said into the battalion hand mic.

"Ghost 6, Talon X-ray, lima charlie, over," a bored voice came back over the radio, using a shorthand that was forbidden and that he probably wouldn't have used if there was anyone above a captain awake at this hour.

"Roger that, Talon X-ray, Ghost 6 out," he repeated, allowing himself to break from protocol a bit as well. He repeated the same process on his platoon freq. Sergeants Johnson and Thomas, his first and second squad leaders, answered up clearly, and Sergeant Clemens' driver answered that the platoon sergeant was handling some issue, something to do with a tow bar.

A green flare shot into the sky from their west, followed closely by a red flare. At first he thought they were tracer fire, but they slowed as they reached their apex and drifted eerily as they burned out. He had seen them every night since he had gotten there three weeks before, just as

he had heard loud explosions in the city when he knew no American forces were out on the road. It seemed more personal now, but that didn't mean he could make any more sense of them.

"Comms are good, V," he said to his driver, the one responsible for making sure that he could talk to battalion and to the rest of his platoon. "Crystal clear."

"We got lucky, sir," Specialist Valdez said, trying to figure out how to align his night vision goggles with his right eye. "The 4th ID guys gave us all of their excess radio equipment before they left and a lot of it was brand new," he said, not taking his eyes off of his helmet mount.

"All through training a Hohenfels and Graf our comms sucked," the platoon leader said. "I actually just thought they were supposed to sound like they had something living in them."

"These ones work pretty good," V said.

He left V alone after that. He had more responsibilities than most soldiers in the platoon, and he had obviously been working for several hours to make sure everything was going to go right once they headed out of the wire. Maybe he was worried that he wasn't going to have time to get his NVGs adjusted in time, he thought. Maybe he was just worried.

"Thanks for getting everything ready to go, V," he said, and walked away, not waiting for a response.

Sergeant Clemens walked up to him, contemplating fresh grease on his hand. There was a brief discussion confirming that everything they could think of was complete and an exchange of head nods that confirmed that they were ready even if they couldn't find the words to say so. He walked back to his humvee in the front, running, lights on, Harrison, his gunner, posted in the hatch

while V smoked a cigarette outside the door. He assumed that Clemens was experiencing a similar scene as he got into his own vehicle.

“Ghost Platoon, Ghost Platoon, radio check, over,” he said into his platoon mic receiving clear responses from his squad leaders and from Clemens. At his next transmission they began moving the several hundred meters towards the operating base’s only entrance and exit. “This is Ghost 6, break,” he said next. “Let me know when we’re red, over,” he said, charging a round into his M4 rifle and making sure everyone else in his truck did the same, then listening to make sure his other three vehicles had done the same.

He paused for a moment, trying to see if the tightness in his chest had dissipated, and tapped the can of tobacco in his right cargo pocket.

“Talon X-ray, this is Ghost 6, over,” he said into the battalion freq.

“Ghost 6, go ahead, over,” the answer came back, even lazier than it had been before.

“Talon X-ray, Ghost 6, break,” he said, releasing the button on his mic. “Ghost Platoon SP FOB Warrior time now, over.”

“Roger, out.”

**HE HAD HOPED HIS VOICE
WOULD BE MORE GRAVELLY,
HIS TONE MORE GRIZZLED,
BUT IT WASN'T.**

V pressed down on the gas and moved them slowly onto the blacktop of Highway 1, headed west. He always thought he would sound different, more confident, more in command the first time he announced his platoon’s entrance into the combat zone. He had hoped his voice would be more gravelly, his tone more grizzled,

but it wasn’t. He sounded like himself, hiccupping slightly from the tobacco juices he had had to swallow and trembling slightly from everything that he was unable to.

Within a few seconds, Clemens told him that all of the vehicles were on the road, looking like a porcupine, just as they had been told. As they started to hit their stride down Highway 1, two more flares, this time red then green bursts above Ehstadt. He slapped Harrison’s leg, asking him if he was hearing anything out there. Not much, the answer came back; just some homemade power lines crackling overhead and a few dogs howling. He asked the same of his sergeants over the radio, but they couldn’t hear anything from behind their bulletproof glass either. He called in his second checkpoint to X-ray, and told V the comms were still perfect.

Ehstadt was basically the southern half of the city, south of Highway 1, which ran through the city from east to west. Gaufurt sat to the north. In actuality, there were six or seven smaller villages that made up each sector, sometimes daring to cross into the opposite sector, each with proper Arabic names, histories, and identities. Someone at battalion had decided to name the sectors after the two towns nearest their base in Bavaria. The battalion operations officer described the decision as one that would give the guys a taste of home when they were out on patrol, a statement made eyes of the lieutenants dart around the room trying to catch each other’s knowing glances. Ghost Platoon was the first platoon of Charlie Company, and it was their responsibility to patrol Ehstadt.

He turned south off of the highway, which was really only a four-lane road that bisected the city, and told X-ray where his platoon was. They were now conducting their presence patrol, he

told them, serpentine through the small villages in the northern part of the city at five miles an hour or so, looking for curfew breakers, insurgents, or anything else that looked out of place. The only time he had been through this town before was during the daytime, when it didn't look at all daunting or dangerous. At night, through the green filters of night vision goggles, every shadow looked darker, every parked car looked weighted down like a car bomb.

HE LOOKED OUT HIS WINDOW AT THE LIFELESS HOMES MERE INCHES FROM HIS WINDOW, NOT A LIGHT OR A CURIOUS SET OF EYES COMING THROUGH THE CLOTH CURTAINS.

Once they turned off of the main road for a presence patrol, they had no set course. He would push his platoon in any direction he wanted to, trying his best to never retrace over the same path. It would be easy to decide where to go if there was gunfire or explosions in any part of town, he figured, but with nothing but a few errant flares, he had nothing to move towards, nothing to chase.

He told V to take a sharp turn down a narrow dirt road between two small brick houses. They couldn't see very far down it, but it looked passable, and it looked like there was some ambient light twenty meters down or so. They moved slowly at first, tentatively. V spoke of his unease for the first time, but kept moving forward in the absence of his platoon leader's direction. They rocked in their seats when his front, right tire slid into a shallow trench, but they were able to keep moving forward even at the new angle.

He looked out his window at the lifeless homes mere inches from his window, not a light or a curious set of eyes coming through the cloth

curtains. He settled back in his seat, hoping they would be able to make it through the narrow alley to the other side when Harrison alerted them to their next problem. The houses were connected by a web of power cords, some looking like they had recently been attached to a toaster or coffee maker, held up by long branches, at best, or by metal tent poles at worst. They were higher out on the main roads, but in this alley they were low enough to catch the long, metal radio antenna on the back of their humvee.

"It's catching and sparking, sir," Harrison said, covering his head in case the antenna released and lurched forward on top of him.

"Can you grab it?" he yelled up to Harrison.

"Yeah, hang on," he said, already lifting himself out through the gunner's hatch and walking down the back of the humvee.

"Hope he doesn't shock himself," V said, without a hint of the disdain that he usually had in his voice when he talked about the gunner.

"He's fine," the platoon leader said, watching Harrison wrestle with the antenna through his rearview. "Ghost Platoon, Ghost 6, break," he said into his platoon mic. "We've got low wires overhead in this alley, break. Get your gunners to jump out and pull your antennas forward until we get through this, over." His sergeants confirmed that they were doing so. Clemens said that he had tied his down before they left the base, embarrassed that he hadn't made the whole platoon do the same.

"No worries," he said, recognizing the sheepish tones of Clemens' response. "There'll always be another patrol," he said, V's uncontested seven mile per hour pace made him confident that they could make it through the alley now that the antennas were down, a confidence that was only augmented when the nose of his humvee

poked out into a cross street twice as wide and with electric cords twice as high. He smiled when Clemens confirmed that all of their vehicles were back on the road, matching V's self-assured ten miles per hour. His voice was crisp when he called in his platoon's coordinates into battalion. His mind was clear when he ordered V to speed up towards the two green flares that were fired in the air a few hundred meters to their direct front.

He was sitting forward in his seat when they got to their best guess of where the flares had originated. Valdez slowed down without having to be told. The platoon leader pulled the Copenhagen from his cargo pocket, packed it with his forefinger, and pushed a tight lump of it into his mouth. He was scanning and seeing nothing. He asked Harrison, but he wasn't hearing anything either. He called into X-ray, but they confirmed that no one was reporting anything unusual within sector.

**HE KNEW THEY WOULD SPEND THEIR
WHOLE YEAR FIGHTING A PHANTOM
THAT THEY WOULD RARELY
GET A CHANCE TO CONFRONT.**

Whoever shot the flares, or had been shooting the flares all night, was not going to present himself when a four-vehicle porcupine crawled down his street. He knew that. He knew that they were probably staring down at him from a rooftop on this or some other nearby street, and that they would never be so dumb as to engage them directly.

He was still sitting straight as they rounded the city blocks and moved towards daytime market areas throughout Ehstadt. They were unopposed, free to move without any concern. For the first time in the three weeks since he had been in

country, he felt like the war was his to lose. He had faith in their windows, their armor, and their vastly superior weapon systems. He knew that he and his guys had been trained as well as they possibly could have been trained, and their will to survive would take care of the rest.

He stared down into a garbage bucket that had been pulled down off of the sidewalk and onto the street. He told Valdez to speed up a little bit as they pulled back onto the black top that would take them deeper into the villages of Ehstadt. He swallowed a thin steam of tobacco juice and called in their latest coordinates to a barely awake Talon X-ray. Even Valdez broke a smile when the platoon leader pinched Harrison hard on his inner thigh, after the gunner started to announce the presence of fictitious insurgents to their front, pretending their boring first patrol was more excited than it really was.

"Talon X-ray this is Ghost 6, RP FOB Warrior time now, break," he said an uneventful half hour later as his platoon pulled slowly through the gates outside their base. "Negative contact, nothing significant to report, over."

"Ghost 6, roger out."

They cleared their weapons at the barrels just inside the wire. He wished they had arrested the guy who was taunting them with flares. He wished they had killed someone planting a bomb on the side of the road as they drove past. He wished he knew which ones of his guys were going to die there. But he knew that those wishes were fruitless. He knew they would spend their whole year fighting a phantom that they would rarely get a chance to confront. And he knew that doing so would guarantee that he would take home a platoon that was only a shadow of what it was tonight.