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Known Unknowns

This was not good.

With the Iraqis pressing around him on all sides like circus spectators leaning forward to see the man on the high-wire act slip and tumble, Lieutenant Colonel Vaughn Strong looked through his field glasses at the man slumped in the driver's seat. The man should be dead by now but he was still breathing and every so often his shoulders gave barely-perceptible twitches.

This was *definitely* something to be filed under Not Good.

This was "Hello, soldier! Welcome to the Land of Lose-Lose!"

This was chopping off his hands, then asking him to conduct a symphony.

This was dangerous and delicate and would not be resolved to anyone's satisfaction.

This was, in fact, the classic tar-baby situation. But what could he do? They were here and here they'd stay until they yanked free of the tar.

Strong fingered the focus ring, pulling the car closer across the 300 yards. The roof was caved in and the steering column had broken loose, pinning the driver against the burgundy upholstery, and half the guy's skull seemed to have been knocked ajar, but this was still definitely a problem. The half-dead terrorist was, after all, still half-alive.

The battalion commander lowered the binoculars and wiped the sweat from his eye sockets. He kept his fingers to his head for a few seconds, hoping his men wouldn't notice how he rubbed his temples, trying to press away the noise inside. It was just one of many tricks to hide the tremors. Make it look like you're full

of ballsy confidence, ready to kick the situation's ass. Never let 'em see you sweat, right?

Not so easy when your skull roared with what sounded like four dozen people trapped on the upper floor of a burning skyscraper, all of them screaming and weeping and making last-minute deals with God, Ross' voice the loudest among them. It had been like this for Strong since that twelfth of September—starting with a low pulse, but building in volume. Stateside, he'd managed to keep it under control: sitting in the brigade commander's back-briefs, he could keep his head down, doodle in his notebook—words like “high pucker factor,” “blah blah blah,” and “manifest destination”—while the rest of the room filled with PowerPoint and laser pointers and the ticking buzz of fluorescent lights.

Once here in Baghdad, however, the volume knob was snapped off and he was left with battering-ram headaches. Moments like this brought it all front and center: the muttering Iraqis, the bleating goats, the restless, sideways glances of his own soldiers, the scraps of trash snapping in the wind, the broken and bleeding terrorist in the middle of the marketplace.

Fuck! Here it came again. A tsunami of pain roared up through his spine and crashed against the bottom of his skull.

Ross dead Ross dead Ross dead. Running through the remains of his office, crackling and sizzling, flesh dripping off the tips of his fingers, legs carrying him forward by reflex alone because there was nothing left inside of Ross that hadn't already been cooked by fuel and flame.

There came a pounding in Strong's head that vibrated against his eye sockets and sinus cavity. Behind the curtain of his fingers, he broke into a sweat as, inside his head, his brother-in-law bumped against desks and plunged through the blizzard of once-important papers, finding his way by instinct alone to the blown-out window. Once there, he launched himself into the cool blue space, soaring aflame into the buffeting wind. Ross was already gone—no longer the brother-in-law that Vaughn had fished with, laughed with, clinked beer bottles with, mutually grouched about the wife/sister with—so it wasn't really Ross that morning who popped like an ember out of the tower.

Strong pressed hard but the static in his head didn't diminish.

There were just two things he wanted at this particular moment: his Golden Retriever, Ginger, snuffling and slobbering against the palm of his hand; and his wife's tit in his mouth. While Ginger licked his hand, he'd suck on his wife like he was a baby and if he was lucky she wouldn't catch him crying over all the bad shit he'd brought home from Sadr City.

He pressed and pressed against his head, willing Ross to snuff out, begone, begone, begone.

They were watching, they were watching. Pull yourself together. This is *not* how a career officer in the United States Army is supposed to conduct himself.

Times like this, he should call on all his training, the momentum of all the years he humped through the field exercises, the assault of PowerPoint, the dance of laser-pointers across maps, the chess-piece shuffle of sand-table briefings, the subscription to *Military Tactics Quarterly* for fuck's sake!

He should break this down, compartmentalize the scene into workable pieces. *Arrive. Assess. Act.* Yes, that was the textbook.

But at the moment, he couldn't do any of that. His head was shrieking and there were no empty compartments left. He knew it would pass, but until then he had to bear with it, ride the pain.

Nearby, one of the soldiers flicked his M-16 selector switch from Safe to Auto and back again. It sounded like the second hand on a clock. They were waiting.

Vaughn Strong sucked in a deep breath, gathering into his nose the worst of all that Baghdad had to offer: dust, diesel, dogshit. He uncovered his eyes. He'd been behind his fingers maybe ten seconds, but it felt like ten minutes.

He set his face into a more traditional lieutenant colonel mode of expression: accomplishment of the mission by whatever tactical means necessary. He looked at his men and nodded. "Okay, let's get on with it."

This asshole in the white Opel was just the latest knot in a long string of rotten luck Strong's battalion had encountered since arriving in Baghdad five months ago.

It started with Jerry, his executive officer, getting his left leg sheared off at the knee while en route to a neighborhood council meeting in Taji. Then the sewage backed up in battalion headquarters and three of his staff officers—the valuable ones who knew the difference between a head and an ass—had come down with dysentery. And last week, ole Ali Baba had finally gotten lucky with a mortar, lobbing it (bull's-eye!) into the middle of Forward Operating Base Triumph where it landed in the post exchange food court, instantly killing two of Strong's men sitting around a picnic table outside Burger King merrily snarfing down Whoppers on their day off.

Now this: a suicide bomber who'd rammed himself up the ass end of an M-1 Abrams tank. Fortunately for the men inside the Abrams, the bomber had been mortally injured in the crash and hadn't triggered the explosives. Unfortunately, however, the white Opel was now lodged under the tank treads and everything had come to a standstill twenty minutes ago. No one knew if the bomber was still

holding the detonator, or if the explosives were still potent, or even if there were actually explosives in the trunk of that car. Maybe this was just another drunk Ali Baba who couldn't drive and the stupid bastard made the A-Number-1 fuckup of getting in a fender bender with a U.S. tank.

This was one of those situations you could not prepare for. The piano falling from the sky. What was it Rumsfeld said about known unknowns? Strong had written it in his notebook and practically committed it to memory: "There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know."

If someone had taken immediate action twenty minutes ago, none of this would be an issue, but the captain on the scene had waited too long, had been too hesitant to slide a foot out onto that high wire, and now a crowd had gathered, including a couple of news cameras. Fucking CNN complicated everything on this battlefield, Strong thought for the hundredth time in as many days. Fuck them and the cameras they rode in on, too.

Vaughn Strong took another look at the landscape where this particular known-unknown had plopped itself. Everything was the color of dust, including the dust itself. Low, boxy buildings. Tattered posters advertising mint chewing gum. The vomit-spill of bricks where a shop's façade had finally given way. A tangle of power-lines that reminded him too much of his wife's morning hair on her pillow. The street, the sky, the air he breathed. The goats, the babbling Iraqis, even the faces of his own men. All of it dust, dust, dust. Fine-grained as baby powder. From dust we began, to dust we'll return. It was fucking Biblical here at this Sadr City intersection.

He'd been called out of a staff meeting with the brigade commander when word of the would-be suicide bomber reached headquarters. Strong had ordered his driver to take him to the site, hoping he could fix the situation quickly with minimal death to innocent Iraqi citizens or his own men (in that order, as per the rules of engagement). But when he got to the scene in the north sector of Baghdad, he realized solving this situation would be like trying to stuff eels into a can of grease. It could be done, but you had to know how to hold the eel.

Strong turned to the pale, visibly-shaking captain at his side. "What do we know? And don't feed me a line of bullshit—I want this thing fixed *now*."

Captain Abe Hornsacker, clearly a man out of his element and who was now paying the price for indecision on the high wire, blanched and scientifically

proved that it's possible for fear to involuntarily suck your testicles up into the body cavity. "Sir, sir," he sputtered.

Strong looked hard at him, tympanis rumbling in his skull. "No bullshit, Captain Hornsacker. We don't have time for it." He stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Listen to me, Abe. There are men inside that tank depending on us to resolve this situation so they can dislodge from the ticking time bomb and take their happy asses back to FOB Triumph where they can sit in their air-conditioned hooch, drink their limit of near-beer and beat off while thinking about their wives back home. They don't have time for wiffly-waffly bullshit and neither do I."

(Strong talked tough, but oh how he himself wanted his wife's tit and Ginger's tongue.)

"Sir," the captain began again, his voice suddenly stuck in a higher, testicle-less octave, "the problem is, we know nothing of the car's contents. The men still inside the Abrams don't have a vantage point of the Opel's interior. We've kept them inside the tank for their own protection. None of the rest of us have been able to get close enough to see what the car was carrying."

"You mean you haven't *wanted* to."

"Sir?"

"The fact of the matter is, Abe, you *could* have gotten closer, you *could* have walked right up to the Opel. You just didn't have the *balls* to do it, right?"

Sergeant Brock Lumley, crouched a few yards away in the standard security posture, rifle at the ready, overheard the battalion commander and wanted to tell him, "*Some* of us had the balls, sir. *Some* of us wanted to chance it and creep up on the Opel." That's what he wanted to say aloud, but he held his tongue. This was Hornsacker's hanging party; let him put the knot in his own noose.

Lumley put his cheek back on the stock of the M-16 and went back to scanning the crowd, hajji by hajji. Let just one of them motherfuckers move a single sandal-clad toe in the direction of the car and he'd put a hole the size of a baseball in his chest. Lumley had eleven of his younger soldiers arrayed on either side of him, crouched in the same posture, sweat-slick fingertips fondling triggers. They could handle this, if they were allowed. He and his men had the courage, the resolve, and the intestinal fortitude.

Captain Hornsacker, whose balls were bobbing somewhere around his liver, said, "Sir, we lost the opportunity for recon right from the get-go due to the size of the crowd which formed around the accident site, making it impossible for us to risk collateral damage."

Strong stared at his junior officer, wondering if he should call him on the bullshit. Instead, he grimaced and said, "Alright, Abe, go ahead."

Hornsacker sucked in a quivery breath and described the afternoon's events:

Bravo Company (under the command of one Captain A. Hornsacker) had been escorting Alpha Company as it returned from a mission in Khadhimiya sector, taking Route Franklin as briefed in last night's update. No issues; everything going swimmingly. Until they got to Intersection Quillpen where, at approximately oh-nine-thirty hours, the convoy of humvees and tanks was forced to a halt by a herd of goats crossing the road. Like all goats everywhere, these animals had no sense of urgency, bleating and blinking and bumping into each other. The soldiers stared at the goats and the goats stared back, some with trash dangling from their jaws. The goatherd didn't look at the Americans but picked his nose and clucked at his goats. "Like I said, sir: *no sense of urgency*," said Hornsacker, a tremor of haste in his voice.

Then came a sound off to the left as the companies sat at the goat-clogged intersection. Number Three Tank was the first to spot the suspected insurgent vehicle coming at a high rate of speed toward the formation. As it accelerated up the frontage road, it quickly changed status from a *Possible* Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device to a *Probable* Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device. Gunners from Tanks Number Two and Three immediately applied Force Protection Measures 1 through 4 and would have implemented Force Protection Measure 5 except by that time the VBIED had already rammed into the left rear of Tank Number Three. Tanks One and Two had moved forward out of the potential blast zone and had established the outer perimeter of security.

"We're labeling it a failed suicide bomb event, sir," Hornsacker concluded.

"Give it time, Abe" Strong replied. "We're not out of the woods yet. Ali Baba could still succeed in his mission."

"From what we've been able to determine, the insurgent's right leg and right hand are pinned beneath the dashboard, restricting his movement on that side," Hornsacker said, pointing at the distant car. "Our spotters can see what looks like a timing device on the passenger seat but it appears to be beyond his reach at this time, sir."

"How far out is EOD?"

"I put in the call thirty minutes ago, sir, but they—"

"They just arrived, sir," Sergeant Lumley spoke up, pointing his thumb toward the explosive ordnance disposal team working at the rear of a humvee. They unloaded what looked like the love child of Tinkertoys and a giant Erector set.

“They’re sending out the ’bot first,” Hornsacker said. “In order to negate human contact with the vee-bid.”

“Okay,” Strong said, “let’s wait and see what we can see.” This was the *Assess* which would trigger them to *Act*. For the first time since he *Arrived*, Vaughn visibly relaxed. In his head, he started a gradual retreat to the bed where his dog and his wife waited for him.

As an EOD sergeant worked the controls, jiggling a joystick from side to side, the robot—all silver limbs and thick tires—moved up, back, up, back with a whir and a grrr. It paced from side to side, impatient to move out and investigate what looked to be a dicey situation. The robot loved hair-trigger scenarios which required precise, mechanical movements, not the fleshy, heavy-thumbed attempts by the humans. You’ve got a touch-and-go, blue-wire red-wire dilemma? Send in the ’bot. He’ll get the job done and won’t get his skin shredded to gore.

The robot stared at the man slumped in the wedged-under car. His opti-eyes dilated to what humans would call a squint, telescoping on the half-dead half-alive human behind the wheel. The computer chips in his head lit in a surge of green lights as he took in the facts and quickly analyzed a path to the solution. The robot paced and even had a bit of a spring in his step as he waited for the joystick to move him forward.

Behind him, the EOD sergeants held their collective breath, as they always did when sending the robot out on missions. These were the dicey moments. You never knew with the ’bot. Maybe he’d run out of battery juice halfway through the mission or have an electrical breakdown. They liked to complain about the piece-of-shit-lowest-bidder T-271, but in the end, the sergeants knew they had to depend on the silvery Erector set to keep them and the other soldiers alive when facing up-against-the-wall scenarios like this. And, truth be told, though they wouldn’t admit it to each other, they loved the T-271 with a deep and abiding affection. If the robot was a girl, they would have bought it beers and taken it home with them on the first date.

“Here we go, sir,” Captain Hornsacker said as the robot rolled forward.

Strong, Hornsacker, Lumley and the rest of the men stood in a tense knot 300 yards from the crippled tank as the EOD team maneuvered the robot to within metal-arm reach of the Opel.

On the other side of the cordon, the CNN reporter—the one with the good hair—turned to her cameraman. “You getting this?”

The robot whirred, grrred, and swelled with joy. Moments like this made up for all the other shitty days in Baghdad.

The sergeant at the joystick watched the progress as it streamed from a direct-feed camera to the laptop he'd set on the hood of his humvee. He could see the driver's head smashed against the cracked window, the blood forking down his temple and matting his beard. The robot raised itself on its legs and peered into the back seat.

"Ho-ly shit, sir!" the EOD sergeant exclaimed.

At those words, Abe Hornsacker's testicles pirouetted around his gall bladder, Brock Lumley's index finger tightened against the trigger in a movement that could only have been measured under a microscope, and Vaughn Strong reluctantly threw back the sheets and pulled himself out of the bed while behind him his wife, breasts dangling like ripe fruit, said, "What's wrong?"

Strong joined the EOD team at the computer screen. *Everything* was wrong. There, in the back seat, they could see three propane tanks, two 152-millimeter artillery shells, and several anti-tank mines. Suddenly, 300 yards seemed too close for comfort. This guy could take out Tanks Three, Two and maybe even One, not to mention the CNN news crew and half the crowd of gawkers—a crowd that was growing larger as word spread through the neighborhood. Dozens of feet (and hooves) were moving toward the intersection, filling the air with dust, babble, and bleats. A dog appeared in a shop doorway, gave a short yip, then sat back on his haunches and started to nervously lick his balls.

"Okay, now we know," Strong said, not looking at his captain. At Strong's elbow, Hornsacker swallowed with a dry *click*.

The robot swiveled his head to give them a look at the front seat: a creased, dog-eared copy of the Koran, a cell phone, a timing device and a grenade.

The half-dead man came to life. He coughed and a rope of blood spurted from his lips. The whirl and grrr of the robot had roused him from his stupor and now he was agitated, taking it out on the robot, which stared back at him without blinking despite the curses invoking Allah the terrorist hurled at it. The robot could care less if he burned in hell with the rest of his Yankee infidel lovers or if he had his privates sliced off with a dull, rusty knife and shoved down his throat—and, frankly, whether or not the Great Satan, George W. Bush, ever had relations with his mother doggy-style really didn't register in his circuitry. He was metal and machine, here to do a mission which the clumsy humans could not accomplish. He would render this bleeding, screaming man inert and he would do it with a steady calm which would earn him a hero's accolades.

That's when the terrorist, fighting off waves of nauseating pain and dizziness from a brain gone askew, summoned a reserve of strength and reached for the grenade in the passenger's seat. It was just beyond his fingertips.

The robot backed away with a growl and, with two flicks of the joystick, was returned to the safety of humans.

“My recommendation, sir, is that we try to neutralize the threat with a water charge,” the EOD sergeant told Lieutenant Colonel Strong.

“Do it,” Strong replied, a snap in his voice. The midday sun was high and burning a hole through his Kevlar helmet, roiling the screams in his head, but Strong was able to cut through the clamor and clearly see the path ahead: get rid of this *hajji* troublemaker and move on with the day, but do it in a way that minimized collateral damage and made his soldiers look not bad on CNN later that night (which was not necessarily the same as making them look good, but was in the same ballpark). The rules of engagement made it clear this was tantamount: complete the mission, but do it in such a clean and professional manner that no collateral Local Nationals were left broken, bleeding or oozing in your wake. And if there were news cameras in the area at the time, you better make good goddamn sure you distributed soccer balls and lollipops, tousling the kids’ hair for good measure, before moving on with your patrol.

He turned to the top NCO on the scene. “Sergeant Lumley, while EOD is setting this up, I want you to take six of your men and move the cordon back another two hundred feet. Get those civilians away from the vehicle. And have someone check to make sure we have enough lollipops to go around.”

“Roger, sir,” Lumley said and moved out with his squad to push back the civilians.

Lollipops, he thought. *That’ll make it all taste better, won’t it? How many licks does it take to get to the center of an insurgency?*

As Brock Lumley flapped his hand at the *hajjis* who’d ventured too close and nudged with the butt of his M-16 those who looked like they intended to stay put, he felt the returning rise of frustration at the impossible task at hand. And not just this mission here in the bull’s-eye of Quillpen, but nearly everything he and his men had been handed since they arrived five months ago. Just like these slant-faced bastards in their dirty *dishdashas* who were slow to move back from the ticking time bomb, *hajjis* in general could give two rat fucks about what the Americans were doing here. And what *were* they doing here? Lumley had no fucking clue. Oh sure, the brigade commander and sergeant major talked the talk about “the extermination of terrorism” and “the triumph of democracy,” but when it came right down to it, Lumley knew he and his men were just playing that old carnival game, Whack-a-Mole. Smack down one terrorist with the rubber mallet and right away another one pops up over *here* and while you’re whacking that guy another

one has popped up over *there*. The only difference is, in the carnival Whack-a-Mole, the game's over when you run out of quarters.

Like the dickwad in the crumpled Opel behind them. They could "neutralize" or "exterminate" him, but his brother or cousin or second-cousin's best friend, would show up with his own backpack of explosives in another neighborhood on another day. Lumley and his men just couldn't move fast enough and, after only five months, he was exhausted just thinking about it.

That's why, when he pushed the cordon back to a safer distance, he might have shoved one or two of the stubborn bastards a little too hard and they, in turn, narrowed their eyes and said something in *hajji*-speak which was filled with a bunch of goat-sounding crap like "laa" and "naa." Lumley didn't really mean anything by the rough shove. He was just tired of this shit, that's all.

Most of the crowd grumbled and shook their fists at the Americans, but eventually they complied, shuffling through clouds of dust, backpedaling themselves to a safe distance.

Most, but not all. While Lumley's men were herding the Local Nationals, a small boy slipped through the cordon and dashed out to the crushed Opel. Lumley made a grab for him, but missed and let him go. He wasn't about to get himself blown halfway to Allah just to save one stupid kid.

The boy approached the driver and held up a bottle of water. The terrorist slowly, painfully turned his head and, for the first time, stopped scowling. He smiled at the boy, tipped his head forward and opened his mouth. The boy put the bottle to the man's lips and helped him drink, cupping his hand beneath the blood-clotted beard to catch the drips. When the man finished drinking, he leaned close to the boy and spoke a few words before his head rolled back against the headrest and he passed out.

Captain Hornsacker radioed out to Sergeant Lumley: "Have your men grab that boy and bring him back here to us."

The little Samaritan tried to dodge Lumley's team and melt back into the crowd, but Private First Class Cassidy Skinner—who'd taken the Pleasant Falls High School football team to the Indiana state finals three years in a row—tackled the kid before he could get far. Pfc. Skinner held the boy in a pincer grip around the neck and brought him before Lieutenant Colonel Strong. The battalion commander turned to his translator and said, "Ask him why he did that, why he took water to the enemy."

The translator questioned the boy, then told Strong, "He say Allah commanded him to do it."

“Of *course* he did. All right. Ask him what the guy said when he was out there.”

The translator and the boy jabbered back and forth. “He say the man tell him to tell you he is from Syria and that his terrorist group has planned to launch many vehicle bomb attacks today and that other attacks will follow. He say he is here to kill Americans and that it is his supreme pleasure to follow Allah’s will as he sends us to the flames of Hell.”

Strong stared at the boy, who returned the look without cracking a smile. This was the problem with Ali Babas, he thought. They believed everything they heard. Now this asshole is a hero in this kid’s mind and he thinks he’s earned a place at Allah’s right hand just because he gave the fucker a sip of water.

Strong frowned and turned to Private First Class Skinner. “Zip-tie the kid and hold him until this is all over. I don’t want him anywhere near that car again.”

At Strong’s elbow, Captain Hornsacker cleared his throat and summoned the courage to speak. “Sir, if I may...”

“What is it, Abe?”

“Sir, what if we exploited the opportunity this boy has presented? What if we send him back out there with another bottle of water, one that we’ve poisoned? The terrorist drinks it and then we’re done for the day. Everyone can go home happy.”

Strong was about to tell his captain that he was a well-meaning, but ultimately useless officer who couldn’t find his asshole with a flashlight and a roadmap, and he meant that it in the kindest way possible, but he was interrupted by the EOD sergeant.

“Sir, we’re ready with the water charge. Robby’s ready to roll forward and place it beneath the undercarriage.”

Strong looked away from Hornsacker and nodded. This was the preferred course of action; poison would have to wait for another day, another terrorist.

The T-271, called Robby by his human handlers (though he disdained the name), moved forward, cradling the water charge in his spindly metal arms. The water and explosives, chambered separately, were contained in a canister shaped like a rocketship to Mars the robot had once seen in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. As directed by the human with the joystick, Robby would carefully set the charge beneath the rear of the Opel, then quickly reverse away from the car. If all went well, the explosives inside the canister would detonate and in the space of two seconds—a period Robby was able to compute and witness in time-slowed sequence, but which his humans would miss if they took a lingering blink—the pentaerythritol tetranitrate would create shockwaves of one million pounds per square inch, cracking open the canister at the bullet-shaped tip which would then puncture a hole in the

car's chassis, followed immediately by a blade-thin geyser of water which would envelope the car, the driver and the bomb in a sheath of violent, dousing liquid, thus rendering the timers, wires, batteries and explosives inert through a patented method of "bumping and drowning."

If all went well, the water charge would knock the Opel with a hard punch and defuse the bomb, kill the half-alive Syrian and preserve the inert IED so that analysts back at FOB Triumph could examine the method and dissect the madness of the insurgency.

All did not go well.

Lieutenant Colonel Strong joined his men in a brief, hearty cheer when the charge fountained up and the Opel lifted three feet off the ground, knocking the driver half-asunder; but then Strong's bowels clenched when the dripping water cleared and he saw the driver move first his left arm, then his right arm. The explosion had dislodged the terrorist from where he'd been pinned beneath the dashboard. Apparently the Syrian, his skull still split and leaking at a more rapid rate, was dead-set on triggering his payload. If he could find the cell phone and punch in the code, and if the wires were still attached to the three propane tanks, two 152-millimeter artillery shells, and anti-tank mines, and if the explosives were still dry enough, then Strong would be looking at a fifteen-foot crater where his tank now stood.

Strong blew out a whistle of breath. "Fuckity-fuck!" This was turning into something like those field training exercises where the scenario planners kept throwing up roadblock after roadblock in increasingly far-fetched circumstances to force commanders like Vaughn Strong to make rash decisions. Like this particular known-unknown situation unraveling here at Quillpen, those FTXes always made him feel like he was squeezing water between his fingers. Nothing ever stayed in his grasp long enough for him to *Assess* and *Act*.

Strong turned to the EOD crew. "Get that robot out there with another charge!"

The sergeants scrambled, loaded another cylinder into the robot's outstretched arms, and jiggled the joystick. They didn't get far before Captain Hornsacker yelped, "Sir! He's got the phone!" and dropped to a fetal position behind his humvee, squirting a tiny stream of urine into his sweat-soaked underwear in the process.

The broken, battered and now drenched man in the Opel was sitting up like a nightmare Lazarus. He turned his head, smiled at the ring of soldiers, and held up his phone for all to see.

"Fuckity-fuckity-FUCK!" Strong yelled. They were the only words which came to mind as he stood there, firmly but recklessly facing the danger (unlike tinkle-

drawers Hornsacker). Strong stood there, arms akimbo, growling at the terrorist punching the code into the keypad of his cell phone.

Lieutenant Colonel Strong was truly the last man standing because everyone else—Hornsacker, the soldiers of his company, the crowd of Iraqis, the EOD team, even the robot—was crouched behind the nearest bit of shelter from the expected blast. That's why Lieutenant Colonel Strong was the only one to see the Syrian shaking his phone in frustration and punching the numbers twice, then thrice, but coming up with the same empty results every time. The detonator was no good, there was no signal from the cell phone to ignite a spark under the homemade bomb in the back seat. The terrorist screamed a string of curses at the phone—no doubt calling it a no-good piece-of-shit hunk-of-junk from Japan—before flinging it out the window.

This seemed to drain the Syrian's remaining reserve of energy. His head fell forward, hit the bent steering wheel and the upper half of his skull appeared to dislodge, sliding an inch to the right. Then nothing moved.

Strong choked on half a "fuckity." The Local Nationals lifted themselves off the ground and began jabbering and pointing fingers at the slumped driver. Captain Hornsacker's men bounced up and resumed their protective posture, a few of them training weapons on the crowd to keep them at bay. Hornsacker remained curled behind the humvee, his hands covering his head, for a few more seconds before he saw everyone else was already on their feet. He stood, realized the stain at his crotch was visible, and immediately pressed himself against the side of the humvee, hoping the piss would dry quickly.

Strong looked at the EOD team again. "All right, gentlemen. Let's get another water charge out there. Just to be on the safe side."

"Roger, sir," the sergeant said and finished securing the cylinder in Robby's arms. He nodded at the joystick-sergeant and the robot rolled forward for a second time, moving toward the Opel with a growing reluctance. The robot, like the humans behind him, was tired of this day-in, day-out bullshit. He had nerves of steel, yes; but you have no idea how tedious it was to be carted from one Baghdad street to the other, morning, noon and night, always expected to go where humans refused, always the same old cautious approach, warily eyeing the suspicious package, the odd swell of fresh concrete, the dog carcass with wires protruding from each nostril, while the humans sat safe and secure behind their armor-skin humvees, watching his progress via a computer screen. One of these days, he muttered, he'd show them, he'd just up and—

The robot quit. Stopped dead in its tracks forty feet shy of the Opel.

The sergeant on the joystick jiggled it up, back, right, left. Nothing. He checked his computer screen and tapped several keys. Still no response. He swore, then looked at the other sergeant and shook his head. “Battery.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Wish I was.”

“Godfuckingdammit.”

“Plan B?”

“Of *course*, Plan Fucking B.” The EOD sergeant would have to examine the car himself to see the extent of damage done to the homemade bomb. If he was honest with himself, he’d seen the inevitability of suiting up from the minute he arrived on the scene. Robby was all well and good, but in situations like this where they faced uncertain payloads, there really was no substitute for non-mechanical eyes-on. With the crowd of locals growing, simmering and pressing ever closer to the cordon, and with CNN beaming a live signal to the mothers and fathers of America—quite possibly his own mother and father who were clutching themselves as they gaped at the TV screen back in Portland, Oregon—he really had no choice but to go out there and defuse the situation as best he could now that his robot had stopped dead in its tracks.

The sergeant began stepping into his 80-pound Kevlar-lined suit, zipping and cinching. Before he put on the hood, he said, “I swear, that robot is gonna be the death of me,” words he wished he could immediately pull back into his mouth. He wasn’t particularly superstitious by nature, but that was like something out of the movies....and we all know how *that* scene ends.

Encased in the suit, he started moving toward the white car slowly, as if he was wading through a river of cold molasses. Inside, he had his own personal sauna, raising the morning’s 110 degrees another fifteen notches on the thermometer, essentially slow-cooking himself to death within the protective Kevlar coating. Not that the suit would do any good if the Opel suddenly went off. He would never survive the blast of the propane-propelled artillery shells. As he liked to say, the suit just gave them something to bury him in.

The rest of the soldiers watched the EOD sergeant lumber forward, stiff as a zombie. He reached the car in slow motion and leaned forward through the window. The sergeant looked like he was kissing his wife goodbye before she drove off on a school field trip with their fourth-grade son who was bouncing in his seat and making grrring sounds for a toy dinosaur he held in his hands, the sergeant pecking his wife on the cheek, both of them laughing at how giddy their kid was

to go to a museum and see a bunch of skeletons, Flesh Eaters of the Past. Inside the Kevlar, he started to smile and drift back to the United States.

But then suddenly, his eyes widened behind the breath-fogged helmet and he was windmilling back away from the Opel, stumbling in panicked retreat. What he'd seen in the back seat meant the end of his world as he knew it. This was it, all aboard for Kaputsville.

A soldier on the perimeter shouted "Watch out! Watch out!" even though he had no clue what they were to watch out for—he was just reacting to the EOD guy's sudden panic. It seemed like a good idea at the time to start shouting "Watch out!"

The warning rippled down the line and everyone hunkered into position.

That's when everything went slow-motion for Vaughn Strong. Later, he'd tell his executive officer that his brain zoomed out for a wide-angle perspective of the scene and he could see

- Intersection Quillpen and the three tanks askew in the road, the last of them with a white car up its ass like a half-squeezed turd
- the half-moon of shopkeepers, goat herders and school children gathered around the accident site, pressing against the hastily-erected cordon and raising a chorus of ululations, tongues flapping at the back of their throats
- the ring of humvees facing the tanks across an empty expanse of street, a squad of soldiers keeping their M-16s trained on the crowd and the Opel, alert for any funny business
- the robot frozen in the center of the tableau, a water charge cradled uselessly in its arms
- an empty plastic water bottle rolling between the robot's legs, skipped along by the wind and moving toward the Opel while at the same time a figure stuffed inside a heavy fire-suit tap-danced back as quickly as his cement-weight boots would allow

- a man—thought to be dead on three separate occasions—now incredibly, like a movie monster who refused to stay down, stirring once again in the front seat of the white car, pushing himself off the steering wheel with great effort—a sticky string of blood cobwebbing him to the dashboard—and turning himself toward the passenger side of the car, fumbling, reaching for something which might be the Koran or might be the hand grenade
- Captain Hornsacker giving himself completely to the dread and terror of close-order combat and releasing the clench on his bowels
- Strong himself standing tall but paralyzed with indecision, clarity of action unable to cut through the fog of headache
- a bullet cutting the day, splitting the air, hurtling from the barrel of an M-16 and lodging just below the Syrian's left ear, the pressure pushing upward, finally knocking loose whatever fibrous matter which had been holding the cleft halves of the man's head together, painting the interior of the Opel with blood-brain-skull
- a tattered copy of the Koran dropping from a limp hand and hitting the besmeared floor.

Lieutenant Colonel Vaughn Strong saw all of this but could not at once process the events. He was still trying to pull himself away from his bedroom back in Georgia and walk through the red, pulsing headache. When his paralysis finally broke, he turned to the right and saw Sergeant Lumley lowering the M-16 from his cheek.

“Good shooting, Sarge,” he croaked. It was hardly the best thing to say in the aftermath of a Bronze Star Medal moment and he would certainly be more poetic in the citation he'd later compose back at his desk in the air-conditioned headquarters, but for now he was just grateful for Lumley's immediate action which saved a three-million-dollar tank, the crewmembers inside, the laughing-bleating-jeering

hubbub of Ali Babas, a few dozen goats, two EOD sergeants and their robot, pissants Hornsacker and his men, and Vaughn himself. “Good shooting,” he said again, unable to hide the shake in his voice. The icewater of a headache was already fountaining from the top of his skull and dripping across the rest of his brain. With the death of the Syrian, he’d once again seen Ross ignite: Falling Burning Man.

Lumley said nothing as he flicked the selector switch on his M-16 back to Safe. He looked at his men, all of them staring gape-jawed at him, and snapped, “What the fuck you lookin’ at? Get your asses out there and disperse that crowd! And for Chrissakes somebody go up there, knock on that tank and tell them it’s all clear!”

His men moved out and when they were safely out of sight, Lumley stumbled behind the nearest humvee, put his hands on his knees and hurled up that morning’s breakfast.

It would be a long time, years and years of therapy, before he could wipe from his mind the sight of that head erupting in a bloody geyser. He’d pulled the trigger without thinking through the consequences. He was not sorry he hadn’t hesitated, but there was always that nagging, niggling doubt: maybe hajji wasn’t going for the grenade; maybe he was reaching to unbuckle the seatbelt so he could come out of the car in surrender; or maybe it was just a final muscular twitch of a man who was already dead.

Probably not, but still there was that *maybe*.

Lumley gagged once more, spit a loogey of bile, then wiped his mouth. Oh well. Didn’t matter now, right? What’s done is done. What’s dead is dead. He took a sour breath. Pull your shit together, Lumley.

But it *did* matter, and he knew it. A universe of what-ifs had hinged on that microscopic squeeze of his trigger finger. The paths branched outward in a vast network from his feet and, right or wrong, he’d stepped forward in that nanosecond.

Later that night, and for the rest of his time in Iraq, Brock Lumley would dream he was standing in front of a Whack-a-Mole, sponge-rubber mallet in his hand. Each time the Syrian’s head popped up, Lumley smacked it with the mallet. The head would burst like a balloon and drench Lumley’s shirt with blood and viscera. Then, another head, and another, and another.

The tank crew emerged from the hatch, their beige uniforms drenched dark with sweat. They’d been told what had happened and now they looked over at Lumley, cheered and gave him a thumbs up.

He waved back weakly and pulled his shit together.

One hour later—after the Abrams had finally pulled itself free of the Opel with a groan-shriek of metal, and the EOD team had gone out to render the explosives

completely neutral and retrieve the battery-dead robot who hung his head in shame as he was carried back to the humvee by his two human handlers, and the Iraqi Security Forces had at last arrived on the scene to disperse the crowd and take charge of the dead terrorist, and CNN had packed up their camera and microphone and zipped away from the scene in their shiny up-armored SUV, and Lieutenant Colonel Strong had ordered Captain Hornsacker to have a preliminary after-action report on his desk no later than 1700 hours, and the infantrymen had been allowed to piss and smoke before departure—the platoon was riding back to FOB Triumph.

They stared with glazed eyes out the windows of the humvees, always scanning, scanning, scanning the rooftops, doorways, ditches for suspicious activity. Nobody said anything, but a few cracked half-contained smiles when they thought about the way ole hajji's head popped like a blood-filled balloon when Sergeant Lumley's bullet had done its work.

Soon, they would pull into Triumph, clear their weapons at the checkpoint, ratcheting the bolts with a *ca-ching*, and reach down to pick up the ejected round. They would park at the motor pool, perform the post-op Preventive Maintenance Checks and Services, then head out for showers, chow, and the soothing calm of an after-dinner cigar. Some would gather for the on-going Xbox *Halo* tournament, some would e-mail their families across the ocean, some would open *Maxim* magazine to the wrinkled, dog-eared page and commence the nightly masturbation ritual, and some very few would lie on their cot in the spreading ink of night and stare at the ceiling of their hooch and try to push away the burst of a blood-balloon now playing on a loop in their head and knowing it was no use, they'd have to deal with this for the rest of the tour...and beyond.

The officers would also sit in the dark, variously watching Marx Brothers movies on their laptop (Hornsacker) and chewing Tylenol like candy (Strong).

One by one, they would all give way to the discomfort of restless sleep.

When the sun's yolk broke over the horizon, and the muezzins started singing from the mosques, and the Blackhawk blades took to the sky with pulsing thumps, and the morning's mortars came down with metal shrieks, then they would all face another day—Strong, Hornsacker, Lumley, the three thousand other soldiers, and even the Iraqis themselves—all prepared to meet more known unknowns.

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