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## *His Service Now is Ended*

And he had never surrendered. He had fought in Baghdad; he had fought in Kabul; he had fought up and down the deserts of Helmand province. He had defended his island, whatever the cost had been. He had fought atop mountains and in the streets. He had fought crouching in ditches and crawling through deserts. He had gone on till the end.

And now, still, he sits sentry. Backed up against a newsagent in South Croydon, Lt James Karlson, 151 Regiment, honourably discharged 2008.

Himself, only somehow shrunken. Washed-out combat fatigues hang loosely from his shoulders. A tattered sole flaps forlornly from the toe of one crusted boot and his arms, mapped with tattoos, are wrinkled like deflated balloons.

But despite his hollow cheeks, he sits rigid and erect, proud and imperious. Eyes blaze from above the brambles of his unkempt beard; staring beyond the endless march of commuters on the pavement in front of him to focus on something nobody else can see. Cars swish back and forth until they meld into the same car, never reaching its destination, only passing back and forth, back and forth, peripheral. Amongst the bustle, only he sits motionless—like a rock in the swirl of the ocean, buffeted by the swill of the tide but standing stoical.

However long you watch him, he doesn't whine or beg, but brandishes a flattened cardboard box like an ensign. The words '*I served my country. Support your troops*' peer palimpsest-like from

behind the bars of a marker-penned Union Jack. Without fail, whenever somebody drops a penny into the cache of silver and copper in his hat he jolts to attention, eyes twitching, repays the jingle with a salute like a coin-activated animatronic arcade puppet, before relaxing, folding back into himself and resuming his gaze towards flickering middle distance, faraway foreign fields, buried memories, buried friends.

The first embers of sun glimmer and glance off the mosques and minarets that stand silhouette against a golden flush of dawn. The last echoes of morning prayer, *Salat al-fajr*, rise with the morning mist. Resonant. Ethereal. Yearning.

A city stirs. Over four million people have rolled up their prayer mats and are rolling out their most winning sun-up smiles. “Sobh bacher,” neighbours nod to one another, “Good morning,” about the only Dari he knows.

Below the Lieutenant’s rooftop roost atop an abandoned hotel-cum-strategic lookout, a boy is grilling skewers of lamb on the street: Asadi, the teen who rarely smiled but would bring him herbal teas, try to talk to him by repeating the names of Premier League football players with varying intonations and facial expressions. The two of them had sat side by side on upturned apricot crates as Asadi’s older sister was marched off to be married to a Taliban. A parent pulling down on each of her arms like cement blocks. Tears chasing each other down her cheeks.

The tang of spices from the boy’s marinade tickles the Lieutenant’s nose and teases his empty stomach as he inhales the morning air, already soupy with the warmth of a new day. Like a freshwater river when it first meets the denser saltwater sea, the smell rides above a deeper, constant stench of arid faecal matter. It blows with the dust on the wind, but he has been stationed here long enough to ignore it.

The inner mechanisms of the great machine of Kabul are beginning to whirl. Men cycle back and forth and back and forth on bicycles overladen with ballasts of rainbow-coloured vegetables, bags of grain, small children—on their way to and from the teeming *souks* in the city centre. Occasionally a beaten-up old Toyota crawls its way through the narrow streets, parting the pedestrians. Mothers

congregate at doorways to natter, babies and bundles of clean washing resting in the crooks of their arms; kaleidoscopic burqas shimmer and wink.

In the backdrop, mountains. On a completely different scale to the intricate warrens of houses and shops, the snow-capped Hindu Kush peaks loom above everything. Like the rim of a bowl that holds the city, stopping it from trickling away.

‘Once crossed by Alexander the Great as he marched on the Indian subcontinent with a horde at his back nearly 2500 years ago’, the Lieutenant had read. A millennium before the Islamic conquest would envelop Kabul, borne by the proto-Sunni sacred books, the bloody sabre of Ya’qub and his Saffarid swarm. Standing at over 25,000 feet at their zenith, their crags would later form the boundary of the British empire in the Middle East, slicing up British and Russian areas of control.

Now—he has seen the grainy satellite pictures for himself—they are a nest of Taliban hideouts. The prefab huts and caves in which militia-men with dusky eyes sharpen their ideals. Vanishing before a patrol can clamber its way up to meet them.

From this unassailable altitude, they bombard the city with rocket fire—like angry gods on high. Or scuttle down in the early hours of the morning to wage stealthy jihad: plant car bombs or exchange fire with British or American troops before escaping up vertiginous dirt corniches where they cannot be followed by the hulking Challenger tanks used by the British army.

Once this is all done with, the Lieutenant thinks, he wants to climb those mountains without having to worry about getting ambushed and executed in front of a camera. He wants to look down and imagine the people on their bicycles, cooking in the street, gossiping at doorways.

Oh, to be as comfortable as his fellow nightwatchman is right now, snuggled up beside him, just rousing from an illicit nap.

“Sleep well, sunshine?” Lt Karlson winks at his junior officer who is busy rubbing the rheum from around his eyes.

“I work harder than you in my sleep, mate.”

“Dream on.” A hint of a smile. “Pun intended,” he lies.

“Course,” the boy punches him on the arm, stretches, looks

around. He has slept on and off through the entire eight hours of their duty.

The kid is only just twenty and Lt Karlson often cuts him a bit of slack, enjoys a bit of banter with him on a long day at the binoculars. Despite sporting the swollen torso of a silverback gorilla, the boy's face is soft and innocent, not yet weathered by the war. He hasn't suffered through enough of those moments in the midst of things, the gunfire like a heavy-duty drill, the explosions that etch wrinkles into the brow. Plenty of time for that.

The boy grins unrepentantly. "You'll never guess what I dreamed, James fella." But what the lad dreamed is lost to the past—memory fails him. He can't have been listening particularly attentively or, no, something happened. All that he remembers is that innocent, cheeky grin and then—

*Crack.* A blast of noise rattles through him. Eyes wide. Every muscle tense. Adrenaline pumps, rapid breaths. He's up on his feet and ready. Reaches for his assault rifle. Scanning for the enemy: not there. The gun: not there. He yells, wildly, ready, ready—

People are watching him. "Come on, quick, quick," a mother steers her school-uniformed son in a wide berth around him, wary eyes to the pavement. London rush-hour traffic hums. A crane has dropped something heavy in the construction site across the road, the almighty crash sending men running and dust billowing skywards like smoke.

But his strained realisation that everything is OK, it's just builders, arrives too late. The damage is done and long, long after the noise has stopped ringing in his ears, shudders continue to echo their way down his spine. Shaving his nerves like a butcher hacking the limbs from a strung-up sow.

He is quivering with the excess energy of a soldier ready to run, but he's no longer a soldier and there is nowhere to go. If he doesn't run and find cover he'll die. Got to rage, shoot, kill, give it back to 'em, kill or be killed, those cockroaches. End them, for his country, so they can't get him, for Queen and Country, that's why. End them. For our way of life, end them, end them, win, win, beat them.

A flailing convulsion from his foot has upset his hat, kicked his coins rolling all over the pavement into the gutter. He rocks back and forth on his haunches, trying to channel the electricity that sears through his body, racks his frame. He's more than aware of how much of a mental patient he must look but unable to stay still, he can't begin to control it.

"Sorry." He rocks back and forth, the angry terror dwindles, gone as quickly as it had arrived, the trembling continues.

"Lunatic," somebody mutters.

"Sort yourself out, mate," another.

Most people don't even glance at him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." but everybody has moved on, scurried on with their lives as quick as they can.

He had tried working. Decorated war veterans are guaranteed work; they deserve it.

He had worked his way up from the bottom. He had been a leader of his regiment, he had guided men and women through both boredom and bombsites. Forward, they had followed him into the most lethal combat zone in Afghanistan: Korengal, 'Valley of Death' as it was dubbed. And back again, back from the mouth of hell as the famed poem goes. But as soon as he took that first step onto home soil, things were different. He had applied for every management role under the sun. Not enough qualifications. Too old.

Before long, honouring an age-old ex-army tradition, he fell into the security industry. Bouncer at a night-club, bits and bobs on the side, mostly killing time and looking imposing. He needed the money. But after he had laid out a couple of upstart kids, his contract was terminated and he was sent to see a shrink (didn't make the appointment).

His brother took him on as a labourer and he enjoyed the honest work, physical, being out in the sun. But his bad knee collapsed under him half-way through his third week. Finally, shamefully, he washed up as a cleaner-janitor-dogsbody at a community centre in Longheath. Demeaning, but he put his all into it, as was his habit; it wasn't particularly taxing. The local councillors who worked there brought him hot coffee every morning.

But the more he scrubbed at the same stains on the same bathroom floor each morning, the more it scraped away at his patience. Before he knew it, three years had hobbled by. Although he had spent more time in Afghanistan making sure his kit was pristine than shooting machine guns and blowing up buildings, this was nothing like life in the army, hardly life at all.

Mopping up and down corridors he found himself wishing he was back at the front, wishing he could feel so alive, so intensely intimate with death again. War is hell but hell is exciting. That first clack of 5.56mm M4 gunfire, there was nothing like it. As soon as bullets started kicking up fountains of dust, pockmarking the walls behind him, he forgot about everything else in the world. The sunburn, the chafing, the sweat, the sandpaper thirst of a patrol through the heat of midday, all was replaced by an incandescent rush of adrenaline. Every explosion, every round, every bellow was amplified, distilled. Five minutes felt like an hour, every second was experienced in heightened clarity.

And even surrounded by sensory overload, surreal, the throb of his heart, he had a purpose. A job had to be done and he was the one to do it. He had trained and he was prepared and even amidst the pandemonium he was focused. Didn't have to think about his next move, he could just watch himself do what was necessary and admire himself for doing it. He could rally the guys without a word, just a reassuring smile; and they relied on him.

Honestly, although most of the time he thought he did, he didn't fight for democracy, for nuclear disarmament, not even oil. He was never thinking about 'home', wanting to protect it or go back to it. Only the man who had his back and the man whose back he protected mattered. Only the men and women who he had spent the last 18 months sleeping, eating, training, joking with. Only the invisible figure who lurked somewhere in those shell-battered houses across the street and peppered bullets over their heads, past their ears. Only wanting to avoid getting killed and to kill, to kill in return. "Who's going home at the end of this, him or me?" was how he explained it to recruits; it boiled down to the most atavistic of contests.

Nothing, there was nothing like the scalp-tingling tension of meeting, for a split second, the eyes of another human being who

wants with every splinter of their soul to extinguish you. And instead extinguishing them, seeing the light flicker and die behind those eyes. A bullet to the head, quick, painless, a grenade, bleeding out, screaming, agony, silence.

He quit his cleaning job. Got kicked out of his flat. He didn't care, found it claustrophobic and he wasn't sleeping anyway. He'd spend hours staring at the ceiling, waiting for it to fall in on him. Nowadays, come sunset, he would return to his usual bench at the local park, the perfect spot to gaze up at the stars, sometimes even doze if he'd had a drink to force him under.

During the day, sitting on the pavement on a tattered sleeping bag he had traded for one of his service medals, he spent more and more time back in Helmand, in his head. He missed the war like a recovering junky misses his hit. He missed the excitement, he craved the brotherhood.

The expressionless faces that walked up and down the street and tried to ignore him weren't his brothers. They were part of a society of freedom, democracy, comfort, the end to which men strive. But they were not his family. In fact, he had begun to realize, he had nothing in common with them at all.

"You've got it easy, haven't you," he grins at a woman talking on her phone. He feels assured, in control, his shaking dampened. Because he sees it now: he is slimy synecdoche for the blood, the shit, the dirt, the sacrifice. Unpleasant to look at. He is the necessary shooting of a wide-eyed boy who they caught planting an IED. The mother of god-knows-how-many cut-down unnecessarily in the crossfire. Unpleasant to think about for those whose lives are built upon it.

"Don't be late for work," he jeers. The lady keeps on talking, walking.

"Can't face it? Keep walking, yeah that's it, keep walking," he salutes a commuter who is clutching a briefcase like somebody is trying to pry it from his fingers. "Keep on walking pal, walk away." The crack in his restraint widens and gapes and it feels good.

"I'm here, you can see me, you can't miss me," exalting now, "I'm in your sights." He peers down the scopes of his index finger and flexes his thumb to unleash an invisible bullet.

He isn't just another tramp, he's the trigger. He wields the collective guilty conscience of a people who don't have to worry about their children slipping away in search of martyrdom, stretching for a prospect of somewhere better and beyond. It hangs about him like a bad smell. A reek of urine and body odour from having nowhere to wash.

"You can't hide me, you can't hide me, I'm here, I'm here," he salutes again and again, thumping his chest with white-knuckled fists.

"Reporting for duty!" He waves energetically at a pensioner who has crossed the road to avoid passing him. Something is stirring in him, a brooding beast which for too long he has confined deep within his chest.

"I don't need money, I don't need you." He didn't need to sit at their feet and worship their charity.

*Si vis pacem, para bellum*, the motto engraved on his badge and carved deep into the flesh of his heart. 'If you want peace, prepare for war'. He had prepared for war, violently sculpted his character like a blacksmith hammering out armour; armour like a city under siege, impregnable yet utterly inescapable; inescapable like the darkness that vibrates everlastingly behind his eyes.

But peace, peace for him was a well-aimed RPG that just slightly lessened the chances of one of his friends not making it home at the end of their tour. Lt Karlson felt calmest hugging each and every member of his unit after they had made it out of a firefight unscathed. Wherever the action was, not back in landmineless London.

But now most of his friends had passed away—whether they made it home from their tours or not. No armistice for the army man, he was left terribly alone on a battlefield strewn with the dead.

A spark lights a fuse, detonation, a decision. Leaping to his feet, he starts striding in the direction of South Croydon station. Watch him, jaw set with the look of a man who finally has a job to do once again.

The only evidence of his stay: a dirty old sleeping bag and, leaning against the wall where he had left it, his cardboard banner standing like an epitaph. *I served my country*.