

New Fiction by Matthew James Jones: Excerpt from Predators, Reapers, and Deadlier Creatures



I'd been in Afghanistan for three months when I saw the woman in the marketplace die. Thirty or forty men haggled the price of fruit as she skirted a low stone wall in her burka, stomach swollen in late pregnancy. Our drone was hovering overhead, studying the Pattern of Life, when the woman triggered the bomb, which exploded in a white flash. The screen dimmed; we saw her legs had been severed, nearly at the hip.

Commotion: the men in the market scrambled to aid her, pouring water in her mouth, and we sent a helicopter, which landed in the marketplace a few minutes later. The men formed a protective circle around the dying woman. When the medics climbed from the chopper with their kits and stretchers, the villagers didn't let them get close.

Minutes passed. The medics arguing with the villagers as the woman's mouth stretched into a black '0' and blood seeped into the sand and we sipped coffee and cracked cruel jokes until she died.

And I didn't even want to go here, because you can't make sense of the stupid awful waste of it no matter how you try. But back then I hadn't yet grown wise; after my shift, I stumbled back to the barracks in the pre-dawn fog and sat on the steps outside in the rear of the building to be alone.

I heard a whimper. A muted cough.

Pulled a little sailor's flashlight from my pocket, spun around, and poked my head under the steps. A black cavity yawned—more than large enough for a person to crawl into the building's underbelly. I inched forward, flashlight piercing the darkness, and discovered the Bigfoot.

On closer inspection: this was not a military-issued Bigfoot. It had wormed its way into the corner beneath the shower room where the floor got soggy and sagged. Shining my little light up and down its hulking body, dozens of greasy frogs hopped deeper into darkness. The creature huddled next to a drainpipe, where marks in the fungi suggested it'd been slurping the nourishing scum.

At first I had no idea what I was seeing: a bulkish white man-shape snuffling in the dirt, enormous hands pressed over its brow like the light was a welding torch. Thick fur tufts, filthy and matted with sweat and frog oil. Some kind of tremendous gorilla-bear, eyes glittering with intelligence, whimpering and seeming to mouth language—what other word but Bigfoot applies?

The flashlight nearly slipped in my sweaty palm. A voice in my head told me to run, run far, sprint all the way back to Canada. Another voice said, get your pistol out, fool, and I complied, pulling my rusty 9mm from the holster, and flicking off the safety.

The creature, seated in the cellar's muck, peeked at me through its fingers, big pooling blue eyes, fuzzy eyebrows furrowing low, two great canine tusks jutting over a wolf-like muzzle. It grovelled: the saddest Bigfoot I'd ever seen, yet also the happiest, since it was my first.

I tried to keep my voice steady, but it cracked anyway. "Are you... with the Taliban?"

To my surprise, it responded in a twangy English with a voice deeper than a bear's. "Shit, man. I ain't with anythin' 'cept

a hundred frogs, and 'bout four thousand fleas."

"You're obviously not from around here." I was looking at his thick fur, orange and matted, with patches of white, freckled skin peeking out. Summer in Kandahar the heat rises halfway to boiling, and just a bit cooler at night. "How the hell did you get onto the base?"

The Bigfoot hung its heavy head and sighed. "Took a nap on the wrong plane." It picked at a few rags that clung to its shoulders, that might have once been a woolen scarf. "I'm havin' a pretty shitty day on top of a whole stack of other shitty days. I know ya gotta job to do, but please don't shoot me. Please." He closed his eyes, waiting for the bullet, and clasped his hairy-knuckled hands. "I know how I look but I never wanted to hurt nobody." His lower lip trembled.

It could not know that it was pleading for mercy from a drone operator. That in the last month, I had seen eleven people killed by missiles and bombs. I hadn't ordered any of the strikes, but I had facilitated each one by lining up assets and passing information. If I hadn't seen that woman die in the marketplace, I would have wasted the freak. But watching without being able to do anything had been the absolute worst feeling, like a fabric in the chest tearing. Here was a living creature who needed my help, and a chance to prove to myself I was still capable of a good deed.

I took a whole sleeve of Saltine crackers, which my mother had sent me in a morale box, and slid it, and two bottles of water, into the crack at the back of the barracks, where his eyes glittered in the dark.

I felt for him, the big bastard. He was hot in his pelt and chomping the heads off frogs. "Don't let anyone else hear you crying," I said. "I can't protect you. Avoid discovery. Preserve water."

The Bigfoot nodded its huge head in thanks.

I made a promise to tell this story, even if it hurts. There will be drone strikes, monsters, barbed wire, and forbidden love in bunkers. Once I was a giant but now I sit in the wake of strength with the cripples. I have taken innocent life and nearly destroyed myself in grief.

But the story starts with a kindness, and that matters.

Predators, Reapers, and Deadlier Creatures is available for purchase on [Amazon](#).

New Interview with Matthew James Jones

[Black and White Noah](#)

Predators, Reapers and Deadlier Creatures (PR&DC) is unafraid to be funny about serious subjects. Can you tell us some of the books that inspired you to write something as unsettling and wry as PR&DC? Or do you see it as a unique book in the history of military literature? Or is “military literature” even a genre of literature?

The humour of *PR&DC* has been one of the hardest things to pitch – the cover looks like a conventional war story; the back cover makes it sound like a surrealistic thriller. And it is those things. But it’s also a profoundly satirical book. All of the officer class is lampooned. I’m pretty sure the Colonels merge in a blur of light, transforming into a four-headed snake, which slithers up a vent. The pranks, the

teasing, the playful barbs: we had to make war funny to survive it. Naturally, the humour darkens until it feels like violence. Naturally, the laughing makes us ache and feel like grabbing a shower after. Naturally, this was a thing we all needed to undo when we got home, so that sacred things could become sacred again.

One of my inspirations here is *Slaughterhouse V*, where Vonnegut uses the device of “getting unstuck in time” to undermine the chronology. Once he even erases the war altogether, briefly. This makes perfect sense to me. Our psyches circle traumatic experiences like unflushable turds whirling. You’re figuring out which brand of smoked tofu you prefer when your body decides it’s back in the war, seizes up; everyone’s too close; you can club your way past six or seven civvies easy, using a jug of maple syrup for a mace, leap the checkout and dodge the police by scurrying up a tree. Right there in that hippie organic supermarket, your breathing has gone apeshit and your heart is hammering out of your chest. So yeah, trauma is your very own fucking time machine so why not put one into the story, in the interest of telling the truth?

Naturally, I could point to *Catch 22* as the classic military satire, again with its loops and loops. The bureaucracy forever pushing the yardsticks back. There’s one scene in PR&DC, an interrogation, which is basically an homage to *Catch 22*, though I don’t have the patience to circle around so much as Heller circled, and I inverted the logic: the main character Yossarian doesn’t want to embark on another bombing run since he wants to be free of the fear of death. Jones, in my book, fears death (the rocket attacks, the Taser Rapist, the Shit Beast) but not as much as he fears killing. Both Yossarian and Jones are pulled inexorably into deeper complicity with the war, and so lose their agency to the bureaucratic mechanisms that give the war its shape.

All that to say PR&DC is part of a longer humanist conversation about war, which will and must continue so long

as war distorts us. So, forever.

PR&DC is uncannily prescient when it comes to our current fitness moment, to somehow appreciate its outsize role on military installations and Global War on Terror (GWOT) culture. What role do you see physical fitness playing in this novel? How does this connect to your own experiences with mental health?

On one hand there's the Army conditioning, exemplified by the "Herculean abs" of the General himself, who promotes fitness as the means to better, saner, stronger soldiers, who can work longer hours, with worse food and less sleep. Others train to boost personal power, dominate others, never feel like a victim again. Another lifts because he feels like his head is cracking apart, to numb and exhaust the body, to sleep without dreams. There's a lot of moving pieces in war – a lot of force flowing. The civilians and soldiers both get swept up into the momentum, become part of the mechanism, or its output. So we train to feel in control of *something* even if our dominion extends no farther than our grasp. One problem with the War On Terror is we often felt we were fighting shadows. No wonder we needed to lift literal concrete.

Ask my comrades who killed themselves how inextricable fitness is from mental health. It still isn't enough, naturally, but even the most testosterone-poisoned soldier, girded with fantasies of invincibility, permits himself to train the body. Meanwhile he scoffs imperiously at therapy, believing the mind is the only muscle born strong. Nagging feelings follow after the war – he drinks. To avoid his rages, his wife takes the kids away. Alone, he drinks harder – life becomes a wheel of grinding mirrors. He takes a long long bath and stuffs the shotgun in his mouth.

In a distant forest, we hear the recoil of our comrade's death – birds leap from their branches. So I started to train with

the fallen logs. No matter the cascade of bark chips and centipedes. Lunge and circle the maple with a knobby trunk on the shoulder – squat a stump. I lined the logs up side by side like fallen soldiers. Other veterans started to join me on these workouts, and so the log gym was born, a shrine.

Why do you think so much military fiction tends to be strictly realistic or tend toward realism?

Because military service prunes creativity. That explains why my students at the École Militaire are trying to develop it so hard – a necessary skill for high leadership, but scandalous for underlings. If the purpose of art is to create emotions, than who is less qualified than the soldier, whose culture demands swift emotional amputation, often self-administered? They worked hard to make us machines. The problem is it doesn't always take, or the life force cracks the sidewalk, like a stubborn flower. This is why the war-poet is a rare thing: the soldier who insisted on remaining whole.

I can expand further: you can describe horrors in detail but only the ones who've also seen horrors know how it feels. Naturally, in describing the emotions too obviously the writing gets heavy-handed, showing. If you want to tell a story with larger-than-life emotions, than you may have to break the rules. And how boring, anyway, to create a world entirely from your mind, like a book, and bind yourself in the same constraints as our tedious earth. Imagination is for breaking cages. That's one of the ways we took ourselves out of the war, by living it half in our heads. So, in my book I wanted the reader to be always wondering, "is this the real part or made up?"

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You remember that scene in *Full Metal Jacket* where the soldiers, so callously, dress up (and even name) one of the

fallen enemies? Soldiers often engage in this type of macabre puppetry, yet the war-writer wants to work with a bit more respect and self-awareness than this. All this realism makes things feel more solemn, more like Hemingway. But soldiers aren't solemn.

The current American vice president dismissed the role of other, non-U.S. countries in GWOT. The current American president dismisses Canada as a sovereign nation. How do you see PR&DC as part of this conversation? Or do you?

Once upon a time, America was the light. You intervened all over the world and stood against dictators, mashed democracy down throats because, ironically, freedom mattered. We forgave you that part of the American dream where you all wanted to be idiot billionaires who lived without consequence – there's always someone else to blame. Now I slap anyone who cracks a 51st state joke. Nobody's fucking laughing. My people went to war when the planes struck the towers and America called on us. I fought alongside my American brothers in Afghanistan – fully integrated into an international force. I sent helicopters to pick up your wounded.

The news never reached Vance that other countries fought in your wars, despite [the fucking Wikipedia article](#). Or pick up [a copy of my book](#) if you want to feel it. Make America Curious Again – you can start by learning who lost legs when those roadside bombs burst. How we lost friends and it cracked our minds like overpriced eggs. How, when we watered the desert with our blood for more than ten years, we killed for you over and over. And we died again and again.

America has suffered history's greatest con – only the idiot billionaires will escape consequence – the rest will pay the price. The meeting with President Zelensky showed the world

that Trump is Putin's ass-puppet. Only the dimmest refuse to see this. Meanwhile, that great light that once lit the world has guttered.

I know American veterans still cling to honour. The world sorely needs your leadership to overthrow your ludicrous pirate-king, who so gleefully sold your country to Russia. Meanwhile, the idiot-billionaire class divvies the spoils, and, in a climax of irony, calls the working people "parasites."

Ask any Canadian, particularly the veterans who fought in your wars, how they feel.

It's quite simple. You betrayed us.

I especially enjoyed how PR&DC captures the sense that we already know what is going to happen in a war story, but knowledge of the event beforehand doesn't make it any less surprising. It also is stuck on one of the central facts of war: We kill people in them. Why do you think this is difficult for people to get their head around? What does it say about people? Should we celebrate our willful ignorance or condemn it?

Yes, the killing isn't the surprise. It's what happens after the killing, when the killed don't stay properly dead. We developed all these tools so that we wouldn't feel the grief: they weren't even humans, just blurry, pixelated blobs. So sure, foreshadow is one of the tricks up the sleeve, but I wanted a proper haunting, rainbow handkerchiefs for miles, a ghost that plagues the story and the point of telling. The killing isn't the surprise at all. The grief is the surprise.

I remember when I came back from Afghanistan and went back to school for my MA. Many of my colleagues in peaceful Ottawa questioned my service, like there was no way military service

of any sort could be honourable, even to aid a then-staunch ally. "What's the point of having a military?" they wondered. "The US will protect us." Some bleated that they believed in peace. I shake my head – no one wants peace harder than a soldier.

Now our old protector is gone and Canada eats the bitter pill of its own weakness. I personally don't believe in war but I went to make tough choices that only a feeling human could navigate, not a killbot. After, I helped create training modules for officers on the ethics of drone war.

Certainly, wars for oil or precious minerals are an abomination of morality. Afghanistan, though? After 9/11, overthrowing the (ruthless, backward) Taliban for sheltering Al-Qaeda was justified. Only after a year or two in the war did things start to get fucked up, when the war became a bizarre act of post-colonial nation-building. We should have left that place long ago. Or stayed forever.

All that to say, keeping your hands clean in life is a tremendous privilege. Everyone who has a problem with my service can go fuck his hat.

We noticed a lot of word play and fascination with naming throughout. Can you expand on the importance of nick names and naming in art and the military? Why did you choose to include boxes that include the definitions of words not usually defined in military manuals?

The book functions as a sort of geometric proof on the theme of dehumanization. So when the narrator meets Noah, the "monster," the steps towards shared humanity are small: first, gender. Second, name. Third, an exchange of stories. And so forth, in little nibbles, until Jones must accept Noah's humanity (and indeed, friendship).

The honourable Major, concerned that killing is becoming “too easy,” insists that all “targets” be given human names. At the beginning, the name-game achieves its purpose, with semi-plausible names chosen for the drone-strike victims. But soon these names devolve into the names of famous betrayers, and eventually, in the hyper-sexualized language of the killing, the targets are all given “fuckable” names, like pornstars.

Your pirate king, Putin’s ass-puppet, plays the name-game very well. He knows the power of the cruel, undermining nickname, or the facetious sub-title, savage soundbytes. The bully’s oldest trick: these names plant seeds in people’s minds.

You may also notice the fun I have with my own name. For the last decade, this shitty, ubiquitous name has done me no favours getting traction as a writer. Indeed, it’s hard to compete on Google with Matt Jones, NFL quarterback or Matt Jones, cancer researcher or Matt Jones, homicidal madman. So I had to own it, in the book – my common-ass name becomes a way for me to speak for an experience beyond myself. We are everyone. We are legion.

I enjoyed writing those little flash-fiction boxes, allowing me to unpack complex issues like “rules of engagement” or “escalation of force” for a civilian reader in a way that appeared, visually, bureaucratic, like a military memo. I also appreciate that my readers, like me, have an attention span of twelve seconds so those formal interruptions give the mind a pause, and allow me to dodge a boring info-dump. Finally, this also became a place I could subvert – the boxes, through edits, became wildly poetic spaces, sometimes confessional, meta-narrative critiques, and/or zones of play.

Monsters play a large role in PR&DC, different kinds of monsters, robotic, human, and monster monsters. Where

did this interest in the monstrous come from? Do you see it as an allegory or as part of a certain literary tradition? Why Sasquatch?

I think it's a bit too tidy to reduce my Sasquatch to an allegory or hallucination – Noah needs to be all these things and also more. One of my most enjoyable games I played writing this book was to prolong this debate as long as possible: is he real?

The funny thing is – none of the characters in books are real. I made everyone up; even the Jones character is a composite of better, gentler humans, with a slice of a younger Matt thrown in. I took the Major's beauty from a friend who killed herself; her drive from a soldier I admired; her ethics from another officer. Literally every character in every novel is a word-puppet dancing on sentence strings, so let's not get it twisted.

The danger of a non-human character is naturally that it will break the suspension of disbelief and readers will pop out of the book with sour looks on their faces like they smelled a fart. I say, if you want to write a character that doesn't seem real you have to double, nay triple, your efforts to make them real. Noah has a voice, a history, a mythology, a minutely described body.

And indeed, without him, it would just be a grizzly war story with scene after scene of heartbreaking ultraviolence. It's not the kind of book I'd like to read and I doubt I would have survived writing it. I wrote Noah to tell the story honestly. I wrote Noah because he's real.

Hold onto your asses: Jung writes about "the shadow" as the part of our own psyche that we frantically repress. So, as dudes we might repress our weakness or our cowardice or our kinks, or anything else culture said was wrong. Our efforts to hide our terrible qualities backfire; the things we flushed into the poo pond resurface; Guantanamo Bay lurks just over

the horizon.

You might say the post-colonial legacy is a shadow of America. You might say Canada's is a smug, sanctimonious pacifism. You might say the fact they got conned is a shadow of MAGA. Noah takes it one step further – his shadow threatens to overwhelm him constantly, but this is simply life. That is me writing this and you reading this. Individual level but also our nations and institutions.

It's the denial of the shadow that fucks us up. It's the successful integration that indicates we've grown wise and let me argue this is the challenge of veterans everywhere. Our massive shadows, that deep world-weariness, the cynicism, the black humour, the contempt for softness: it's nearly impossible to integrate. That's why coming home is so hard.

The deployment no-fraternization policy plays a large role in PR&DC. So does sex. Why have there been so few military books concerned with sex? Or willing to talk about it in the honest ways that PR&DC does?

"Killing was quotidian, but touch was taboo." Killing was right and just and true, something that "made a difference." Meanwhile, even married couples, deployed together, were expected to maintain professional distance, Kevlar chastity belts. Not even allowed to soothe each other.

Science says monkeys fed from bottles dangling from wire frames will always prefer the metal skeleton wrapped in fur over bare steel. History says every time we dam the life-impulse it explodes into something nastier – the chastity of some infamous Catholic priests.

When I wrote PR&DC, it was under the working title "Drones." On one hand, yeah, I was nodding to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. On the other, it was to us – the humans – who weren't actually

bees or ants in a hive, not controlled by the hive queen's megamind. A drone follows orders; a soldier, often, doesn't. A drone can kill without grief; a soldier, can't.

Military culture strives to silence those empathy-producing nodes in our minds that inhibit the killing. A human being is more than a bundle of memorized processes that make murder easy. We are more than complex weapons, speaking in a sanitized language, feeling nothing. That's how lovemaking became a radical act. How it became sacred.

PR&DC makes use of glossaries and helpfully defines military terms throughout, but also seems to be caught on an essential failure to communicate on the part of all the characters, maybe starting with the drones themselves. Everyone often feels very lonely even though they are together all the time. Why? How come many veterans tend to remember deployments as moments when they were not lonely?

Some soldiers can't get enough of war. They keep running back to it, like a rat to electrified cheese. Perhaps because the civilian world is constantly screaming at soldiers to expose their emotional worlds, and by the time the soldier has a tour or two under his belt there's a whole iceberg of pain under the surface. But one can continue to incubate in the cocoon of the war, surrounded by other numbed-out dudes, and so feel nothing forever. Or this is the fantasy, until the soldier's personal life finally intrudes on his working life, the family stands in for the shadow, embodying the repressed parts of self, and spills into the waking world.

Or I'm projecting the loneliness thing. Maybe I was lonely in war because I was an empath who got lost, took the wrong plane, and ended up on Afghanistan by mistake. So naturally, being surrounded by shut-down humans is lonely. Or maybe I was lonely in war because I spent most of my twenties physically

enormous and so loneliness is a wound I carry everywhere. Or blame the no-fraternization policy and the way we starved for touch for no reason. The walls they set up between us. Or maybe I worked the night shift, so the day-worker infrastructure didn't accommodate. Or maybe the most acceptable pastimes – video games, drinking, gambling, porn – are profoundly numbing and disconnecting.

I always feel stupid saying “trigger warning” as I promote this book, since there's a freakin' drone on the cover, but there is also non-sacred sex: a brutal predator who preys on men. There's one character who seems to go willingly into this situation, showing up a certain place and time, Stockholm syndrome. That probably seems impossible until you take a good look at America as the idiot billionaires busily dismantle the protections for the working class. I saw on the news last week they shut down the Department of Education. Because the stupefaction of the people was only mostly complete, so I guess you needed a little shove. The MAGAs are right on the cusp now of realizing they've been duped, but look how they cum so obligingly, and beg for a second and then a third round, and shout down anyone who tries to intervene in their ongoing rape.

Did I mention Canada has no interest in joining your idiocracy?

I too have been haunted by the image of blurry bodies running away from our drones on Tactical Operation Centre (TOC) screens. Thank you for having the courage to see through this story of one person on the far side of the screen. It couldn't have been easy to write something as human and delightfully strange as PR&DC after a deployment experience you yourself describe as “an empty lake with jagged edges where nothing grows.”

Do you have any words of advice for any writers just starting out on this journey? Whether back from a war long ago or at the front line (or screen) of one right now?

For veterans who want to write: any new craft takes seven years for mastery – there are no shortcuts. I don't give two shits if your Commanding Officer praised your Progress Evaluation Reports, or your boss gave you a hundred attaboys for your incisive memos. Attend workshops ([mine is monthly, international, by-donation](#)) and read books on craft. Bounce your ideas off other writers and take their feedback. Go back to school. Read every book in your genre. Stop flexing in the mirror and try to look yourself in the eyes. Maybe you keep sliding away from yourself. Maybe along the path you became an emotional cripple, too. Water your withered wit with therapy, meditation, time in nature.

The goal, at some point, is to transition from being a veteran who writes, into a writer who veterans. Somewhere along the path you'll find that writing, like any form of creativity, is one of the paths to protect and foster your mental health, too. You'll get so used to working through the knots in your mind that when you finally sack up and sit in front of the therapist, you'll chunder a spray of trauma, half-digested hotdog, and pure healing. I used that last oxford comma because I'm still pissed off at America.

You don't go into war with just a grenade, or just a sniper rifle – you want the best tool for the situation. Grammar is the same. Read "Eats Shoots and Leaves" and master the whole grammar toolbox; thank me after. Stab yourself in the leg with a ballpoint pen whenever you stumble into a comma splice, or let a lazy double hyphen replace a dash. When you read a book let a part of your mind hang loose, watching, observing, noting, and carefully stealing twigs. Soon you will discover all of life is a book and a sneaky magpie within builds a nest.

I mentioned Noah, in PR&DC, is the only character who's real. He's also one of the main storytellers. Finally, he suffers enough and gives up the craft. He throws a soggy, severed arm at the narrator and growls: "Stories don't bring people back to life."

If you've lost some friends to war or suicide or whatever else, let me repeat that it doesn't matter how good you get in craft – those friends are gone. "But I just want to see them one more time," you say. Fine, do whatever the fuck you want. I know from experience you'll be lonelier after. Maybe you gotta dig your friend up a few hundred times and bury them over and over to accept they're gone. Maybe you need to make a shrine like I did.

Don't let your writing give you an excuse not to heal. Stories don't bring people back to life.

Predators, Reapers, and Deadlier Creatures is available for purchase on [Amazon](#).



New Fiction from Matt Jones: "The Fisherman"



"You coming to work, New Guy?" Sailor asks, and I snarl at my nickname. Dude gives me the creeps—somehow they stuffed a

three-hundred-pound bear who never blinks into a uniform. When the plane landed in Kandahar last night a sergeant with bagpipe lungs paired us off. New blood was teamed with guys who'd been here for a while—I got saddled with Sailor. Ain't no way some Navy goof is gonna push me around, even this missing-link motherfucker whose voice rumbles like grenade day on the range.

We leave the barracks and the Afghan sun kicks me square in the coin purse. Next thing I notice is the stink. Like when your little brother drops a deuce under your bed and, reaching for a sock, you grab it by mistake. "Hey Sailor," I say, "Does it always reek like this?"

"Yep." Deadpan. "Civilians wisely bury their shit to keep the stink at bay. Here in Kandahar we pool it in the poo pond. During hot days the shit heats up and particles attach to the dust. That's why you can taste it." Sailor leads me down the maze-like streets of the base, where twelve-foot concrete barriers offer a little shade. On top of each, coils of barbed wire scrawl like signatures. In fact, all I can see is concrete barriers and kill-wire, the world's largest rat maze. Not some lifeless anti-oasis: there are troops everywhere with assault rifles. I snicker at a dead bird getting torn apart by ants like a bitch.

He's right about the dust, goddamnit. Fucking everywhere. Within minutes of trudging through it, I could taste the poo pond and feel stones form in my nose. Next there's this wicked-loud sound from behind—European police sirens wailing or how the fuck should I know? Sailor grabs my shoulder with a beefy mitt and we're both face down in the ass-dust. "Rockets," he hisses. The alarm eases into a snobby British voice of God going, ROCKET ATTACK, ROCKET ATTACK. Holy fuck, man. I'm not going to say I'm scared or anything—last summer after Phase Three of infantry training (HUA) I got jumped by four bikers and broke their faces with a pool cue, fearless. Still, having someone shoot missiles at my ass made my palms a

little sweaty, ya know? But then there's this huge WOOF except the dog is loud as six dragons. Gravel rains all over us. Alright, fine—now I'm scared shitless. Meanwhile, Sailor has hauled me on top of the friendly Afghan cactus, whose hook-like barbs itch for human skin. "Wait another minute, and then we move to that bunker," Sailor rumbles, pointing with his never-blinking eyes to a concrete structure across the street.

"How am I gonna wank with my hands full of thorns?" Pretty sure I sounded tough despite my little squeak at the end. Sailor doesn't say shit anyway—we hustle toward the bunker. I've got that feeling another rocket's gonna burst before we get there and fill my guts with shrapnel. WOOF WOOF WOOF go the dragons.

Sailor flops against the concrete. "We'll wait here until the siren sounds again, New Guy." I'm not a big fan of taking orders from some cumguzzler—Sailor doesn't give a fuck about my murder-gaze, and he seems to not get that I'm infantry, and Army, and therefore better. Sitting in the dirt, he rests his feet on the opposite wall and shuts his eyes. Sailor doesn't look scared, but man, he's about as tired as a Dad with forty-eight kids. I'm feeling safer since the bunker's got these thick-ass walls—we're talking three-foot-thick concrete. Almost underground except you can still see some sky through slits. Cloudless. Piercing. Blue.

Sailor catches my eye. "The Taliban pay locals to launch cheap rockets bought from the Russians. Fuck-all for accuracy, but as the base is big, there's a chance that someone will hit the death-lottery and blow up a mess hall." Dry laugh. "I don't even blame them. The locals, I mean. Someone offers you more money than you make in a year to fire a few rockets at foreign devils? I'd take that deal too." Sailor trails off and stares at that little patch of sky and the silence stretches. I'm thinking, fuck this guy.

"Sailor, you got a perverted way of looking at the Enemy.

We're talking terrorists and suicide bombers, right? Osama Bin Ladens? Fanatics who want to make an orphanage for your kids? I'm supposed to feel bad for psychos just because they're poor? Listen, Navy, someone shoots a rocket at me they deserve to bleed out slow." Sailor snorts. He looks like he's gonna say something and maybe he'll confirm that I'm the shit or maybe I'll need to buttstroke the fucker, but that siren blares again and the British asshole is saying ALL CLEAR.

We pile from the bunker and start heading toward the mess. Sailor says, "When we get to work later I'll introduce you to a friend of mine. He's called the Fisherman." He stares through me again. Oh great. This Fisherman sounds like another goddamn Navy guy, another silverback pillow-biter dreaming of ways to touch my junk.

The mess is colored with the same shit-paint as every other building. Sailor flourishes his ID to a raghead behind a counter. It's like other messes I've been in back in Canada except there's a hundred people here and no laughter. Sailor wanders to a depleted salad bar and scoops cucumbers. No wonder he's grumpy—no fucking protein. I order the meatloaf, like a man, from a wizened dude behind a counter. Gandalf arches an eyebrow suspiciously, arms himself with a plastic glove, and tenderly places the loaf on the plate like it might explode. Not gonna lie, I've eaten some humble loaves in my day but that one could have moonlighted as the lung from the cigarette package. In the Army you choke down some weird shit and keep it down. I sit with Sailor and hack the rubbery mass with my plastic knife until it breaks at the hilt and Sailor hands me a spare. Finally get a chunk to my mouth. Never French kissed a corpse before but now I don't need to: "Just add Tabasco," I say, smiling.

After the meal we trudge down a street with big fuck-off tanks and trucks driving past. Tanks look different back home. These ones have sharp angles on the bottom and the turrets are belted with rebar. Distracted from the bubbles frothing up

from the poo pond, and imagining what a swim would feel like on my naked skin, I lose situational awareness and follow Sailor blindly. Not that I'd ever admit it to him. I gotta get me a map of this place, man. There's no fucking street signs or anything. I could get lost as balls and end up devoured by ants.

Pretty soon we reach a twenty-foot-tall gate with razor wire looping along the top. Sailor teaches me the door code and we enter the Canadian compound. I plug a nostril and fire a rock out of the other, and it ricochets off a second door with a separate combo. Inside, air conditioning. "Welcome to the Operations Centre, New Guy." Sailor gestures at the room as if he's pulling the curtain off a shitty masterpiece.

But what a fucking dump, man! There's a couple of long tables covered with computers and wires which have a dozen grim-eyed dudes plugging away. At the far end of the room two large screens have words scrolling down them. Facebook chat for murder. There's also a big television showing the news. Everything's made out of knotty plywood, the cheap shit, except the computers and a well-stained coffee pot. "Time to meet the Fisherman," Sailor says, guiding me to one of the screens at the front. No one looks up. "One of the things we do here is use drones to fire missiles at people putting bombs in the road. We watch them through our many screens, and when we catch them in a hostile act, we strike."

"That's what I'm talking about!" I say. "No fucking hidin' in a bunker for me—reach out and destroy the Enemy." I've heard about these videos: drone porn. This righteousness has spread all over the internet—assholes getting blown to bits. Sailor nods to someone and the video starts to play.

The screen shimmers into place over a dusty dirt road, lined with little ditches cracked with crotch rot. There's this towelhead on the road, wearing pyjamas. He's maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. The screen is gritty and the resolution

sucks balls. Still, no cars, no humans, not even a fucking sheep, and the asshole is digging, no matter the afternoon sun.

“You killed this prick, right?” I ask Sailor.

He looks at me and for a second he’s a big fuckoff owl and I’m a mouse. He says, “We’d been tracking The Fisherman for a while, trying to make sure he was actually planting a bomb instead of working on the *wadis*. But here you can see a spool of wire and he’s connecting the wire to something in the hole he’s dug. We had the drones on site.”

As I’m watching the towelhead working on his bomb, the screen lights up in this flash. “Take that, you fucking raghead!” I cackle. There’s a big cloud of dust where the missile struck next to the dude. I’m surprised more people aren’t cheering. Killing towelheads gives me righteous wood, you know?

I figured he’d be evaporated, pink mist—get the mop—but no. When the dust clears the towelhead is on his knees and his turban is bobbing up and down like he’s praying. Wouldn’t it be a shame if the raghead pulled through? Maybe the missile missed? As the drone circles, the camera angle changes. I start thinking maybe he’s not praying after all. From the side, he looks like he’s fishing for something. Like he’s reeling in a bigass fish and he’s working his balls off to get that sucker in the boat.

I’m still trying to figure out what’s happening when Sailor says, “Praying and fishing, New Guy. Praying and fishing. My parents were born in Newfoundland in a little coastal village. Praying and fishing were all they had.” I see that the Fisherman’s not reeling in a fishing line at all. He’s got his guts smashed open, man. He’s got guts snaked out all over the fucking place. He’s just trying to piece himself together, grabbing handfuls of intestines and cramming them back inside. I can’t hear anything since we’re watching through a drone but

the Fisherman's got his mouth open in this noiseless scream. The meatloaf backflips in my stomach.

"New Guy, this is a Battle Damage Assessment, or BDA. We conduct a BDA after every strike to watch for a mob forming, to make sure the dropped weapons aren't reclaimed, and to make sure the dead are truly dead." The Fisherman writhes. He's attracted a big swarm of flies, glittering grey pixels, trying to lay eggs inside him. He's still cramming in his guts, but he's losing speed. There's so much fucking dirt and dust on his insides that there's no way he's gonna make it. "Normally when we strike and the victim is this injured we'd send a helicopter and get him to a hospital. But some zones are too dangerous, protected by RPG."

We watch in silence. The Fisherman is still going. He's getting slower and weaker, but he's hanging in there. I get this awful feeling. My chest is made of cloth and it's tearing. Some fabric I didn't know I had, ripping apart slowly. You don't know you have it until it tears.

Fuck this, man. Just gotta find the numb place. Just gotta get warm and comfortable and numb. I look over at Sailor and his face is as hard and cold and lonely as a mountain. I guess after a year of this shit, there ain't no fabric left. Just rubble.

I don't want to admit watching a towelhead snuff it bothers me, but after fifteen minutes I blurt, "Alright, Sailor, thanks. I fucking get it. It's awful, alright? How long are we gonna watch this guy die, you sick asshole?"

Sailor fixes me with a stare. "This isn't a television program where you can just change the channel. You talked shit earlier about how the Enemy deserves to be killed, and how the Enemy doesn't deserve our sympathy. Well here's something you don't learn in your training. The skin colour is different but the guts are the same, aren't they?" Now that Sailor has mentioned

the guts I'm taking a closer look and they do look grey and slimy, even through the drone feed. The Fisherman is still twitching and I'm begging, actually begging in my head, *Die, man. Just die already, alright?*

I'm sure he only has a few twitches left when Sailor goes on, "Lot of people back home will want to know what Afghanistan is all about but you can't explain the Fisherman to anybody. You just carry him wherever you go." And as Sailor says this a dozen human shapes scurry down the road—I'm sure they're scorching in those burkas. As they come closer I pick up details, you know? Like a few are wringing the shit out of their hands, a few have baskets and they're collecting parts. One woman gets right next to the Fisherman and takes his hand and you can see her wailing wailing wailing. I think of my own mother back home and how she'd feel watching me die like this and that cloth in my chest tears from shoulder to waist.

Sailor's voice is soft. "When you strike, you don't just wound a person. You wound a whole community. Just because your job is to drop bombs on people doesn't mean you have to be a monster." He goes quiet and I see his eyes shut down and he's a mountain again.

Fuck this shit, man. Killing from an office? Killing with compassion? I didn't train for this—I trained to be a warrior. Give me a C7 rifle and send me out past the barbed wire. I wanna be in the shit, with the other killers. I wanna sleep on a big pile of dead Afghans at night...

Movement on the screen: the Fisherman is still alive. He's sprawled all over the grass with blood bubbles popping out. His lips are moving like he's whispering to his mother. I catch myself leaning towards the screen, trying to listen, hoping he'll say whatever he's gotta say and then he'll finally slump down dead.

But the Fisherman will live forever.