

—IMMORTAL REMAINS

by Tom Pendergrass

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.*
-Rudyard Kipling

There were only three now. They had been as far as the passes that led to the fertile plains of the Indus River which washed to the great ocean beyond. They had seen that it was a land ripe for conquest and had been excited to bring the good news to Alexander and his generals. But the way back had been tortuous, with armed tribesmen hiding in the rocks and lightning rains which brought mudslides, killing half the men. And now the great eastern passes were blocked by snow. Alexander's army would go no further this winter.

They had traded their horses for mountain ponies weeks ago, and now they and their mounts were near starvation, only the fear of certain death kept them moving. They had wandered in the high mountain passes for weeks. Polybius, their commander, knew they would die, their bones left to bleach far from the fair green hills of Macedonia.

"Look," one of the men called. He stood atop the ridge they had been climbing most of the morning.

Polybius spurred his pony and forced the poor beast to trot to the ridgeline. Below him, a narrow valley was carved from the snow-brushed peaks. A stream ran through the middle, and he could see green fields and farms below. And in the middle was a whitewashed village as neat and welcoming as any in Hellas.

"I hope the natives are friendly," Polybius told the men. "And even if they aren't," he added silently, "a quick death in battle will be better than freezing slowly."

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The valley lay beneath them green in its splendor. The Humvees of Recon One sat at the edge of the granite cliffs, their engines idling. 1st Lieutenant Logan and Gunnery Sergeant Martinez stared at the map spread on the hood of the trailing Hummer. Logan took off his helmet and scratched his head.

"It's not on the map," Gunny Martinez said.

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“I can see that.” Logan cursed the clueless cartographers at the Pentagon. How did they expect to find the enemy if they couldn’t find a whole damn valley?

“G-2 says that the hajjis came this way.” Gunny Martinez used the Army slang for al-Qaida fighters. “They probably found the valley too.”

The men looked at the near-vertical sides of the valley. A footpath was carved into the face of the wall and snaked down into the verdant gorge.

“A mule may be able to go down there,” Martinez said, “but not a Hummer.”

Logan looked through his field glasses into the village. It was clean and tidy, not like the other Afghan villages they had rolled through where livestock and human waste choked the streets. There was no sign of activity below, not even the smoke of cooking fires. Fear knotted his stomach.

“I don’t like it,” Logan said. “It’s a perfect place for an ambush.”

“You think the hajjis are down there?”

“That’s my hunch. We’ll need to flush them out.” Logan scanned the village again with his binoculars for any signs of life.

“Gunny, pick two men. I’m going down to scout it out.” Lieutenant Logan tried to swallow but his throat was dry and scratchy. “Stay here with the Hummers.”

“Are you sure, sir?” Gunny asked.

“No choice. Usama himself could be down there for all I know. I’ll maintain constant radio contact. Alert the Combat Air Patrol that we may need close support. If I’m not back by tomorrow I want you to hold tight and call for reinforcements.” He looked Martinez hard in the eye. “No matter what happens, you are not to go down there without my signal. Understand?”

Gunny Martinez pressed his lips together so tight they turned white. He reached out and grasped the Lieutenant’s shoulder.

“Yes sir,” he said. “Hatton, Monroe! Suit up, you’re going with the Lieutenant.” Martinez turned back to his officer and said quietly enough that the men couldn’t hear, “good luck.”

The track was only wide enough for the men to go down single file. Hatton led them, scanning the ground for tripwires as he went. The Americans picked their way carefully down the footpath, taking nearly four hours to reach the bottom. There had been no sign of booby traps on the way down.

“We’re on the valley floor,” Logan called over his walkie-talkie to the sergeant two thousand feet above. “It’s at least twenty degrees warmer here.”

Logan looked around. The trees were in full leaf and grass grew waist tall along either side of the hard dirt trail. Grapes grew on arbors along the path, hanging blue and heavy. The buzz of bees and fragrance of fruit filled the air.

The Lieutenant called his men together in the shelter of the tall grass.

“Monroe, you go left and Hatton right. Encircle the village and keep your eyes open for snipers. Stay low and out of sight in the grass. I’m going to walk down the path. If you hear any shots get out of here quick.”

Monroe and Hatton nodded and did as they were told. Within minutes they had disappeared into the grass, their camouflage blending into the gold and green stalks until they were completely invisible. Logan patted his flak jacket to reassure himself. Hopefully if the hajjis were in the village they wouldn’t have heavy weapons.

Logan held his M-16 at the ready and walked down the path. His heart was