

New Fiction from Cameron Manning: "Glory Chasers"

May 3, 2009

After Captain Short returned from his training with the Australians, he scheduled himself to take leave the following week, which meant he'd be gone all of May. While I waited for him to go, I didn't do shit except play Axis and Allies with the guys and cook for everyone.

Until this morning, that is. At about oh-three-hundred, I jumped out of my bed to the sound of gunfire and a helicopter. When I ran outside, I found Sargent Doran and a few of the soldiers peering over our northern Hesco barriers through their Nods. The noise was coming from Shahr-e Safa, and I darted to the Tracker in my truck to see if there were any blue icons on the screen. There weren't.

Short came over to me, dazed and confused. "What's going on, Lieutenant?"

"I think it's the Colors," I said without hiding the enthusiasm in my voice. If I was right, this was exactly what we needed. No use in relying on a mismatched team of weekend warriors to exterminate the enemy when we could depend on the most elite fighting units ever developed. Maybe the Colors had caught some Taliban traveling through Shahr-e Safa. More dead Taliban meant a securer Jaldak. If Taliban were staying over in Shahr-e-Safa, maybe the Colors could also tell us who was hosting them—or being *forced* to host them. I called Zabul Base, but they didn't know what was going on.

While our soldiers geared up and started the engines, Zabul called back a few minutes later and told us to stand down. Thirty minutes later, I got a message confirming it was the Colors, and I asked for more information on the nature of

their mission and who they'd engaged—maybe they killed the Dad—but they had nothing else to share. I called Dickson later in the morning, but he said he didn't know about any operation in my area either.

Around oh-eight-hundred, our mixed patrol of Cobra soldiers and Jaldak police walked into Shahr-e Safa and up the beaten path to the top of the hill. Instead of running up to us asking for candy, the children avoided us this time, and the ones who came out of their huts were crying.

"What happened?" I asked a cop.

Rocky translated. "He says the U.S. came in helicopters and murdered six men from the village last night."

"Murdered?" I said.

"Martyred," he said, before immediately correcting himself again. "They were *killed* when the U.S. broke into the compounds of the men and shot them."

"The men they killed lived here?"

"Yes, sir."

"They lived here?"

He confirmed again with the cop. "Yes, sir. They lived here with their families. They were part of the Dad's team."

What the fuck? "Where's Ghani?" I scanned the crowd and the mud huts looking for the man we'd so often relied on to provide us with Taliban intel—nowhere.

"Sir, this is very bad," Rocky said. "An Afghan's home is his sanctuary. It's a terrible message you're sending to the people here. You need to tell your people to stop raiding homes at night and killing villagers."

Un-fucking-believable. We've been living next door to six

Taliban families this whole time.

On our way up the hill, two women burst out of a nearby hut and ran over to us, with crying children following after them. They tore the heads of their burqas off and began screaming and yelling. Two of the cops stood between them and us, and Short kept walking forward. I drifted toward the women, though. One was old—a mother of the dead, I assumed—and the other was younger than me. The old one shouted and wailed at the cops and me, wagging her finger as tears ran down her face. I didn't need to speak Pashto to understand the vulgarity streaming out of her mouth. And then she stopped to spit on me. It hit my forehead and began rolling down my cheek, and I wiped it off with my sleeve and headed back toward the front of the patrol.



My stomach ached as I remembered marching with Freeman through Kakaran and the home of Abdul Kabir and the Dad, listening to their mother yell at us and our police. That had been satisfying, rewarding almost. But this was different now. Here I felt guilty and sick. But why? The men we'd just killed were no different from any of the others who'd tried to kill us. Or the ones who murdered their fellow Muslims in the streets.

And then it hit me—no matter how justified the killings were, we shouldn't have been here. Our patrol shouldn't have been taking a victory lap. Spiking the football right in the villagers' faces. Taking a self-congratulatory tour of the

destruction we'd caused. Freeman would have known better than to come and do this today. He would have sent the cops instead and brought the village elders back to talk. I should have known our presence now would feel like a spit in the face.

When we got to the top of the hill, close to where the groundbreaking ceremony for the well had been, Short approached a village elder. It was Razaq—the father of Naney the pedophile—and he asked what we could do to help in the aftermath.

I wished we could have killed his son, too.

I walked to the well and looked up at the top of the tower where the solar panels used to sit.

Fucking bastards.

Even though I knew what would happen, I pulled the lever on the faucet beside the well and watched as nothing flowed out of it, symbolizing my failure. I headed over to Doran and Lane.

*How could we have been so close to the motherfuckers? For almost a year, I'd slept next door to a village of insurgents. These guys weren't Taliban from Pakistan traveling through the area, forcing villagers to feed and host them—they were our fucking neighbors. After eight years, we hadn't even "cleared" the village beside our base. "Clear, hold, build" my ass. And if there were six Taliban living in Shahr-e Safa, guys whose children I'd spent a year throwing candy to, how many lived in the other villages in Jaldak? *Jesus Christ, they're everywhere. They'll never leave this place.**

"It's pretty fucking hot, LT," Lane said.

"Yeah, pretty fucking hot."

"We gonna be out here for a while?"

"Look, dude, I don't know. Pull security."

He made a face and headed off.

I walked back to Rocky, lost in my own fog of disgrace. "Let's get names of the Taliban killed," I said as I handed him my notebook.

I watched as he stopped a policeman and talked to him for a while, writing in the notebook. When he returned, I scanned the list of names but didn't recognize any of them. Across the way, I noticed that Short was still talking to Naney's father.

"The police are saying the U.S. who came in the helicopters stole a bunch of weapons and explosives from the men they killed," Rocky said.

"Stole?"

"I mean confiscated."

Fuck this.

Rocky turned to leave, but I grabbed his shoulder. "They were bad guys, Rocky. Taliban. If they had guns and explosives and—"

"It doesn't matter, sir." He pointed to a boy standing beside his older brother, both of them crying. I got the message.

I surveyed the mud huts on the slope of the hill we'd just hiked up. These were the people we'd been trying to make life better for? The people we fed and provided running water for and whose children we built schools for? The people who'd never told us about the six Taliban living in their village—the village that neighbored us?

But why would they tell us? These men were their sons and fathers.

This is fucking hopeless.

By now, Short was done talking to Razaaq, and we headed back down the trail to the highway, where I put myself on the south side of the patrol. The side away from the woman who'd screamed and spit on me on our way up. But there was no escape—more women came out of another hut and started in on me and the cop beside me, wailing and cursing in Pashto, more orphaned children behind them. Their bare faces streaked with tears, they made wide menacing hand gestures whose meaning I could only guess at. I could feel their hatred just like I could feel the heat of the sun.

Fuck all this.

At the road, Ghani was waiting for us. I ran to him, and Rocky scurried along after me.

“Did you know these men?” I demanded.

There was a pause.

He said something to Rocky. “Yes, for many years.”

I glared at Ghani, the crooked bastard. All this time I'd thought he was the kind of guy we needed to save this place from Taliban, but he must have only been using us because he hated Zahir. Not because he hated Taliban.

“Why?” I stepped forward, my face close to his “Why not tell us?”

Rocky didn't hesitate. “He knew them well, sir. They were part of his clan.”

Ghani just stared back at me sheepishly.

I wanted to spit on him. Instead, I turned and walked down the driveway as our crooked fucking cops opened the wire gates for us.

All this work for the sake of the women and children and this

was the result? A police force corrupt to the core and a well that didn't work and a generation of fatherless sons and daughters? Sons who would grow up to join the Taliban and kill us if we were stupid enough to still be around? Daughters who would be forced into marriage as soon as they menstruated? Imprisoning their faces behind those suffocating burqas for their entire godforsaken lives?

Why the fuck are we still in this place?

The people would never support the police as long as we were here. But if we left now, the Taliban would replace the police force we did have. Every man and woman who died in this country for the sake of this war would have died in vain. None of it would mean anything, to anyone. Vietnam all over again.

What a tragic fucking joke.

I kept walking, leaving the wailing and cursing behind. If only till the next time.

*

Back at base, we debriefed in the Toc even though it was hotter inside than out and there were just as many flies.

"You see how empty the whole place was?" Kilgore said.

"The elder I talked to said just about everyone's left, and tomorrow they'll *all* be gone," Short said.

I slapped a fly on my arm. "The business owners *and* the villagers?" I grabbed the flyswatter from my desk and waited for the next one.

"Everyone. They're all afraid of U.S. in helicopters coming to kill their sons and husbands again."

"Well, if their sons and husbands are fucking Taliban trying to kill us, stealing solar panels—"

“God, you really got a hard-on for that solar panel thing, don’t you, LT?”

Kilgore laughed.

“If they’re fucking Taliban, they ought to die,” I said, glaring at him, knowing that I wasn’t going to bother trying to explain to him the complicated truth I’d just learned. The fact that we’d just given every child in that village a once-in-a-lifetime experience that would shape their decision-making for the rest of their lives. The invaders had just killed their fathers and brothers, and they’d gladly take up arms against us as soon as they got the chance. The truth that killing more bad guys could never be the answer to winning this war.