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Michael Orsay
College of DuPage

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Outside the Wire

by Michael Orsay

(English 1101)

Every muscle and tendon in my body was as tense as a drawn bow as I ran my hand against the cold steel of my pistol halfway down my thigh for the fourth time that hour. We were finally in Afghanistan after months of training and weeks of traveling. We thought we were ready, but now that the diesel fumes rose around us, slithering into our nostrils, reminding us that we were far from home, we weren't so sure. We gathered for a picture and tried to dredge up the confidence we had felt when leaving the States.

The Humvees were even different here, clad in 3-inch thick steel. The doors were like a bank vault, protecting what was inside from those outside, and just as heavy. They closed with a solid boom, rocking the whole truck, as if to convey a sense of finality. The windows jutted out from the doors half a foot, accentuating the danger in the surrounding area. They all could open, but none of them were open. The engines grumbled and grated like a grizzled man constantly clearing his throat, ready to take us through the town and to our base for the year. The bland, muted tan of the trucks matched that of every color in the desert that was now home. Gravel met the bottom of our boots with a protesting crunch, like dried leaves. The small stones ground against each other, never quite giving a flat surface to stand on. The larger stones, unsure quite how to position themselves, dug into the bottoms of my feet.

We were circled up to take the photo. Prosis had jumped on a truck and laid down on it awkwardly, trying to put on a sense of ease and confidence. Johnson held his weapon out in front of him, trying to look tough, but gripping the barrel like a boa constrictor that had just caught some prey. All of our uniforms, muted by use during training, had already been absorbing the dull brown of the local sand, a stark contrast of the brand new, stiff uniforms of three months prior. We waited in silence, listening to the mix of Humvee grumbling and helicopter rotors beating the air into submission. That sound would become like the air conditioning in a house, usually there, but rarely noticed.

I stood tall, waiting for the picture to be taken. My uniform, having been subjected to the blowing sands, was dusty and scratchy. It felt as though I had just rolled around on a sandy beach, each grain prodding my skin as though egged on by the heavy, thick fabric of my uniform. The wind cut through the outer layers, leaving me chilled. The sun was veiled behind the clouds, only peering through every few minutes to give a much appreciated burst of warmth.

He snapped the picture and we each mounted our trucks and prepared to leave the base. The air was charged with tension. I checked the reassuring weight of my pistol yet again. I prepared my other weapons in the turret, checking and double checking that everything was ready. I braced myself and my truck bounced over the terrain towards the gate. Every little movement and sound was amplified as we left for our first mission. Even though we were scared, we left, ready to do our jobs.