

Desert Blooms

The patrol slowly climbed the rocky terrain toward the mountaintop. Sergeant Clyde Wessler was in the lead. He was a tall man, almost six foot four, square jawed with pale blue eyes that contrasted deeply with his browned skin. He had been in this barren world for almost a year now. Every day it was the same thing over and over, walk the dusty, dry goat paths up and down the mountains looking for the group of raiders that constantly barraged the base with mortar fire and improvised explosive devices. His bunk mate Corporal Paul Gates, a freckled face farm kid from Nebraska was at the rear. They were a dichotomy but would die for each other if necessary. Ahmed, their interpreter, held the reins of their pack animal, a donkey the Chaplain jokingly named 'Cheeks'. The rest of the team had rotated in a couple of months ago and were learning the terrain. They were headed to a remote village across the mountain gap to confirm intelligence reports.

As Clyde looked up the path toward the top, he caught a flash of purple. Giving the signal for the others to halt and seek cover, he crept up a little further on the path. Using the rocks as cover, Clyde moved around to the west side of the mountain. He edged up the side to where he had seen the snatch of purple. Realizing what it was, he shook his head and radioed the rest of the team to follow. Settled into a low rock outcropping nestled a bed of flowers.

The brightly colored flowers stuck out against the desolate mountainside. The purple petals in contrast to the dull browns and grays of the rocky terrain. Paul laughed when he saw what had caught Clyde's eye.

"This here is the deadly iris lily. Watch where you step gentlemen. It might bite you." Paul told the others as they grinned.

“Can it Paul.” Clyde retorted. “You know it’s unusual for these flowers to be growing here. You would have done the same thing. Besides,” Clyde looked at the others, “never believe anything you see is harmless. Especially in these mountains.”

Clyde leaned over and gently reached out with his gloved hand to grasp the delicate bloom by the stem. Tenderly snapping the stem, he plucked the flower, looked it over and then placed it in his bag.

“Whatcha gonna do with the flower Clyde?”

Clyde looked over at Paul. “Nothing probably. Just nice to have a piece of beauty in this godforsaken country for a change.”

They continued on the trail to the village at the top of the next hill. Clyde hated going on patrol but it had to be done. He was sweating even with patches of snow still on the ground. Especially under the fifty pounds of gear they had to wear. The emotional toll of being on patrol was worse. The raiders always had the advantage hiding in the mountains. You also never knew if the villagers would welcome you or cut you down where you stood.

Moska stood at the table trying to put the pieces together. She hated doing this but they were afraid of the raiders that came through the village looking for anyone helping the soldiers. She wished she could find a way to keep the explosive devices from working. However, if she didn’t do as the raiders said, the whole village would be destroyed and everyone killed. They had killed her parents three years ago when her father refused to join them. It was a warning to the others to do as they asked if they wanted to continue to live. Moska thought she heard a sound and looked out the window of her room to see someone coming through the pass. A donkey loaded with packs was flanked by two soldiers. Several other soldiers followed behind. Her gaze strayed to one of the soldiers. A beautiful blue scarf flowed in the mountain wind around a soldier’s neck.

It was a scarf her grandfather had traded to one of the soldiers for some tobacco. The man wearing it now was not the same one as before. This man was a big man, probably the biggest man she had ever seen. She ran to her grandfather.

“Baba there are soldiers coming through the gap. One wears the blue scarf.”

“I know Moska. I saw them. You stay inside with Musa. I will talk to them.”

The soldiers moved slowly toward the village, their eyes searching all around for danger. The village was eerily quiet and no one was about.

“What do you think Clyde? Looks too quiet for me.” Paul whispered into his radio from the rear of the patrol.

“We’re being watched. I can feel it. Stay alert.” Clyde instructed the patrol.

Clyde and their interpreter continued forward while scanning the area. They moved cautiously toward the village. The patrol spread out as they reached the perimeter of the village. Clyde and the interpreter moved forward to a non-descript hut where they had been told the village chieftain lived. The interpreter called out in the local language for the chief. An elderly man came into the doorway. He had a long white flowing beard reminding Clyde of Santa Claus. Behind him, in the shadows, Clyde noticed a young girl anxiously watched the soldiers. She stayed in the hut as her grandfather walked out to greet the men. Her little brother rushed past before she could grab him. He was curious about the soldiers as they rarely came to their village. The old man stopped the boy with a stern look. Ahmed offered greetings to the village chief while the soldiers kept watch.

Paul reached into one of the bags tethered on Cheeks and pulled out a soccer ball. It was a universal greeting as everyone in this part of the world had a passion for soccer. He tossed the

soccer ball to the boy and watched as he started kicking it around. The old man and the interpreter continued to talk as Paul entertained the boy with the soccer ball.

“The chief says we are welcome though I can tell he is uneasy.” The interpreter relayed to Clyde. “He said they have been warned by the raiders to not help the soldiers.”

Clyde nodded to the old man with respect. “Tell him we will be on our way soon. Ask him when the last time was the raiders came through.”

The interpreter questioned the chief, then turned to Clyde, “Three days ago. They come every other week or so. From up there.” He pointed to the mountain top to the left.

“Looks like our intel is correct for a change. Let him know we appreciate his letting us rest here and it’s not our intent to bring harm to his village.”

The interpreter and the chief started conversing again. Clyde noticed the girl in the background. He moved toward the doorway where she was hiding. He reached into his bag and pulled out the flower. Though he knew it wasn’t proper in her culture, he held the flower out to her. For only a second, he looked warmly into her eyes.

“*Lutfan*, please,” he nudged the flower to her.

“*Tashakur*,” she whispered in thanks.

He quickly glanced away to make sure no one had seen his actions. Thankfully, the old man was watching the young boy with the soccer ball and hadn’t seen Clyde give the girl the flower. Clyde glanced her way once more, smiled at her, then turned and walked toward the boy playing with the soccer ball.

Moska watched as Clyde walked toward her brother, Musa. Moving back into the hut where no one would be able to see, she broke into a huge smile. She hugged the flower to her chest. She couldn’t believe the handsome soldier had given her a beautiful flower. She knew it was wrong

and if anyone found out she would be punished. Moska didn't care though. She quickly muted her expression and hid the flowers in the fold of her dress as she heard her grandfather come back into the hut.

“Moska, watch for your brother. The soldiers will leave soon. I am going to rest.”

“Yes Baba.” Moska moved to the window she had stood at earlier. The pieces of the explosive device lying there on the table waiting to be used.

Her grandfather headed to the back of the hut and laid down. Moska looked across the sparsely covered field to see her brother talking and laughing with two of the soldiers. The soldier who gave her the flower was among them now. He still wore the beautiful blue scarf she had seen earlier around his neck. He kicked the ball around as Musa chased it and kicked it back. She stood there watching him though she knew she shouldn't. She had seen soldiers before, but for some reason this one called to her heart. He was so different from the men in her village. The only young men were children and the only other men were elderly. All the young men of her age had been either killed by the raiders or had joined them in fighting the soldiers. She was still unmarried only because her grandfather needed her to take care of Musa and him. Moska was happy to be unmarried. Most girls her age were already married with children. Her life was better here with Baba than if he had sold her for marriage to one of the men in the village. At least with her grandfather she had some freedoms. He was strict but not abusive. She had heard some of the other women in the village talking about their husbands when they didn't know she was around. They were not allowed to do or say anything without their husband's permission. Those that defied their husbands were severely punished.

Clyde felt eyes watching him, but not in the sense of feeling danger. He glanced around with his eyes until he connected with the young girl watching him from the window. They both knew

it was wrong but neither could look away. They were locked in an unspoken communication across the open field. She shyly smiled back at Clyde. She could be punished for making eye contact with a man much less one of the soldiers. She couldn't help herself though.

“Boof!”

Clyde's head reeled back from the force of the soccer ball hitting him. He had forgotten the young boy and the soccer ball. The boy laughed as he ran to grab the ball.

“Hey! No fair. I wasn't watching.”

Clyde grinned as Musa dribbled the soccer ball around him. Clyde heard the faint tinkling of laughter come from across the field. He wanted to talk to the girl but it was forbidden. It had been so long since he had seen anything so beautiful in this desolate land. She reminded him of delicate wildflowers found in the fields of home. Varied colors that glistened in the morning dew and swayed gently in the breeze. He had been in this colorless country so long those images were fading. He would always remember her though. On long lonely nights and days of patrolling, he would remember her hazel green eyes glittering in the bright sunshine. The wisps of long, straight hair as black as the night that escaped her head scarf. Her melodic laughter at her brother's antics with the soccer ball. If only things were different.

Clyde checked his watch and then motioned for his men to prepare to move out. “Okay guys, time to hit the road.”

The boy stopped and looked forlornly at the men getting ready to leave. He hung his head as he brought the soccer ball to Clyde. Clyde knelt to Musa's level and waited for the boy to look up. Clyde tapped the ball and then pointed to the boy signaling that it was his ball now. He didn't need an interpreter to translate the joy in the boy's eyes. He ruffled the kid's hair and rose. Clyde signaled for the patrol to move out. He took one more glance at the window where Moska had

been standing. He placed his hand over his heart and nodded his head. She raised her hand slightly in a gesture of goodbye.

Clyde thought to himself as they crossed over the mountain. Every so often, amid the death and destruction of the war, they came across a sliver of grace and elegance. Though Clyde understood she probably wouldn't stay that way. Life would overtake her innocent smile. Her religion and culture made her a slave to the whims of the men in her family. Her days would be spent in grueling work and degradation, especially once she married. Maybe she would be able to ease her suffering by remembering the gift of the flower. To remember that once someone thought enough to give her a gift. Delicate petals given to a young woman in the midst of grim desolation and war. She was like the flower. A rare beauty budding in the arid, infertile soil of intolerance.

As they passed out of the village, Moska watched as the soldier removed the blue scarf and put it into his bag. He blended in with the landscape and it wasn't long before she lost sight of them. She set her hand on the table and the sharp edge of the wiring mechanism bit into her skin reminding her that she had to finish the device before the raiders came back. She did what she had to do to keep her village safe. She had already lost her parents. They had threatened to kill her grandfather and her brother if she didn't do as they said. This time would be different, however. Before she never gave thought to the people killed by the explosives she built for them. Now she would always wonder about the handsome young soldier. Would he be killed by a device she had constructed? Would the raiders find them and kill them all? Would he go home to his country as others before him had? She knew they never stayed and they never came back. If only things were different, but circumstances beyond their control dictated the way things were. She sighed and picked up the pieces of the device to begin working on it once more.