

A GAVEL FOR A CRUTCH

Garret McCarthy suddenly heard it. Louder than all the guns and bullets, all pounding on his eardrums in a chaos rhythm not two seconds ago. He heard his own breathing and nothing else. His own breath, his lungs filling with air and expelling it in adrenaline bursts was an intruder now, and it made him nervous. He whipped his head from left to right, trying to see if he could hear the enemy, anything. Anything? He held his breath; nothing but the ringing in his ears. God not again.

He was pinned down in the blasted remains of a building, housing of some kind. The rest of his company was long gone, days ago, weeks maybe. He couldn't remember when or how he got separated from them, just that he'd been stuck in this village for too long, surviving on scraps and hiding places. No radio comm. Each day he figured would be his last, each day saw him survive. This was bad though; all exits were covered and he was completely pinned down by gun-fire...

What the fuck, he thought to himself, get up! Now's your chance! Garret dragged himself to his feet, rifle pointed out the window down at the street. Nothing. He whipped around to the opposite wall, most of it punched out by a giant's fist, rifle ready, pointed at... nothing. And still in his ears, just breathing. It felt like something was coming, fueled by his very breath, pressing down on all sides until it clamped its maw shut on him and his pathetic excuse for cover. Fuck this, he said to himself. He holstered the rifle, pulled out his pistol in one hand and a grenade in the other, his last. He stepped through the blasted wall into the hallway, gun-barrel following his eyes as if they were attached.

The hallway had fared no better than the rest of the building, large sections of the walls blackened, beaten, chewed up and spat out. It smelt of blood, explosives, and that same

unpleasant, alien smell this whole country seemed soaked in. Garret moved down the hall like a nervous rodent, peering around corners, skittering past open areas. As he turned a corner where the roof was completely missing, he noticed something scrawled on the wall, little hashes marking someone's growth through the years. Nothing registered in him. He passed through the connecting room and poised himself behind the entrance to the building, also blown apart.

Sunset on a suburban combat zone. Directly in front of him, on the street and yards away from a crater in the road, the overturned vehicle where just a minute ago several insurgents had planted themselves, covering the whole front of the building. It was a good tactical position; had they really abandoned it? He waited, straight as a board behind the remains of the door frame, and held his breath. The ringing in his ears was dying down, silence growing louder. Not even a scuffle of feet or a maneuver order whispered in haste. He wanted badly to pull the pin, toss the grenade at the truck, and run out of that building firing death at the fuckers left. He thought of the guys in his company that had died, briefly. Seemed so long ago. He shook the thought from his head, then concocted a new plan. He couldn't afford to waste any resources he had left.

Waiting until dark was out of the question, as that put him at even more of a disadvantage than it did the enemy. He needed an exit out of that building but couldn't afford to assume the enemy had left; that just didn't make sense anyway. He needed cover and, possibly, a distraction. And he needed it quickly.

And there it came, several of them in fact, sauntering down the street. Goats, most tethered together, clanging bells tied to the tether as they made their way down the street towards his building. Squinting at them through the window on the opposite side of the door, Garret could

have kissed each one of them. All he really needed was to get past the truck, away behind the building down the alley...

Garret prepped himself for the sprint. The muffled clanks of bells approaching slowly, slowly. Strangely, he found himself imagining an ice-cream truck rolling up the street, dead somehow, ice-cream cones filled with dirt and mud. He shook his head; focus!

Here they came, heads then necks then bodies, shuffling towards the gap between the truck and his house. Soon now. He'll fire the pistol, scare the goats, run out the door, around the corner. More clanging, now right in front of him, an occasional pathetic bray. Any moment. Any moment. Any...

The time was right. Now. But at that moment as Garret watched the goats in front of the truck, almost pastoral in their passing, as he heard the bells and felt a slight breeze puff through the crippled doorway, suspicion turned to fact. This had happened before. Several times. Somebody was cheating, and he almost would have preferred a normal, bullet-ridden death to this.

Garret expelled the breath he didn't realize he had been holding. The goats had kind of stopped now between him and the truck, milling about, the bell clanks reduced to muffled clunks.

Another breeze, this one chilling the sweat on his brow. He wiped it off as he rose, very slowly, and walked out the doorway as one would walk into a church, both gun and grenade held loosely at the ends of his limp arms.

The sun spilled its golden soul all over the melting clouds in the horizon as he strolled through the small crowd of animals and around the back of the truck bed, his focus fixed on it the entire time. The world rotated into view, and showed no one in the truck, no one behind it. He bent down and looked at the dust. Footprints, scuffles. None of them led away from the truck, only

towards it. He knew there was gunfire coming from behind this truck. He knew. Wouldn't he have seen them leave? Why in God's name would they even fall back?

Garret sighed, head hung heavy as he glared at the footprints. As he prepared to stand back up, though, he caught sight of something on the other side of the truck, through a gap between ground and vehicle. Goat legs and small human feet. Garret cursed and drew his pistol; all it took to fire a gun was a working hand, and in this place anybody could be recruited.

He popped over the top of the truck (actually the right side of it, since it was over-turned) and brought his gun to bear on the person attached to those feet. He felt foolish the moment his brain had a chance to take the scene in. A small, thin boy, aged maybe seven years old, was holding tight to the neck of one of the goats, his deformed legs dragging to the side. He peered up at Garret's gun, too familiar with both the weapon and the threat. Garret holstered it, embarrassed.

"What's your name," he managed in his best Farsi.

"Come. Help." The boy's voice was quiet and even.

"What happened here? The soldiers?" He motioned in the air around himself.

"Come. Help."

Garret eyed his surroundings nervously. It was getting darker by the minute and he had no idea how much longer his good luck might last. The need to leave the streets revisited him now, stronger than before, shoving his previous reverie to the side. These soldiers may have vanished, but there would be more.

"Come. Help." Ever patient.

"Riiight," Garret muttered as he strode around the truck to the boy. He bent down a bit and offered his open arms to the child, who obliged, wrapping his arms around the man's neck. Garret wondered at how light the boy was, but the feel of his bent, atrophied legs straddling his ribs made him uncomfortable. The boy pointed down an alley across the street (Garret was glad he didn't want to go anywhere in the open) and he started walking at a quick pace.

Garret tried to regroup in his mind. At least he's off the main street, but these alleys could be deadly and he really didn't know where he was. Too many opportunities for both snipers and surprise melee. Every door he saw ahead he imagined an insurgent popping out, rifle aimed at his heart, he walking down the alley like a tourist. He bent down and decided to quicken the pace, zig-zag.

"What's your name," Garret huffed.

"Kamal."

"Where are we going, Kamal?"

"You help us." He pointed down a side street, this one narrower than the last, and they disappeared into its shadows. Twilight was approaching.

Garret's stomach turned. With every step he took, his instinct told him to turn around. None of this was adding up. Where did those soldiers go? Why the hell was this kid, an invalid, wandering down the street, a combat zone hotter than hell not two minutes before his arrival? And where were they going?

It smelt like a ruse. It had to be. He didn't know about those soldiers, but this kid was wrong. Definitely something wrong. Nothing was beneath these people, they used kids like body armor.

Some fuck-twat command-type probably told him to do all this, play pathetic, go get the American soldier, bring him over here, we torture him, we kill him, yay. Well fuck you, rag-head, I'm not going down that easy. Besides, his passenger was a liability if they were ambushed.

Garret tried to set the boy down, but he wouldn't let go. "C'mon kid, ride's over."

The boy shook his head, still gripping his neck tightly.

Garret grabbed one of his thin arms, trying to pry him off. "Listen, this is as far as..."

"They're in there! They're in there!" The child was pointing down the street, calling loudly. Only dark angular silhouettes populated the alley now.

"Who?"

"Just a little further. You help us!" He was yelling in Garret's ear, and the attention the two of them were possibly gathering was making him nervous. Further bargaining proved useless and Garret finally acquiesced to the boy's demands, for the time being. Hopefully he could just dump the brat off at his family's place and bid adieu to this shit-hole town, maybe hole-up in the outskirts till morning and find his way back to base. He found himself suddenly really missing his uncomfortable cot in that stuffy tent they jokingly called Motel 6.

They headed further down the street, Garret still ducking, still zig-zagging. The boy was now craning his neck to see where they were going, which was a good sign; maybe they were getting close after all. Close to what though? Garret put his hand in one of his pockets and felt the reassuring cold corrugation of the grenade. Light was almost gone from the sky now.

"They're in there! They're in there!" The boy yelled and pointed at one of the buildings to their right, not ten paces from their current position. Garret stopped and heard movement come from that direction.

The boy repeated, yelling louder, "They're in there! There!"

Garret tore the boy from his neck and instinctively dove for cover on the right side of the street near a wall. Gun shots, two of them, rang out from within the building. He vaulted the debris he had landed near, towards the door. A window, in the same building and between him and the door, flashed bright within as another shot rang out. As soon as he landed, Garret grabbed the grenade and pulled the pin, squatting flat against the wall near the window. He quickly tossed it in, back-handed, then crouched and covered his ears.

Still loud.

His rifle was in his hands by the time he kicked the door in, four quick shots into the billowing smoke, then he pulled back out into the alley behind the wall and listened. Some limp movement, a cough. He watched the door and the window; wait until the smoke cleared a little more. Then he whipped around, half-way in the doorway, rifle leading the way, and took the scene in.

Small bodies, small parts, all children. Not all. One, a larger arm sticking out from beneath a plank of wood. The old man it belonged to was near the window, a book and a gun lying next to his dead body; he was no insurgent, that much was clear. Must have been at least eighty. No other weapons were in sight. Garret wanted to vomit.

Then he noticed the boy, who must have pulled his way here into the building. He was dragging himself about on the ground, looking at all the blackened bodies of the children. Garret slowly holstered his rifle.

"Look, Kamal... I'm sorry."

The boy was looking at their faces, from one to another, dragging himself about more quickly now, desperately.

"God," Garret muttered under his breath. The old man must have thought Kamal was giving them up to an American. Not to him though; he thought they were soon to be at the mercy of one of the Americans he had been told about, a monster. He kicked the gun as he stared at the floor.

"Kamal, I didn't know..."

"Where's Naser?" His eyes spelled concern, but was there aggravation there too? Garret didn't know how to respond.

"Where's Naser," he repeated, louder now as he resumed his dragging search into the other room, which remained relatively untouched, wood-plank benches arranged neatly in rows. Garret followed him in, confused. "Who are you talking about?"

"Naser, Naser! I wanted Naser!" He scanned the room in a jittery manner.

Garret stared at him for a long moment. "You wanted me to kill them." Then louder, angrier, "You wanted me to kill all those kids!" He glared now at the boy, propping himself up off the dirt floor with only his skinny arms, legs twisting off his torso like tree roots. His face was anger, almost tears. Long seconds passed.

"You kill Naser," the boy said, calmer now. "I take you to him."

Garret stared at him for a moment, mouth open. "I'm not doing shit for you," he yelled back, in English this time, kicking one of the benches down as he did. Unable to stop himself, he kept kicking the planks down off their stone blocks, one after the other. Then he noticed tablets, crude ones, underneath some of them, shaky Arabic scrawled on them in charcoal. "It's a fucking schoo..." He couldn't force the word out of his mouth.

He retreated back into the main room, now mostly dark and smelling of burnt flesh and exposed tissue. He stared vacantly at a boy's face, half of it ripped apart by the blast. A fly, barely visible in the fading light, alighted on the edge of his cheek bone, rubbing its feelers together. In the back of his mind he heard the boy drag himself into the room.

"They hurt me," Kamal said quietly in the dark. "Naser hurt me." Garret fished a flashlight out of his pockets and shown it on the boy, who stopped and looked up at him.

"I don't care what they did to you, it's no excuse for, for..." He showed the light on all the bodies here, a feeble search light focusing on nothing.

His thoughts were diverted back to the boy making scuffling noises in front of him, closer now. He whipped the beam of light onto the boy, who had pulled down his trousers. Garret got the point; Kamal's penis was missing, sliced off some time ago. Garret froze in disgust for just a moment, then quickly turned off the flashlight.

"Naser did that," the boy said quietly. "You kill Naser, I take you to him."

"Why did he..." Garret managed to croak.

"They all hated me. They hated me for the way I look, and made fun. Because I'm different.

Naser... Naser was the worst. He told the others what to do. He said I was a monster, that I was

evil. He said that monster's make more monsters. That the way to stop making monsters is to remove their sex, so he had them...."

Garret swallowed hard and looked out the door, avoiding the boy's gaze that he could feel even through the dark. "I'm leaving." He started towards the door.

"You can't leave!" He spoke the words not in Farsi this time but English.

Garret stopped and slowly turned to face the voice. "What?"

"Naser must die, but I cannot do this alone. I need your help. Please."

"How do you know...?"

"Your language? I know many things." It may have sounded the same, may have had the same timbre and tonal quality, but the boy's voice was different now, aside from the choice of language. Some indescribable quality to the words seemed to make them stride right in to Garret's consciousness instead of being merely spoken.

"Look, I don't care who you are or what your vendetta against this kid is. I'm leaving, getting out." Garret felt the boy's presence in the shadows, felt his gaze on him, and felt choked. He needed air, he needed to be away from this child.

"I can show you where the soldiers go. I can tell you what happened to your American-friends!"

Garret stopped and turned his head, staring hard into the darkness. "My squad? My company?? What happened to them? Where are they??"

"You must help me first, then I help you. Then you find your friends, get out of here."

He thought then of the battle earlier, how the boy just happened to arrive when it had all died down, when his combatants had practically disappeared. It felt like making a deal with the devil.

"You know where this Naser is?"

"Yes."

Garret nodded curtly and took the child up in his arms once more like a tangled marionette. He pushed all useless thoughts out of his mind; the smoke, the fly, the dead children. He just wanted to leave, to get back to his squad and out of here for good. Nothing else mattered. That was his mission.

"You Americans smell funny," the small voice said in his ear.

Garret kept walking.

Everything was too loud. No matter what he did, they were just too loud. His boots on the gravel, his fatigues on his skin, the kid on his back just mumbling to himself. Every little click a clang, every little scrape a scream. They must've woken the whole town by now, a two-man freak show parading down the street, just dying for attention.

And he was more than lost. Kamal was steering him like a bike through the dark, giving him little tugs on his shoulders when he wanted him to turn right or left. Any minute Garret felt like he was going to run into some rusty rebar jutting out the side of a building and get skewered through his abdomen.

Garret suddenly skidded to a stop, panting. They had come upon a teetering structure, something held up only by the hand of God and limply lit from within. Feint music drifted from inside. He

listened quietly for a moment, trying to suppress his own gasps for breath. Kamal kept mumbling unintelligibly.

"Shut up," Garret croaked.

Then he heard it. Above the quivering singing from the building, he heard troop movement through the streets. Boots on the ground, ten maybe, approaching from the southeast. Getting closer.

"Shit!" Garret started running away from the sounds, towards the alleys across the street from the building.

"No," hissed Kamal. "Use street next to building, then make building fall! Hit the enemy!"

Before even thinking about it, Garret turned and did as commanded, dodging into a dark, narrow opening beside the building, dusty tarps hanging like dried skin above. The boots were getting closer. The passage was impossibly narrow, the walls from both buildings pressing in like a vise. Cracks of dim light sliced into the dark from the left side, barely providing any illumination. A man's voice now, an excited alarm to the others, 50 or 60 yards behind him. Garret ran between the walls and vaulted ally debris, his body constantly getting clipped and buffeted by concrete. It seemed to surround him and move in on him in the dark, closer and closer, like a dense crowd of morbid voyeurs thirsty for a trip, a fall, a bullet through his flesh. Any time now they would get what they wanted. Why oh why did he take the kid's advice and flee down this ally? He felt like a rabbit running right into a...

Then his progress was halted, abruptly. He couldn't move forward. He struggled and strained several times, but something was caught. A brief glance revealed his pack was wedged between

some steel girders and a protruding block of concrete. He yanked on it some more, a stream of curses sputtering under his breath. Boots getting much closer.

"Hurry! They come!" Kamal, on top of Garret's shoulders, started climbing down his chest, trying to put his protector between himself and danger. This, however, made it even more difficult for Garret to free himself.

"I can't...! Fucking get off!" Garret struggled to unbuckle his pack, but Kamal's panic was in full swing, pulling and swatting at Garret in a fevered desperation.

A pop and a sharp flash illuminated the far end of the passageway. Yells.

"Fuck!" Garret tore Kamal off his body and fired several shots blindly down the alley. A machine gun burst came in reply.

"Break building! There!" Kamal pointed to a precarious set of bricks holding up far more beams and boards than they should. Garret kicked the bricks, and the collapse began. One final heave freed his pack from the stubborn space as the whole left side of the alley began to crumble.

Garret grabbed Kamal and ran. Bricks and iron previously propped up by luck crashed to the ground behind him, and in that clang and clamor the faint, almost imperceptible sound of people crying out. It only lasted a few brief, kinetic seconds, but they came through to the other side of the passage at last, in tact.

Garret immediately took cover and looked back. A huge plume of dust rose into the night sky, the ally wall reduced to its natural state of rubble. The sound of the last few pebbles falling, then silence. Garret waited, and remembered the goats that had walked past his door earlier. A chill ran up his spine.

No troops.

Garret stared at the wreckage. "Did you hear...?"

"Music inside. Probably radio," said Kamal.

Garret looked back at the alleyway. None of the rubble had fallen into the passage; the building had completely collapsed inward. If anything, the alleyway was clearer now, more wide. Garret crept out from under cover and carefully, cautiously approached the ally's entrance. A dirty, singular light bulb hanging in some abandoned stall lit the far end, throwing a wheezing light down the gauntlet he just ran. Long shadows licked down the length towards him over bricks, rocks. But no bodies. No insurgents.

He scanned the area. There was no way; those guys were right on their backs. That gunfire was close, he could smell the powder. Garret strode back to Kamal and grabbed him by his shirt.

"What the hell is going on?? What happened to those men??" He screamed.

"The building..." Kamal struggled against the soldier's grip.

"The building had people in it, you little shit, now tell me...!"

Kamal's eyes turned in terror towards his right. "Naser! It's Naser!!"

Garret turned and saw a middle-aged man, a local, dusty and dim in the dark, standing before a crumbled bath-house twelve yards away.

"Naser," screamed Kamal hoarsely, his gaze fixed on the man.

"Kamal?" the man ventured, then stepped forward. Garret could see his face clearly now, the man's eyes straining to see, then slow, dark recognition. "Naser," he breathed.

"Kill him! Kill him!" shouted Kamal.

Naser then started speaking, rambling in Farsi, his wide eyes locked on Kamal. Garret could only pick up bits and pieces of what he said since he spoke so quickly and disjointedly, but he heard "cursed," "banish," and "evil." The paranoid diatribe poured clumsily out of Naser's mouth as he slowly backed away, staring, unblinking, and pointing a long, bony finger at Kamal's broken legs.

The more the man spoke, the more agitated Kamal became. He repeated in Farsi, "Kill him," louder and louder, faster and faster like a chant. It started to echo, thrown back into his ears unnaturally, as if every rock and pebble were trying to imitate the words behind a thick, ghost veil. The words bore into Garret's ears, the whole scene dissolving into one agitated, muddy pool of consciousness. The man and the child's voice, screaming over each other, Garret's gun, his trigger, the pop, silence.

Naser slumped to the ground, blood spurting from the bullet hole in his neck. He grabbed the wound and heaved quick, gurgling breaths sucked through the hole in his larynx. Kamal dragged himself towards the body and turned Naser's face upwards. Garret saw Kamal whisper something into the dead man's ear before he let the head slump back to the earth and gently pulled his hand away from the wound. The breathing finally stopped, and Kamal turned back towards Garret, his bloody fingers poised in the air over an invisible string, ready to pluck.

"It's not Naser."

Garret finally lowered his gun to his side and stared at Kamal. "What?"

"It's not Naser. I mistook." He moved his index finger imperceptibly.

Garret stood frozen for a moment.

"You...? How the hell could you not know?? He was right there! You screamed at me to kill him, over and over!! I shot him! YOU TOLD ME TO KILL HIM!!"

Kamal looked at Garret calmly. "I mistook."

Garret looked at his gun for a moment. His hands trembled uncontrollably, and he recalled his grandmother's Alzheimer's, how her hands shook, those knobby bones under a thin tissue of skin, weak, blue veins woven in wilted wires underneath. He thought of a bullet piercing her skull.

"You mistook. Right. OK. And I'm leaving."

He holstered the gun and started heading north into another alleyway. The sun was just beginning to crest the horizon, and the dark, jagged outline of the town surrounded them on all sides.

"You cannot leave! You must kill Naser!"

Garret stopped. "I'm not killing anybody else for you."

"Have you forgotten what he did to me??"

"Yeah, that's too bad. But you know what? I don't give a shit. Do your own killing." Garret turned back to leave.

"You want your troops! You want to leave! I can show you!"

Then, as if they were there the whole time, Garret saw the rest of his squad standing by a street vendor's dilapidated tent, their dim silhouettes sipping water, relaxing. Garret stared in

amazement, unsure what to feel. Until he joined the army Garret never truly knew what the word "foreign" meant. But they all learned it together, he and his brothers, with guns pointed at their hearts. It had forged a bond he had dearly missed these past few days.

"Hey!" He started to run towards them. "Hey Greg! Derrick! Jonas! Hey, it's me! Garret!! It's...!"

And as soon as they had appeared, they were gone, melted back into the dark. Garret pulled up his stride to a slow stop. He stared for a long moment at the vendor's tent, willing his eyes to see them again, but nothing.

"You want to see them again, I can show you. But you kill Naser."

Garret slowly walked up to Kamal. The boy's disfigured legs splayed out to the side like a discarded doll, his thin arms bowed inward supporting the rest of his tiny frame. Garret looked down at the man he shot in the throat, the blood quickly pooling around Kamal.

"Who was he?"

"A bad man."

Garret turned and looked at the collapsed building near the ally. "And them? There was a family in there, wasn't there?"

"Bad people."

"And bad school children too, right?" Garret crouched down, eye-level to Kamal. "And what did you do to the soldiers? Hmm? Was the 'bad man' there right about you? A curse? Evil? Powers from...?"

Kamal roared at Garret, "NOOOOO!!" It was like the sound of a tornado. The force hit Garret right in the chest, and he fell backwards several yards amidst a cloud of dust and flying rocks. His ears rang for a moment, but the rumble of more buildings collapsing could be heard in the distance. Garret coughed and raised his head, trying to see through the dust, and saw Kamal come crawling up to his head, his face contorted by pure rage.

"THEY are the evil! THEY are! Not me! Them! They hate me, they hate my legs! They think I'm, they think..." Kamal stared into the dirt, panting, a thin string of drool hanging from his lips. "My papa, Naser. He said mama had sex with the devil. That I am her sin. The sin had to be punished." Garret saw his small hands clench into fists in the dirt, one instinctively covering his crotch. "I tried to make them all disappear, but only the army men go. I tried to rip their heads! I tried, I...!" Kamal punched the dirt and choked back a sob, sounding like a wounded animal.

Garret slowly stood up, his gaze fixed on the child. "I'm real sorry," he said, "but I'm not going to kill anybody else for you."

He took a step away, but Kamal grabbed the cuff of his pants and held on. "No! No, don't go!"

Garret pulled his leg away, but the boy remained attached, clinging with both arms now wrapped around his calf. He reached down and pulled and pried, but his focus remained on the limp legs in the dirt, as if they were an extension of his own legs, a freak mutation on his foot. This upset Garret more than he could account for, and with a final effort he tore the boy's body from his legs, stepping back until the hanging dust from the scuffle drifted on to nowhere.

Then Garret noticed a glint in the sun, in the boy's hands. Alarmed, he looked down at his ankles, at the sheaf on his calf under his fatigues; the combat knife was gone and now in the possession

of Kamal. They stared at each other for a moment, Kamal gripping the knife with both hands, trembling.

"I will kill them myself," Kamal said through his teeth, and he turned away and started to drag his body down the street.

Garret stared at him a moment. "Wait, Kamal! Kamal," he called back, but Kamal kept crawling.

"You... Hell, how are you gonna...? You can't stand, you little shit! That's a knife, you...! Shit!"

Garret kicked at the ground, then looked down the street Kamal had chosen. The sun now crested a hill outside the town, its top crowning the jutting, skeletal remains of the buildings that lay at the end of the road. Crimson rays poured down the hill and lit the ground, a gasoline red carpet in the sand. The light bathed Garret's body as he caught up to the boy and hoisted him onto his shoulders, continuing down the street with long strides.