

CHAPTER 1

The American tried in vain to shake the dust from his well-worn combat boots. There really was no point; the whole damn place was covered in thick, gritty dust. He swore it was up his nose, in his ears, probably even up his ass by now.

Four years.

He had been in this god-forsaken desert for four years already, and he was resigning himself to the idea that he may never leave. Alive, at least.

The first month was the worst. He wasn't used to the smell yet back then, and it had caused him to uproot his meager Army-issued breakfast from the depths of his stomach on more than one occasion. Now, he barely noticed it. The smell had dissolved, to be replaced by the scent of smoke bombs, metal, and blood. The damn dust, though; he just couldn't quite get over it. It felt as if it were smothering him, pushing him right into the sand.

A sharp whistle drew him from his tent into formation with the rest of his regiment. The faces of his commanders were more somber than they had been a few weeks ago. Things weren't going well. They had never gone well, but they were regressing now, day by day. All of the work the American and his fellow soldiers had done here in the desert was going to be blown to smithereens by the new enemy.

ISIS.

The Islamic State had chosen Iraq as its next conquest. Impeccable timing. The United States had been at war in this country for twelve long years, eradicating supporters of Bin Laden and trying to build a government that could stand up for itself and its people. Most of the outsiders didn't understand why they were here, but that didn't bother the American. He understood why he was here, and that was good enough for him. They had finally found a glimmer of hope here in the desert, hope for the Iraqi people and hope for a real future for the devastated country.

ISIS was here to fuck it all up.

The American watched a video of one of his countrymen being beheaded by an agent of ISIS, though the agent spoke with a British accent that didn't match his present garb. He watched as an innocent civilian, kept captive for years, was murdered by the radical Islamists they had worked so hard to keep out of Iraq. No doubt, the whole world would watch this, if not given access already.

The American's blood boiled as the truth of the matter sunk in. He would not be leaving this hell hole for a while longer. How could they leave now, after all this work? The bodies he had carried, his brothers' bodies, would not rest if they gave up now. This war was gearing up for more battles, and he would rather die trying than leave now. They had to finish what they had started.

He listened attentively as his superiors outlined their plans. They were given intel, the sort that the American government held tightly to, fearful of the public and what the reaction might be if released to anyone other than the country's finest soldiers. The American knew he had a job to do; the faces of all the Iraqi children he had met since he landed here in 2010 swam into his eyes as he thought ahead to the future. He knew what he would be asked to do next. It

was a necessary act of war in this day and age, yet the American's heart pounded as he thought about the bodies that would inevitably be strewn around Iraqi cities in the weeks to come.

Only after they were dismissed did the American speak. Four other American soldiers stood around him, waiting for direction. He told them to strap up and get their recon gear ready for action. The sun would set soon, making way for heavy darkness. The American preferred the dark here in the desert, though he knew it came with a high price.

He checked each piece of his gear with total concentration; one overlooked mistake could mean his death and the death of his brothers. He checked his night vision goggles inside the darkened tent, making sure they would work once he was out there in the sand with nothing to guide him but the stars in the sky. His rifle was immaculate, his lifeline out here with a scope that could pick out a terrorist from a mile away.

When it was time, they all gathered outside the base camp. They were stoic and composed despite the violence that awaited them. This could be the last night the American would have here on Earth, in this hellish desert of all places. He would resist that outcome with every ounce of courage and strength he could muster, but sometimes that wasn't enough. He looked from face to face of his fellow American soldiers, reminding himself of his duties to each of them.

“Sir.”

The American paused on the face of the soldier who had spoken.

“Why is it just us?”

The American didn't need the soldier to explain his question further. He knew exactly what was being asked because it was a question that had run through his own mind since he had first heard of ISIS's beheadings.

“We are soldiers for the United States of America, Jones. It is not our place to ask why; it is our place to do. Just remember what you're fighting for, and remember who you're fighting for.”

The soldier clasped his front pocket. The American knew he kept photos of his wife and children there, close to his heart. With a quick nod, he turned and led his fellow men forward into the desert as hot dust blew into the air and into his face.

That fucking dust. They soldiered on.