

The Ghoul Part 1

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A military group encounters a terror from the desert sands while in Iraq.

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The Ghoul The following happened about ten years ago. There are times that I still wake up in the middle of the night, sweating in the grips of a nightmare. When this occurs, I know that getting back to sleep will be a losing proposition, so I instead get up and make a pot of coffee. As time has passed, the nightmares have lessened, but like a virus, they have never truly left. I will have a good couple weeks, maybe even a month, when I can sleep through the night. Then, suddenly, the nightmares will come crashing back, and I am not only remembering what happened but am there again. I believe that I will be dealing with these memories for the rest of my life, which is a blood-chilling thought. When I think of the prospect of never forgetting, always remembering, and dementia seems like a blessing. But I'm getting ahead of myself... Ten years ago, as a US Marine, I was stationed in Iraq for my third tour of duty as a basic metalworker attached to an armored battalion. I was basically in charge of repairing any problems that needed to be fixed via welding. We also did quite a bit of fabricating and any other type of metalwork that was necessary. I was not, however, able to do all of the work by myself. There were certain jobs and tasks that I was simply unable to do. As a result, I worked very closely with two other Marines; incidentally, they also happened to be my best friends. One was a machinist by the name of Chris. Chris was quiet and never really spoke a lot until he started drinking. Once he got a few in him, he never shut up. The other Marine was a mechanic, also by the name of Chris, but who I will call Sam from this point on to differentiate between the two. Sam was the complete opposite of Chris. Sam was brash, loud, and always had an opinion which he was more than willing to share, whether you wanted to hear it or not. Both of them came from West Virginia, albeit different parts of the state. I was from New Jersey and was somewhat between the two in terms of personality. We had all met at boot camp, thrust together by virtue of our last names being next to each other alphabetically. We had quickly connected and had been thrilled to discover that not only would we be stationed together at the same battalion, but we would also be deploying together. I am usually seen as more of a loner by nature. I prefer quiet, and my hobbies usually are solitary activities, such as reading and fishing. I know that fishing is usually seen as a group endeavor, but it can be solo as well. I am married now, but back when this all occurred I was as single as could be. I wasn't worried; I figured I would meet someone eventually. Chris was single as well, although he was popular with women around the base. He said that he didn't like the idea of being tired down. He liked

to “play the field” in his words. Sam had a steady girlfriend. They had met in high school and had started dating shortly after that. They had just celebrated three years together before we deployed and he was planning on proposing when we returned. Since Kayla (that was her name) lived in West Virginia, he couldn’t see her all that often, so they talked on the phone almost every night while we were in the States. He would go up to visit her almost every weekend, however, even though the drive was a killer. In Iraq, however, visits were not possible, and phone calls were limited, so Sam had been very moody for a little while. When we arrived in Iraq, we learned that we were going to be stationed at a large base outside of Fallujah, Iraq. Not being known for their creativity, the military had named this base Camp Fallujah. After we arrived and settled in, we began the daily grind of going to wait and waiting around for something to happen. After about two months, we received orders one day to travel to a remote base about 2 hours distant. We were told that one of our vehicles had hit an improvised explosive device and they needed a welder, a machinist, and a mechanic to try and determine if the vehicle was repairable and, if so, to repair it. The vehicle had been towed back to the base, but it was deemed too dangerous to tow it back to Camp Fallujah. Instead, we were going to travel to it. On the designated day, we loaded up in Humvees and made the drive, which was surprisingly quiet, and after about 2 hours, we arrived at Forward Operating Base Smitty (named after a member of our battalion who had been killed in action a few months previously). Our battalion had previously used the base heavily, but we had since moved our command to Camp Fallujah. We still had a small contingent of Marines at Smitty, but it was mostly used by an infantry company for patrols. To call FOB Smitty nice would be too kind. The base was about half a mile by half a mile square. Mud brick walls about 8 feet tall ran around the entire perimeter. There were only a few buildings within the walls. There was a small building in the southeastern corner that served as a barracks for the Marines that were stationed there, enough space for about 100 men. The building was divided up into small, cell-like rooms that were placed every few feet down the hallway; all arranged around a central courtyard. There was a large building on the western side that served as the FOB Command Center. Immediately outside of the command center stood a covered area that served as the base motor pool. There were also quite a few concrete bunkers randomly scattered around the base which was meant to serve as emergency cover if we were attacked. The defining feature of the base, however, was a warehouse that was at along the eastern wall. Hulking, rusting, and huge, the warehouse squatted there like a malevolent beast. The doors and windows were missing, giving the old metal structure a neglected, empty, and forlorn look. We had been told that the base had previously been a privately owned tank production facility, but it had been appropriated by the Republican Guard for their use during the first Gulf War. That was it; that was home. No showers, no bathrooms, not even a chow hall. After getting acquainted with our new home, Chris, Sam, and I got settled into the barracks area and began to get ready to repair the vehicle that we had been called to fix. We had been told that we could expect to be at FOB Smitty for about a month to a month and a half. We expected the repair job to be difficult, but we finished in just under four days. The damage wasn’t that extensive, and we were able to get everything ready for the vehicle to be used again. Since we had finished so early, this left us with a lot of free time on our hands. As is typical among

Marines with nothing to do, we very quickly grew bored. People are under the impression that war is a constant buzz of activity and fighting. This, however, is not the truth. About 90% of the time spent in a combat zone is sheer boredom, interrupted only briefly by brief bursts of activity mixed with sheer, utter terror. This is the actual combat part of war. Boredom, not bullets or bombs, is the biggest danger that is faced by a military member. After a couple of weeks of just sitting around, we were bored to tears. We were itching for a firefight, attack, hell, even a case of lice. Just something to break up the monotony. Since we were forbidden to leave the base, we were forced to find ways around the base to stay entertained. We spent an entire day emptying the powder out of rounds and trying to make a bomb out of a canteen (it didn't go off). We perfected trick shots with a BB gun, trying to shoot cigarettes out of each other's' mouths with it (yes, there were quite a few intentional misses). We also would sneak up on each other at all hours of the day and night, just goofing around. Our favorite activity, by far, though, was called the FOB 500. The FOB 500 required a dark night and a Humvee. We had established a sort of track that ran inside the entire perimeter of the base. What we would do is drive the Humvee and try to complete five laps as quickly as possible. After the driver had finished his last lap, he was supposed to drive through the warehouse and the timer would be stopped as soon as he crossed the threshold of the opposite door, which is also where we started the "track." Looking back, I realize how dumb and dangerous it was, but you need to understand, we were young, in combat, and exceptionally bored. Obviously, this was not a proper use of military equipment. I'm certain that some of the Staff NCO's on base knew what was going on (after all, it's hard to ignore the growl of a Humvee engine being redlined as it raced around a base at night) but, for some reason, they let us be. The night of February 10th, 2006, was a cold, exceptionally dark night. The clouds had covered the face of the moon, and it was difficult to see anything at all without the use of night vision goggles. We realized that we had a perfect night to do the FOB 500, possibly for one of the last times since we were scheduled to leave in the next couple of days. After discussing the issue, we all agreed that we wanted to do it one more time. We got dressed, went over to the motor pool, took out the Humvee we always used, and drove to the northern side of the warehouse, where we would always start the laps. After a quick round of rock, paper, scissors to determine who would go first (always throw out scissors), I was the first to go. I climbed in, adjusted what needed to be adjusted, and, on Sam's signal, I mashed the accelerator to the floor. The Humvee quickly gained speed as I flew around the perimeter of the base. The sensation and experience of flying over the desert sand in an open air Humvee in the winter is unimaginable to anyone who hasn't experienced it. It is complete and utter freedom. You forget that you're in a combat zone and you are just completely alive. I honestly forget what my time was, but I do remember that I was disappointed when it was over. There was no chance that we would be able to continue this at Camp Fallujah and I wished that I could do this again. I already missed the sensation of freedom and exhilaration that I had experienced and seriously considered going again when we were done, just so I could revel in the feeling one more time. I had, however, to wait my turn. It was not, however, completely enjoyable. As I had driven through the warehouse after completing my last lap, I had a distinctly uneasy feeling, almost like I was being watched. I just shrugged it off, however, as I was certain there was no one

around that area of the base except for the three of us. Still trying to ignore the feeling that I had, I got out of the Humvee and turned it over to Sam. He took off when we gave the signal and, again, I forget his time, but I do remember he finished a little more quickly than I did, so it looked like I was the loser of this round, regardless of how quickly Chris finished. Continued in The Ghoul Part 2.