

# The Ghoul Part 3

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

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Chris and I both groaned. We knew Sam was one to go a little bit too far, but this was too much. "That's absolutely disgusting," I said. "That used to be a person. That is so disrespectful. You're unbelievable. How would you feel if someone pissed on you when you were dead?" "I wouldn't care," Sam called back over his shoulder as he finished up. "I'd be dead. Plus, I already told you this country and these people cost me everything I care about. I'm getting some payback the only way I can." "I think I'm going to be sick," Chris said. "It's probably just a little bit of a feeling from the crash," Sam replied. "No, it's not," Chris said. "It's from watching you piss on a dead body." Sam started to get a little upset again. You could see it from the flush of his cheeks and the way his voice took on a slight edge. He had tried to be funny, and it had backfired. Neither Chris nor I were laughing. It looked like he was going to argue, but instead, he puffed his cheeks out, and we heard him take a deep, long breath in. "Okay," Sam said. "I'll stop. Wanna help me get him back in the hole?" Chris and I were agreeable to this, so long as we didn't have to touch it with our hands. The sooner we got everything back to normal, the sooner we'd be able to get in the rack. Using our feet, he pushed and rolled the corpse back to the edge of the hole. With a final tap of our boots, the body rolled back in and hit the bottom face down. Chris had walked over and gotten the board. He drug it over the hole and covered it the same way he had before and took a step back. If you didn't know that a hole was there, it looked just like it was a board lying on the ground. We climbed back into the Humvee and, without another word, we slowly drove back to the motor pool. We got in without anybody seeing us, and we snuck out the back door. We evaded the roaming guard (they were too busy talking in order to really notice anything anyway) and we got back into the barracks without any problems. We walked into our "room" and quickly got settled and ready for bed by flashlight. Exhausted, we all lay down on our separate cots. As we lay there, I kept remembering what had happened in the warehouse. The fact that Sam had actually peed on the body was really eating at me. I knew Sam had crossed the line, but I also realized that it wouldn't make any sense to talk to him about it. I decided to try and let it go. Before I fell asleep, however, that feeling of being watched again returned, stronger than before and pervasive, almost like there was something leaning over me staring down. I knew it had to be my imagination; there was nobody else in the room with us. Additionally, I chalked it up to what we had just seen and done. I tried to clear my mind, but even though I was bone tired, sleep would not come.

I tossed and turned, flipping towards the wall, then back towards the door. My mind kept returning to the body that we had seen? Who was he? What had happened? Did he have a family and did they know what had happened? What did he ... I awoke in the pitch dark. I hadn't even realized that I was starting to fall asleep. I felt wary, however. I knew something wasn't right. I wondered what had woken me when suddenly I heard automatic weapons fire right outside the barracks. That must have been what woke me up. The rhythmic thump of heavy rounds impacting the walls (which were right on the other side of the barracks) along with the rat-a-tat-tat of the gun also caused Sam and Chris to fly out of the rack. Reacting purely on instinct, and still half asleep, Chris, Sam, and I grabbed our flak jackets, helmets, weapons, and ran outside. In our rush, we hadn't even had time to get dressed. We were all wearing PT gear (green shorts, green t-shirt) and we had slipped our boots on without bothering with socks. As we tore around the corner, however, we stopped in shock. There was nobody there, nobody shooting, all was quiet and dark. We looked at each other, wide-eyed with confusion. We looked around, but matter how hard we tried to discern it, we were unable to discover what had happened. We did notice, however, that the guard, usually loud and walking around, was nowhere to be seen. I was just about to remark on this when we heard a brief, shriek whistling sound, and, suddenly, the world exploded. Apparently, the machine gun fire had been a signal to begin an attack. Mortars began to rain down all around us, but miraculously we weren't hit in the onslaught. We had all immediately dropped to the ground and were hugging it as closely as we could. There was a brief lull, so we got up and ran for the safety of the barracks. Before we got there, however, the mortar attack resumed, and the back wall of the barracks exploded in the shower of hot metal, dust, and dirt. The force of the explosion threw all three of us backwards, and when we raised our eyes, we could see the barracks had been reduced to a pile of rubble. No mortar had the power to do that. I realized in that instant that it was not just mortars that we were being hit with, but instead heavy artillery, probably at least a 105-millimeter piece, a serious piece of hardware. Just then, mortars or whatever they were lobbing at us started landing again so we ran for the only safety that we could think of: the warehouse that we had been in earlier that night. The mortars seem to chase us as we sprinted across the sand. Our breathing was harsh and was coming in short, sharp gasps as our legs pumped as fast as we could, sprinting as fast as possible for the scant security that the warehouse would offer. With the final desperate burst of speed, we dove inside and rolled to the right inside the missing door towards the wall. We quickly put our backs against the wall, put our head between our knees, and waited for the onslaught to stop. No sooner had we thought about it, that the mortars did indeed stop. We waited a couple of minutes, but the attack had seemed to have come to an end. As the realization came that the attack had ended and we had survived, we briefly took stock of the situation. We had our helmets, our flak jackets, our weapons, and little else. We knew that there had been nobody else in the barracks, (the infantry company was running patrols that particular night and all of the higher ups slept in the command center), so we didn't have to worry about anyone being killed in the attack. I glanced at Sam, and let out a breath that I have been unconsciously holding. "That was freaking intense," I said to him "Are you OK?" Sam asked. This question was directed at me, and I answered in the affirmative. "I think I'll be OK, just bring me a new pair of pants." I didn't

mean to be funny; it was just the first thing that came to mind. Chris snorted and then began to laugh. Not a giggle or a snicker, but great, loud, gasping laughs. I couldn't help it; I began to join in, and then Sam did as well. For a solid couple minutes, we couldn't contain the hilarious laughter that issued for from us. I have no doubt that it was a direct result of having lived through a mortar attack, but it felt spectacular to laugh. All of our stress and worry came pouring forth from us in one hilarious moment. The laughter slowly died away, and we all wiped away the tears that had come from laughing so hard. Eventually, we slipped back into silence. After a good five or 10 minutes, our heartbeats had slowed down enough, and we had caught our breath. We quickly discussed our options and decided that we had better head over to the command center. We had no idea if that's where everyone had gone to, but it was as good of a place to start looking as any. We were just about to get up when Chris grabbed my knee and squeezed, it was so hard that it brought an involuntary cry of pain to my lips. "What is going on?" he stammered out. "What do you mean?" I asked. "What is going on?" he repeated. I looked at him, trying to figure out what he was talking about, but he didn't say a word. I noticed that he was not looking at me, but past me, over my shoulder. I turned around and followed his gaze to where it was directed, and I noticed that he was staring at the far wall. The wall where he had almost crashed. The spot where had hit the hole. The hole where we had reburied the body. I turned on the flashlight that I had clipped to my vest earlier and directed the weak beam towards the spot where we had put the body. It was quite a distance away, but the beam clearly revealed the board that we had placed over the hole thrown back, and the gaping maw of the hole stood open. Seemingly as if we had one mind, we all stood up and began creeping towards the hole, sure about what we would see when we got there, but not believing. As we crept, we all began to shake like a tree in autumn as the wind blows. We reached the edge of the hole and slowly, cautiously, peered in. The weak beam of the flashlight revealed empty sand in the bottom of the hole without a trace of the body that had been there. We were suddenly overcome by a feeling of sheer, utter terror. As one we turned, and ran as fast as we could out of the warehouse, across the compound, and into the command center. I personally think we ran even faster than we did when the mortars were landing. We tore into the center and, thankfully, no one was right behind the door, or we would've knocked them out. We all started talking at once, too terrified to make sense of each other or what we had just seen. "Did you see..." "Empty! What the..." "Missing! How is it missing! "There were no mortars there! No one came past the wire!" "What? WHAT? WHAT?" "STOP!" Sam screamed, and we all quickly lapsed into silence. In the quiet we could hear voices from the command center, all raised, talking about the mortar attack. It seems that our outburst and mad entry hadn't been noticed. "We don't know what happened, so just calm down." Sam lowered his voice to just above a whisper. "We know the body is missing, but we don't know exactly how it went missing. Somebody may have found it. Someone may have taken it. If it was one of our guys, we'd know soon enough. He looked at Chris. "I know what you're thinking Chris. I know how much you love those movies and shows. Stop. Before you even begin. There is no walking body around here. I can see that look in your eye." Chris looked at Sam with wide eyes. "I wasn't going to say there was a zombie around Sam, honest. I know that that's all fake. But, what the hell happened? Where is it?" "We'll find out in the morning. What we

need to do now is head into the center where everybody is, or they'll think that we bought it in the attack. If they find out that we ran to the warehouse, we won't have to worry about finding a body; they'll have three fresh ones. We'll look around in the morning and see what we can see. Maybe the concussions from the explosions moved the board and body out of the hole. Watch, it's going to be right by the hole when we check in the morning. With that decided, we went into the command center where our presence was noticed, but our earlier absence was not. We all claimed a piece of real estate on the floor behind the radio and stretched out to try and sleep. We were too tired to continue talking, so the remainder of the night was passed in silence as we were left alone with her thoughts and listen to the hum of activity around the command center. Eventually, sheer exhaustion took over, and we fell into a fitful, nightmare filled sleep, full of dead things and the feeling of ever-increasing dread. Continued in The Ghoul Part 4