

Another insufferably hot day on foot patrol. It was Dave's turn to take point, leading the six-man section through a crowded market square. Christ, it seemed like every 'Hodgie' was out this morning, he thought.

Slow and alert, his comms chirping in his ear in the background—the sounds were irritating and comforting at the same time. "Gun!" Dave had caught sight of a handgun through the maze of people. It was held by a boy probably no more than seven or eight years old. Weapon up. He had already taken the slack out of the trigger, but he hesitated. Dave blinked and looked back knowing he would have to take the shot to protect the guys. This time, no weapon.

"Sitrep! Sitrep!"

The calls were insistent in his ear. "All clear. Proceed." Dave could not understand what had just happened. Did he endanger everybody by hesitating, or had he just imagined this and nearly killed a child? Chances were that the boy had been set up by someone in the crowd to create a big incident to turn people against the Canadians. It was messing with his head; it was all fucked up. This whole place is fucked up, he thought.

"How could you be that stupid? I can't see how you are my son."

Two nights after the market patrol, Dave bolted up from his cot, remembering a long-ago comment from his father. Putting up with his father's anger over minor things had been nothing new for the fifteen-year-old. But that time was different. That time his father had embarrassed him in front of his friends for not closing the cabin door on the family boat. Explanations or excuses of any kind were always ignored, so he simply stopped talking to his father. He hated him and could not wait to get out of there. On his next birthday, despite his old man's comments about the military, Dave was in the cadets. A year after that he was a reserve force infanteer, and his request for transfer to regular force was quickly accepted.

He was surprised at how easy military life seemed; it was as if he had been made to be a soldier. He loved the challenges and the adrenaline rush, the weapons, and he excelled in the field. Recognition from his NCOs and respect from younger guys gave him a type of confidence that he had never known. He was a soldier, a man, and he needed nothing from anybody.

But this would all come crashing down here in Afghanistan. After that day, it took everything he had to keep his anger in check. He was losing his mental grip and finally went to see the medical people. He was given one day off, but it only got worse. He was packed up and sent home to Canada.

It was over; just like that he was a failure once again.