



A Foreign Affair

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photography

Dirt

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The sun rising over the mountains in the east would be picturesque if any of us cared. That novelty wore off by the end of the first month. Now all it means is the rays are going to start beating on us while we wear all this gear and these clothes and carry all this shit and walk for miles and miles and *it is so fucking hot.*

The plowed poppy fields make five kilometers feel like a hundred. Every time I take a step I sink up to my ankles and somehow a pinch of dirt finds its way into my boot. It doesn't matter how tight I tie them; it always creeps in. *This shit is everywhere.* It ends up in my pockets, down my back, in my magazine pouches; I wonder if

I'll ever be able to get rid of it all. It sticks to everything. This whole place sticks to everything. One day I'll learn that it sticks forever.

No matter what anyone says about it being a dry heat, 120 degrees is miserable. Long pants. Long sleeves. Leather boots. A helmet. Body armor that is loaded down with so much shit that it hangs on my shoulders with 40 lbs of smothering weight. Nothing breathes. I can't breathe. *This whole place is suffocating.*

I can't remember the last time I was soaked from sweat. There was no moisture anymore, just a constant salty crust on every part of me. I feel older. At 27 years old, I could easily

be mistaken for 40. I feel 50.

Four months deep in a six-month rotation. I keep a daily log. It helps track the time, even though time has no meaning here. I suppose the log is meaningless, but I keep it anyway. Every day is the same. The only thing that changes is the height of the poppies.

I'm not even sure what we are looking for... *or what's looking for us.* As I look around at the 15 others trudging through the tilled landscape, it still bewilders me to see how different everyone is, even though they all look the same. Each has a different personality that I've figured out over time while keeping my distance. Deployments are short. Shorter for some.

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