

"COIN"

By Matt Gallagher

The war nearly seemed over when Red 1 began faking al-Qaeda. Not just one or two, either – whole cells of sham terror, jihadis fabricated out of magic desert air for captains and colonels to freak over. And freak they did. White people turn pink when they get angry, so there were many meetings of important pink-faced men screaming at each other, trying to figure out how, and what, and why. They all wanted to go home, for good this time. That meant the al-Qaeda needed to go away.

The other officers at the outpost accused Red 1 of doing it for attention, or accolades. "We're trying to end this," they said. "What the hell is he doing?" They didn't like him, and truth to the shrine, neither did I. He smiled too easy but trusted not enough and reminded me of a pill bug, but a pill bug with a big gun who thought it knew Arabic. But he was my officer and I was his terp. We needed to be one, or something like it.

That's how I knew he faked the al-Qaeda. He faked them like a motherfucker, and then they became real. It wasn't for attention or accolades, though. The other officers were wrong about that. Red 1 didn't want to end the war. He wanted to save it.

The town of Tarhalah was backwater Sunni country, a hamlet on the Diyala River with a cement bridge and olive groves. Baghdad was only ninety kilometers away, but it might as well have been the moon. When they learned where I'd been assigned, my uncles in the capital joked I was translating for donkeys. They weren't talking about the occupiers.

I'd grown up through the war, with it. I'd been ten when I heard my first bomb, eleven when I saw my first burnt corpse. I was thirteen when a friend got deaded by a loose bullet. Three years after that, a cousin's university closed because of the battles. He responded by joining Jaish al-Rashideen. My mother said that was proof he'd never belonged in school to begin with, only a fool with shorbeh for brains would do something like that. Then he went north with the militia and didn't come back. My mother's jokes stopped then, and his parents began visiting the Garden of the Martyrs.

But we had it good in Yarmouk. Government ministers lived there, which meant lots of guards and lots of checkpoints and lots of construction projects. Car bombs and death squads happened to other parts of Baghdad; we were too deep in the Sunni belly to deal with the sectarianisms. The few Shi'a families we'd known before the Collapse turned to bedouins after it, ghosting in the dark of night without even a peace out or a salaam.

I know why, now. Then I didn't understand why anyone would leave behind their PlayStation. The American soldiers who visited Yarmouk were calm, grateful to be in a neighborhood not trying to dead them. My sisters and I sold them sodas and flatbread, rapped them Tupac songs. We even took some swimming once, to the pool. Our father was the only dentist in the area, which Americans always laughed about. But it was a good thing to be, and gainful. The war made people's teeth hurt.

In Tarhalah things were different. The war hadn't just touched everything. It'd taken it. The economy depended on dates and olives being transported and sold at the large markets in Baqubah and Taji.

That'd been disturbed by the Collapse, then super-blasted by the al-Qaeda battles. By the time I got there, things had begun to recover, though the memories hadn't.

"You stare too much," an old farmer said on my first day. I'd never seen mud huts before. "This is what a harvest looks like."



In some ways, the townspeople hated me more than the occupiers. They called me a traitor, a rich bitch from the city. Ba'athist scum. I tried explaining we were Sunni kin, fellows in the new Iraq. Why the hostilities? They hissed at me. Real to Allah hissing. I'd have been better off as a spy Jew. I'd stopped being a cherry long before Red 1 and his soldiers arrived. I knew how to talk to the townspeople, how to sniff out their lies. How to threaten them to speak truth and when to ignore them for the same. My old unit liked to do raids and break things and shoot faces. They were good at it, too. But Red 1 said he and his soldiers were going to be different. He said I needed to be different, too.

"Different is good," I said. "But Tarhalah is the same."

"My friend," Red 1 said to me. He was smiling and patting my shoulder but I could tell he didn't mean it. We'd just met. We couldn't be habibis yet. "What do you know about COIN operations?"

"Coin." I swished the word around my mouth like it was a cube of ice. "Lots. Metal moneys."

"Well." Red 1's forehead crunched together to form little trenches on it. Then he smiled again, and I thought he meant this one. "Actually, yeah. That's a great place to start."

COIN stood for counterinsurgency, which stood for many things. Hearts and minds. Clear, hold, build. Oil spots. Ink spots. Information operations. Stability operations. Armed humanitarianisms. Knowns and unknowns. Cordon and ask. Cordon and knock. Cordon and no response. Cordon and kick down the fucking door. I learned lots of words and phrases over the next few months, lots of words and phrases that had to do with war. The Americans seemed to have no end of them, like there was a treasure chest in the Green Zone where they kept them all. I stopped trying to understand the differences when I realized they all meant the same for me: go to the meeting and terp, terp.

Meetings were big to COIN, and terping was big for meetings. Sometimes they were shuras for top officers with clean uniforms and top sheiks with dry-cleaned dishdashas. The food tasted best at these, and I could eat knowing a country donkey wasn't going to dead me with undercooked meat. Mostly though, Red 1 took us to small meetings around Tarhalah, to talk about electricity or garbage pickup.

"These are Iraqi hilly-billies," I told Red 1. I loved that word. It was perfect. "They live like this because they choose to. If they want those things, they will do it themselves."

He just smiled at me –always smiling, loud American teeth blaring out like swords – and told me to keep translating good.

Of all the tribal leaders and chiefs, we met most with Mayor Bob and Imam Ali. They were half-brothers, the same age, the two most powerful sheiks in Tarhalah, and they hated each other very much.

"Ali is short for Ali Baba," Mayor Bob liked to tell us. "What kind of holy man runs a car dealership?"

"The mayor is bad, very bad," Imam Ali often said. "What kind of Muslim goes by Bob?"

The mayor and the imam had set aside their blood feud when they were both awarded contracts for a water treatment plant. That didn't stop them from blaming each other for why the plant was taking so slow. By the time Red 1 and his soldiers arrived, it was still just a collection of blocks and plastic pipes along the riverbank.

"You are young and rush too much," they said, when Red 1 pressed about the plant. "COIN takes time."

Red 1 did not smile at that.

Red 1 may have been young for an American officer – twenty-three, three years older than what my terp papers said and five years older than me for reals – but he read lots of books. He read them at the outpost between missions, he read them in the Humvee during the overwatches, he read them at meals between bites of food. Then he'd repeat things from those books to the rest of us. Things about the famous General Pegasus being the COIN apostle, making us all COIN disciples. (Muslims could be disciples, too, he said. At least for this.) Things about winning the population and human terrains. Some dead French donkey had written about the importance of census to COIN, so we spent our whole July walking around Tarhalah asking who lived in each house, and for how long.

The soldiers hated censusing but still did it. They were good soldiers like that. And Red 1 got so excited for those census numbers, he reminded me of a fat Rejectionist eating bars of chocolata.

Near the end of the July month, Red 1 said we were doing good work. Then he quoted some dead



Chinese donkey, saying we were draining the swamp to find the insurgency fish. There was a long pause, quiet like a good Baghdad morning. Then one of the young sergeants raised his hand.

“But sir,” the sergeant said, “Aren’t we in a desert?”

All the soldiers laughed. So did I. Red 1 turned pale as an egg, and the swamp jokes went on for many months.

The census was before Red 1 began faking al-Qaeda, but that’s probably when he got the idea for it. We’d gone to a meeting with Imam Ali. The imam lived on the outskirts of Tarhalah, past the bazaar and near the green lake that smelled like cow piss, in a house of concrete blocks. He was too important for a hut of mud. After a meal of fried eggplant and goat falafel, the imam congratulated Red 1 on finishing the census.

“You all worked very hard,” the imam said in Arabic. “All the townspeople say so.”

“Yes,” Red 1 said in Arabic. “Thank you.”

“Though you should’ve waited until fall,” the imam said. “For the olive harvest. Many of the farmers are south now, planting orange trees.”

“Argh,” Red 1 said in English. “Fuck me with a tire iron.”

“Translate that?” I asked. I’d been sticking slices of goat in my pockets when no one was looking. The black soldiers said white people have no tongue for flavor, and they were right. The outpost food tasted like spit.

“Jesus.” Red 1 was frustrated, I could tell by the vein pulsing in his forehead. What the prophet-not-as-good-as-Muhammad had to do with things, I didn’t know. “Ask about the water treatment plant.”

The imam claimed to have his order for the water tanks and sand filters lined up and ready, just as soon as Mayor Bob got the correct valves and filter heads and brackets.

“He ordered the wrong ones through a bad contractor,” Imam Ali said. “A friend of his. Not the best man for the job.”

Mayor Bob had alleged similar regarding the imam’s water tanks, but Red 1 left that spider hole alone. Instead he sighed and asked where the war had gone.

“Not gone,” the imam said, tossing a dessert date into his mouth. “Just waiting.”

At that, the vein in Red 1’s forehead pulsed again.

On the drive back to the outpost, Red 1 turned around in his seat and poked my leg. I smacked the sleep-drunk off my face and pretended to have not been napping.

“They say COIN takes time,” he said. “But time is the one thing we don’t have enough of.”

All the terps had heard the rumors about the American withdrawal. Most were trying to get their immigration papers in order. Me, I was sending every paycheck home to my mother and sisters. My father had gut cancer, so he couldn’t fix people’s teeth again until he was better. That left me to make the moneys, and was why I’d come to Tarhalah. No one knew that, though, not even the other terps. My bitches were my own. “When?”

“A year,” Red 1 said. “But that’s not long enough.”

I was counting dinars in my head, twelve months’ worth. Red 1 seemed to counting something else.

He came to the terps’ room that evening. I was playing Madden against some greasy Jordanian scared to leave the wire. He wasn’t long for the outpost, and his team wasn’t long for the game. My Eagles were beating his Chiefs 35 to 10.

Red 1 called me out to the hallway. “Pause,” I told the Jordanian. “I’ll choke you in your sleep if you run a play while I’m gone.”

The kid thought I was serious, nodding with long eyes like mirrors. I felt bad for him but he was soft and terps couldn’t be soft, not in Tarhalah. I walked into the dim of the hallway.

“Wasn’t there a big-time terrorist here a couple years ago?” Red 1 was never one for easy talk. He must’ve been a bad sex-haver. “Al-Qaeda dude.”

“The Khayal.”

“What’s that?”

“Means shadow.” The townspeople talked about The Khayal in hot whispers and flitting eyes, even to each other. They talked of how he sniped American soldiers from their roofs. They talked of how he bombed the famous golden mosque in Samarra. They talked of how he promised them a nation



free of crusaders and Rejectionists, a Caliphate that'd make all Sunnis rich from the oil moneys in the north. The Khayal noised very good at speeches.

The townspeople also talked about how The Khayal had gone away five years before to fight the Mahdi Army and not come back, and was probably dead.

Red 1 didn't care about that, though. "People are still scared of him?" he asked. "Even just his name?"

"Yes," I said. "They say he could jump through shadow holes on one side of Tarhalah only to jump out another shadow hole on the other side. Dark shaytan magic. Hilly-billies, they belief anything."

"Great." Something like fire crossed Red 1's face as he said that. "He's perfect."

I didn't know what he meant by that but he wouldn't explain. "Keep it up," was all he said before walking back to his hooch. So I went back into the terps' room and finished whooping up the Jordanian at Madden.

"This is good for you," I told him after I scored another touchdown, because it was.

It took two weeks for The Khayal to show up in intel reports. Red 1 was smart about it. On patrols through the bazaar, he'd stop and talk with the ice man, the barber, the jewelry boss, and say, "The men at the tea bar say that The Khayal is back! Ha ha ha, aren't they stupid!" Then he'd go to the tea bar and say that the men from the bazaar had told him the same. "Ha ha ha! Aren't they stupid!"

Then he left it alone. This townspeople told this townspeople, who told this other townspeople, who told this other townspeople. Then those townspeople told the other officers who came back to the outpost and said, "Oh no, oh no, The Khayal is come back to Tarhalah!"

Red 1 just sat there with his arms crossed, puckering out his lips to keep from smiling.

I thought he'd turned mad. I mean, he was mad. Who fakes al-Qaeda's? But he was mad like a wizard. Once the colonels read the intel reports about The Khayal, they sent bribe moneys to give to sources to find him.

"What are we going to do with this?" I asked Red 1 before a patrol, when no one else could hear. We had whole backpacks filled with American dollars and Iraqi dinars to hand out. "How can moneys find a man who doesn't exist?"

He began telling me to keep translating good, but I insisted. "I'll tell," I said. So he told instead.

Red 1 didn't belief the American army was doing good by leaving Iraq. We created this mess, he said. We have to see it through. He thought that the big American bosses, the politics men and the generals, didn't care about peace for Iraq. They only cared about calm, and that the al-Qaeda's and the Jaish al-Mahdis and the militias were just waiting for the Americans to go away so they could go back to the battles again.

He was probably right about that. My uncles in Baghdad had said the same.

"The key to COIN is time," Red 1 said. "But that's the one thing our nation won't allow for. We're a bashful empire."

His plan was to extend the war, one fake jihadi at a time, to keep the Americans there longer. He thought the longer they stayed, the better chance Iraq had for a real peace that would last. There would be more time to make security, more time to train Iraqi army and Iraqi police, more time to build roads and health clinics and maybe even finish the water treatment plant along the river. He quoted some still-alive Australian donkey about the three pillars of COIN: security, economics and politics. All those things needed more years. Even decades, he said.

The fake jihadis would begin in Tarhalah, then go elsewhere. The Khayal was just the beginning. He'd done lots of researches in the files. There was an al-Qaeda named Ali the Prince from 2005 he wanted to bring back, and a Jaish al-Rashideen named Mahmoud from 2007, and an Iranian named Jassim from 2008 who the townspeople believed was part of the Revolutionary Guard. These men weren't pelicans, either. They all led big terror cells, which is why he'd chosen them.

"I wish there was another way," Red 1 said. "But there's not."

Then he asked me if he could trust me, that he needed my help to accomplish the mission and that it'd only be the two of us, because all the other Americans were brave and good soldiers but they wanted to go home and didn't really care about Iraq. Neither did I, truth to the shrine. Country meant something different to us than it did to Americans. But I did care about my mother and my sisters, and I cared about my father getting good from the gut cancer and going back to fixing people's teeth. More



time meant more moneys. So I said yes and became Red 1's habibi.

The war went to plan through the summer and into fall. The stories about The Khayal were everywhere in Tarhalah, and the Ali the Prince stories popped off quick as mortars. So the colonels kept sending bribe moneys. Red 1 gave out the moneys to lots of townspeople as long as they said they wouldn't buy weapons. "For the local economy," he said, and it was. The barber bought a giant flatscreen for his store, and everyone in the bazaar gathered there to watch soccer matches.

"We love Red 1," the townspeople said, to each other and then to me. At first I thought it was just because he was the moneys-man. Everyone loves a moneys-man. Then I saw how he'd stay and talk with them for a long time, much longer than the other officers, sometimes about war stuff, but also family stuff, Tarhalah stuff, life stuff. I saw how they looked at him different than they looked at other Americans, how they looked at him different than they looked at me. There wasn't cold bite in their eyes with him, but something else. Maybe they really do love him, I thought, and not just for the moneys.

Well. Not totally for the moneys.

The colonels also began sending things they'd said they didn't have before. New ballistics armor for the humvees. Super scopes for the soldiers to put on their guns that could see across all of Tarhalah. Racist dogs that were supposed to sniff out and attack hidden jihadis but instead sniffed out and attacked all brown people, to include good and loyal terps.

Fucking stupid racist dogs.

It was all junk for real war, not pretend war, but the colonels didn't know about our pretend war so we had to pretend to need the junk. "Sirs, thank you so much!" Red 1 would say on the radio, puckering out his lips to keep from smiling. "This will be very helpful in finding The Khayal."

The stories about the al-Qaeda even helped with the water treatment plant, which we learned at a meeting with Mayor Bob. The mayor lived in the center of town, between the old mosque and the field with rocket shells, in a house of adobe bricks. He was too important for a hut of mud. The soldiers and me liked going to meetings here, because the mayor owned a pool and sometimes his niece would go outside in a burqini to tease us. She was young and beautiful and I would call out from the humvee, rapping her 50 Cent sexy songs, saying I would buy her many jewelries for one kiss. Mostly I did it to make the soldiers laugh, but also because there was a chance she would say yes. She never did, but even from the humvee I could see her laughing, and my uncles had taught me that kisses often start with laughs.

But that fall there was no swimming pool talks, not even one sneak of the niece and her burqini. Red 1 brought me inside as soon as we got there, and after five minutes of bad easy talk, he asked the sheik about the filter heads. When the mayor began hemming and hawking, Red 1 interrupted.

"We have intel about The Khayal," he said. "His rage isn't so much with Americans, not anymore. It's with tribal chiefs he believes don't have the townspeople's best interests at heart. I know you're a man of the people, Mayor. And I know this thing with the filter heads isn't your fault. But some in Tarhalah, well, they're not so sure. They want that water treatment plant. And people are going to talk."

Mayor Bob looked like he'd swallowed a scorpion. Then he shook his fist at the ceiling and demanded to know who in Tarhalah would dare speak of their mayor that way. He was a loyal mayor, a good mayor, dedicated to his town. And this was the thanks he got?

Red 1 gave no names and no specifics, saying that Mayor Bob was the best mayor Tarhalah would ever have, but also mentioned The Khayal again. Five minutes later, the mayor promised to have all the correct filter heads to the riverbank by the month's end.

"That was crazy," I whispered to Red 1 as we walked out to the humvees. I'd hunched over my shoulders so only he could hear me, but could feel the mayor in his doorway, his eyes on our backs.

"I'm not worried," Red 1 said, but the vein in his forehead was pulsing.



The for-reals war came back on the Day of Arafah, a late morning in the November month when the air was beginning to snap again. I was in the terp shower thinking about Mayor Bob's niece and baller things to say to her. Then the road bomb blasted into the sky, the biggest noise I'd ever heard,

like it was the end of the world. I ran out of the shower and to my room to change and in five minutes Red 1 had us all going to the black smoke clouds on the other side of Tarhalah.

The road bomb had blown apart a humvee and the soldiers in it. The driver lived, sort of, with a half-brain and a shorbeh face, and so did the gunner, because he went flying through the air and landed in a ditch. The others didn't. The humvee had flipped onto its side and the windshield and front right tire were just gone. Dark scars marked the bottom of the vehicle, ballistics armor gnarled and chewed up like old gum.

It had been many months since I'd seen dead bodies, and I'd never seen dead Americans up close before, and I tried very tough to look like the soldiers putting the bodies in bags: fury, but firm. But it was hard, because the soldiers in the humvee had been my friends, and now they were dead.

"Today is a day of repentance," I told Red 1. "A holy day. For Sunni and Shi'a."

Red 1 reminded us all to drink water.

We found the Jordanian terp under the humvee. If the bomb hadn't deaded him the vehicle had – torso up, he was more flesh juice than man. I told what was left that I was sorry. It didn't really matter what I was sorry for.

Red 1 stayed quiet that day, both at the bomb spot and later at the outpost. He told me to reach out to sources in town while he took calls from Imam Ali and Mayor Bob, who both promised to find who had done the bomb. I talked to many townspeople, but no one knew anything. Everyone was surprised because everyone thought peace had preturned to Tarhalah, because of COIN, and the moneys, and because of Red 1.

But the war wasn't waiting anymore.

Late into the night, a chief source called and said she'd heard something at the tea bar.

"The Khayal," she said.

"No," I said. "That can't be." I stopped before saying why that couldn't be, but the source insisted.

"It was The Khayal," she said again. "He was tortured at Abu Ghraib and then let go. Now he seeks blood revenge for the dead."

After the phone call, I went and told Red 1 what the source had said. He looked very sad and kept rubbing at his temples, saying nothing.

"Today wasn't your fault," I said. "It is Tarhalah's."

"Only fools and demagogues speak in absolutes," he sharpened, so I left his hooch. It took me a long time to understand what he meant, and to know his anger wasn't for me.

The Iraqi police brought Ali the Prince to the outpost the next morning.

They'd beaten him with their rifle butts and flashlights after catching him on a rooftop hiding under blankets. A leper of blood and bruises, he was tall and thin and caked in dirt, not because of the police, but because he was a poor. He also couldn't have been more than fifteen years old, three mustache hairs poking out at the world like broken teeth.

The boy looked scared and wore rags that said TEXAS RANGERS, WORLD SERIES CHAMPIONS. The soldiers laughed, because the Texas Rangers were not World Series Champions, but second-place losers, and clothes of second-place losers got sent to places like Tarhalah. I laughed with them, but didn't really get it. Clothes were clothes for poors like Ali the Prince. It didn't matter what was on them.

Red 1 laughed for another reason when he saw the young terrorist shaking in the hallway. "This is not Ali the Prince," he told the police captain. Then he pulled out a paper from his pocket. It was a photo of a mean-looking man with curly black hair and a thick power beard. "This is Ali the Prince. From our files."

The teenager spat on the ground at Red 1's feet when he saw the photograph, his eyes turning to flares. He didn't look as scared anymore. A police backhanded him, but Red 1 stepped in, and told me to ask the boy why he was angry.

It didn't take long. The boy was a boy. He had no swindles to him.

"My uncle," the boy said, pointing to the photograph. "He was Ali the Prince. Now I am Ali the Prince. It is my honor to hunt dog occupiers as he did."

The boy didn't know what had happened to his uncle, he hadn't seen him for many years, ever since American Delta Forces raided the family's house and taken him away in a hood. The family



bird had been shot in the process, a memory that still burned hot within the new Ali the Prince.

“Did you have anything to do with yesterday’s bomb?” I asked.

“No.” He shook his head. “I wish. But that was The Khayal.”

That didn’t seem to bother Red 1, at least not as much as what came out of the boy’s mouth next. “I became Ali Prince because of the stories in town. We all did. We knew it was our time.”

“Maybe they read COIN books, too,” I said to Red 1, trying to get a laugh. But his vein just pulsed and pulsed and he told the police captain to put Ali the Prince in a cell.

The weeks that followed were filled with gun battles and small road bombs. It was like my old unit, with the raids and breaking things and shooting faces. Red 1 and his soldiers proved to be good at those things, too, even though they weren’t COIN things. Red 1 stopped quoting from dead donkeys and caring about censusing. He wanted blood revenge for the dead, just like The Khayal.

Before patrols, Red 1 would hold up a bullet from his gun. “For Tarhalah,” he’d say, pounding his chest, and then the soldiers would cheer.

A new source called, saying The Khayal sometimes slept in a small hut south of Tarhalah. I wasn’t sure we could trust this new source, because he noised like a hilly-billy and said we needed to move quick because The Khayal could jump through shadow holes, but Red 1 thought it was worth looking into. So we went out on foot, in the dark, when the town was sleeping in shades of black and night-vision green.

I didn’t want to go. Midnight raids always made my belly tumble and, ever since the road bomb, leaving the wire was harder. But the soldiers needed me.

We arrived at the building and stacked against the side of it, the soldiers checking their rifles, me checking my bootlaces and helmet. A prickle went up my neck, like cold poison water. I knew we were being watched, but couldn’t say anything, because the baddest thing anyone can do on a midnight raid is talk, especially when that anyone is a terp. I looked in front of us. I looked in back of us. I looked across from us. There, in the upper floor window of a house, I saw the Jordanian terp, greasy as ever. In the window over stood my cousin, the one who’d gone north with Jaish al-Rashideen and never come back. I blinked and he was gone, they were both gone, but I’d seen them and they’d been strange and floaty and looking straight at me, with a fat question on their faces.

The soldiers went on their raid. The hut was empty. When I told Red 1 what I’d seen, the soldiers raided the house across the street, too. It was also empty. On the way back I thought about my cousin and the greasy Jordanian and what I’d seen and what it meant, maybe. At the outpost I couldn’t sleep, and went to Red 1’s hooch. He was awake, too, rubbing at his temples. The General Pegasus’s COIN bible was on his desk, open to a page in the middle.

“I think you’ve done something,” I told him. “I know it wasn’t on purpose, but you cracked some sort of shaytan magic when you brought back The Khayal’s name. The bombs. Boys becoming their dead terror uncles. Now my cousin is a phantom, and so is the soft Jordanian. I don’t know what you did but we need to stop it.”

Red 1 didn’t want to hear that. “You’re on outpost duty until I say otherwise,” he said. He thought I’d gone crazy. “Other terps will do the Tarhalah missions.”

Then he ordered me out of his hooch. We weren’t habibis anymore. The light on his desk went off as soon as I left but, for the minutes I stayed at the door, I didn’t hear any noises of sleep.

As winter neared my father got badder and badder. He threw up blood every night and loosed much weight and the doctors now thought they needed to remove parts of his gut to save him. Every time I called home my mother asked for moneys, but I was sending all the moneys I had home already, so there wasn’t much to talk about.

Red 1 had told the truth: I never went into Tarhalah anymore. I terped at meetings in the outpost, talking with townspeople while they waited for Red 1 or another American officer. It was easy work and I was still being paid the same but part of me missed the patrols and missions and big dangerousness, because every day out there was new and strange, and every day in the outpost was the same.

Part of me didn’t miss going out there.

Early in the December month, Imam Ali and Mayor Bob arrived together, which interested me.



Red 1 was out with the soldiers hunting for The Khayal, so I sat down with them and asked why'd they come.

"The water treatment plant," the mayor said. "We are ready."

"But the construction team," the imam said. "They are from Baghdad. They won't come to Tarhalah, because of the war here."

"But they will come if Americans do security for them," the mayor said.

"So that is why we're here, together," the imam said. "To ask Red 1 for that."

The two half-brothers clasped hands and held them aloft, to show their treaty. "For Tarhalah," they said.

I didn't believe what I was hearing, or what I was seeing. These men hated each other. But a couple weeks back I'd seen my dead cousin's phantom through a window, and a couple weeks before that, a jihadi had come back to life through a fake story. Two old men being habibis again couldn't surprise.

"This would have made Red 1 very happy," I told the mayor and imam, "back then. But now all he cares about is finding The Khayal. It's all the colonels care about. The Americans want to go home, but can't until the al-Qaeda go away."

I probably shouldn't have told the sheiks that, but they didn't seem to care. They just looked at one another and nodded.

"So if the Khayal is captured," Mayor Bob began.

"The Americans will do security for the water treatment plant," Imam Ali finished.

"I'm just a terp," I said. "But yeah, probably."

They nodded at each other again and left the outpost.

The plan formed in the next days. As long as Red 1's soldiers escorted the construction team into Tarhalah, and did security at the plant while they put everything together, the mayor and imam promised us The Khayal. They became mystical when I pushed for detail, and eventually Red 1 stopped making me ask.

"If they do have The Khayal," he said, "I don't care how."

The construction team came on The Day of Ashura, because they figured all the Rejectionists in Sadr City would be too busy whipping themselves to blow up their trucks. Red 1 came to the terps' room that morning and said I could come on patrol if I promised to keep any phantoms I saw to myself.

He was trying to be funny, but I didn't like it. Still, I agreed. I needed to breathe air again.

I put on my body armor and helmet and took my normal seat behind Red 1 in the lead humvee. Another terp walked up and gave me a look for being in that seat. I told him he was a donkey and to get into another vehicle.

On the drive to the riverbank, I asked Red 1 why the mayor and the imam now wanted to finish the plant so bad. They'd said "For Tarhalah" but I didn't think they'd meant it.

Red 1 sighed and rubbed at his temples. "I told them about us leaving," he said. "Their contracts stipulate that they only get full payment if the plant is functioning by the withdrawal."

"Oh," I said, wondering again about the moneys, and my family.

We spent the long day at the riverbank, watching the construction team crane water tanks, put pipes together, and show the mayor's people how to work the sand filters. The project wasn't quite done, but most of it was in place for the engineers. The townspeople would get clean water from the river now. More had happened for the plant in ten hours than had happened the whole before year.

Red 1 looked almost happy standing there, his pill bug frame and big gun a shadow over the river, watching the sun fall down the sky. He had that look on his face people get when they're taking a picture for themselves, so I left him alone. Then he told me to bring Mayor Bob and Imam Ali to him.

They came with big words and sloppy smiles, congratulating Red 1 on his triumph. Imam Ali said he'd proven himself the best American commander to ever come to Tarhalah. Mayor Bob said he'd ensure a statue of Red 1 was made to stand in front of the water treatment plant. Imam Ali said he'd hire a poet to write verses testifying to Red 1's courage. Mayor Bob offered to name city hall "The Red 1 City Hall" after the withdrawal.

Red 1 puckered out his lips to keep from smiling. "And The Khayal?" he asked.

They said he waited at the outpost for us, a poor farmer who had done the road bomb for dreams



of glory. Their sources had found him after much work and bribe moneys, and when they found him, they'd convinced him to turn himself in. For Tarhalah. Something like fire crossed Red 1's face. I knew that under his helmet, the vein in his forehead was pulsing. The sheiks had used swindles on us.

Something ugly came out of Red 1. "You're al-Qaeda," he sharped, his voice like I'd never heard before.

The imam laughed and the mayor shook his head, sadly.

"No," the imam said. "Tarhalah is our home."

"Do you even care about the water treatment plant?" Red 1 wasn't done. "Did you ever?"

"Of course," the mayor said. "Who do you think will run it after you leave? This is our home. These are our people."

Red 1 said nothing to that.

"We forgive you, habibi," the imam said. "It is a day of atonement."

"Go home," the mayor said. "Your man is waiting."

Then the meeting was over. Imam Ali walked north with his people, Mayor Bob walked south with his people, and Red 1 and I stood there along the river, looking at the water treatment plant.

Red 1 had puzzle all over him. I patted his shoulder and tried a joke. "Anything in the books about this?"

He laughed. He didn't mean it but that was okay. Then he quoted some dead Jew donkey: "Nearly all COIN literature is written by the losing side."

"So?" I asked.

"So." Red 1 loosed a quick whistle. "Yeah."

When we returned to the outpost, the farmer was waiting, just as the sheiks had said he would be. He wore a simple cotton thawb and had sags in his skin from the sun and stains on his hands from picking dates. Red 1 walked straight to him.

"Go home," he said to the man. "You don't belong here."

Discussion Questions

1. Who is the narrator? What do we know about them and their motivations at this stage of the story?
2. How does the introduction of the Khayal change the course of the story?
3. How do the narrator's three encounters with the Jordanian "terp" in this story contribute to both the story's structure and the portrait of the narrator himself?

