

Charlie Dale can't see shit. It's 4 AM, and the marine layer is blocking out what's left of the moon. He should be able to see in the dark with his PVS-14 night vision goggles. But Dale can't bring his single-tube into focus, no matter how much he twists the lenses back and forth. All his NVGs do is cast the world in phosphor-green light, like someone wrapped a dim overhead lamp in cellophane. He can distinguish where the gravel road in front of him turns to tree line, and looking up, where tree line turns to sky. That's it.

Dale turns his NVGs off and on again before deciding to leave them off. When the time comes, he'll just shoot in the same direction everyone else does. They can't be more than twenty meters from the road, all thirty-four of them, lying prone to conceal themselves behind a stand of dry grass and bushes. Close enough to spray and pray. He squeezes his rifle's upper receiver with one hand and chokes the pistol grip with his other.

The enemy will stroll down the road on a resupply patrol any minute now. Dale should be locked in, ready to open up. But his mind is too sleep-deprived to work properly. Fragmented by twenty-minute naps, snatched between patrols and shifts on security and forced marches up and over endless ridgelines, Dale's brain drifts from sensation to sensation: a pebble digging into his elbow, prickly grass poking between the buttons of his uniform, the oily smell of CLP lubricating his rifle. Eyes definitely closed now, jaw definitely loose now, definitely asleep now.

Dale's head bobs down and he snaps awake. A brief surge of adrenaline sharpens his senses. He can taste the salt air blowing in from the Pacific Ocean, feel the night ticking towards morning one second at a time, hear the crunch of gravel on the road.

The crunch of gravel. Dale props himself up on his elbows. The shadowy figures to either side of him do the same. The crunching gets closer and assumes the familiar form of boots slapping ground, heels rolling to toes.