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The Court of Tar and Oil

It is late fall in Saudi, and the heat rolls like reflective tinfoil over the whole of the Kingdom, and even though the soldiers get virtually no supplies delivered there, Clark has a plan to fight the boredom. It is two days after the first fatal mortar attack, deadly because they had all stopped paying attention to the warnings. The enemy had to get lucky at some point though, so when another soldier dies in the field hospital, Clark decides that if they are just going to sit there in the desert like a bunch of goddamn Bedouins. He is going to have some fun before he dies.

He hits the supply chain, bartering for wooden pallets. It takes weeks to find even three that are serviceable, given how close they are to the border of Iraq and how few resupplies come through—even though from the month-old newspapers the soldiers learn they are spending a gazillion dollars on this war, even though there is no evidence of it that they can see. They don't even get beer. Or prostitutes.

Once he has the wood, Clark walks around with a five-gallon metal bucket, not speaking to anyone, which is how he is. The soldiers discover the bucket is being slowly filled with the tar he can pry up from the highway, a place none of them are supposed to visit—it being too open, too busy with too many eyes, and technically they are supposed to be hidden and secret still, even though they are magically visited by young boys and leathery men in old Mazda and Datsun trucks with food and drinks to barter. They stop coming when they realize the only things the soldiers want are women and liquor, two things they cannot or will not provide, and that the soldiers have nothing of value except useless American money. Useless because if they exchange it everyone will know they are trading with them.

Clark volunteers for latrine detail so he can kill two birds with one stone: he gets the messy job done so that they don't ask him to do other things, and he can set the can of tar in the fiery heat of toilet paper and shit and diesel and let it bubble and cure. He discovers that by adding a splash of diesel here and there the tar becomes even more sticky and thick and hard when it dries.

It takes him a month to get enough wood from the pallets, and he sets to work with only a handful of nails that he has pried and straightened from the pallets he dismembers. The soldiers learn from Nunez that civilians who are building up the Saudi bases are selling anything they can to the Pakistani and Afghani workers for a pretty good profit, which angers some, but if they had anything to sell, they'd do it too.

Clark uses an old OD wool sock to slather the soft wood with the tar, which he lets partially dry to harden, then he takes the wood and lays it all together in a complicated arrangement that he has figured out ahead of time will give it the best chance of holding together, and when he gets it all pressed as tightly as he can he lashes it together with parachute cord until he has a stout twelve-foot-long four-by-four pole. Then he gets to work on building a backboard and base in a similar manner.

Some of the officers come out of their tents to look at him working, and Command Sergeant Major Howard hands Clark a couple of nails he has pried from the officers mess, which they use to hang their BDU jackets on when they sit to eat their hot rations.

Once he has finished, he needs to fashion a hoop, so he takes the coils of concertina wire from the top of one of the shelters and pries the razor barbs from the wire, slow and sure and painful work that leaves his hands in tatters. He measures it carefully, making it perfect regulation size, then thinks better of it and narrows it an inch in diameter so that it will be more of a challenge for him because he is a lights-out shooter. What looked like a crown of thorns for a giant ends up looking like rings of a halo that have come unsprung, and no matter what he does, he can't get them to hold together properly.

The solution comes from some of the maintenance brigade soldiers stopping through, who are willing to take it to the rear units and have it soldered together by some of the men and women who worked on their radios. A long and arduous task, apparently, and one Clark has to pay \$200 for, not to mention the \$100 and a week's rations he gives to a Saudi kid who is able to scrounge up a soccer ball by stealing it from some British airmen. It doesn't even cross his mind that those same Brits are hit with mortars the next day and lose two men.

The soccer ball is lighter than a basketball, but it bounces well on the sand that Clark has packed down flat with used oil from the motor pool, and a crowd forms around the circular court simply because it is something new, and they are all pretty impressed with the work and the planning and grit it has taken to complete it. Some even take pictures with disposable cameras loved ones have sent in care packages.

The game lasts only a couple of minutes. Clark is on fire from the beginning, crossing over the other guards on the team, boots pivoting and shaking the dust up from under the oil, the sun coming in from behind as it gets ready to set, his fade-away jumper in monochromatic contrast in the light. A beautiful afternoon for a game, and everyone knows that Clark grew up playing on the Kickapoo reservation in Texas and is one of the best players on their Division team, so it is no surprise that the score is ten-four, one more bucket to win, and Clark gets by the defense again, threading between two flat-footed

players from the 504th, and rises up and thunders home a two-handed jam that brings the whole thing down in a rain of splintering wood. He never even bothers to drop the rim until he is walking away, and when he passes Private Winters, they hear him say "Worth it," as he walks away, dropping the rim in the dust. Even the cooks get it, the beauty of that. Even the soldiers just there to pass the time recognize it, all of them standing there in the twilight, the ball coming to a rest near the broken backboard, and no one dares pick it up. Some of them go back to their shelters, sit on their cots, and as they begin to fade into sleep they find themselves praying or hoping that he makes it home alive, if just to have another moment on a real court doing something he loved so much that he was willing to destroy it.