

Hide and Seek on a Summer Night

by Zetian Ni

What's next? The echoes of my own thoughts became frightenedly distinct. As the truck slowly blended in with the night, darkness quickly descended on us. Everyone stood in silence as if we were waiting for the distant exhaust sound to restore the stillness in the air. I knew the answer to my question. I was just about to play a game of hide and seek, but I wasn't quite excited about it.

I was attending a course about the techniques of evasion and surveillance. To graduate from the course, we had to participate in this game. The goal was to sneak through multiple terrains at night without being detected. Combat instructors acted like sentries who would patrol around the area or stand posts in key locations to stop us from advancing, they also had access to many types of counter-surveillance equipment like flares, spotlights, and night vision goggles.

The game took place on an early-August night, heat and humidity were only a few of the many obstacles we had to overcome. Before the game started, we had already been training in the field for weeks, ate only military rations, and barely had any sleep. The goal and rules of the game were simple, except losing means being disqualified from the course and having to do everything all over again.

My team was dropped off on the edge of a forest, with the moon being high and bright, the woods seemed like an ideal place for us to start. I took a look at my team, after weeks of training, everyone appeared to be exhausted, myself included. I remember one of the teammates looked exceptionally miserable. His name was Sanchez. I've known Sanchez for a while, he was an artistic kid with thick glasses, grew up in the city of San Francisco, loved drawing and

painting; he had also gotten himself in trouble quite a few times for being too polite. I liked Sanchez as a friend, but I always wondered how did he end up in the Marine Corps out of all places. I wish I could have taken a picture of Sanchez's face that night, he had a very iconic concerned face that reminded me of the sad emoji. I remember looking at his face and thinking how great of an internet meme material it could have been if I had a camera with me.

I broke the silence and said, "If you keep up with that sad dog look, they might actually confuse you with a stray dog and leave you alone." I was hoping a little bit of my dry humor was able to cheer him up, but Sanchez just gave me a long sigh and carried on.

"Speaking of wild animals," said Harper, one of my other teammates "Y'all better keep'n eye out for snakes'n spiders, we sho' nuf already got plenty of problems." I met Harper during my tour in Japan, despite being from Montana, he always spoke with a strong southern accent. Harper is like the opposite version of Sanchez, he had little to no regard for what comes out of his mouth, but he always meant the best for his friends. I was able to sense the humor in his tone, as dark and little as it was, I can tell Harper was just trying to mock the situation we were in and encourage everyone to be positive. Sanchez looked even more frightened after Harper's comment, I can imagine growing up in a city probably did not make him a fan of snakes and spiders.

I handed the map and compass to Sanchez and told him to navigate the direction for us, he was always the smart one in the group. Perhaps a little bit of brainwork might also distract him from thinking about spiders all night. In the meantime, I stepped on a boulder and gazed into the gloomy forest. There wasn't a reason behind it, at least not one I can remember. Clouds and trees blocked off most of the moonlight, everything just seemed so endless in the dark. I remained to stare for a few minutes, probably thinking about how nice a bed would feel the next

time I get to sleep in one, or having sausage and gravy for breakfast whenever I get the chance. Sanchez woke me up from my daydream after he figured out the general direction, everyone else also looked quite ready to start moving.

“Well,” I took a long pause after a deep breath “Let’s hope we won’t have to do this shit again.” We started crawling through the woods, I took the lead in the front while Sanchez followed at the end.

The forest was filled with clattering noises on a hot summer night, the ceaseless chippering from crickets, mixed with relentless rattles from cicadas reminded me of the white noise I used to put on before bedtime, but now the same noises only irritated me; perhaps the sleep deprivation had a special effect on how I perceived sound. There was also an owl that must have followed us the entire time, the occasional hoot from above made me think that even the animals were laughing at our miserable state. My imagination was interrupted by a shimmer of light coming from the depth of the forest, it was from the flashlight of a nearby sentry. I quickly rolled behind a trunk, my team followed up and concealed themselves accordingly. The glimmer of light shined in our way for a few seconds, the sudden movements must have caught the attention of the wielder. I locked eyes with my teammates from behind the cover, signaling them to stay still; these instructors are all experienced combat hunters, and I was in no mood to test their ability to hunt. After a while, the sentry went on his way, I wasn’t sure if he saw us, perhaps he was satisfied with our patience, perhaps we just did a good job staying still.

It didn’t take long until we made it to the end of the forest, as trees started to fade away, a giant field of tall grass came in sight. Each blade of grass was covered with dew, glistening under the moonlight like thousands of pearls. As I inched my way through, the wetness from the grass quickly soaked my uniform, which felt surprisingly good under the blistering heat. I took off my

night vision goggle and signaled my team to speed up, as stunning as the scenery was, being under bright moonlight without concealment was a quick way to be spotted. We continued to crawl in silence, I had to keep my head down to reduce light reflection, but it also meant I wasn't able to tell what was in front of me from five feet away. The openness of the grass field gave me a weird feeling, along with the problem with visibility, I felt like I could have crawled right into an instructor's boot without noticing. It didn't take long until we had to halt our advancement. An unusual noise broke the silence of the night. It sounded like a powerful gust thrusting towards the distanced sky. As soon as we heard the noise, everyone quickly planted their face into the dirt. The noise came from the firing of a military flare gun. It works like a firework, but instead of displaying colorful patterns, the flare will illuminate the entire area for about 10 seconds, revealing any movement in the area. I laid in the field with my face down in the dirt, leaving only a small gap to breathe. The light from the flare pierced the gloom of darkness in an instant, I wasn't able to see much with only peripheral vision, but I was also too scared to make any movement with my head. The flare was only supposed to last for about 10 seconds, but it felt like an eternity. As much as I enjoyed the break from crawling, the smell of the dirt mixed with sweat and camouflage face paint created an unbearable scent of burnt plastic. There was also a tingling feeling coming from the back of my neck, I wasn't able to tell if it was a bug crawling, or just sweat dripping down from my head. I heard a whistle going off about 100 feet away from us, it's the sound that only an instructor would make when they catch someone, to scare the others in the dark. I had no clue that there was another team that close to us, but the whistle did serve its purpose as I dropped my face even lower, completely touching the dirt.

When the darkness returned, I slowly rose my head up to see what was in front of me. The feeling of fresh air in my nostril had never felt better, but it was more relieving knowing that

we weren't spotted. I turned my neck to check on my teammates and signaled us to keep moving forward.

We made our way to a swampy area. The ground was wet and muddy, I attempted to slide instead of crawl to preserve energy, but quickly realized it was a dumb idea since I was pushing too much mud around. On the bright side, crossing the swamp should be our last objective before reaching the destination. Towards the end of the night, exhaustion quickly overwhelmed my other senses, I was in a state of mind that we used to call "being so tired that you forget about feeling tired." My body movements were soon taken over by muscle memories. "Left arm out, right arm out, left arm out, right arm out..." The sound of my own thoughts echoed endlessly in my mind as I inched forward, I had no clue what I was seeing or hearing, only the thought of moving forward. My time perception also became extremely blurry, I had no clue how long we'd been crawling. I was eventually pulled back into reality after a pebble was thrown at me from the back of the formation. The pebble came from Harper, I felt that there was quite a bit of force in that throw, he must have been trying to get my attention for a while and became frustrated. When I turned around to see what was happening, my heart almost skipped a beat.

There were only three of us crawling.

Sanchez was nowhere to be found, he must have gotten left behind without us knowing. I didn't know what to do. Leaving Sanchez behind didn't feel like the right thing to do, as far as I knew he could've been bitten by a snake and left helpless in the dark by himself. Going back for Sanchez meant we might fail the test, nobody knew how much time we had left. Flashbacks of memories and random phrases started overwhelming my thought process. "Leave no one behind," "Mission accomplishment above personal value," and of course, Sanchez's stupid sad

emoji face also made an appearance. Going through the devastating training for another month was not on my to-do list, but at least I will be able to go to sleep after that. Having made up my mind, I gave the hand gestures for the rest of the team to move on. I smeared some cold mud on my face to keep myself awake, then started slowly crawling back towards the darkness.

It didn't take that long for me to find Sanchez. He was slowly inching his way in the swamp, mimicking a low-pitched owl noise. The owl noise was a code we established, if one of us got lost, we'd mimic the noise for the rest of the team to find us. Sanchez's owl noise sounded more like a painful screech from a dying goose, but at least there wasn't a sentry around. When Sanchez saw me, he didn't look happy or relieved, he just gave me a nod to acknowledge that we met up, and started crawling forward again. I spent some time thinking about Sanchez's reaction as we were moving, why wasn't he happy to see I turned around? Did he feel bad about falling behind? Or perhaps he was just too tired to express anything. Sanchez and I crawled to the end of the swamp minutes before time ran out. Surprisingly, our teammates waited for us at the end. We ended up reporting in all together, covered in mud, but happy to be on the finish line.

Up until this day, I still don't know if I made the right decision to go back for Sanchez. There isn't a textbook answer of what to do, whether to focus on accomplishing the mission, or risk everything to save your comrade. I don't think anyone has the right answer either. I'm more than glad that the result turned out to be great, but that does not guarantee anything in the future. I guess what I've learned at the end of the day, is just to have the courage to make a decision, and have the heart to live with the result. When I turned around for Sanchez, I was ready to live in the field for another month. I am glad that Sanchez got lost that night only during a training event, the price of indecisiveness would have cost me a lot more down the road.