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A Brother Among Heroes

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A Brother Among Heroes

Natalie Chaves

“Good evening and welcome to the CBS evening news, I’m Brian Williams. We begin with a story that chronicles what some are saying is the most devastating military defeat since the attacks on Pearl Harbor. As you know, the U.S. military has spent a great deal of effort to bring aid to those in Somalia. Just a few weeks ago, U.S. Marines left Somalia after bringing food, water, and other supplies to the country, which had been desecrated by a famine of biblical proportion. Five days ago, on October the third, the Task Force Rangers, 160 highly trained men comprised from the U.S. Army Delta Force, Ranger teams, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, Navy SEAL members, and the Air Force Pararescue, led by Major General William Hrothgar, were given orders to capture Somalia’s warlord, Mohamed Farrah Aidid. Aidid, arguably the most ruthless dictator living in the twentieth century, has been living in the city of Mogadishu, where this battle took place. What was supposed to be a thirty-minute mission turned into a two-day battle resulting in the death of nineteen U.S. soldiers and leaving 73 injured. The government is not releasing any more information and has not revealed the names of the fallen soldiers; however, we here at CBS will do everything in our power to find out what exactly happened during those tragic two...”

Mom shuts off the TV before the shiny, plastic-looking news anchor with the furrowed brow can finish his sentence. It has been two days since the man in the spotless uniform came to tell us that Dad fought bravely for his country, and that he was dead. The day has replayed in my head over and over.

Manning and I were sitting at the kitchen table eating grilled cheeses when the black car pulled up and the man stepped out. For a second, I thought it was Dad. But I knew at once it wasn’t – Dad didn’t walk like that. I looked at my mom and both of her hands were covering her mouth but somehow I could tell that it was wide open. Without taking her eyes off the man, she told Manning and me to go upstairs and not come down until she said so. I looked at Manning. He looked at me. Mom had never sounded like this before, so we got up and went to our room as quickly as we could. An hour passed. Or was it only five minutes? “I’m bored. I wanna go see what Luke and Mike are doing,” Manning said.

“Yeah, so do I, but you heard Mom.” I paused for a moment, trying to come up with an idea for something to do.

“Go get the book,” Manning said after a while.

My grandfather moved to Nebraska when Dad was only two years old. Yapa, as we called him, moved from Hungary to America when he was twenty-three. He didn’t understand a word of English and when he came to America, he brought a few clothes, a picture of his mother, and one book, *Beowulf*, which was in English. Yapa read this book every single day until he became fluent in English, and even keep reading it after. So *Beowulf* has stayed in our family since. When he’s home, Dad reads it to Manning and me every night before bed; but, lately, that hasn’t been very often so I’ve been reading it by myself.

I run into mom and dad’s room and open his nightstand. I grab the old copy of the book and run back into my room, sit on Manning’s bed beside him. The book is so worn down that the

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words are almost impossible to read, but it doesn't matter because we have memorized the whole story.

"Hrothgar departed then with his house-guard..."

"No we already read that part," Manning whined. "We left off at the part right before Beowulf fights Grendel." I flip a few pages forward and begin reading once again.

"In off the moors, down through the mist bands God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping..." I read for what seems like an hour and then keep reading more. I couldn't hear anything from downstairs after a while so I keep on reading. "So the Geat people, his hearth companions, sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low. They said that all of the kings upon the earth he was the man most gracious and fair-minded, kindest to his people and keenest to win fame."¹ I paused for a moment and let my fingers trace around the last paragraph. I looked up and saw that Manning was asleep and from the looks of it probably had been for a while. I put the book down, take off his dirty sneakers and tuck him into bed. I grab the book and rub my hand over the cover; the crumpled paper feels good against my skin. I bring it to my nose and take in the scent of Yapa and dad and all the times they read it to us, time we acted out the story and everything dad taught us about being a good warrior.

I take one last whiff and walk back to Mom and Dad's room to put the book back. I get to the door and I notice that it's only slightly open and there's a light on – Mom's in there. She's turned the other way so I can't see her face. I open the door a little more but she doesn't seem to notice. I take a step inside. "Mom?" Nothing. "Mom?" I asked again. Still nothing. I am frozen to where I'm standing.

"Come here." The sound of her voice startles me and melts my frozen feet. I walk over to the side of the bed she's sitting on and finally look her. Only it doesn't look like Mom. Her face is dark and pale at the same time. Her eyes are the same emerald green, but are flat. I can't look at this woman. I force my head down and stare at the book. "Come here," she whispered. I keep my head down. I already know what she's going to say. "Your father..." she began. But I stop her and wrap my arms around her neck, which seems much frailer now. I don't remember trying to stop them, but tears begin pouring from my eyes. I hold on to her for a day. I feel something pressing against my chest. She pulls me back. Dad's dog tags. They're around Mom's neck. She unclasped the collar from her neck and gave it to me.² The metal was warm in my hands. I'm mesmerized by them. I run my fingers over the pressed letters. "I think it's time for bed," she said.

"Ok," I mumbled. I don't know what else to say. I just walk back to my room. I forgot to put the book back, but I hold on to it. I want to sleep next to it tonight. I look at Manning and shut off the light beside him. I couldn't fall asleep that night, but I wake up to the next morning.

* * *

"Good evening and welcome to the CBS evening news, I'm Brian Williams. Tonight we cover what really happened on that fateful day in Mogadishu on October third and fourth of last year. We've received information as to who those nineteen brave men were, who led the mission, and how it went awry. The mission was led by Major General William Hrothgar and was supposed to have taken only thirty minutes. Two U.S. Black Hawk helicopters were shot down in

¹ *Beowulf*, p. 213

² *Beowulf*, p. 181

Mogadishu just above the infamous Dragon Hotel, Aidid's safe house. As Hrothgar attempted to evacuate the two choppers, more and more Somalian R.P.S.' devastated the small brigade of U.S. soldiers. Sargeant First Class Bradley Wiglaf, or as his fellow men called him, 'B.W.,' or 'Sarge Beowulf,' is the first man since the Vietnam War to receive, posthumously, the Medal of Honor for his inexorable bravery. Sargeant First Class Bradley Wiglaf entered the battle after seven men had been pronounced dead already. Sargeant Beowulf was deployed a few miles east of the Dragon Hotel, entered the building and succeeded in executing Mohamed Farrah Aidid..."

* * *

Water forces its way into my nose and ears. We've been doing this for nearly two hours, but each time the frozen wave crashes on me, it's like hell all over again. But I keep holding on – because I will be a Navy SEAL, because of the men whose arms are linked up with mine. If I quit, so will they. We roll against the waves for another eternity until Staff Sergeant Monroe tells us to “get the fuck up.” Monroe is a typecast drill sergeant, Marine for five years, SEAL for fifteen. He's got more hair on his eyebrows and moustache than his head. He walks with a slight limp, (there's a rumor that he's been shot in his right leg six times), but he's in better shape than some of the men here.

We stand on the snow-like sand huddling around for warmth, some standing some sitting. “What is it, naptime Reynolds?” Monroe barks. Reynolds is lying on his back, arms around his knees, and convulsing from hypothermia.

“N-n-n-oh, s-s-st-aff s-s-sarge,” Reynolds forces out.

“It isn't? Oh well that's too bad, I was gonna let you boys have a little R'n'R! But if you insist Reynolds! Everybody get up! Ten to a bunker. GO!” Monroe points to an array of 300 pound wooden logs. Reynolds is still on the ground. “What's the matter Reynolds, you tired?” Monroe keeps taunting him. I turn back and grab Reynolds under his armpit and pull him up with whatever strength I have left. We run over and ten men each pick up a massive pillar and raise it up. From a few thousand feet up, the beach would look like a pile of sand with a bunch of ants carrying toothpicks. My forearms are burning, I can't feel my fingers, and my thighs are screaming. But I keep holding on. Burkesy, directly in front of me, grunts in pain and I see his elbows bend slightly.

“Come on Burksey,” I mutter to him. He elbows straighten a little and I feel the weight on my own arms get a little lighter and I feel, somehow, a surge of energy. A while goes, by, (I've lost all sense of time in these past few months), and I start to hear my men in the back talking to each other too. I've never been in so much pain, but I ignore my body. I'm not dropping my arms. The other groups start yelling, and the logs get a little higher.

But one log is low. It's Henderson. “Uh-oh looks like Hot-Shot Henderson's feeling it.” Henderson's brothers are silent; they're using every last ounce of energy to keep the mast up. His arms are shaking; he's screaming and crying at the same time.

“Come on Henderson!” I scream. He can't fail now. I've known him since we were eighteen, since we finished Plebe summer together at the Academy. He always beat me at testing; he was always a little bit stronger and faster. We've got only one month left to go and I can't let him quit after surviving the last five. I scream at him again. But, Henderson's elbow's buckle and the log falls and clips a few men's shoulders. “What the fuck is that, Henderson? I thought you were a big tough, man?” Henderson vomits a gallon of sea-water. “Let's go, pick it back up!” Henderson doesn't move. “You gonna quit, Henderson?” He says nothing. The once

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All-American football player gets up and walks toward the truck. Monroe looks around at all of us. “Alright. Another one bites the dust. Who’s gonna be next gentlemen?” Silence. It wasn’t good enough. I should have kept yelling at him.

Monroe turns back to Henderson’s group. “And what the fuck are you doing? Pick up that goddamn bunker!” The nine remaining men wrap their arms around the giant column. They struggle to pick it up. Not only are they exhausted and frozen like the rest of us, but now they have one less man to carry the weight. Now I’m cold, tired, and pissed off. I can hardly breathe, but I’m so mad that I start yelling.

“Come on boys!” I yell from a few yards away. They lift the log up.

“Let’s go boys!” Burksey yells. The log is an inch above their heads.

“All you!” shouts Diaz from another bunker. Each of their arms is straight now. We keep yelling, all of us, and the log stays up.

It’s the last day of BUDs, but Monroe makes it feel like the first. There are only 59 of us, but no one quit today. We finish the day standing in the frigid February San Diego water holding rafts above our head – all our elbows straight. Monroe yells from his bullhorn and we’re done. We run up the beach and huddle around him. “Take a few seconds, and look to your left and your right, at every man that’s still here with you.” I turn and look beside me to Jonesy. He grabs the back of my neck and nods, and I clap him on the shoulder. I put my arm around Jonesy’s shoulder and Donato next to me does the same. “Listen up! Three weeks ago, 164 men were wearing your same uniform and your same helmets and they’re not here anymore. Five days ago a hundred men were wearing your same uniforms and your same helmets. And now there’s only fifty-nine. And all that comes down to is making a choice. They made it their way you guys made it your way. Everybody you see here in a blue shirt, made the same choice. You guys should think about that. That’s all it comes down to. Carry yourselves with pride. Wear your brown shirts with pride. Be humble, and enjoy your careers as you move on. But be ready, this is only one step. On Monday morning, it’s game on all over again. As you get rested after this experience you’ve gone through, remember that you’re the only guys in the world to go through this believe it or not. It’s a pretty special thing. Take time to thank all those guys that took their time to put you through this and bring you into the brotherhood. Class 272. Hell-Week secured!”

“Hoo-yah!” We all yell over and over again. We jump up and start hugging each other as we scream. We’re all in a big circle, yelling even though we’re hoarse from exhaustion. “Two-seven-two! Two-seven-two! Two-seven-two!” My voice is yelling “272”, but my head is chanting a line from Dad’s book, “and now the youth was to enter the line of battle with his lord, his first time to be tested as a fighter.”³

* * *

It kills Mom that both Manning and I joined the military. Manning’s in the Air Force, but it’s not any less dangerous than SEALs. She can’t say anything because she knows there’s no convincing us out of it what with having a dad like the one we had. Joining is the only way to try to live up to him. Of course, along with joining, there’s the added reminders of how impossible it is to live up to him. Every commanding officer, general, first in command, you name it, who

³ *Beowulf*, p. 177

looks at my nametag lets me have it. Reminds me that my dad was awarded the Purple Heart, and the only man since the Vietnam War to be awarded the Medal of Honor. Over and over again, like a broken record. I knew joining the SEALs would give me the best chance to live up to him.

* * *

“Ok kids, ten o’clock, time for recess!” Mrs. Angland tells us and everyone in the classroom jumps up and runs outside. Manning is already outside because the third-graders’ recess starts at 9:50. I jump on the monkey bars with Luke, our neighbor and look over by the sandbox and see Manning playing with some of his friends. I continue racing Luke on the monkey bars and beat him. I jumped down onto the woodchips and look over again at Manning. Beside him is an older kid. And, beside the older kid is what looks like the remnants of a castle; I couldn’t see Manning’s face, but I knew something was wrong.

“Race ya again!” Luke shouts, still hanging on the bars. I ignore him and ran over to the sandbox. The older kid was Joey Doolan, who had been harassing the third graders since September. I finally saw Manning’s face. His left eye was puffy and beginning to turn blue. I was furious that I hadn’t protected Manning sooner, and Joey was going to know it. I ran over, but Joey didn’t see me standing behind him. Manning looked at me, his eyes filled with fear, but still he didn’t move. Joey finally heard me when I got closer and he tilted his round, blonde head to the side.

“What do you want, butthead?” Joey sneered. I stepped forward. Joey seemed five feet taller than me; after all he was in sixth grade and two years older than me. It didn’t phase me. I was filled with so much rage that I thought my teeth were going to crack from clenching them so hard.

“That’s my brother.” I growled at him. I cocked my fist back and unloaded onto Joey Doolan’s fat, red face. I aimed right for his stupid, pig nose. I hit him so hard, he fell backward. He didn’t get back up. He touched his hand to his nose and it was red, but I wasn’t done. I jumped on Joey and punched him again. I had failed at the one thing my dad had made me promise to do while he was gone, and Joey was going to know I wasn’t happy about it. I hadn’t realized, but there was a huge crowd gathered around me and Joey. Becky Cohen didn’t hesitate to run screaming for Mrs. Angland and in a few moments, I felt the arms of our teacher dragging me off Joey.

The three of us found ourselves in the principal’s office in less than a minute. Joey was holding a paper towel to his nose and whimpering like a little baby. What a faker. “Let me see if I get this story straight, young men,” Principal Gately began, “Mr. Doolan was playing in the sandbox with you, Manning, when you ran and fell, hitting your eye. Then you, Mr. Wiglaf, ran over and started beating up Joey?” I had tried to get the real story across but it was hard with all of Joey’s obnoxious crying. I didn’t care that I was going to be in a huge load of trouble. I was ashamed I had let down Dad.

Principal Gately let Joey go back to class after his nose stopped bleeding and told Manning and me to stay. “Manning, you may go back to class. Lyle, you can wait right there while I call your mother.”

I got the tongue-lashing of a lifetime from Mom on the way back from school. I just sat in the passenger's seat quietly and let her go on. That night Dad called and Mom told him what I had done. Mom called me downstairs so that he could yell at me. "Listen Lyle, your mom wants me to yell at you," he said through the phone, "but I'm not gonna do that. I'm proud of you kiddo. You did the right thing taking care of your brother. Now pretend that I just yelled at ya." I couldn't help but smile. "I'll see ya when I get home."

"Bye Dad."

Mom took back the phone. I tried to put on my saddest, most ashamed face, but inside I was beaming. I didn't care if I wasn't getting supper for the next week. I had made Dad proud. I ran upstairs and grabbed *Beowulf*.

"I remember that time when mead was flowing, how we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall, promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price, make good the gift of the war-gear, those swords and helmets, as and when his need required it."⁴ It wasn't the page I left off on, not by a long shot. I didn't do anything though, I just kept reading. "He picked us out from the army deliberately honored us and judged us fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts – and all because he considered us best of his arms-bearing thanes. And now, although he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face by himself alone – the shepherd of our land, a man unequalled in the quest for glory and a name for daring – now the day has come when this lord we serve needs sound men to give him their support. Let us go to him, help our leader through the hot flame and dread of the fire. As God as my witness, I would rather my body be burned in the same burning blaze as my gold-giver's body than go back home bearing arms."⁵ I finished there. I swore that day that I would never let anyone hurt my brother again.

* * *

It's oh-three-hundred hours and we've been told we're finally boarding the Black Hawk. Our mission, of course, is unknown to us but guessing by the fact that we're flying over Abbottabad, Pakistan, it's going to be a hot target. I change out of my sand-colored fatigues into my night gear. I take off my shirt and look into the mirror. I read the words on my chest that I had read on my father's chest years ago: "in a man of worth, the claims of kinship cannot be denied."⁶ The words were printed on my left breast and were in the shape of a circle. I kiss my index and middle fingers together and press them to the black ink. We load our gear and head onto the bird. About thirty minutes after takeoff, we get a call from Major General Portnoy telling us our mission: Bin Laden. For a moment, the five of us just look at each other. Ramirez cracks a smile. Eldridge howls. We all join in with scattered "Hoo-yahs!" It's finally here. After decades of humiliation and terrorism, we, SEAL Team Six finally get to kill him. We cheer for a bit more and we hear Portnoy in our ears telling us to calm down. "Wiglaf. You'll be giving the double tap; one in the chest and one in the left-eye. It's just like any other mission boys. I'm looking for perfection."

We're close. We are right above the largest city in Pakistan. I feel like I can hear Bin Laden's heart beating faster. Like he knows we're coming. The mission is simple: both hawks fly above the safe-house and we enter from above. He's on the top level and there's at least ten

⁴ *Beowulf*, p. 179

⁵ *ibid*, p. 179

⁶ *ibid*, p. 189

men guarding him. I look over at Burksey. He grabs my neck and smiles. We've been together since Basic. "Here we go Wig," he says. We're seconds away. I bring my M4A1 rifle to my face and kiss the side where I've etched dad's favorite quote: "We must band together, shield and helmet, mail shirt and sword."⁷

We're over the safe house and we slide down the ropes onto the roof top. Burksey kicks open the door to the inside and Ramirez, Eldridge, and Jones enter first. I hear six shots: three double-taps. We all move in. Eight more double-taps, four down. We enter the main room and find him. It's Bin Laden and one of his wives. Eldridge shoots her in the thigh and she falls, screaming. I've got the shot. Finally, my chance is here. To end the life of the most notorious and hated terrorist the world has ever seen. To avenge thousands of lives. To make Dad proud. He's unarmed and I have his heart in my cross-hairs, my finger flirts with the trigger. And then I hear a shot. But it's not from my rifle, it comes from the floor beside me. It's bin Laden's wife. She's shot Burksey in the stomach. She shoots again and hits him in the arm. Without hesitation I turn from bin Laden to the woman and give two shots to the head. Ramirez hits bin Laden. Burksey is leaned against the wall and I run over to him, throw his arm over my shoulders and pull him up. Before I can lift him, though, one of bin Laden's remaining guards runs in and starts firing like a madman. He hits Eldridge and Hamel before I hit him three times in the forehead. I run to Burksey, he's hurt the worst, and then I hear more voices from below. Jones and I leave the room and head toward the staircase. There are more than ten men down there. Jones and I stand by the stairs until we finish the guards.

"Fuck, so much for perfection," I mutter. Jones doesn't reply. I look over and his shoulder is gushing. "Goddamnit." I pull Jones over my shoulder and run up to the rooftop and throw him into the Black Hawk. I race downstairs, did I hear more gunfire? There's three of bin Laden's men coming from downstairs and I hit them all before they can fire. I pull Burksey and Ramirez up and haul them in the chopper as well. Eldridge is the last one and I head back to carry him up. He's hit in both legs. I pick him up and I'm just onto the roof when I hear more gunfire. Bin Laden's last man hits me in the back of the kneecap. It's surreal pain, but I push through it. I hauled Eldridge onto the chopper and pull myself in. I turn around to see the shooter and hit him twice in the ear as we fly away.

We somehow managed to pull it off. It was over so fast. My one chance to live up to the greatest man I knew had gone and passed. It was right there. My career as a Navy SEAL was over, that much I knew as I ripped the bottom of my pant leg off to see the damage, and I had missed my perfect opportunity to prove I was as good a soldier as my father.

It had been a few weeks since the mission, and although the American public was rejoicing, our team was distraught with the injuries. Our identities had been kept secret, but to the higher-ups, it was obvious who had carried out the mission. Burksey was still in critical condition, so I headed to Virginia's base hospital to visit him for the fifth time this week.

Karen was sitting beside his bed, asleep. He had just gotten out of surgery two days ago, but he was looking better already. I sat there for a while, in silence replaying the mission over and over again. Why didn't I just shoot her in the head when I had the chance? I could have had her and bin Laden. It didn't matter. There was no fame and glory with succeeding with this mission either way. Karen wakes up after a little while and we talk as we always do when I visit. She looks tired so I tell her I'm going downstairs to get some coffee for her.

⁷ *ibid*, p. 179

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I'm in the café and paying when a man in uniform approaches me. "You're Wiglaf, right?"

"Yeah?" I say.

"Lyle Wiglaf?" I'm surprised, no one had ever asked me if I was *Lyle Wiglaf*, it was usually, "Wiglaf, Bradley's son."

"Michael Durant," he shakes my hand. "I heard about your mission. You should be very proud. Your father would be."

"My father?"

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"Yes, I knew your father. In fact I was with him right before he died. He told me about you and your brother and that his proudest accomplishment was teaching you to take care of each other. The last thing he said was, "Go on, Lyle, do everything you said you would when you were still young and vowed you would never let your name and fame be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous, so stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now with the whole of your strength. I shall stand by you."⁸ With that the man walked away. I'm left standing there. I suddenly didn't feel the pain in my kneecap that had been piercing through my entire body. My career was over, but I had succeeded. I had succeeded as a soldier, as a son, but most importantly, as a brother.

"...In what seems like an almost irrational act of bravery and brotherhood, 'Beowulf' returned to the crash site to defend his fellow soldier, pilot Michael Durant who suffered serious spinal fractures and internal bleeding from the Somali attack. We have reports that before dying of serious external bleeding from bullet wounds, Sergeant First Class Bradley 'Beowulf' Wiglaf killed approximately eleven Somali terrorists. Despite the Somali's best efforts, 'Beowulf' was able to save Durant's life.

⁸ *Beowulf*, p. 181

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