

Perfect Soldier

By
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The back of the Wal-Mart erupted, a volcanic spew of cinder block ash, particles, and molten chunks. The shockwave nearly tumbled Sergeant Michael Edwards from his vantage point atop the deserted I-35 overpass. The HARM skittered through the dust and across the rubble to a meadow behind the former low-price leader.

"I hate robots," Mike muttered as he crouched behind the guardrail, skin crisping in the mid-morning Dallas sun. In particular, he hated ones about to kill him.

"Target in sight." Gus Pritchard, the contractor, stabbed at the satcam image of the HARM.

"No shit, Gus," Colonel Benjamin Yancy replied, staring over Pritchard's shoulder at the same laptop display. "For a second, I thought that was the goddamn stock boy hauling out the trash."

A blue icon blinked insistently in the laptop's system tray.

Pritchard thumbed the laptop's omni-directional mic. "Delta Nova. Uh-huh. Hold." He addressed Yancy, "Colonel, Fort Hood indicates candidate two-four is ready. Awaiting your orders."

"De-metaled?"

The contractor nodded.

"Standby. Helo him here on my signal only." Yancy's voice echoed in the dusty air of the abandoned warehouse.

Pritchard relayed the command. His stubble-free jaw, crisp Dockers, and Banana Republic freshness contrasted with Yancy's burning eyes, tarnished eagle, and fatigues wrinkled from far too many fully-clothed naps throughout the three-month state of emergency.

Fucking idiot civilian, Yancy thought. The profusion of United Defense Alliance corporate logos emblazoned on the left tit of Pritchard's polo shirt didn't make him any less of one. Yet, Yancy knew his own job existed because of Pritchard and everyone else who never had pledged their lives in service to Duty, Honor, and Homeland. Those who took the oath gave everything for those who didn't.

The satcam image pulled back, revealing a naked man sneaking across a highway overpass. The current volunteer, candidate number 23 – distinguished combat veteran, career soldier, husband, and father of two Cub Scouts – initiated his final assault, a valiant attempt at mission completion and most likely a suicide effort.

That, too, was due to Yancy's job. The weight of the world rested on those damn squawking avian insignia he bore. He refilled his mug with the evil sludge liberated at

dawn from the wrecked Seven-Eleven. By lunch, he could have the “Dear Mrs. Edwards” letter typed and sent before mission prep commenced with candidate 24.

The HARM, in precise Army parlance, Heavy Armored Response Mechanized, serial number 00000001, looked fit, if a bit blistered and scarred from its nonstop three-month rampage. At rest atop the last of the spring's bluebonnets, it reminded Mike of an oversized stainless steel Dempsey Dumpster adorned with interlaced pipes and yawning cowls in multiple diameters, a trashman's heroin-induced nightmare.

It jerked away from its crushed azure carpet, reconfiguring its bipedal supports for open ground traversal. Joints swung and merged with appendages as the legs extended, hoisting the HARM to its full, two-story height. It tilted left then right before unleashing a tight spectrum pulse at the stucco houses across the meadow. Homes, trees, privacy fences, patio umbrellas, play forts – everything raked by the pulse – flared into a raging blowtorch.

"Bastard," Mike hissed. "Just give me an opening. One clear shot at you."

The HARM lurched forward. Mike shadowed it across the overpass before bolting the wrong way down an on-ramp, leaving bloody footprints baking in the Texas heat.

Carry out your mission, soldier. Do your Duty.

And so he would, with everything inside him aligned to this one task, a singular purpose now dictating his existence.

Before the Bradley had dropped him off in the Denton morning gloom, the scrawny colonel had asked him once more about doing the mission in the buff.

Mike's response seemed obvious, almost scripted. "I came into the world that way, Colonel. I can go out the same way," which satisfied the old officer who curtly nodded a tired face. As he doffed his bathrobe and dove out of the vehicle, Mike's respect, already high-flying for the 22 grunts who'd gone before, shot through the stratosphere. Each had perished in only the skin God had given him. Now came his turn.

"Delta Nova," Pritchard's voice droned. "Colonel, Command Ops is asking for a mission assessment report."

"Tell them we're not Tango Uniform yet. No, wait...." Fuckwads at the Joint Chiefs scrutinized the same real-time satellite feeds he did. Mustn't show weakness or incompetence. "Assault two-three engaging target. No resolution prejudice yet. Status update in fifteen."

Pritchard transmitted the report.

If this strategy didn't work, one of the upcoming missions would fall from high in megaton form. It amounted to torching city and county to eradicate a single termite infestation. Crude. Effective. And utterly stupid.

Today's Army excelled at surgically precise warfare, killing a squad of terrorists in a Waterford store without so much as a single chime from the crystal on display. Perfect death mated with point destruction – the twitchy world of capitalism demanded it. But area-wide obliteration, Yancy thought, that solution smacked of the very terrorism it purported to eliminate. The irony churned in his gut as he contemplated his fateful

decision three months prior....

"Excuse me, Colonel."

Pritchard, hands clenched in his lap, headset off, sat facing him. When their eyes met, he continued in a low voice. "I've been reviewing the profile and scoring of candidate two-four." His breath caught. "There's something you really should know."

"Oh? Well, let's see. His name is Stuart, though he prefers just 'Stu'. Master Sergeant. Career soldier. Twice decorated in Iraq, once in Iran. Exemplary service record with a long string of promotion recommendations from his COs. His Myers-Briggs scores are extraordinary, particularly indicating strong leadership. Married to a lovely woman named Susan. Three kids. Always had dogs, including one now, a skinny rescue greyhound named Slick by his eldest daughter, who thought it would be cute to hear Daddy say, 'Slick, sit'. Likes fly fishing, model trains, Chinese food buffets, and the Chicago Cubs for some ungodly reason I can't fathom. Has a jagged scar on his left forearm from colliding with a little league sandlot fence when he was ten, trying for a home-run ball. He made that catch, by the way. Kept the other team from scoring the decisive run. The only win for his team the whole season." Yancy glared at him. "What else should I know?"

Pritchard's head dipped. "I just thought," he said, fidgeting in his seat, "you might consider changing the prep, maybe giving him a few more details about the mission, a little better insight, considering—"

"Fathers have ordered their children to war for centuries, and endured the consequences. It's called Duty, with a capital 'D'. No less important now than it ever has been. Why should this time be different? He gets the same training and information all the other volunteers get, so he can perform his own Duty. No more. No less. That's how it is." Nothing else was possible, though Yancy knew the civilian across from him could never comprehend that.

Fifty feet away, the HARM chugged toward the neighborhood inferno. Mike saw his best opportunity approaching. Crouching, he darted into the meadow, circling to come up behind the thing, dancing through years of accumulated cockleburs mowed into a matted carpet.

On the crest of a deep slough, the HARM stiffened. Mike slowed, prepared to flatten himself on the dirt if the thing showed any sign of swinging about. Side panels flared over the power compartment, followed by the banshee wail of the chillers, which vented their waste heat and byproducts extracted off the HARM's micro-breeder reactor heart. Mike ducked into the roiling steam cloud, closing the distance.

A sudden breeze whisked the steam away.

Mike froze.

The HARM had swiveled. Death now stared at him with an array of spectrum emitters. One micro pulse and he'd evaporate, adding his failed attempt to the next training vidcast.

You're a shrub, Sergeant, an inconsequential life form. No metals, fibers, or plastics distinguish you from the background clutter of native life. Safe to ignore. Insignificant.

He became a tree and braced for death.

On the laptop, the juggernaut prepared to claim its twenty-third victim.

That should be me, thought Yancy, as he had every time before at this instant. Countless letters signed with his scrawl extolled pride and admiration to newly-made widows and fatherless children, when all he could think was that the very first letter should have gone to a modest colonial structure in Maryland that had been in his family for generations.

During what seemed a lifetime ago, he'd applied that same scrawl atop a thousand-page contract authorizing a certain black program. Out of his pen a defense consortium was born. The might of capitalism backed by insane amounts of tax dollars yielded a HARM conceptual prototype about the time a radical faction made landfall in Redondo Beach, holding off a Navy SEAL assault long enough to trigger a small-yield thermonuclear device. America incurred a West coast terrorism tragedy that day, a bookend to the one on the East coast over a decade earlier. Yancy compounded the LA disaster by rushing the HARMs into production, consenting to manned vehicles in place of full automation. Only elite soldiers – those the Army considered nearly perfect – qualified as operators, but as a last-minute precaution, Yancy directed UDA to include an undisclosed capability. It would forcibly replace the operator and was intended only for dire situations.

The first squad had emerged three months ago, serial numbers one through 10, near-invincible weapons of absolute power for urban and low-conflict settings.

Mike sold it, the understated performance of a lifetime.

His audience rewarded him with total indifference.

The HARM spun about and crested the lip of a deep ditch. Its cab dropped as it descended.

Now!

Mike bolted forward. As he reached the lip, the misshapen box hung a few feet up and before him, silhouetted against peals of smoke. He sprung, arced through the air, and smacked the base of the cab, snatching a tenuous handhold on a slender pipe just before falling into the HARM's churning treads. His bare flesh sizzled against buffed metal, the machine's polarized armored skin. He held on. Twisting, jerking, shoulder screaming in protest, Mike endured the torturous carnival ride up the other slope before hauling himself onto the narrow catwalk underneath the rear service doors.

Almost home.

An embossed UDA logo decorated the pair of doors facing him. The "D" split in half as he threw the release lever. He staggered into the cramped service alcove. Outside, the HARM unleashed fresh spectrum pulses, escalating the wanton carnage of its rampage.

"Time to shut you down, robot," Mike muttered through clenched teeth. Aching fingers flew across several panels, entering confidential override and security disengagement codes.

As the last was accepted, multiple amber strobes flickered, accompanied by a siren's warble.

"Cry all you want, it's over." He reached for a pair of switches, thinking of the woman's face he loved and the two tiny faces he adored. "This is for you guys," he

announced as he slammed home the knobs. "Your world just got a little safer."

The pair of service doors slid shut behind him as the HARM ground to a halt. The cab began quaking, escalating to violent shakes as suffocating heat built around him. At the edge of tolerance, he heard muffled screaming resonating within the HARM's rattling walls. Then, the screams cut off and the chillers quieted. The trembling stilled. Indicators winked out.

Something was horribly wrong.

Before him the control panels parted, revealing another, deeper alcove. The stench of burnt flesh gagged him as he glimpsed an empty, man-shaped, padded cocoon. Something smacked his back. He fell into the cocoon's black caress, which constricted like a second skin. Tubes probed and invaded. A thousand needles burrowed under his flesh. Tingles shot from toes to brain stem before obliterating all conscious thought from the man once called Edwards.

"Readings?" Yancy demanded.

"Nominal," Pritchard replied. "At least for stage one of rehosting."

"Do we have control?"

"Too soon to know, Colonel. Let the rehosting complete."

"Ready destruct command. Issue on my order if control waivers." Yancy stood back and waited for the HARM to finish engaging its new operator.

Three months ago, in response to cryptic intelligence of some unspecified threat to Washington, DC, Yancy'd ordered the first soldier into HARM 00000001. The reported threat to the nation's capitol never materialized. Instead, the manned HARM created a new menace. Absolute power indeed conformed to the ancient adage, especially in the clutches of a human mind invaded, occupied, and subsumed by a specialized war-fighting machine. The subsequent loss of life and property was unfortunate, but the unit's emergency operator replacement capability gave Yancy and a successive string of volunteer candidates repeated opportunities to pilot the unit back to its Fort Hood base for permanent deactivation. They were performing their Duty, no more, no less, as best as they could. Yancy would repeat it all unchanged, if the chance to redo it materialized. That's how it was.

"Unit oh-one, acknowledge voice command on secure channel omega," Pritchard droned. "Unit oh-one, this is Delta Nova Field Ops. Acknowledge."

For Yancy, the worst aspect was the futility. In the war on terrorism, to do nothing meant the terrorist won. If one fought like a terrorist, then, again, the terrorist won. The only way to triumph was to deny the terrorist admission to the fray in the first place. Unfortunately, that option eluded Yancy, being far outside of his job scope. Indeed, sometimes defeat was inevitable and only Duty remained.

"Got it, Colonel!"

"And?"

"Self-preservation's already peaked. No destruct possible, but we do have some control, except—"

"Except what?"

"The projections from Edwards' qualification scoring are way off. Mental stability readings are trending poorly against the baseline. He's gonna go fast. We might have a

day. Maybe."

Yancy's fist smacked his palm. The pain felt good. Appropriate. "I'm sick of this, Gus. Sick to death. What's it going to take to finally end it?"

"A saint. A goddamn saint."

"Too bad we didn't spec that requirement from the start. Well, you can go call the Vatican, because we don't have any of those in our ranks. Never will. Let me speak to Edwards."

Pritchard activated the mic and nodded.

"Unit oh-one, acknowledge. Delta Nova here."

"Read," came the flat, expressionless voice.

"Mission accomplished. Dallas metropolis secured. Orders are to return to base. Best possible speed. Coordinates pending. Acknowledge."

"Confirm."

After Pritchard transmitted the lat-lon coordinates of Fort Hood, Yancy watched with him as the HARM reconfigured for flight. It rose on a tongue of white flame and angled into the sky. Perhaps Edwards could accomplish the second part of his mission, to force the unit home, safe and secured, before what remained of his mortal mind succumbed, and he became the target for the next volunteer.

"Fucking robots. I hate 'em," Yancy said, staring at the satcam track of the HARM.

"Colonel? I don't understand. I mean, if you'd just funded the fully automated unit, we wouldn't be here now."

"That's exactly what pisses me off. Pack up."