

Assault Recon

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- HQ, this is Zulu One. We are at the AO. Preparing to breach.
- Zulu One, this is HQ. Copy. The signal is getting weaker, we will probably lose you when you enter the structure. - The woman's voice responded on the radio.
- Affirm HQ. Going dark on breach, T minus sixty seconds.
- Copy Zulu One, good luck.

As the transmission ended, the drilling stopped. The last echoes of the drill faded out through the cave. The cave itself was quite spacious but littered with equipment left in a rush by archeologists. Shadows were dancing on unevenly lit brown walls of the cave by knocked-over work lights. All but one were scattered around the cave. The one that stood still lit the far end of the cave, where the grey stone brick arch and in it a door made from one block of the same stone with a dividing line in the middle. On the arch there were engraved mostly faded out symbols, one per brick in the arch. Besides Zulu One in the cave there were five other operators, each dressed in some kind of desert uniform, night vision goggles on their helmets, bodycams attached to their plate carriers and outfitted with varied equipment.

Zulu One who was leader of this group, moved closer to the door or at least what soon will be the opening that can be used as a door. In front of it stood another operator, stuffing some kind of plastic into the drilled hole. Z-1 stopped and asked him.

- You sure it's not too much? I don't want to have this ceiling coming down on us.
- I am sure. - Zulu Four answered, and started placing thermite charges around the explosive.

The stone slab of the door had a weird seam in the middle, like it was made from two stones, but if inspected closely there was no gap. In the middle of it there was a hole about an inch wide stuffed with plastic explosives. Around it were wires and weird plastic containers filled with thermite, marking 1 square meter on the door.

- I wonder if it has some kind of password that opens it. - Zulu Three thought out loud.- like in Lord of the Rings.
- Fucking nerd - Zulu Six commented.
- Quiet - Z One ordered.

The next moment was filled with the echoing sound of placing plastic explosives.

- It's done - Zulu Four announced.
- Team positions. - Squad Leader ordered.

The squad aligned themselves with the cave wall and the arch, waiting for a signal.

- Ready, go.

Thermite began melting the stone. A sharp metallic scent filled the cave. As the stone melted, the thermite finished burning. An explosive charge inserted in the drilled hole in the door exploded, filling the cave with dust and leaving the squad with slightly ringing ears. When the dust began to settle, the newly created square hole in the door opened to a dark, narrow hallway with a rounded ceiling.

The group entered the hallway one by one. Turning on gun-mounted flashlights as they entered. The light from the flashlights did not reach the end of the hallway. The overbearing smell of dust attacked the nostrils of operatives as they entered the narrow

corridor. The hallway had space for two men being uncomfortably side by side while being two and a half meters tall. On the walls of the hallway, equally spaced, were unlit stone torches. When all had entered inside, they formed a formation and kept moving carefully forward.

- NODs - said Z One. - flashlights to infrared.

In a few seconds, all that the team could see was tinted green. Their range of sight did not increase, but they saw their surroundings much more clearly. Not long after, the arch doorframes in the walls of the hallway started appearing. Behind them, there were mostly empty rooms, Some had some wooden old benches and weapon stands, but no weaponry; others had shelving and some creases. Zulu carefully moved forward without paying much attention to those rooms, to make sure they were clear of any threats. As they move further, they begin to slightly go down.

Suddenly, they spotted something. The team carefully approached the mound-shaped object that appeared in front of them. As they came closer, they realised it was not a mound, it was a carcass. Skeleton reassembled one of the humans. While near it, Zulu Two crouched down and took a look at the skull.

- Weird, this isn't a human skull - said after a quick look. - Its chin and cheek are elongated, it resembles more...
- Doesn't matter - Z-1 interrupted him - We need to keep going.

He put down the skull, giving the whole skeleton a last look, and he realised that not only the skull had elongated parts, but the whole skeleton was in some way deformed while remaining in humanoid form. The group continued to walk down the hallway.

Soon they saw the light coming from the end of the corridor, which flickered as they moved closer. When they came close, the light was strong enough for them to turn off the night vision devices. They came to the door, which had a firelight shining through. The doors were barricaded from their side, with a barred window letting the light through. They removed the barricade. Z One tried to open the door, but it was locked.

- Zulu Five, I need a breach. - he said.

Z-5 came from the back of the squad to the door. Unholstered his breach short shotgun and gave a sign for the team to prepare to breach. They aligned themselves behind him. Getting ready to enter the unknown.

- Breach - the order rang in their ears. As the shot of the shotgun pierced through the lock.

They moved in, one after the other, and they entered a big empty space. While they were expecting some kind of room. They have entered a big tunnel or corridor. It was 20 meters wide and 15 meters high with an arching ceiling. Evenly lit by the fire of the torches, which emanates stronger light. The floor was bricklayer like in the old towns of European cities. But beside them and a few skeletons that laid slightly out of sight it was empty. The walls looked like medieval few story tall buildings. It went to the left, up to the surface. To the right it was going down. The squad stood still in awe for a moment when finally the voice of Zulu Three, broke the silence.

- What the fuck.
- Where the fuck are we? - Z-6 said what most of them thought at that moment out loud.

They stood in awe, distracted. The enormity of the corridor engulfed them in its enormity, as it stretched both ways for what seemed like kilometers. The improbability of such a corridor or tunnel existing dawned on them. As its impossible existence was somehow justified itself in this world.

- We need to get going - the voice of Zulu One echoed through the corridor.
- Get going? - Z Two responded - How can we get going. Where are we?
- We cannot stop for long, we need to be moving. - Z-1 repeated himself.
- Who built this? and how did it stay hidden? - Z Three asked
- We don't know but we need to complete our assignm...
- Which is? because this is some kind of first encounter bullshit. - Zulu Six interrupted Zulu One
- Assault recon. - Z-1 answered and continued. - We have bodycams which record all we see. Those who will come after us may find answers, but right now, let's make their path clearer.

There was a slight vibration in his voice as he reminded them of their goal. The Squad gathered themselves.

- Copy that - Z Six answered.
- We are going down - Z-1 stated.

They started walking left from the hallway they exited, close to the wall so as to be less exposed. Repeating shapes on the walls. Despite the enormity of the corridor, it felt quite boring. Stylised shapes on the walls, like an old European town, sometimes opened their windows and doors to the darkness inside. More often than not, they passed skeletons of people who used to live here. Some were the same as the elongated one they found in the corridor, some were shorter and wider, some were taller, some had different skulls and bones never seen before on a bipedal skeleton, but some were just human. Most of them had scraps of clothes on them, now dissolving to dust. Others had pieces of medieval armour on them. The armour itself was unfamiliar to soldiers' eyes, and they could not pinpoint where it was, but most of it was eaten by time.

The team walked the corridor for some time. They could have walked for kilometres or more. They didn't count. They passed an empty carriage. There were no remains of horses nearby. Some skeletons began wielding remains of weapons most rusted beyond repair. There were swords, spears, halberds and tips of arrows. Soon, the openings in the walls were appearing less frequently. Their steps began to be louder while the environment did not change. The flooring was the same, and nothing seemed to be much different, but the stones began to be much smoother, as if they were polished.

The steps echoed while they made slow progress forward. The one stone within this road was different from the others. It had inscribed in shadowy ink a rune. Some stones like him have already activated themselves or lost their inscription. This one stood the test of time. For centuries, it waited to fulfil its purpose. As the military boot of one of the operatives stepped on it. With a slight shimmer, the inscription vanished and activated one of the defensive mechanisms. The stone fulfilled its purpose. Where the wall meets the floor, there is a slight slit with grating. Through which the thick grey smoke started coming out.

Zulu One signalled to stop.

- Keep close and watch your step. - declared.

The smoke now rose above their heads, hindering their sight. Smoke was thick enough that one could see about one meter in front. Turning on the flashlights didn't help much. They stayed close to each other. Occasional catching would disrupt the silence. When Zulu Four were about to take the next step, both the smoke and the ground disappeared into the abyss. He quickly recovered balance and looked beyond the smoke.

- Watch out, there is a chasm. - Z-4 informed - It's about three meters wide. Beyond it, there is clear air.
- Let's move closer to the wall. Maybe we can shimmy by it. - Zulu Three suggested.

So they did. They moved back closer to the wall and traced the edge of the chasm. Near the wall, there was a slight edge a few inches short where the rest of the floor used to be. One after the other, they started shimmying across the chasm. While looking down, it looked like there was no bottom, and someone who might have fallen there would never land. With little stones detached from the floor, reminding them of their probable fate. As soon any one of them crossed it, there were sighs of relief. As soon as the last of them stepped off the edge they started to prepare to continue the mission. There was no smoke on this side.

- What the hell was that? - Zulu Two asked. - The smoke, we are lucky that it wasn't poisonous.
- Calm down, soldier - Z-1 answered - You're right, we got lucky, but we need to move forward.
- Forward? We are ill-prepared for this, goddammit.
- We have to. - Zulu One said calmly
- Yeah, you are right - Z-2 said while calming down.

They recounted their gear and once again began marching on. Now in a tighter formation. Staying closer together to prevent getting lost in the event of disruption.

The corridor began to change itself once again. It began to feature shooting galleries near where the ceiling began to curve in an arch. The walls themselves became smoother, and now rare openings were flush with a wall. Torches, which lit the tunnel, began to be more and more spread out. It started slightly, but with the distance travelled, the increase in distance between torches has become more noticeable. The team turned on their flashlights and continued on. As they walked, more carcasses began to show up around their path. More often than not, they were in armour now. Some even had well-kept weapons near them, as time did not affect their edge.

A sudden click under one of the squad members' shoes. A silent shimmer was let into the air. The next trap has been activated. A sudden wave of invisible energy went through the corridor, originating somewhere further down. When it came through the team, it felt like some kind of membrane went through them. As this wave passed, their light flickered and shut down.

- NODs - order came from Z One.
- No picture - came a response from Zulu Four. - They broke as well.

As soon as the response came, the fiery lights began to extinguish themselves. First started those further down, and like in sequence, coming to the squad. The second wave of darkness

- Glowsticks - Came another order from Z-1.

In response, the clicking and braking sound of plastic and thin glass could be heard. As the green began to illuminate the surrounding area, the lights went out around them. The third wave goes through them. Around them, the sudden racket of metal and something else disrupted the silence. The uneven shapes began to show themselves to the team. The silhouettes of unknown humanoid shapes played tricks on their minds as if they were coming closer. The squad stayed close together. They were a few meters away from one of the walls.

Zulu Three was at the back of the group, looking at the way they came from. The noise came from the left of him. As he turned around, he saw a human skull staring back at him with one of its arms in the middle of the swing. Swords cut through the uniform and skin. Zulu Three opened fire from his M4. The sword cut his neck. As he began falling from the attack. The finger was stuck on the trigger, automatic fire of the rifle decimated the skeleton.

As Z-3 fell, other skeletons began to reveal themselves to the squad. They opened fire. Some shots went through spaces in between the bones, but the volume of fire disregarded the need for precision. Zulu Five quickly switched from his MP7 to the breach shotgun. The skeletons attacked one after another, coming from the dark around them. The muzzle flash of the guns only revealed more undead to come. From five it went to ten, then to twenty. More skeletons were on their way. One soldier reloaded their gun, and another one covered them. Bullets broke through the rusted armour and broke bones inside.

After many rounds were fired and many broken bones, the skeletons stopped coming. Z Two turned to see fallen Z-3. He kneels down by him.

- Fucking hell, stay with us, man. - He said as he took Z three's hand and put it on his neck - Come on, put pressure on it.

As he did, Zulu Two only felt the disappearing pulse of his fellow soldier.

- Zulu Three was killed in action. - Z-2 two stated - Cut wound to the neck and subsequent blood loss.
- Get his tags, we need to move, or more of them may come - Zulu One acknowledged.
- There are lights further down the tunnel, - Z Six informed - It will be safer there.

They started walking once again. Throwing glowing glowsticks a few meters in front to mark the path and light the way. Slowly, they made their way to the lit area. Which turned out to be the rest of the tunnel, now lit back again.

- What the hell was that? - Zulu Four asked
- Skeletons? walking skeletons. - Z-6 answered. - What fantasy bullshit is that? I don't know.
- We don't have to - Z-1 interrupted conversation. - We have a job to do.
- This fantasy bullshit killed one of us - Z Six continued - We should do something about it.
- We don't have time for that - Z-1 responded once again - If we keep focusing on what was that and how was that, we will get surprised once again. And more of us will end up dead. So keep vigilant and move forward.

Soon their flashlights turned on. With minimal reaction, they continued moving forward. The environment kept being stale. They could have worked in meters or kilometres, but they would not have known. The environment did not change to show them how far they went. But they were going forward, there was nothing disproving that. But they moved more slowly than before.

Zulu Six walked in front of the team. He was more forward than before, with his thoughts wandering around. As he took his next step, something below him clicked. On the next step, a stone wall shot out in front of him. The wall was about a meter and a half high. Second, after that ground beneath him folded in half, opening into an empty chasm. Zulu Six fell down the hole. His squad mates did not have a chance to react and could only see him disappear into the ground. After a few seconds, they heard the sound of squashed meat and ripped flesh.

In front of them, there were more walls popping out of the ground, and more holes revealed themselves. One hole in front of the wall. Holes themselves were around a meter and a half wide. They tread carefully as the mechanism that Z-6 activated finished functioning. They passed the section and moved on. Mostly in silence, as the death of Z Six woke them up. As they walked away, something bigger began to reveal itself on the horizon.

They continued walking in silence, from six down to four. Through the limited light, they saw the end of the corridor. They walked in silence, the sound of their steps echoing

lonely in the tunnel. As they came closer to the end, the number of skeletons increased. Unlike before, where the skeletons were all black, with bone white being a rarity. Fearing another ambush, the rest of the squad kept close. Until the light of their flashlights showed them a wall of metal and wood. Bleak light from torches was not enough to show them what they truly saw.

They stopped fifteen meters before the object. They began tracing the object with their flashlights. Giant pieces of wood connected and reinforced by steel or unknown metal. Split in the middle filled the corridor.

- Those are... - Z Four started.
- Doors. - Z-2 Finished.
- We need to get through them - Z One said - Zulu Five ideas?
- Nothing at the moment - Z-5 Five answered - I need to take a look.

Z Five got closer to the door. Examined it from closer it looked like there was nothing from this side able to move it, and they were certainly too heavy to open by hand. They could also be barricaded from the inside. Soon enough, he found what he was looking for. On the left door, right close to the middle, there was an outline with a handle. A smaller door. A sliver of light escaped from the inside.

- Found something - Z-5 announced.

The rest of the squad came closer to him. He pushed slightly on the door. They were unlocked. Squad prepared for entry. Two of them are to the right, the other two to the left of the door.

- On my mark - announced Zulu One - Three... Two.. One.. GO!

Zulu Five opened the door fully, and they entered one by one. Going through the threshold into the unknown. But as soon as they entered the blinding light stopped and they saw something none who was not there would believe.

When they entered the hall, they stood once again in awe but also in fear. The entrance section was an extension of the tunnel. The hall itself was round with a ring of pillars a few meters from the wall and around 20 meters between pillars. From the pillars, the ceiling was a dome. The hall was well-lit with torches on each pillar and around the walls. These torches burned with unnatural bright fire. In the middle of the room, there were tons of gold, gems, decorated or well-preserved swords and other weapons, differently decorated shields, and other artefacts of unknown origin. Gold seemed to shine by itself. But the most impossible thing was lying on top of it. From the top of its hoard, there was an awoken dragon looking at the intruders.

The red dragon was the biggest creature the squad had ever seen. With four legs and gigantic wings was a sight to admire. The most dangerous sight to admire. As they stood there with their weapons down, the dragon stretched itself and turned its head on the long neck of the squad. His body was covered in red scales that changed in tone as it moved from deep, dark red to shiny and bright red. Lighter scales could also be spotted on its chest and stomach. Its tail, which was as long as the dragon's, swung from side to side as the dragon moved. As it stopped moving, it positioned its horned head in front of the Z One and spoke.

- What? - Zulu One asked - We do not understand you.

The dragon distanced itself from the soldier. It sighed and gestured something like snapping fingers with its right front paw. Some dim magenta light from that paw and some shimmering filled the air.

- Who are you, and why did you wake me? - The Dragon asked, but there was a slight delay between it speaking those words and the squad hearing them.

- We are a Zulu team from the US Marine Corps - Z-1 Responded - And it was not our intention to awaken you. We are deeply sorry.
- Not your intention? - Hoard rang as the dragon moved - You are either stupid or ill-prepared. To activate what was left of my alarms, especially for a bunch of thieves.
- We are no thieves, - As Z One spoke, he felt the sight of the dragon on him. We are on the mission to perform a recon of the area.
- And look how far this so-called recon got you. - Dragon responded mockingly - So tell me what are you really after. Or suffer consequences.

Zulu One counted his options, took a deep breath and reached into the pocket on his plate carrier. He pulled out a folded piece of paper and began to unfold it. On it there was a print out digital recreation of white round like a gem in between metal rods.

- We are looking for this artifact - He said as he showed the print out to the Dragon.

Dragon put his eye to the paper, getting his head close to Z-1 so that he could smell the sulfuric breath of it. The rest of the team looked at each other confused.

- Very well - Dragon said while pulling his head back - so either you want to steal it or at least can trade for it. So, tell me what you can offer for it?
- We cannot offer much for it...
- THEN you are no better than thieves you claim not to be - Dragon interrupted. - You clearly have no idea how much it's worth and do not have anything of equal value to offer. So let me give a warning. You either leave and come back with something to offer or face the consequences.
- We cannot leave without the artefact. - Z One said as he took a battle-ready position with his rifle. The rest of the squad followed. - You either forfeit to us the artifact or you die.
- Then you all die, thieves

Dragon took his front right paw and swung into Zulu one as the squad opened fire. Zulu One flew meters into the air landing into the wall. The sound of breaking neck and cracking bones was muffled by the sound of firing guns.

- Spread out - yelled Z-2 - Take cover.

Members of the squad ran to the pillars. Zulu Two who was furthest from any of them was left in the open. As the dragon began to blow fire. The hall was filled with the smell of burning clothes and flesh and screams of dying Z Two. Dragon turned his head to Zulu Four who ran to his right. As the fire engulfed the pillar behind which Z Four was hiding. Zulu Five fired his mp7 from the other side of the room.

- It stings - Dragon yelled - your little toys.

As the next portion of its fire went toward Zulu Five. He began to scream as the fire engulfed him entirely. As the dragon was hit once again from the right side. Zulu Four fired from his m4 as suddenly his rifle jammed. Surprised, he tried to switch to his side arm as the dragon took a bite out of him. Lonely legs dropped to the ground. The sound of the fight died down. The Dragon slowly walked to the doors wondering to himself.

- Lets see what has changed while I slept.

Epilogue

Six months later, somewhere in the United States, three-letter agency documents.

Operation Grave Robber, recovery - Report.

Team: Zulu Status: KIA with two members MIA.

Bodycam Status:

Zulu Three - Recovered;

Zulu One, Two, Five - Destroyed, memory recovered;

Zulu Six, Four - Missing.

Artifact: Secured