

## These Woods

The sun is not yet cresting the horizon, there is a dim glow over the mountains to the east but the visibility is still low. I can hear the ground beneath my feet, but just barely. The ground is still wet and soft with the fresh rain, about three inches, perfect for stalking. It has been so long since the last time and I can hardly stand it. My mind starts to wander as I think about the tracks that we have been following for the past four hours. What lies over the next ridge, how many, have they been alerted? The sound of a snapping twig beneath my foot brings my mind back to where it needs to be. I catch the gaze of my buddy, Jason to my right, his eyes stand out against the paint on his face and I can feel their intensity. I can hear his eyes telling me to watch my step as we start to move.

We stop about twenty paces from the top of the ridge and take a knee as the sun illuminates the peak, we don't want to silhouette ourselves. Look, listen, smell, gather as much information and situational awareness as we can before we move again. I pointed out a small spot, kind of a pocket at the top between a couple large rocks and some small shrubs; it should provide a good covered and concealed position. We slowly moved to the position without speaking a word. My battle buddy, Jason, ditched his pack and got set up on his scope. I did the same, extending the bipod on my M14 as quietly as possible. I brought the rifle to my cheek and released the scope covers on both sides. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, exhale, this is it.

Looking through my high powered scope I see a group of four armed men. Two of them were sitting next to a low fire, probably on a watch shift while the other two sleep.

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“They are definitely not professionals” I said in a low voice.

“Roger, call ‘em out.” Jason replied, looking for supplies and other valuable items.

“I’m seeing cooking supplies, at least four rifles, and who knows what’s on that pack mule?” I said.

“Probably ammo, food, maybe some coin. Let’s take ‘em” Jason decided. “Roger”

They were about two hundred thirty yards away downhill, there was a slight breeze blowing to the west but nothing major, I adjusted my sights. I flicked the safety off and slowly moved my finger to the trigger. It was cold to the touch; it had been so long since I had pulled it last. I started a slow squeeze, no need to rush. The report from my rifle echoed throughout the mountains, my M14 is not quiet.

The first man went down with no struggle, I moved to the second one who was now reaching for his weapon and trying to pinpoint the origin of the sound. I squeezed again, this time with a sense of urgency. He had only enough time to look our way before the next shot rang out, two men down. As I shifted to my right I saw one of the sleepers scrambling for his weapon which he had foolishly left out of his reach.

“The other one is behind those rocks to the left, take the one in the open.” Jason said as he watched the action through the spotting scope.

I exhaled slowly and timed the shot during the natural pause in my breath. The third man went down, he struggled for a moment but there was no hope. The last man returned fire frantically and in the midst of his untrained, inaccurate volley he exposed a leg, so I took it. It

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immediately took him out of the fight. He dropped his weapon and reached for his wounded leg, exposing more of his body and further compromising his position. My last shot ended all resistance.

“Good shooting.” Jason patted me on the shoulder. It was standard procedure for us to wait for about two to five minutes to see if any of their friends showed up in their aid. During which time I noticed my heart pounding and my hands shaking, it had been a while.

“No one is responding, I think these men were alone” I said. They were definitely not professionals or they would have known not to trespass in these woods, our woods. It was now about six months since the collapse of American society. Looting and rioting soon became bloody battles over territory when people started to band together. Jason and I wasted no time, we alongside a group of our friends from our time in the military headed to the hills with our families. We now control about four miles in any direction around the small camp that we operate out of, living off of the land and the people who seek to challenge us or in this case wander into the wrong territory.

It is time to pick up and move, time to claim our reward. We back tracked moving down the opposite side of the ridge and then cleared our way around the left side to keep from being predictable always checking our six-o-clock, stopping every so often to look and listen. Jason and I put about ten meters in between as we cleared the camp checking for survivors.

“Looks clear, I’ll pull security” I said, moving past the limits of the camp to take a knee. Situational awareness and security have always been essential to survival but are so much more prevalent now.

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We stop about twenty paces from the top of the ridge and take a knee as the sun illuminates the peak, we don't want to silhouette ourselves. Look, listen, smell, gather as much information and situational awareness as we can before we move again. They are just over this ridge, it is amazing what you can pick up in the silence of the mountains. I pointed out a small spot, kind of a pocket at the top between a couple large rocks and some small shrubs; it should provide a good covered and concealed position. I turned back to the three large, bearded men behind me and nodded; they proceeded to sneak around the left side of the ridge. We slowly moved to the position without speaking a word. My battle buddy, Jason, ditched his pack and got set up on his scope. I did the same, extending the bipod on my M14 as quietly as possible. I brought the rifle to my cheek and released the scope covers on both sides. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, exhale, this is it.

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“Probably ammo, food, maybe some coin. Let’s take ‘em” Jason decided.

They were about two hundred thirty yards away downhill, there was a slight breeze blowing to the west but nothing major, I adjusted my sights. After a few minutes Jason slowly moved his right hand up to the small radio on his collar, my adrenaline rose.

“Go” He said.

The tree line to the left of the small camp erupted with gunfire shredding one of the men two men by the fire almost instantly, the other barely escaped with his life as he fell back behind the rock he had been sitting on with his weapon. I flicked the safety off and slowly moved my finger to the trigger. It was cold to the touch; it had been so long since I had squeezed it last.

Only seconds had passed since the assault started and the two sleeping men had now found cover, however the volume of fire that they were facing was too much for them to raise their heads and return fire. They were reduced to using the same method we had all seen time and again overseas, raising their weapons above cover and shooting blindly.

I moved the cross hairs to the man closest to me and started to squeeze, no need to rush. The report of my M14 echoed above the commotion below, a different sound than that of an M4. The man slumped over into his buddies lap. He looked on in horror and searched the trees for the origin of the shot that had taken his friends life.

“Moving!” Robert sounded off as he bounded forward to another position of cover, Bryan and Davis keeping the enemies heads down. One at a time they repeated the same tactic getting on line with Rob, closing in. The next man was much like the first, a slow exhale and another loud shot that tore through him leaving him hemorrhaging helplessly, out of the fight. The last man stood up in a valiant effort to bring at least one of his assailants down and was met with an overpowering wall of lead. It all happened in under a minute.

“Good shooting.” Jason patted me on the shoulder.

I couldn't hide the grin on my face as I watched our boys push through the camp looking for survivors. It was a textbook assault. Rob's beast of a dog was searching excitedly for explosives, traps, more people hiding in the bushes, anything.

“No one is responding, I think these men were alone” I said. They were definitely not professionals or they would have known not to trespass in these woods, our woods. It was now about six months since all of this started and we were forced to take refuge in the mountains. living off of the land and the people who seek to challenge us or in this case wander into the wrong territory.

It is time to pick up and move. By now the others had set up a perimeter, we moved straight down the ridge to the three broken bodies and their camp that was now ours.

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