

The Varmint Hunter I

Borderland

By Greg Kay

The morning sun had barely risen over the desert, yet the chill of night was gone and it had taken the light dew with it. Already the first traces of heat mirage were shimmering across the ground. Before long it would make an accurate long shot difficult if not impossible.

Of course, if the varmints were coming, they would come before then. They preferred to travel in the cool of the day.

The hunter shifted infinitesimally beneath his blind, just enough to allow his lips to close around the drinking tube of his canteen and suck up a mouthful of water before returning his eye to the spotting scope. Flat on his belly, he resumed scanning the arid landscape.

He was patient. They had taught him that in the Army...along with other things.

Like how to make a good blind, for one: good enough you didn't have to worry about it.

A tarp of desert pattern camouflage covered the shallow depression where he lay. It was firmly propped up with dry sticks, and more brush was scattered across its top. The construction shaded him, protecting him from the great burning eye in the sky, and from other, equally dangerous eyes. He had more to worry about than being spotted by the varmints: of greater importance was to conceal himself from those assigned to safeguard them, since hunting these particular varmints was highly illegal. They were a protected species, although far from endangered.

That last part was something the hunter intended to change.

He didn't like to kill. He didn't even like the sport; although he was honest enough to admit it exhilarated him on a deep, atavistic level. In some ways he even felt sorry for the varmints, but they were overrunning his country, eating his people out of house and home, and were on the verge of taking over completely. If his people were to survive, that simply could not be allowed. There was a duty to stop the infestation and turn back the invasion, and since he was capable of it, that duty fell to him.

The time ticked by and the blazing sun climbed higher. A vulture rode the thermals, nearly out of sight against the cloudless sky. If they were coming, it would have to be soon.

A hint of movement along the varmint's migration trail caught his attention and he shifted his scope.

There they were: a herd of almost two dozen. The powerful optics magnified them thirty times, and he could make out the details even at a thousand yards. They trudged along through the spiny vegetation under burdens of sacks and bundles; their heads slumped against the heat.

There was something that didn't seem right about this bunch. It was only when they came closer that he spotted it.

A trio of protectors had attached themselves to this herd, armed and ready to fight to ensure their passage. They intended to see that more varmints were safely installed in the hunter's land.

Normally the hunter only took down the herd leader. When the guide dropped and the sound of the shot echoed in their ears, the rest of the herd would stampede back the way they had come. Once you scared them off like that, they seldom returned to your territory.

This was a different situation and called for a different strategy.

Most other hunters would have called off the whole thing as too great a risk, but he was not one of them. He saw it as merely as a challenge to be met and a puzzle to be solved.

At eight hundred yards, he was able to assess the situation.

The leader was obvious. Like the other protectors, he was the same species as the other varmints, but having lived in the hunter's land, he carried himself differently. He made his status obvious by waving his hands and gesturing authoritatively toward the others at every opportunity. Two lumps were visible on his belt; squinting the hunter could make out a pistol and a cell phone. The first was no threat to him, but the second definitely was. It wouldn't do to have the misguided authorities show up before he was long gone.

Along with his place and position, that tiny piece of digital circuitry marked the leader as the primary target. The hunter memorized his clothing and appearance before swinging to the next man.

This one was carrying what looked like a Tech 9: a clumsy, close range weapon that fired 9mm pistol cartridges. The hunter would save him for last. The scope's glass eye moved on.

After studying the third man carefully, he reassessed his objectives, putting the pistol-toting leader second and moving his newest target into his place. The scoped rifle this protector had slung across his shoulder made the decision for him.

In the military, his officers always stressed to take the leader out first, egotistically believing that the enemy would be unable to function without their opposite numbers in command. The sergeants, on the other hand, taught him to prioritize taking out what was a danger to *him*: the other sniper.

As an afterthought, he sought out the 'coyote' - the varmint herd's guide - and filed him away in his mind for future reference. It was unlikely that he would still be around after he took down the first three, but one could always hope.

He knew he had to engage them well away from any cover if he were to have any hope of killing more than one of them. Before the echoes of the first shot died away, they would all be scrambling for a hiding place. His job was to make certain they had none.

Scanning ahead of their progress along the well-worn trail, he found what he was looking for. Four hundred and fifty yards out, their path crossed a large dry wash. Just before the trail dropped over the lip, it passed over a windswept stretch of sand and rock, flat and nearly bare of any concealing plant life for a diameter of about twenty-five yards. Only a hand full of waist-high bushes spotting the area offered any chance at a hiding place, and they were nearly bare of leaves and their branches were light and open enough to shoot through if necessary.

It wasn't ideal, but it was the best he was going to get. He'd just have to be quick enough to insure that neither their sniper nor their leader could reach the thicker surrounding brush or the cover of the wash.

Carefully, with as little movement as possible, he folded the tripod's short legs and stashed the scope in the pack beside him, followed by the canteen, before securing its Velcro flap. Once this was over, he would need to move fast.

He visually checked his rifle. The bipod was down and locked in place, its springs tense and legs planted with the strip of camouflage ground cloth beneath to prevent the muzzle blast from kicking up tell-tale dust from the parched earth. The ragged burlap wrapped around both the stock and the heavy barrel didn't obscure the scope's powerful lens.

Without rising, he moved the rifle butt to his shoulder, seating and supporting it with his left hand. He set the raised cheek piece against his face and locked himself in position, gazing out through the predator's eye of the range-finder scope.

Now they were at the edge of the killing zone.

Slowly, with the instinctive distrust of open areas common to all varmints, they began to cross the bare patch.

He had to time it just right. The three protectors were in the lead, still in the same order. The key would be to wait until he got a good, clear shot at their sniper, but not so long that the leader with the means of calling for help at his side would have time to drop into cover over the edge of the wash. It was going to be close.

The hunter breathed deeply twice to saturate his tissues with oxygen. He settled the crosshairs on the sniper, in the center of his chest. There was no need to try for anything risky like a head shot. A torso hit would take his target out of action, and if the wound wasn't immediately fatal, the desert soon would be.

At the end of his exhalation, his index finger squeezed the familiar surface of the trigger and the rifle rocked against his shoulder.

The .308 bullet shattered the sniper's sternum and cut his heart in two before exiting through his back in a spray of blood. The man and the rifle clattered to the ground together.

The hunter didn't pause to watch him fall. Confident in his abilities, he rode the recoil as he shifted his aim past the second protector and onto the leader.

Their leader was either not trained well or not expecting an attack. He stopped and stood, legs spread and arms akimbo, trying to see where the shot had come from. Only too late did he realize that they were the targets. The bullet took him in the upper chest, and the hunter saw the puff of dust fly from his shirt before he went down, less than ten yards from the shelter of the wash.

The last of the protectors dove behind one of the sparse bushes and began firing the Tech 9 wildly in the direction the sound of the shots had come from. At that distance, he may as well have been throwing rocks.

Ignoring the harmless spray of lead, the hunter aimed carefully at a gap between two branches and shot him just under the nose. The severed brainstem made the body quiver visibly.

He scanned briefly for the coyote, but the wily old border rat had taken to the brush along with his charges at the sound of the first shot. Only their discarded baggage showed they had been there at all.

Oh well; there would be other days.

Carefully, he swept the scope over the bodies, looking for any signs of life.

They were as still as the desert.

Gathering his gear and spent brass with the quick efficiency of long practice, he set off walking. He would pick up the same wash just a little further on to keep himself off the skyline and to take advantage of the little shade it offered.

Just before he dropped over the edge, he gave the area one last look. He wouldn't be coming back this way – there would be no need. The varmints wouldn't use this track again.

Nearer now, the vulture still circled against the vast blue ocean of the sky. He was no longer alone.

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