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The Sphere

Charles Williamson

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The Sphere  Chuck Williamson

Time behind the sniper rifle was an odd thing. If ever there was a way to slow the river of time it was to put the scope in front of you. I always knew it couldn’t have been longer than a minute, but it felt like a year. The longer the years went on every moment got longer and stretched out, like grains of sand in a shrinking hourglass. Raff, Luke, and I had only been there for five hours, but it felt like an eternity.

Behind me Raff was getting restless on the radio.

“You mind if I smoke real quick?”

“And what if we get an important call?” Luke quipped. “Like that brunette who’s the cardiac surgeon decided to give you another chance? Also, I thought you quit.”

“A thousand apologies, my liege lords. With the crown’s permission I will indulge in a small pleasure I may not have again.”

Luke let out a short laugh next to me and Raff retreated to the opposite end of the room.

Under normal conditions I would have told him to wait ’til we had finished operations, but there hours on overwatch were taking it out of all of us. The dingy brown and lack of furniture in the room didn’t exactly provide much to look at either, but it was an abandoned house on a hill with an intact roof and a large hole in the wall I could view the operational area from. The street below was quiet. Alpha company wasn’t scheduled to be there for another few minutes for a “presence patrol” to remind the militants we were still very much in charge. We had done dozens of them in the last month and nothing ever happened, yet the captain had still asked for sniper support. Lacking an excuse Luke, Raff and I were now spending the day looking for trouble, or “kicking sand looking for land mines” as I had once called it.

The smell of burning tobacco filled the room. I turned. Raff sat against the wall, cigarette in one hand, in his other the Zippo lighter continued to burn. For a moment I watched the Zippo
flame dance in the afternoon light. Something in the primal brain responded to fire like that. The more tired you were, the greater the call of the flame. At some point I noticed Luke joined me and Raff seemed to have forgotten to close the lighter as well. Something about fire always made people stare at it.

I gave myself a quick mental slap and got back behind the gun. Below us Alpha Company had arrived, directly ahead of them was the city mosque, its domed structure dominating the landscape. It was an ornate structure, high columns and few windows to let the worshippers practice without the eyes of the world looking in. There was only one window I could clearly see. Inside, figures I couldn’t make out moved around. One passed the window and my stomach dropped as I saw what looked like a rifle in his hands. Overwatch at that point in the war was largely pointless. Luke and I were so constrained by rules of engagement that we basically had to have a militant shoot five people in front of us before I could take a shot. God help you if you caused any property or civilian damage. Months of “goodwill” effort as well as USAID funding meant that any damage to important structures like schools or mosques would be a significant setback for nation building and you could expect anything from a congressional hearing to demotion and court martial if you were responsible.

“Luke, focus up. Spotter scope now. Need eyes on the dome. Directly ahead, left side window next to the door. Need you to tell me what you see.”

“Aw fuck, is that dudes with AK’s?”

“I need distance. Raff, radio the captain, let him know he’s about to get lit up. After that get the colonel. Tell him he can either authorize whatever I am about to do, or I’ll sign the paperwork and see him at my court martial at a later date.”
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As if on cue the whip crack of a single shot rang out and one of the windowpanes shattered. Moments later the doors of the mosque flew open. Militants ran out. With my unaided eye I couldn’t see their faces or hands, but could see guns and arms. At 300 yards you couldn’t see human hands with the unaided eye.

“Doorway, got a runner. Is that a vest?”

Luke’s sentence might have been a question, but it didn’t need an answer. The crosshairs swept over the figure. The reptilian part of my brain kicked in as I saw the same thing. It became kill or be killed. To my right Luke had answered his own question and was already calling out range modifications and adjustments. Numbers the lizard brain could understand and recognized as important, but were deemed unnecessary. I could hear Raff behind me, but processing what he was saying was likewise deemed unimportant. The bomber almost to the door now. I settled in on a point I thought would be square on his chest and took the slack out of the trigger. If I was as good as I liked to pretend I was, the shot would blow out his spinal column or at the very least make him stumble a bit.

The trigger wall broke and there was a slight twinge against my shoulder as I sent a .30-inch ogive on a journey to terminal ballistics. Down range my gaze held on the figure in the doorway as if I was looking at the very origin of creation itself.

The silhouette of the man jerked bolt upright as if possessed by some kind of divine power. For an instant I thought he was looking for me, then started to fall over as his brain tried to process being dead. Lacking input his other hand relaxed and he dropped the detonator. It never hit the floor, and the figure disappeared. In its place was a miniature sun whose arrival was punctuated by the sonic boom of an explosion that blew out every window on its journey outward. On its heels a perfect sphere of the fireball spilled out the now open windows and set
out to consume the world. The dome cracked and the world shook. The remaining militants scattered and ran off. Then as quickly and violently as it arrived it was gone. Inside countless small fires raged as the upholstery ignited.

“You see anyone else?”

“You, ground troops are moving in to secure. Great shot though.”

Luke, Raff, and I just looked at the fires. Something about fire always makes people stare at it.