



JEFFREY HERSCH

The Designated Marksman

a short story by OTIS HASCHEMEYER

Now that our job

was over, we were back from the desert and drinking beer and a good quantity of Canadian Club at the canteen. A huge guy from another outfit came over. There're a lot of guys with a chip on their shoulder, with something inside them that they're trying to get out, but they don't know how. This guy walked up and pushed my shoulder. It didn't matter to me, but to the SEALS sitting around me, that was a bad career decision.

Tee stood up. "Touch him again and I promise you, I'll stuff you and all your buddies into a knothole."

The guy said something like "Why, who's the old man?" "It doesn't matter to you who he is," Tee said.

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Some of the other guys were there. Belmont and Hector and L'Heureux. I'm not exactly sure. I was getting pretty obliterated. But they didn't get up. They would have gladly watched Tee dismantle the guy and all his buddies, and probably figured that Tee deserved a little fun since he'd been saddled with me for the last ten days.

Wisely, the guy did not accept Tee's invitation. He backed away and did not touch me again.

The next day, our team met in a trailer and had our debriefing. I was highly hung over. The SEALs seemed fine. A high-ranking officer was there. He wore a trident. He said, "Everyone enjoy your outing?"

We responded together, "It's a fine navy day, and we're proud to be here." In the navy, that's something you sometimes say sarcastically, but that day we meant it.

For the most part I stayed out of the debriefing. I thought I might be called down, but I wasn't. I heard them say something. I can't remember what — something-something and my call sign: Sandman. In general, when I heard that word, it meant someone was .8 to 1.6 seconds away from dying. That was all. I also heard just enough to realize how little I knew.

You see, during my time in country, behind the lines and moving along with the SEAL team, I knew nothing — *nothing*. I was totally in the dark. And if you spend enough time in the dark, like I have, you learn something very important: that the brain is a very active muscle and a hungry one. Deprived, it will make the most out of what it gets. So it was with me.

Tactically, I didn't need the Cyclops. I had my thermal detector and light enhancement on my scope. That's all I needed, because that was all I was going to be used for. Before we left, the CO said they would look after me as if I was an expensive piece of equipment. I don't fault them for anything. They got me out of there alive.

And I didn't need information either. I didn't have the training those guys had. I didn't know how to respond if we were captured. For the safety of the team and the mission and the larger world — because we were responsible for that, too — I knew nothing. I was just a tool, and I had only one purpose.

Still, a man is not a tool. So if I say that maybe I was a little crazy, and that I thought we were somewhere we weren't, or that I had a special purpose when really I didn't, I hope you will understand. Walk in the desert in the dark night after night, as I did; follow shadows in the dark.

After the debriefing, I met with a shrink. I would not tell him what I knew, the small piece of knowledge that my hungry brain *had* gleaned, because that shrink had only one purpose too: he wanted to take that knowledge away from me. We sat in straight-backed metal chairs. He was a sharp little man, and he slouched down and leaned back in a way that he must have learned in shrink school.

"So, tell me about your experiences," he said.

I looked out the window and calculated the distance to the next trailer, and then I looked farther off and calculated the distance to the next trailer, and I did that until I reached the hills, where I saw something just about half a centimeter

high — which would be the size of a man at five hundred meters.

In country I'd paid attention only to longer distances, leaving the immediate distances to the SEALs, and this was the case when we were leaving Mosul, where we actually were, and not Baghdad, as I'd thought. We'd been in town for the bombing the night before, and in the predawn, with the bombing over, we were on the move.

Though I trailed the group, I was the first one to see the machine-gun barrel emerge from a side street. The man carrying it was followed by a group of children and what looked to be several women. The women wore head scarves and were round and formless. I turned to Tee and pointed, and then I was high-tailing it to cover even before Tee could grab my shoulder. As I darted out of the man's sight line, I saw him taking a position at the corner. That position pinned the SEALs who were at point into doorways some two hundred meters from the man, but the man hadn't seen them. The children didn't seem to be there for any purpose other than that they were interested in guns, like children are, but they served another purpose just then: they stopped the SEALs from moving in and wasting everyone.

Tee was listening to the headset. "Can you take a shot?" he asked me. I leaned my rifle out of view and looked around the corner. I could see only the children.

"Not from here," I said.

"Then from where, for Christ's sake? I'll get you there."

I looked around. Across the street was a low, flat building no higher than ten feet or so. That might be good enough. I pointed, and we went.

"We should go around," I said, meaning we should go around the block and cross the street farther down. We were already about four or five hundred meters away; another hundred and the man would never make us out.

"We are not separating from the team," Tee said. "If we have to fight our way out of here, we have to be together."

We got down on our bellies and crawled across the street. I matched Tee's speed, which was slow.

On the other side of the street, behind the building, Tee gave me a leg up. I crawled up the side of the building and onto the roof. Tee handed up my rifle. "This is your signal." Tee held two fingers together and then spread them apart. "Open up," he said. "Got it?" I gave an OK sign.

I set the bipod on the other side of the roof, facing down the street. The women and children were still crowded around the man. He was now crouched even lower and finding his position behind the weapon. I wasn't high enough to get an unobstructed shot. I looked over my shoulder and saw Tee's hand above the edge of the roof. His fingers were spread: "Open up." But I didn't have a shot. Moving to tell Tee that might mean losing an opportunity. I looked down the scope again. The man settled himself, cross-legged, behind the machine gun. A woman sat next to him to feed the ammunition belt. I placed the cross hairs on the man's cap and calculated my elevation. I was below my zero and had a drop. My scope was fixed and didn't adjust by way of clicks. From that elevation,

and at that distance, just under five hundred meters, my arc would flatten, and I had to put the cross hairs even lower. I couldn't bear to look at the sight picture that way, though I knew the reality of the bullet's trajectory was not what I saw: the cross hairs fixed on the backs of those children. This might be something the SEALs wouldn't have understood, but the rationalist shooter in me would have argued, if I'd had the time, that confidence is the greatest gift of the marksman, and that analysis of this shot precluded shooting. I didn't feel confident looking into the backs of these children, their dirty necks, their black hair strung thick with dirt like my own, no bigger than my own son, thin arms swinging like sticks from soiled t-shirts. Nothing, nothing could be worse than a parent surviving his child. I remembered when Buzz had slipped in the tub, and my fear and grief, even though he had only broken his orbit bone. This was already after Delia had run out on me. But Buzz falling hadn't been her fault. I was the one there. I was the one responsible.

So if there was a benefit for me to having those children there, it was this: I hated the machine-gunner for bringing children into a field of fire and figured the world would be a better place without him. In fact, I relished the idea of killing him just for this reason.

I looked back over my shoulder. Tee's hand jerked urgently.

And then the man did something that endeared him to me. He waved a hand at the children, first kindly, and then, when they didn't respond, with more anger, and his mouth grew wide and his brow narrowed. He wasn't furious, but he wanted to get his point across. Sometimes it's necessary to put a little fear into a child to get her to move, to realize the gravity of a situation. I had yelled at Patsy, my oldest, the day Buzz fell in the tub, because I needed her to look after Ruby, the baby. I had to rush Buzz to the hospital. Patsy started to cry. I yanked her by the arm and said, "Do it *now*." So when the machine-gunner crouched down and swatted the shoulder of the boy in my cross hairs, a heavy thump that moved the boy's shoulder, I thought that was all right. And the children moved down the side street from which they'd come. Now the machine gun was manned by just the man and the woman. Maybe you'd call her a girl. I couldn't really tell, she was so wrapped up.

She blocked my shot too, but then the man jerked his head. He'd heard something down the street. The SEALs who were pinned down might even have planned it that way. When he heard whatever it was, he stood up to get a better look. I had no time to hesitate. That was my shot. I squeezed the trigger.

When I shoot, nothing is left to chance. I calculate all aspects of a shot: meteorological conditions, wind speed, elevation. I know the fine points of target acquisition, psychology, and body language. I know the nuances of internal, external, and terminal ballistics, though with the .50 caliber bullet I was working with, *nuance* might not be the right word. Designed for hard-target interdiction, the .50 caliber destroys people.

To the shrink, I said, "I'm not sure what to tell you, Doc.

We went in and did our job."

Had a furlough

in London for a week on my way back to the States. Everything was arranged ahead of time. All I had to do was show up. As a security measure I wore civilian clothes — a blue suit that I'd bought when I'd been an air-conditioner salesman; not little ones, but big commercial units — and I took a C-141 troop transport to Spain and transferred to a commercial airliner to London. By the time I arrived, I was too drunk to do much more than push the papers I carried at the taxi driver. I lay back, my shirt pulling from my trousers, but I didn't care. Sometime during the ride I became aware that the driver was dark skinned.

"We're really whipping your fucking ass over there," I said. "You know that?"

The driver seemed not to hear. He looked straight ahead and merged into a traffic circle. If he was any man at all, he'd have thrown me out of the car and hammered me into the sidewalk. Kicked my teeth in. I resented him for not being more of a man, and I swung my fist around and hit his seat back. The driver glanced at me in the rearview mirror. I reached for a cigarette, found one in my front pocket. On the dashboard was a sign that said, NO SMOKING. I slapped my pockets for a few moments, looking for matches, checking my front pocket and my pants pockets again and again. Finally I just seemed to lose steam. I laid my head down.

When we arrived at the hotel, the bellman put my duffel on a brass cart, and the driver came around and opened my door and pulled me out. I felt myself passed to the bellman, a thick man in a red overcoat. The bellman pinched my arm just above the elbow. That straightened me up, and we walked together through two large brass doors.

"This way, sir," the bellman said.

"I work for a living," I said.

I seemed to slide along the polished marble floor and through the singsong English chatter. To my right was a large red velvet settee and, around it, small marble tables on spindly iron legs. A few couples sat and drank tea or held highball glasses in their hands. One young woman was dressed in a navy blue cape with two large black buttons. Her brown hair was pinned back, and a long curl of it hung over one shoulder. She strode toward a blond child, who was wandering into a dark, oak-paneled restaurant. Where was I? I felt somehow that they were putting on a show for me, that this couldn't possibly be real.

(end of excerpt)