

Minarets



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The desert is not what we thought it would be—it’s colder, grayer, indifferent as a corpse. Everything is ravaged. There’s a thin film of dust that covers this entire city, but it’s more like ash than sand. Even the palm trees are muted and dull. Buildings that have been blown into piles of rubble look like scorched crumbs in the bottom of an old oven. The devastation is permanent.

“Two hours left,” Bronson says lazily, and then spits a yellowbrown stream into his empty plastic water bottle.

The night is quiet. We’ve built a small fireplace out of loose bricks, and what’s left of our coffee boils into a thick, tarry sludge as the flames die out. Lennie is downstairs smashing the small desks apart. We can hear him snapping the wood off of them for our fire. The sounds echo through the empty rooms in this building and spill out into the empty streets.

We are on the rooftop of what was once a school. It’s a skeleton of a building, with no doors, no glass left in the windows, and it’s painted everywhere with bullet holes. In the sandy field next to us lies an old

cemetery, with its rows of dirt mounds all facing the same direction, as if they're pointing toward something. They've been burying people here for centuries, but every day they bring another, these solemn trains of bearded men in long white robes, carrying the body over their heads. We wonder how they can fit so many in such a small plot of land.

Lennie's heavy feet begin pounding up the stairway. He walks over to us with his rifle slung across his back, sweating, and dumps a pile of broken desktops next to the fire. "Wake up, fuckers," he says. He rinses the blood and dirt from his filthy, scraped hands with a bottle of water, wipes them on his pants, and then slumps next to us on the worn out couch we've brought up here. I get up to scan the streets again.

Nothing is happening, of course. The curfew keeps everyone inside, and the rutted, pockmarked roads and labyrinth of alleyways remain completely abandoned until sunrise, aside from the occasional pack of roaming wild dogs that howl and fight over piles of garbage. Sometimes we shoot them. The city is dark except for the long strands of green lights that hang from the mosque near the center of town.

They shine and reflect off of its massive golden teardrop-shaped dome.

We often get shot at from the cemetery, so I check that way, but there are only the quiet mounds of dirt. A faint light begins to grow in the east, just enough to silhouette the tall, slender minarets punctuating the skyline like giant candlesticks in the distance. I light a cigarette and lean against the sandbags, watching. Waiting.

Suddenly a sharp *click* snaps the brisk dawn air. We hear a rustling come through the speakers at the mosque. A tired, scratchy voice whispers, “Allah whakbar.” A few moments go by, and then he repeats the same words, drawing them out a little more, “Allaaahhh wwhhakbarr.”

“Finally,” Bronson says. He gets off the couch and begins to pack his ruck. “These nights never end.”

The voice comes through the speakers again, a little louder, but still shaky, trying to wake up. He eases his way into a few higher notes, experimenting. We didn’t know what to make of these strange, foreign songs in our first few days. There seemed to be a constant warbling that blared through speakers all over the city, shouting in a language we didn’t understand, for reasons we didn’t understand.

There's another short pause, and then the voice suddenly belts out the words so powerfully and unexpectedly that the explosion of sound sends nestled birds flying from nearby rooftops and palm trees, flapping away into the cold morning sky. His voice slowly grows into a barrage of undulating, melancholy sounds, and now begins to move faster, climbing up and holding onto each note for a fraction of a second before landing on one and blasting it, piercing the air with a painful lament that gets louder and louder. He starts wailing like a dying man, almost crying as he clings to the high notes, straining his voice with his entire being, and then darts back down the scale until he hits a tone so heavy and thick that you can see it pouring out of the speakers in waves.

Now he only pauses to gasp for air, but then jumps right back into the melismatic bombardment, his voice skipping all over the place, flying up and down like a madman in this eerie, esoteric form of desert jazz. And just as abruptly as it began, he ends with a few strong, steady calls that linger and reverberate through the empty streets and alleys long after the speakers have clicked off.

We can hear faint traces of the other ghostly prayers from the mosques spread throughout the city, but when they finish, all is quiet

again. Lennie leans back on the couch, shifting the body armor that's pulling down his shoulders, and says, "That kid's not bad."

"They're all bad," Bronson argues. "I'll be glad to never hear this shit again, once we get home."

"If we get home," Lennie says, and we all laugh.

"If we get home, then I'm never even thinking about this place again."

The city loses its ominous mystique once the sun is up. It's sprawling, with over 350,000 people, but organized in such a haphazard way that it has become a maze of crisscrossing alleyways and roads and tangles of power lines and sandstone buildings that all look identical. Generations of war and the brutal desert sun have seared everything into such a faded, desolate wasteland that our panoramic view from this rooftop is like a black and white photograph.

The only patches of color are near the mosques. Next to the shiny golden bulb is a second dome, a little smaller, but covered with an incredibly complex, swirling mosaic of vibrant blues and teals and pinks and yellows and greens, arranged in intricate, repetitive

geometric patterns like a massive Faberge egg. Everything else is the color of sand.

The Spiral Minaret towers hundreds of feet over the northwestern part of the city, with its winding staircase wrapped around the outside all the way from its wide, round base to the narrow top, where we have snipers. It can be seen from almost anywhere in the city, like a giant upside down ice cream cone along the skyline. Mueller claims that its design is based on the original Tower of Babel, spinning and climbing toward heaven like Doré's *Confusion of Tongues*, but none of us actually know a thing about it.

So we sit up here on the school and watch the city. In front of our position, half a block past the concrete jersey barriers and snarled strands of razor wire, is the busiest part of town. There are shops and restaurants and vendors of all kinds. We see donkeys pulling carts full of dates, barefoot kids riding double on bicycles, open-air butcher shops with skinned carcasses hanging from hooks and fresh blood running down the sidewalks. Most of the shops are garages, and the merchants begin each day by rolling up the large metal doors, cranking open their awnings, and setting up their tables. We watch shadowy women in long black dresses with their faces covered float

down the sidewalks like apparitions in mourning, starkly contrasted by the men in bright white robes and sandals walking the streets smoking, always gesturing and animated.

Since we don't know the Arabic name, and haven't tried to learn it, this is now Market Street. We've renamed the rest of the main roads after professional basketball teams—Clippers, Jazz, Lakers, Heat, Celtics—and all of our maps are labeled this way, so you can tell someone, “Head west down Knicks, take a left on Bulls . . .” and they'll know exactly what you mean. It's easier that way.

There are traffic checkpoints controlling access to the city on these roads, and this morning, like every morning, eternal snaking lines of vehicles are backed up for miles almost immediately after the morning call to prayer: beat up old Mercedes sedans stuffed with passengers; semi trucks with people clinging to the sides and back; hordes of cars spray-painted bright orange and white to let everyone know that they're taxis; rusted motorcycles with two, sometimes three, guys riding on them; snub-nosed blue Bongo trucks with the flatbeds packed full of men standing shoulder to shoulder.

We watch the police at the checkpoints in their bright blue baggy uniforms as they dash back and forth with AK-47s, patting down

civilians, looking underneath cars with mirrors attached to long poles, arresting people, waving vehicles through. The uniforms are all one size, and therefore large enough to fit anyone, but since they're all poor and thin they look like children in their father's clothes. Kids playing cops with their belts pulled tight and shirts ballooned.

Everyone is trying to get to work, or, in most cases, trying to get into the city to look for work. Car horns blare, sirens wail, the police yell through megaphones, gunshots ring out through the city at random.

All of this commotion begins to stew as the sun rises higher in the cloudless sky, and it permeates everything with a disgusting potpourri that is Samarra. Spiced meats are grilled by the vendors as flatbread cooks in clay ovens and falafels are deep fried in grease. Stale cigarette smoke wafts through the air. Giant heaps of rotten, months-old garbage are burned. Sweat blends with tremendous body odor. There are the sweet, strong spices from chai tea being brewed, the bitter fumes from burnt gunpowder that you can sometimes taste, a mixture of exotic incenses and perfumes, car exhaust, open sewers, and the putrid decaying stench of death.

We sit and watch all of this, exhausted, waiting for our replacements and fantasizing about sleep. Far in the distance an

explosion makes everything tremble and shudder, and the city becomes quiet for a moment. We all instinctively scan the horizon for the plume of smoke, wondering if anyone we know has been hit this time. Eventually we see it, a few miles to our north, stretching up toward the sky with its tall, thin column and round puff on top, like a desert flower. It looks like a big one. “Shit,” Bronson says, but then nobody talks anymore. We only watch the city, waiting. And another day begins.