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Conflict

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Conflict

By Kenneth Weaver

I pulled the trigger. The sound stretched, expanded around my head, reminiscent of grainy films of mushroom clouds. Slow. Rising. A bullet commenced its supersonic crawl down the barrel.

There were what used to be vehicles, now engulfed in flames--scattered bonfires of steel and rubber. There were what used to be buildings--what used to be homes. Rubble made good cover. We did this. Because they would have done it to us.

My brothers and I wore no unit insignia; we were not here. We didn't need it. It was tattooed on our souls. It kept us warm. It kept us awake. It kept us sane in the knowledge that we were working for our nation--even if no one else knew it. We knew.

There was never any fanfare when we returned. No one ever noticed. No one knew where we had been, what we had done--for our nation. It might be on the news. We might see it. We would say, "We did that, because they would have done it to us." The news would say, "It is unclear who was involved in this action." And that was the way it had to be. That was the way we liked it. There was a reason we wore no unit insignia.

Black forms sprawled dead-still, contorted, on the street, in alleys. There were a lot more of them than there were of us. But we were superior. They were the bad guys. We did this, because they would have done it to us.

Some of us would receive hushed awards for this--medals to pin on our chests to remind us of this day. Some of us would shake officers' hands; there would be whispered congratulations for a job well done. Some of us would get promotions.

Nothing compares to the smell of a dead person, especially one who's burning. That deep stink crawls into your nose and slithers down your throat. You can't cough it out. Like an oil-slick, it sticks. Children shooting with full-auto thumb strokes on videogame consoles don't think about that part. They never consider it. I never did. You can't cough it out.

There are children playing those games at home. Children laugh, safe in the streets, because of us. That's what we told each other. It kept us warm. It kept us sane in the knowledge that we were keeping them safe, laughing--playing videogames, shooting electric bullets over DSL lines, minus the smell. Minus the fires and blood. Minus the pieces of bodies.

There were planners here, plotters--evil people. There were those allied to our enemies--working against our national interests. I didn't know what those interests were, exactly. Nor did my brothers, who wore no unit insignia. They were bad guys; we were here to kill them. We did this, because they would have done it to us.

We had parachuted in only three hours earlier. That's how these things worked--four, maybe six hours, in and out. Three hours--this town was already ours. Unarmed people ran screaming. My brothers and I left them alone; they had no reason to scream. They had no reason to run. The ones with guns had reason to run, but they didn't. They rattled their weapons in furious fire, bouncing bullets around us.

But rubble made good cover. My bullet streaked forward. The man in my sights curled and fell. His face contorted, but not in pain. In fear. In disbelief. He was asking to live. He was begging--begging whom, I didn't know. He was begging the air, the earth, begging his god. Begging me. The expression froze on his face as his eyes went distant and faded. He slid to the earth, joining the black forms, dead-still, contorted.

We did this, because they would have done it to us. That's what we told ourselves. It kept us warm. It kept us sane in the knowledge that this was justice. Some of us would get awards for this. They were criminals working against our national interests.

Blood spread around the man and the earth soaked it in. His face still begged, terrified even in death. What if this was my home and he was me? I would do as he was doing--fighting, protecting my town, my family. What if I was him?

We would still be enemies.

I pulled the trigger. Another man folded and fell. A woman roared and ran to him. And I would do it again. And again. And every time, blood spread--the earth sucked it in. We said, "We do this. Because they would do it to us." Every time we left behind the rubble that made good cover; every time we left behind the black forms, contorted, terrified even in death; every time we left the wailing wives, kneeling in their husbands' blood, we told each other it was justice done. But even as we chanted these mantras, behind our menacing war-faces, we wondered.

About Kenneth Weaver

Kenneth Weaver was born in Virginia, raised in New York, and, as a veteran of the U.S. Army, has had the distinct pleasure of living in numerous states and countries. Currently, he resides in Tennessee. Kenneth began writing the day after he mastered the alphabet and plans to continue, regardless of success or failure, until the stiffness of death freezes his fingers on the keyboard. He just hopes he has time to type the ellipses...