

The Rifle Range

Scene 100

“Today, gentlemen, begins your introduction to that most august of activities—firing a rifle.” Thus spoke Jack Stewart, former Lance Corporal, Royal Highland Fusiliers, and singing sniper. Apollo and Mercury listened very intently; they sat on a grass-covered berm on the newly finished rifle range on a small peninsula south of the village. MacDougal and Scott stood nearby. The berm they were on was 200 meters from the targets, which were barely visible in the early morning light. There were more berms at 300, 500, 800, 1000, and 2000 meters. The 2000 meter berm was almost 1.25 miles from the targets; Stewart had explained you would use a Barrett .50 caliber rifle and a high-power scope from that distance. “The good Cap’n has introduced you to firing a pistol. Almost everything you have learned there applies here, only a hundredfold. If your sight alignment is off by a hair at 25 meters with a pistol, you will miss by a bit more than a quarter inch. Be off the same hair with your rifle at 500 meters and you’ll miss by 5 inches. Then if you have a wind, it will act on the bullet much longer. This is an art as well as a science. You have to know the science to hit a target standing still in good weather and light. To be able to hit a man walking, in the twilight, in the rain, now that’s an art. Your rifle must be a part of you, and you a part of your rifle. Now, we’ve covered the basics of the sights, how to lay, how to hold the rifle to your shoulder, et cetera; the only way to learn more is by doin’. Samuel and James are down in the butts to work the targets. We’ll start out here at 200 meters to let you get the feel of it. There’s no way to let you start off with no wind, this was the best we could do; if there’s a time around here with no wind, it must be when I’m sleepin’, ‘cause I’ve never seen it. You can judge the wind by the little flags we put up. The Cap’n and Corporal Scott will coach you for now, I’ll stand and watch a bit. I’ve bore-sighted your weapons with a laser, as I have with all the rifles, so they will hit what you aim at. Remember the weapon will shoot essentially flat at this range, so no bullet drop to account for. After you fire 10 rounds we’ll stop and have another chat. Very well, gentlemen, the range is hot, you may proceed.”

Apollo and Mercury moved to two marked firing points, set down the loaded magazines they had, and stretched out on the damp grass. They were to begin in the prone position before later progressing to sitting, kneeling, and standing. MacDougal and Scott made some minor adjustments to their positions and then they inserted a magazine and loaded and locked.

BAM! BAM! Both fired, almost simultaneously; they waited for James and Samuel to pull down the bulls-eye targets and mark the shot hole with a spotter disc. In only a few seconds, the targets reappeared. Apollo’s black marker was a little low and to the left, just outside the black bulls-eye; he cursed. Mercury’s white spotter was dead-center. Corporal Scott whooped. Mercury felt pretty good. He had *thought* he was doing it right, it *felt* right as he squeezed the trigger; to be proven correct was gratifying.

“Now, lad, show me that weren’t just beginner’s luck,” said Scott with a grin.

Mercury did not reply as he nestled the butt of the rifle into his shoulder again. He glanced at the range flag, wind was from his left front, about 11 o'clock on the imaginary clock face; about 5 miles per hour, almost no wind as far as Craignish was concerned. He felt it a tiny bit stronger on his left cheek than his right. At 200 meters he doubted it would move the heavy 7.62 mm bullet by more than a 16th of an inch. He lined up the sights on the target, focused on the front sight post, put it in the center of the rear sight aperture; took a breath, let it out halfway and held it, checked his sight picture and sight alignment again, and slowly squeezed the trigger. *BAM!* The explosion was loud in spite of his earplugs and the butt of the rifle slammed into his shoulder. That had felt right again; no, it felt even better that time. He looked over the barrel of his rifle and saw the target move down into the butts. It took a couple of seconds longer this time, but there was the white spotter, dead center in the bulls-eye. Scott did not whoop this time, he didn't want to jinx Mercury; he did it silently. Mercury did it all again. Then again. Then again. The white spotter stared back like an eye. After the fifth shot, the target took a while to come back up. Mercury felt someone next to him and he glanced to his right.

"Sorry to interrupt, sar," said Stewart, kneeling next to Mercury. "But we needs to change some things. Samuel called on the comm unit, he says you've shot the spotter all to hell and he's having a bit of trouble. So, we're going to take out the spotter and let you fire the rest of your magazine at your own pace. He'll then pull the target and mark your shot group. That way you won't destroy the spotter."

"Okay," replied Mercury. He didn't quite follow, but he understood what he was to do. He saw the target go down and then come back up with no spotter. He settled back in. Check the wind, line up the sights, breathe, out, hold, start trigger squeeze, last check of wind, check sights, finish trigger squeeze; *BAM!* Repeat. Repeat. Finally, he felt the magazine was empty; he glanced down, yes, the bolt was back. He ejected the magazine.

Beside him, Corporal Scott lifted his wrist. "Call Samuel. Pull the target now; he's finished the magazine." The target went down out of sight. In ten seconds, it was back up; a single white spotter winked from the center of the bulls-eye. The 3-inch diameter spotter covered the entire shot group, 20 rounds. "Oh, my eye," breathed Scott.

Stewart knelt next to Mercury, a small spotter scope in his hand. He looked through it at the target, then handed it to Scott. Scott looked, shook his head, and handed the scope to Mercury. Mercury wasn't sure what he was supposed to see, but he looked. Sure enough, there was the white spotter, centered on the bulls-eye, staring back at him.

Stewart's comm chimed. "Samuel here, spotter covers all 20 shot holes. They're all grouped tight in the center, except one, it's right at the edge."

"Yes," said Mercury. "The fifteenth shot. A bird flew across the range just above the target and I let it distract me." Scott stared at him.

"Well, sar," said Stewart. "I'd say you've proven you know what you are doin'. Take a bit of a rest, let me go talk to Master Apollo." He walked away.

"Bloody hell, lad, are ye sure ye've ne'er fired a rifle before?"

“I’m quite sure, Corporal. I simply followed instructions and then I sort of tuned out everything around me. It was very strange; it was as if I could *feel* the bullet and willed it to go where I wanted. Is it like that for you?”

Scott shook his head. “No, sir. It’s not like that for anyone. Maybe Stewart, but it took him years to get that way. Nobody feels that way on their first day.”

“Hmm. Strange. Why not? It seems obvious.”

Scott could not answer.

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The men stayed on the range all morning. They fired from 200 meters sitting, kneeling, and standing. Then 300 and 500 meters prone. As they were packing the equipment into the Land Rover, Apollo was ebullient. “That was surely the most fun I’ve had in ages! May we do it again tomorrow?”

“Now, sir, we can’t come to the range every day,” replied MacDougal, chuckling. “But we’ll come one day more this week, and then once a week after.”

Apollo was crestfallen. “Drat. Oh well.” Then he saw Mercury’s rifle. “Say, they let you use a scope? What, were you having trouble hitting the target?” He grinned.

MacDougal, Scott, and Stewart shared a glance. “Master Apollo,” said Stewart. “I let Master Mercury use the scope for his last ten shots. I did that because he had not missed the bulls-eye all day. Those last 10 shots at 500 meters I had him aim for the head on the target; he put them all into a circle less than 4 inches across.”

Apollo goggled. Mercury grinned sideways and shrugged.

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“I don’t know how else to explain it, sar,” said Stewart, lifting his hands. “He’s a born sniper.”

“Hmm. Don’t suppose I knew there was such a thing.”

“Oh, aye, sar, but there’s no way to test for it except like we did today. It’s a very slow way to do things for the army, but that’s how we does it. We looks for the recruits who are the best their first time on the range.”

“Yes, the Corps does the same. Still put them through a rigorous school. I suppose I knew there was some talent involved, but I’d never thought of being born a sniper.”

“Aye, sar. You can tell ‘cause when you ask ‘em to explain what they’re doin’, they can’t. They start and then somewhere along the way they say, ‘And then it hits the target,’ or some such-like. Most of us like to think the rifle is a part of us, but it’s not really, it’s all mechanics with us. But for that very few, like Master Mercury, it’s true.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “Sar, I heard him talkin’ to his rifle. Whisperings sweet nothings, he was.”

“I see. Well, now what, Captain?”

“Well, sir, we’re going to split them up. Master Apollo is actually a good shot, we can get him to expert level soon, but he’s not a natural like Master Mercury, he’d only slow things down. So, Apollo does one day like today, then the next Mercury. Also, we are giving Mercury a Barrett with a scope, straight away; there’s no point in pussy-footing around. We’ll take him out twice a week.

After a bit we'll start takin' him out at night with a thermal scope. The plan is to have him in a tower with a thermal scope in six to eight weeks, tops; I think it will be more like four."

Stewart nodded. "Cap'n's right, sar. In a month he'll be takin' my place in Tower 4, he's gonna be much better than me. Gives me goosebumps!"

"Please contain your enthusiasm, Lance Corporal, don't give him a big head. Push him—hard; work him like the devil's after him, which he is. If he is all you say he is, he will be the linchpin of our defense. Very well, proceed with your plan, Captain. I will make any necessary adjustments to our schedule."

The other three men snapped to attention and saluted, in the household manner of fist to chest. Gavin stood and returned it, and the three soldiers marched out of the office.

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That night, as they were getting ready for bed, Apollo finally spoke to Mercury. "Damn, dude, seriously, how do you do that?"

Mercury shrugged. "I don't know. Or rather, I can't explain it. It just *feels* right. It's like the bullet talks to the rifle and then the rifle talks to me, and then the bullet flies out to the target where it is supposed to go."

Apollo stared at him. "Fracking hell. That sounds spooky."

Mercury shrugged again. "You're telling me. It's like Grandpère and Huginn, can't explain that either but it exists; even though I don't think he recognizes it intellectually, he just accepts it as a fact of life and moves on. I suppose this is the same; for some reason I can use a rifle and therefore I will."

Apollo shook his head as he climbed into bed. "Okay, but it's still spooky."