



L.G. Dalton

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Six Minutes

They gather. Amid the noise, the heat, and scent of damp cloth, they seek each other out. One grows to two, two become three, then four, then six. Groups of various sizes form. Eyes weigh, consider, seeing enemies in shadows. Weapons are polished, honed and checked. Hair confined, headgear donned. Steady hands apply camouflage. A final check. A twitch here, a tug there. The call comes. Move out! As one they march to their destination.

They pause at the edge of a pocket. Concealed in thick darkness, they peer out. Across the space they see the whites of eyes. A steady hand grips a heaving shoulder, imparting comfort, confidence and calm. A whispered comment, a nod of acknowledgement. Breathing slows. In the distance the droning ceases. Count to three. A hand signals. Stations!

They fan out. The far edge recedes with each measured step. They take predetermined positions and settle in to wait. They stand with backs to their rivals, daring them to do their worst. Proud arrogance is in every line.

Tension tightens and shoulders rise. Fingers consciously relax, a learned response. Feet are positioned, placed for instant movement, ready to propel into action.

Heat from twenty sources adds torment. Sweat trickles down foreheads, and salt stings the eyes. Not one hand moves to ease the torture. A slow blink eases the sting. A drop hovers on nose-tip. Gravity wins.

The world narrows. The edge of ringing darkness flickers on the periphery of eye lines. Conversely, the nearest comrade appears out of reach. A second stretches outwards. A minute seems like five. The focus shifts.

Ears fill with the sound of the heart beat, rhythmic, reassuring. Ribs throb, pounded from within. Chest tightens but steady breathing brings control. Shoulders held motionless ache. Another measured breath. Spots dancing before sweat-stung eyes disappear. The little exercise goes unnoticed by the hidden.

Shadow figures move. First in slow motion, then increasing in speed. The future zips past. Every motion is detailed.

Silence settles. The moment of truth has arrived. Ears strain to catch the signal sending them into action. Into the hush comes the thud of a single drumbeat. A slow count of three beats follows. Attack! The arena explodes to the rapid volley of thunderclaps.

They surge into action as rehearsed so many times. Frenzied feet move, separate to bending swaying bodies. Each knows where they are to be at any given time. Thunder deafens as steel meets wood. The thuds and cracks are unceasing.

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The joy of engagement is blinding. Light shards spear deep into darkness bringing fear to hidden watchers. Admiration tussles awe.

They jostle. They feint sideways. They lunge for positions. A strange hope rises in the unseen's heart.

They do not hinder their partners. They know exactly where they are. The enemy is dazzled.

One step is barely completed before the next step begins. The third step flows seamlessly into the fourth. The intricate patterning allows no margin for mistakes. Fluid changes add texture to movement. Execution is paramount. Despair oozes from the concealed. Its tangibility feeds determination.

No words are spoken. They know what to do and they do it. A hand signals. Another moves forward, changes direction. Eyes never lose sight of their target. Their focus and intent never shift.

Every phase is complete. Clarity is concise. Unison is supreme. They move as one. The euphony of movement and sound is consummate.

Suspense rises. Thunder keeps pace. They leap and spin. Their landing is timed perfectly. Tension snaps.

Silence reverberates, reaching outwards. They stand tall, shoulders square and heaving. Sweet air is drawn deep into starving lungs through parted lips. Pride and exhilaration shine from them.

Defeated shoulders slump. A hundred eyes glare at them.

Six minutes was all they were given. They won the battle in five minutes and forty-five seconds.