

## Instrument of Allah

by

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A cracked granite fishbowl filled his view.

The crack ran from top to bottom, less than the thickness of his little finger. There was no place wide enough to find hold, to climb out: just a hairline crack to taunt him. Midway between his head and the fishbowl entrance spun a miniature tornado. In the gray light it glowed a dull yellow, the grains of sand it held luminescing gently.

Three days. His throat cracked and ripped when he tried to swallow. A thick tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Itchy eyeballs throbbed. The dusty wind sucked the moisture from his body. He couldn't be sure how much longer he had, but the outcome as inevitable. Death by dehydration.

The realization that he was dead, only waiting for his heart to stop beating, hung over him. The unfairness. Lips cracked and bleeding, throat tearing at the effort, he screamed to the sky.

"Why, God?"

His body trembled from the exertion. He held on, eyes shut, palms flat against the cool rock. The trembling came again, but not him. Looking into the swirling sand, he watched it shift slightly. The pattern flowed. Small patches of light danced to the wail of the wind.

The ground Shook slightly. Dusty motes drifted down on him.

"Because you have been chosen." The voice echoed throughout the fishbowl.

His world turned fuzzy and dark as he fainted away.

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"Copy Algiers. Arrival 15 minutes. Williams out," he said in a crisp, flawless, slightly American-accented Arabic.

Captain Stan Williams relaxed his throat mike. His hand gently caressed the yoke. Less than a hundred feet beneath him the Great Western Erg leapt by at Mach 1.5. He skimmed over a waterless sea.

Then everything stopped. Dead.

There were no turbulents before the flameout, no flaky readings before the instruments died, no mushiness before the hydraulics froze. Nothing. One moment gracefully streaking, the next falling from the sky like a brick.

The bolts exploded, the canopy fired. He hit the slipstream, unconscious before his head even snapped back. The blackness lifted while he spun between blue and brown. The brown growing closer, he stabilized. The black smoke and hot engine from his downed jet would be easily detectable to the Resc Sat. He knew that a team from Algiers would be there before he could even walk to the wreckage. Spinning through a full 360, he couldn't spot the smoke. A flash caught his eyes. He saw the impossible. Screaming out at maximum climb, flame from its tail, his jet raced toward the horizon.

Bad luck, but not insurmountable. The beeper in his harness would bring the rescue team to him no matter where the jet finally crashed.

