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caught up in the moment

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"Is he okay?"

"I don't know, Marshal. He won't talk about it."

"Call me Bob on the wet deck. My rank doesn't apply here."

In a dark lounge on the wet deck of the Marauder, Deputy Marshal, Robert Jackson hands trooper Cricket Washington a whisky on the rocks. After she takes the drink he remembers his manners, "You prefer something mixed?"

Cricket shakes her head no. You may want a mixed drink but in the SA you learn to shoot straight when discussing business. Cricket slams the drink back and, according to protocol, Bob refills the glass. This one you sip.

Bob slides into the chair beside Cricket. While looking out the window onto the jungle moon orbiting sixth planet of kappa-Orion, he takes a sample of the same poison he served her and begins, "As a company commander, the well being of the troops under my wing is of primary concern to me. It may not show sometimes but I actually give a shit about you people and I hope this informal chat doesn't come across as meddling."

"I understand, Bob."

"No, you don't. I have two valuable people dead and a kid who's seen more action inside thirty minutes than the both of us will see in our entire careers. The problem is, he shows none of the classic signs of combat induced stress or personal loss. Not that I take exception to that reaction, abnormal as it may be, but the rest of the platoon has managed to distance themselves from him because of it. Tell me; are they afraid that Jacob will act out?"

"You've pathed the file. Draw your own conclusions."

"I don't have a crystal ball."

"So, what do you want from me?"

"I want your insight. I can't put this kid back in the saddle unless I know that he'll be ready-n-steady in the field."

"Fair enough, but there's not much to tell."

"I have nothing else to go on." Bob sips his drink, "This is not an official debriefing, Cricket. Give it to me in your own words."

Cricket looks down at her drink and sighs big, "We think highly of Jacob."

After an awkward pause Bob tries to gain her trust, "I understand that he and Maggie were very close. I don't know if any of you were aware of this, but she pulled every string to get Jacob assigned to her platoon. A bunch of you recruits from that cycle were added so that it wouldn't look too obvious."

"I didn't know." Cricket lied—the whole platoon knew.

"We considered it a mentoring opportunity." Bob downs the rest of his drink and adds, "We're not totally without feelings."

Cricket stares at Bob and finally volunteers, "They were inseparable."

Bob interjects quietly, "That was a problem."

"We didn't think so."

"That's why I didn't get involved."

"It didn't make a difference in the final outcome."

"I don't know that, and that's why you're here."

Cricket flashes Bob a look of contempt. She understands that Marshal Jackson has a job to do, but she doesn't have to like it.

"It was just another snipe hunt until they walked into the ambush." She looks back out the window and swallows hard, "Mag and her point man, Rogers, they both got flat-lined outright and we lost telemetry a few seconds later. We figured they all got scrapped, but we dropped hoping to at least recover the bodies. What we found was totally unbelievable." She cringes slightly, "I lost count of the K.I.A. when we located the skinny shit."

"One hundred and twenty three."

"Confirmed?"

"It's official, but we don't want to publish that just yet."

Tears well up in her eyes as she shakes her head in disbelief, "I don't pay the dead much mind, but I'll admit it's the hand-to-hand kills that tend to bug me. I saw five of 'em, and something is not right about how they died." After a long pause, she forces herself on, "When we found trooper Graves he was sitting beside Maggie. Well...what was left of her."

Bob has already reviewed the transcript from the autopsy:

Corporal Prather, Magdalena, was struck by an HKEp outside the right orbit along the frontal process of the zygomatic structure. The missile (suspected 3.31mm/MB) has been trace-vectorized from a level 1:30 E/SE. The impact resulted in absolute trauma above the third cervical spine.

Which is a sterile way for the forensics geeks to say her head was blown apart.

Bob hates himself for pushing her, "What was Jacob doing?"

With tears running down her face, Cricket blurts out, "Nothing! Not a God damned thing! He was just sitting there. Just sitting there all quiet-like with this look on his face!" She hisses, "It was like ice." She starts to sob into her hands, "I can't seem to get that look of his out of my head."

Cricket was wrong—it was indifference. The fight managed to beat the grief out of him. It was just then that Bob decided to hand a business sized data-card with the tacnet file to her. Wiping the tears away, Cricket takes it from him.

Bob sits back, "After you path it I want you to post it on the net for the rest of the platoon." After a few seconds he adds, "Ah hell, you might as well know. I got orders to send your platoon back out tomorrow morning but, if you don't mind, I want you and Ramirez to keep Jacob company for the next few days while he pulls light duty. Can you do that for me?"

"Can do." Collecting herself, Cricket looks up at Bob, "Think he'll be okay?"

It's not Jacob that Bob was worried about—it never was, "There's always hope..."

Cricket chimes in with Bob, "And I got a hard-on for hope."

It's Bob's signature line and Cricket, as with the rest of the platoon, thinks it makes him seem more human.

After a few seconds, Cricket asks, "We cool, Bob?"

"We cool."

Taking the hint she stands to leave, but before stepping out the door, Cricket hangs her head, "On Cue Ball, he was voted most likely to die on their first hot-op. No one thought Trooper Graves would amount to much."

"I didn't know that." That was Bob's lie.

Cricket adds, "It really makes you think about how wrong you can be about someone."

And she was gone.

Bob takes a moment to ponder what Cricket had just said. Through the tacnet he pulls up Jacob's file from Saiph-3 and paths it again.

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"Maggie, get down!" Jacob screams—just as the miniball hit.

Normally such a projectile would glance off, or disintegrate on impact, but the ball managed to punch itself through her canopy. It's not exactly a common occurrence, but it happens by and by. At 5,800 meters per second, the 3.31mm kinetic-energy projectile, made of mostly depleted uranium, makes short work of her head. When tissue and bone is hit at that speed, even by an itsy-bitsy 39-grain pellet, the resulting hydro shock can be explosive.

As with Maggie's head, the canopy was also shattered from the blow.

Pinned down in a shallow depression, and with the whole area being hosed over by miniballs, Jacob thought, *Fuck it!* He shoots off an entire clip of mico-nukes, twelve bombs, each with a one-ton yield, almost straight up into the air. At such a steep angle he was betting that they would bounce around in the dense flora and drop close to his position—or on his position if he were lucky, so he thought. Set for remote detonation, he waits until the last one was on its way before popping them all off at once.

To this day, it's still referred to as arc-light. When looking towards the blasts the casual observer would notice short-lived, but intense, arcs of condensation produced by the shock waves. At night the light from the blast will refract through the vapor. A beautiful sight from a distance, but up close it's a cataclysm.

Within the time it takes to blink an eye, everything out to a hundred meters was smashed and burning. In the confusion, Jacob

slips away into the jungle and sets to work.

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Bob terminates the path. With as much action Bob has been in, he doesn't have the stomach to see the horrors that were about to unfold a second time. He recalls the line he wrote in the after action report: *After the initial attack, Trooper Graves policed the AO in detail. No prisoners were made available for questioning.* Which is Bob's way of softening the fact that this kid, reported to be mediocre by his drill instructor, and voted most likely to die by his fellow recruits, just didn't sack the shooters from the ambush—he hunted down a whole field company and slaughtered them all.

It was just then that Bob had second thoughts about giving Cricket the file. As soldiers, killing is a regrettable but evil necessity. That's the part of the job that actually sucks, and then only in a shot glass long after the fact. What would be considered righteous kills by any other standard, if one were to critique Jacob's rampage, with the peacekeeping protocol in mind, he could very well be standing tall charged with seventy-eight counts of manslaughter and two counts of aggravated homicide. Unlike wars or police actions, peacekeeping missions have a whole different slant to them and the ambiguities of the rules of engagement, as imposed by the protocol, are a class unto themselves.

Troops deployed in close proximity to an operation, such as an ambush, are normally looked upon as to be *in position* and not *in reserve* as a slick prosecuting attorney would have you believe. Though seventy-eight troops were not directly involved in the initial trigger action, thus neutral according to protocol, in the confusion they did lay down a substantial volume of defensive fire and made little effort to egress from the area.

A wounded soldier who reaches for a weapon is *fixin' to fight* and isn't exactly the *defenseless casualty* as a prosecutor would also argue. It would be agreed that non-ambulatory, wounded-in-action are not combat-effective in anyone's book; but alone, surrounded, and under a baptism by fire, Trooper Graves had no choice but to see through with the unenviable task of neutralizing two such WIA. Granted, 0.5 seconds is not much time to reconsider your initial urge to make a grab for a gun; however, in combat, with adrenaline coursing through your body, a half a second is an eternity.

Fortunately, Jacob will never face any of these charges.

Truth is, it would be somewhat embarrassing for the Confederation if it got out that their reservist forces, not only screwed-

the-pooch by ambushing *friendlies*, but that a whole company of their more *experienced* troops were wiped out by a single man, and a greenhorn at that. One who said that he was miffed because his girlfriend got scrapped before his eyes.

The press would have a field day with this sort of stuff.

As it is, Bob is left with two challenges: 1. How to avoid censuring Trooper Graves for being "caught up in the moment" as he so readily shared in his debriefing, and, 2. How to avoid issuing Trooper Graves a citation for his exceptional performance on Saiph-3.

The boy deserves a medal, but he ain't gonna get it.