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Fulfilling Duty

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Fulfilling Duty

The man raised the eyepiece slowly and painfully to his face. He gazed through blood-speckled eyelashes to stare down into the boulder field. He searched the field with a clinical trained inspection. He first located a broken, twitching corpse; blood had puddled among the stones after pouring from numerous wounds.

His gaze slowly fanned across the field. Without reaction he surveyed a scene of carnage. Among the rocky ground lay many varied kinds of death. Crack snipers lay mowed down among the metallic debris of destroyed battlebots. Pieces of human bodies lay everywhere, blown apart by explosives. Worst to look upon were the guerrillas, they were contorted in photographic images of horrible death, simple folk murdering and murdered in defense of their homes. Here lay one man spitted on his own rifle, another pair had been melted together by a blast, and one body lay propped against a boulder, a gaping hole in place of a chest.

The man's eye moved to the right, from death in mass to a neater set of rows. Here the corpses had been placed in a flat line as if they had been killed on parade. Their dismembered limbs were placed by their bodies as if they had been dissected. Beside these rows were pools of blood that stained the rocks red, and massive piles of scrap from destroyed battlebots surrounded the corpses.

After taking all this in, the man lowered his eyepiece. With jerking movements, he replaced it in a battered leather case. He slid off the boulder he hunched upon with a sickening thud, and his face contorted in pain. He pulled himself upright with strong, but battered arms. He began to move through the boulder field in a wrenching half hobble, half crawl. Every time his left leg hit anything, he let out a small cry of pain, for his leg was cut off raggedly halfway below the knee. He moved by, using his arms and remaining leg, and with his left knee pushed off trees and upright rocks. In this fashion, off-balance and wrenching motion that brought constant pain, he could move steadily.

As the afternoon wore on, the man made progress through the rock fields, aided by a large branch and an ingrained sense of the quickest and easiest path to travel. By this time it was too dark to see and move safely, though the man had pressed recklessly up to this point, making use of superb night vision. He had traveled twelve miles.

The man curled up in a small crevice and collapsed instantly into a light and dreamless, but quite restful, sleep. All afternoon he had focused only on his journey, not once had he thought about what he had seen. He thought only of the relevant tactical information the situation created, and how that information must be relayed.

The man awoke before dawn; he had slept only three and a half hours. He was not tired, yet his pain aggravated him and he berated himself for letting it affect him. Immediately after he awoke, he raised the eyepiece and scanned all around. Then he lurched onward, heading east toward the rising sun and stark, jagged, snowy mountains.

As the day progressed the man moved closer to the craggy peaks and reached easier ground. With the advent of easier ground, the man no longer focused solely on the trek itself. He began to think, for the first time, on what he had seen.

Why? Why did the battle go so poorly? They annihilated us. Oh, they paid heavily for it, but still, we should have been victorious. I saw the battle happen, every

moment from beginning to end; somehow they were able to protect their battlebots from our guerrillas' missiles. We were destroyed.

I was the only survivor, the thought echoed in his mind. *That fact cannot change my mission*. The man was a Dastrian Scout, a member of the elite scout corps, the best reconnaissance and intelligence force among humankind. His observation skills were superb, he could walk forty miles a day without tiring, and he could go without sleep for four nights with no degradation.

Always return the information. That was the most important task of a scout. The man would normally have communicated with high command by secure comm transmission, but his transmitter was broken and satellite communication was down. He knew a staging base was just over the mountains, only forty miles from his original position. Normally he could have traveled that in a single day, but now he was exhausted, wounded, and missing part of an essential limb. Still, though he truly feared climbing the mountains, his duty and task were clear.

The man proceeded to travel throughout the day. By the end of the day he had reached the foothills of the mountains. The man found clouds slowly drifting across the darkening sky. Soon the moon was clouded over. The scout stopped. Then he curled into a ball and fell asleep upon the open ground.

The scout awakened in the morning after sleeping for eight hours. It was still dark and rain fell softly, soaking through everything. The scout was already totally wet, but he did not feel the rain through a mask of pain and resolve. The scout began to move through the black darkness, his severed leg so frequently striking upraised objects that the pain became almost rhythmic. Even worse, the scout suffered from agonizing muscle pain throughout his body. He found it difficult to think and contemplations slipped from his mind like elusive sounds. If not for the training that penetrated down to an instinctive level he would have fallen and been unable to continue.

Gradually the foothills changed into jagged, cliff-like mountains and the real struggle began. The ground shifted until the vertical seemed to outweigh the horizontal, and the scout was forced to leave his branch behind in order to have his hands free. His progress slowed as he was forced to rely almost completely on his pained and weary arms.

The Scout began to leave a trail of blood behind him as scabs broke open on his legs and his hands scraped themselves apart on the rocks. The horrible wound on his leg broke open again and the scout could feel himself slowly weakening. As the sun grew higher in the sky the rocks heated and a glare blasted at the eyes of the scout. He began to lose focus and his vision swam. Still he pressed upward. The scout did not carry sophisticated climbing equipment so a single fall could mean death. The scout scraped and stumbled and had numerous close calls. He broke the bones of two toes and strained several ribs, making every stop and breath an agony worse than any torture.

By midday the scout could not continue to move. He had gone eight miles in as many hours; his broken body had navigated terrain that would give an experienced climber pause. Still, the scout felt like a traitor, he was failing in his duty. He was traveling too slowly, if he could not make his battered body do more, his information would arrive too late and his fellow countrymen would suffer.

The scout knew he must rest. He bound his reopened wounds as best he could

and settled into an uneasy sleep. At dusk he awoke. He contemplated the remainder of his journey. He had four more miles to go upwards. Then it was a long, rocky voyage down to his goal. He knew that if he reached the top he should be able to make better progress and survive the downward trek. The scout needed to endure only four miles more.

Therefore, he willed the pain from his body and started upward as darkness began to fall. Every single step was a trial. He had difficulty seeing and for every two steps he took forward he slid backward one. His body fought against any motion, it wanted only to let go. The scout was forced to override every natural impulse with a massive exertion of will and press onward.

Blackness fell across the scout's vision at the worst possible time. He hung upon a cliff face too far to fall to the nearest ledge. He had to feel with his broken, bloody hands, to find the way upward. He kept going, despite being blinded by the night. In the morning, with the sun creeping over the horizon, the scout collapsed on the summit. He had reached the high point; everything would be easier from here to the objective. Relief swept over the scout as he spiraled into sleep.

When the Scout awoke it was mid-afternoon. He struggled to get up and move on. He went slowly, to help his body recover as best it could, but the downhill slope was gentle, it went easily and he made good time. By the time he stopped next morning only ten miles remained before he could reach the base.

At midday, as the scout set out once more to begin the trek, he heard a sound. It was a metallic noise, the sound of an armored boot striking the rocks. The scout instantly dropped to the ground and ripped his eyepiece up to his face. He scanned 360 degrees for infrared signatures. He picked up ten that qualified as human. The scout was immediately dismayed. There were too many to fight, too many to even count on successfully hiding from. The scout knew he needed more information to determine if there was any possible course of action.

The scout pulled himself up on a ledge and used his eyepiece to get a better glimpse of the men. The ten were gathered in a loose band in a clearing. Each carried a powerful multi-purpose assault rifle. They wore a complete combat suit made up of light polymeric alloys, suits designed to block both ballistic and laser weapons. They wore blast helmets that concealed their faces and made them look more like machines than men.

Instantly the scout determined who these men were. They were Mavel Dash Troopers, the common foot soldiers of the same house that had destroyed his countrymen those few days ago on the battlefield. Anger burned in the scout to attack these men, yet his training and his reason prevailed, keeping him hidden. He knew the best way to hurt these men was to deliver his information. He also knew that the small pistol he carried was barely worth covering a captive; it was not going to be very useful in a fight with fully equipped Dash troopers.

As the scout was observing, one of the soldiers stood up and began giving orders to the others. The scout could not read his lips because of the blast helmets, but he could tell what was happening as the Dash troopers spread out in a pattern. The scout knew now that the soldiers were looking for him.

The scout skimmed down from the ledge, worried but not yet panicked, even though only 300 meters of light forest and rock separated him from the Dash Troopers.

The scout picked his branch up and began to hurry on his way. The scout moved quickly and rather recklessly, but he was sure he could put distance between himself and the soldiers. The Dash troopers would have to move slowly to make sure they did not miss the scout in hiding, and they could not use the maneuvering capabilities of their Dash suits or risk alerting the sensors of the nearby staging base.

Strangely, as the scout began this last leg of his trek, his mind refused to focus on the current situation. For the first time since the end of the battle the scout had seen another human being. This had opened up the path to thoughts other than completing his trek once more. The images of the carnage fields hung in front of his eyes. They spurred him on, he could not fail the deaths of his comrades. The scout's mind wandered wide through an eerie landscape of morals, values, and duty, trying to reconcile himself to the events of the past few days. First was the battle itself, which he had seen from his far off observational position and still could not escape. Then came the fields of corpses and his desperate trek through the wilderness. Now his situation was precarious. If the Mavel Dash Troopers caught his trail he had no chance to outrun them in his current condition.

The scout moved as fast as he could, fighting both a physical and mental race against time. He had to avoid his pursuers and reach the base before his mind snapped completely from the pressure and exhaustion of the past few days.

As the scout traveled his physical gauntlet, his mind unraveled further and further and he began to doubt even his duty, that one conviction that had carried him this far. Then suddenly everything changed. His shortened leg clattered into a rock and a single thought struck his mind with the quickness and force of a lightning bolt. *This is my final mission as a Dastrian Scout*, he thought. He was crippled, and no artificial limb would restore him completely. He would be discharged with honor and placed in some other service. With that realization in mind he knew that if he failed his duty now he would be forever a failure. His storming mind found an anchor in that fact, which made all other struggles irrelevant. The scout determined he would continue onward, no matter the obstacles or the personal cost, he would not fail the call of duty in its final hour.

An explosive flash impacted to the scout's right. He immediately tumbled onto his belly and slithered into a crevice in the ground. He had recognized the flash as a laser blast; at least one enemy soldier had found him. The scout twisted in the crevice and pulled free both eyepiece and pistol. He found the soldier on a ridge above him, comm. antennae extended, assault rifle searching. The scout took in the soldier's profile, then aimed and fired. He hit the soldier in the vulnerable right hip. The soldier collapsed on the ground.

The scout got up and strove to move at a run toward the staging base. He managed a twisted amalgamation of hopping and running that gained him at least something better than walking speed. The scout was now trapped in a combination game of hide-and-seek and a race. The scout traveled swiftly through the forest, and the soldiers followed. As the soldiers tried to track and corner the scout, the sound of their metal boots, and the occasional laser blast, rang out in the night.

Then the scout could see the staging base through his eyepiece, it was only six hundred meters away.

Then pain exploded everywhere and all went dark. The burst from the fragmentation grenade scorched the ground in a circle that included the burnt corpse of the scout.

The Mavel soldiers approached the scout's body, communicating to each other on their helmet comms. Then each man suddenly reeled and fell, a large hole appearing in his head or chest plating. The only sound was that of bodies hitting the ground. The burst from the fragmentation grenade had attracted a sniper patrol from the nearby base, and they had swiftly dispatched the Mavel Dash Troopers.

The scout was dead. He had failed to reach the base. Still, his body was recovered. The data record from the scout's eyepiece was retrieved. Due to the scout's death the record was given a high analysis priority. This would ultimately result in a major intelligence victory. Had the scout not been killed the data would have received a lower priority, and it would have taken second place to the scout's personal report. By the time analysis would have been completed the data would have been outdated. Thus it was only through his own death that the scout was able to complete his duty and save the lives of his countrymen.

--Daniel Kinicki '05