

None Left Behind

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Gracie stood in the jungle clearing, her ears straining to pick the sound of someone approaching. The forest was full of sounds, both Earth-normal and native, an odd mix that rarely worked out but was normal on this crazy world.

Something that looked like a small wooly snake with purple butterfly wings flitted through the clearing making a weird, shrill whine. It hadn't been in her brief as dangerous, so she only gave it a passing glance. She wished it would shut up, however. An elephant could walk up on her with that ear-numbing noise, and she'd never know until it stepped on her.

Focus, Gracie.

She wasn't happy about this mission—no, not at all. From the hurried ops order to the insert by an automated submersible onto this godforsaken coastline to why she was waiting, this wasn't a normal operation. Some other snipers said she was too by the book, too . . . well, “stick up her ass,” had been mentioned more than once in her sixteen years in the Corps. Cool and calculating, her “Ice Queen” nickname was probably deserved. But being that way had made her the best sniper in the Corps with her fifty-three kills. The mission was the mission, however, and orders were orders. That took precedence over any misgivings. And being a sniper made her an expert on making do no matter the situation.

Gracie took a deep breath and pulled her mind into the zen state, tuning out everything that wasn't human footsteps. One thing a Marine Corps sniper knew how to do was wait. She'd once spent six days in a hide, never moving, to record a kill. And finally, there it was. A snap of a branch. She wasn't quite sure how she knew it, but that was a person out there.

Gracie straightened up and held her hands out, palm forward, her Barrett and M99 still slung over her back. The footsteps approached, then halted for a moment, possibly fifteen or twenty meters away. She knew she was being watched, but she stared straight ahead, ignoring her observer. After a long minute, the steps started again, and twenty seconds later, a thirties-something man stepped into the clearing, dressed in a ratty shirt that might have been red once a long time ago and handyman's pants. As far as Gracie could tell, he was unarmed.

He stepped up in front of her and asked, "Are you my Marine?"

Gracie stared at him, saying nothing, while her hands almost trembled to take the Victor handgun from her holster. It took an effort of will to resist the temptation.

"Lavender, apple," the man said, his voice trembling.

Gracie relaxed. She knew the man had to be her contact, but while a retinal scan would have made it a certainty, this would have to do given the circumstances.

"India, wolf. I'm Staff Sergeant Gracie Medicine Crow, United Federation Marine Corps."

She could see the stress melt off of him like snow on a sun-warmed roof, but not all of it. He was still nervous. "And you are?" she asked, trying to put him at ease.

"Teren, ma'am. You can call me Teren."

Gracie motioned with her right hand, and, with a thump, her spotter landed on the ground from the tree branch where he'd been perched. Teren almost jumped out of his skin, and he looked ready to bolt.

"Lance Corporal Guppy Rancine," he said, holding out a hand.

That simple act evoked an instinctual reaction. Their guide reached out and took it. Rancine solemnly shook it, glancing to Gracie and giving her a wink.

Gracie suppressed rolling her eyes. Rancine had known he would scare the shit out of their guide, and he rather enjoyed doing it. Where Gracie was a stickler to the regulations, Rancine didn't know what one was. If he wasn't such a good spotter, she would have shit-canned him long ago.

Not really. The guy was infectious. But she'd never admit that to him.

"Teren, if you would lead us, maybe we should go. This isn't the most secure spot," she told the civilian.

And this was the main thing that she didn't like about the operation. Gracie had worked with other services, but even with the Brotherhood and Legion, if they weren't Marines, at least they were military. Now, she was trusting Rancine's and her life to an unknown entity. A civilian. And how nervous he was certainly didn't give her a warm-and-fuzzy.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm ready."

"Staff Sergeant, Teren. I work for a living."

He stared at her in confusion. The standard joke about officers, as told by enlisted, went right over the poor man's head. But she wasn't going to have him ma'am her ad infinitum.

"Gracie. My name is Gracie."

"Hey, then can I call you—" Rancine started before she cut him off.

"Not on your life, Lance Corporal. Now take point."

Rancine had a Cheshire Cat-grin on his face as he pushed past Teren. She'd walked right into that one, however, serving it up on a platter. Score one for the lance corporal.

"Uh, if he's gonna lead, how can I take you there?" Teren asked.

"You just keep pointing. He'll go that way."

Teren looked confused, but he held his arm straight out, pointing in the direction from where he'd approached. Rancine gave him a jaunty salute, then stepped off. Gracie nodded at the civilian to follow him, then she unslung her M99 and took up the rear as the jungle swallowed them up.

Four hours later, Gracie and Rancine were on their bellies, their tarnkappes draped over them as they glassed the small dock on the blackwater river. A worn road led from the dock before disappearing into the trees.

“What do you think?”

Rancine paused, then said, “Forty meters up, eleven . . . uh . . . twelve-twenty to the base of the dock. Breeze from downstream at five KPH.”

“And? For the Barrett?”

Her spotter/A-gunner turned to look at her, his face scrunched up in concentration. “Uh . . . right nine and down . . . five?”

Gracie grunted. He was close. Gracie had it at forty-five above the river and twelve-fifty to the dock, which with the Barrett would be right nine clicks and down seven, figures she gave him. She’d confirm in a moment, but whenever there was time, she had tested her A-gunners and herself without the tools of the trade. When she was just a PIG, a “Professionally Trained Gunman, the old salts made fun of her for her “stubby pencil drill.” But a sniper might be without their scope or firing solution AI. War was tough on equipment. If that happened, then what? Every Marine rifle could be fired with iron sights, but that couldn’t happen unless the rifleman knew how to calculate a sight picture.

Now, of course, as one of the most renowned HOGs, or “Hunter of Gunman,” no one gave her shit for anything. And more and more of her peers did the same exercises as they set up their hides and firing positions.

“Let’s find out,” she said, setting down the binos and picking up the Barrett. She sighted down her Brady, a sophisticated scope and firing AI. All of the environmentals, such as the planet’s gravity, air density, rotation, curvature, and such, had already been uploaded. Now it was time to measure range, drop, and atmospheric conditions.

She held the crosshairs on the base of the dock, then pressed the interrogation.

“Range twelve-hundred-forty-eight meters. Drop forty-five meters,” she read aloud.

“Damned, Staff Sergeant. How the hell do you do that?”

“Lots of practice, young one. Pay heed, and one day, too, you shall be an exalted HOG.”

“Can’t make HOG unless you let me get a kill,” he said with a laugh.

Gracie knew that despite the laugh, there was more than a bit of truth in what he said. But in her five kills since he’d been assigned to her, the shots were of such difficulty that she couldn’t have left any to him, not with the mission being the first priority.

“And with those numbers, the clicks are . . .”

“Are what, Staff Sergeant? As always, you nailed it.”

“Right nine, down six.”

“See I told . . . wait, did you say six?” Rancine asked incredulously. “You mean . . .?”

“Yeah, six clicks,” Gracie said.

But it couldn’t be. She might make a mistake in range but never with clicks on the Barrett, Windmoeller, or Kyocera. And twelve-forty-eight and forty-five above, with the M43 round, that was seven clicks. Unless . . .

“Six! That means we tied in elevation! We were both off by one,” a happy PIG chortled next to her.

She ignored him as she pulled out firing AI and checked the inputs. And there it was. She’d forgotten to take into account the higher gravity on Woomoora.

Shit! Stupid!

She didn’t care that no one else had her skills. She was a perfectionist in a profession where the tiniest mistake could take her life. While Rancine crowed, she filed this away in her never-do-that again folder. After sixteen years in uniform, that folder was getting pretty big.

Not that a click off would necessarily ruin the shot. Twelve-hundred meters was nothing. Any Marine with their M99 could handle that distance. Most of Gracie’s kills occurred at over two-thousand meters. The farther out, the better, as that meant she’d be out of range of anyone pissed off that she’d just dropped one of

them. But with the heavy jungle, line-of-sight was very limited, and this bluff offered the longest shot possible.

“Snap in the Windy, Rancine,” she said, cutting him off.

“You got it, Staff Sergeant.

He was entirely too happy with himself, but he needed a lot more practice before he could start getting cocky. At least that’s what she told herself.

As soon as he said, “Done,” she had them both back away from the edge of the bluff.

“That’s amazing,” Teren said as they scooted down three meters to where he waited. “You were there, but you weren’t.”

Gracie waved him forward and held up the edge of her tarnkappe, showing him the faint openings of nanotubes. They were everywhere on the cape, but they could best be seen at the edge.

“What you’re looking at are the ends of what are tiny optical cables. They crisscross in every direction. So, when you’re looking from this end, what you see is what’s on the other side. We’re bending the light around whatever’s covered by it.”

“And you’re invisible?”

“Not really. But it’s a pretty good piece of gear. It works best if the observer’s directly in front or behind or directly to the sides. That’s why we need to watch our orientation.”

“We don’t got nuttin’ like that here.”

“Well, you aren’t snipers, either,” Gracie said.

“Yeah, I know. But me and my dad hunt groovers, and they’ve got super eyes. Hard to get close, you know.”

Gracie didn’t want to tell him that one tarnkappe probably cost half of his annual salary. Her explanation had been simplistic and ignored most of the tech embedded in it.

“And speaking of staying invisible, Lance Corporal, it’s time we got our hides up. I’ll take the right side of the boulder there. I want you on the other side, by that fallen . . . hell, I don’t know what that thing is.”

Teren craned his head and said, “That’s a snot tree.”

“Appropriate. That snot stuff, it is dangerous?”

“No. It’s not bad at all.”

“OK, Rancine, I want you to take up a position there. Make sure you have a good line-of-site to the dock.”

“I can’t really spot for you from that far away,” he said with an obvious and hopeful unasked question.

“At this range, I think I might be able to manage without a spotter.”

“So, you mean . . . ?”

“Just set up your hide. We’ll discuss it later.”

“Aye-aye, Staff Sergeant,” he said with excitement he couldn’t hide.

“And don’t overdo it. I don’t want you looking like a damned Christmas tree!”

“Got it!” he said as he started gathering materials to camouflage his firing position.

“Teren, so they don’t usually come until after dark, right?”

“Not that I know of, ma’am.”

She didn’t even try to correct him again. It was a lost cause. She guessed she’d just have to be “ma’am” for the duration.

“Well, we’ve probably got six or seven hours until then. So, while we’re preparing our hides, I want you to go back down a hundred meters or so and keep an eye out for anyone coming up our rear. You see anything, and I mean anything, you hightail it up here and tell me. Can you do that for me?”

He shrugged and said, “I guess. But won’t be no one coming.”

“If I were coming in with a load of weapons down there, and this the only high ground for kilometers, then I’d want to make sure no one was up here.”

“OK, I’ll do it. But when you, I mean, after you, you know, shoot, then how will I know to get you?” he asked.

“We’ll be coming down fast, and we’ll grab you.”

He looked uncertain, but he said, “I guess I can, ma’am.”

“See you then. You just be ready to boogie, OK?”

She watched him retreat down the trail for a moment.

I hope he doesn’t bug out.

But that was out of her control, so she turned back to the task at hand. Tarnkappe or not, there was a lot to do. An experienced eye, and the SevRevs had them, could pick out the subtle images of a Marine under one if they knew what to look for. So, she had to break up the outline. As she told Rancine, however, she couldn’t just stack branches on top. That would be a beacon that there was something there.

The question was what to use. The hilltop was covered with thick vegetation, only opening up on the rocky bluff. Woomoora’s star had close to the same wavelength as Sol, so the native vegetation hued to the greens, but this stuff was bulkier than the Earth plants, their stalks more like stuffed sausages. There was one plant with thin tendrils that looked like lime-green cotton candy, but they wilted and collapsed within three minutes of her picking them to use as cover. In the end, she used a dead Earth-evergreen branch, some laurel, and a few dead native plants along the edge of the rocks to give her some cover. She pulled a few more dry branches near and out-of-sight to anyone below. She’d pull them on top of her tarnkappe when the time came. The Freedom League didn’t have aircraft to speak of, and the SevRevs weren’t about to bring any of theirs, but the SevRevs did make use of drones. And what she told Teren was true. Any competent SevRev commander would check out the hilltop.

This wouldn’t be Gracie’s first dance with the Seventh Revelationists. Her first kill was one of them, on Wyxy. She subconsciously fingered the round hung on a thong around her neck. Her spotter had recovered it from the man she’d killed. Now, it was her Hog’s Tooth, a talisman that would keep her safe. Superstition, of

course, and Gracie was a woman of science. What was being a sniper but understanding math? But she never took it off while on a mission.

The SevRevs were a thorn in the hide of all the governments of humankind, terrorists willing to do anything to bring about the end of times, and they had amassed power over the years. Woomoora had their homegrown terrorists, the Freedom League. They'd been a ragtag group kept in check by the local militia with FCDC—the Federation Civil Development Corps, or “fuckdicks, as those in military refer to them—advisors. That was until the SevRevs started arming them. A jungle outpost of thirty militia had been overrun with no survivors, and the planetary governor had put in the call. The Marines were sent in.

And tonight, across the continent, a dozen arms transfers would be hit while the grunts raided known FL camps. One battalion of Marines would crush the nascent movement before it could gain steam. And if SevRevs got killed in the process, well, that's what happens when you screw with the big dogs.

Satisfied, she backed out of her firing position, walked below the edge of the bluff so she wouldn't leave a trail to those below, and went to check on Rancine.

“Look at the native stuff. It's already wilting and turning colors. Change it out.”

The lance corporal stood back and looked at it, then slapped the side of his head. “Duh. Me no know how make hide. But Zog trying.”

“Well, try harder, Zog,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Seriously, though. Watch the vegetation and replace it as needed. We don't expect anyone until after sunset, but you never know. I have to think they'll run up some drones to recon the place before they come upriver.”

“Zog understand,” he said, a hangdog look on his face that not quite, but almost made her smile.

“But stop for a moment. I said I'll discuss what you're doing here later. I want to coordinate that right now.”

“Zog” immediately disappeared, the Marine sniper Rancine had trained to be taking his place.

“I'm ready for this.”

“I know you are. So, this is what we’re going to do.”

Gracie scanned the river, watching for any sign of activity. She wasn’t antsy. The six hours she’d spent on her belly under her tarnkappe was nothing. If there was one thing that being a sniper had taught her, it was was patience.

Somewhere out in the ocean, if Intel was on the ball, a small ship would be transferring weapons and ordnance to a boat of some kind that would then take the load to shore and nine-hundred meters upriver to the dilapidated-looking dock below. This was being done in over a dozen locations tonight. Sniper teams were assigned to four of them, while armed drones were in holding patterns over the others.

Lieutenant Borisova had asked the battalion commander why they didn’t hit them all with drones or with the Navy gunboat in orbit instead of putting her snipers at risk, which was a valid question. But technically, Woomoora was not in a state of war, and *posse comitatus* prohibited the military from taking direct action that could result in the loss of civilian life. But the Marines and Navy could target contraband if the orders came from the FCDC or Space Guard. Which had already been done.

What the Marines needed was for a force to surgically take out the weapons or boats, and there was nothing as surgical in their toolbox than a HOG. If the Marines received return fire, then they’d be allowed to defend themselves, and that would shift the legal situation.

So, Gracie and Rancine’s mission was to destroy the boat with the weapons, then act as targets, firing at, but not hitting anyone . . . until they fired back. And everyone thought that there would be returned fire.

That single act would unleash the rest of the battalion and the gunboat to commence the main operation. Gracie pushed all of that into the background, though. She understood the strategic aspect of her mission, but if she wanted Rancine and her to get out of this in one piece, she had to focus on the mission at hand. Being a target didn’t particularly please her, but orders were orders.

Maybe one of the other teams will engage first, and we'll be weapons-free by the time our objective arrives on the scene.

“Movement, nine-o'clock,” Rancine passed on the no-wave. “Can’t tell if it’s local traffic or our pick-up wagon.”

Without moving her head, Gracie tried to see, but the boulder on her left blocked her view. No matter. She’d see it soon enough if it did come to the dock.

“Be prepared for drones,” she told him. If it was their target and coming to the dock, then they might send some off to check the area.

“Roger that.”

Gracie wished Teren had a no-wave to give him a head’s up, but even if he had one, she doubted she’d be able to reach him. The no-waves were small, handheld, low-energy communicators. They had a very limited range of twenty-to-thirty meters, which made them useless for most military applications, but they worked fine for sniper teams. They were so-low powered that they were difficult to pick up by anyone scanning for activity and used wavelengths not normally attacked by jamming or other countermeasures.

On the negative side, they were only slightly better than two coffee cans on a string. But for this, and when facing a non-sophisticated threat, they’d do.

Gracie and Rancine were already in the shadows, the sun setting behind them. Daytime critters were quieting down while the nighttime were rising. A series of hoots echoed across the treetops. Gracie was a Montana girl from old Earth, raised in the wide-open spaces along the banks of the Greasy Creek in the Apsáalooke Reservation. She knew nothing about the jungle and didn’t have a clue of the hooter was Earth-life or native.

She didn’t need to be from Woomoora, however, to know things were coming to a head. Too many missions had given her a sixth sense, a sense she’d learn to trust.

Soon.

She checked her distances one more time. All were within forty meters of each other, but it didn’t hurt to have accurate distances for each potential shot.

A few minutes later, a battered truck—a wheeled truck, not a hover—crept out of the jungle and into the clearing. It completed a three-point turn, then backed right up to the dock. A man and a woman got out, the woman walking down the dock and glassing the river toward the ocean. The man leaned on the truck and puffed a cigarette to life.

“Looks like we’re a go.” Rancine passed.

Gracie didn’t answer. The no-waves might have a very little signature, and the two down there didn’t look very military, but there was no need to keep using the comms when they didn’t need to.

Gracie brought her scope to bear on the woman, putting the crosshairs on her neck. With night falling, the scope was continually entering the drop in temperature and other environmentals, but at this stage, she still wasn’t in NV mode. It would be soon, which would make it a little more difficult to pick out the signs of how strong and from what direction a breeze might be blowing. At the moment, however, it was calm. The river’s black water was smooth.

Boom! You lose, lady.

Despite the popular notion that snipers were all cold-blooded killers, Gracie didn’t enjoy the actual killing itself. She enjoyed the process of calculating how to reach out and hit a distant target with so many factors working against her. And when her target was trying to kill her, that heightened the excitement, the competitive factor. Most of all, though, was the feeling of accomplishment.

At 142 centimeters tall and 41 kilograms soaking wet and being what most people would consider beautiful with her raven black hair and piercing eyes, Gracie had never been given credit for her abilities growing up. She’d enlisted in the Marines to make a name for herself, but even then, she had never been taken seriously. But as a sniper, it didn’t matter how tall you were, what your gender or orientation was. A kill was a kill, and whether you lived or died depended entirely on your own shoulders.

The death of her target was ancillary to her. It had to be done for the mission and to keep the Federation safe, but it didn’t give her a thrill.

“We’ve got more company,” Rancine passed.

Gracie shifted her scope downriver, but there was nothing. She lifted her head, and back at the dockhead, a larger truck pulled up, the bed with twenty-or-so

armed men and women who piled out. One of them pulled down a cable and hooked it into the jack on the side of the truck while two more wrestled an old energy cannon onto a mount on the roof of the truck's cab.

Shit.

The cannon had that Gentry-made look, and if it was made by them, it wouldn't be sophisticated, but it would work. The Marine's STF, Shear-Thickening FLuid armor, woven into the fabric of their combat utilities, wouldn't give them any protection against the beam that kind of cannon could produce.

The rest of the fighters lounged around in groups chatting. They had to be FL, and not well trained, but that damned cannon sure changed things. If she and Rancine were trying to draw fire, she hoped it wouldn't be the beamer that fired at them first.

"If they start to swing that around to us after I fire on the boat, you take the gunner while I try to disable that thing."

"Roger. I'll take out the gunner."

For all his excitement and joking earlier, Rancine was all business now.

Gracie ranged the cannon. It was a good three to four meters higher than the ground, and that changed her adjustments. She decided to zero in on the cannon instead of where the boat would be. She'd have time for that shot, and she'd just manually adjust her point of aim on the boat.

Of course, I can proactively take it out. It's equipment, right?

Gracie could break radio silence and push the question up to battalion, but that wasn't a good enough reason to start broadcasting. Besides, she was more of the act-first-and-request-permission-later kind of woman.

Darkness fell quickly over the area, and her scope switched to NV mode. Down below, cigarettes shined bright like little flares. The fighters didn't even bother to cup them in their hands, shielding them from view.

Gracie shook her head. It was hard to believe that any group that unprofessional could be a threat. But that cannon was almost foolproof, and professional or not, it could put Rancine and her in a world of hurt.

The waiting dragged on. The fighters made a small fire behind the big hover, and gathered around. Someone started passing a flask. As far as Gracie could tell, no one had been sent out as security, and no one was in the bed of the truck on the cannon. She started feeling a little better, despite presence of the heavy weapon.

After another hour, there was a flurry of activity and a group of them kicked out the fire as the rest scrambled down to the dock where they stared downstream. The woman who'd been there since the beginning stood and looked in that direction as well.

“We're on. Get ready.”

Racine almost certainly realized that, too, but despite the image presented in the Hollybolly holovids that the Marines were perfect warriors, Marines had been known to fall asleep on watch before. She didn't think he had, but better safe than sorry.

She scoped the river, and about four minutes later, a mid-sized boat, low in the water, appeared from the trees lining the bank and made its way to the dock. Gracie was tempted to try and sink it there, out in the deeper water, but the ROI required her to see the transfer of weapons from the boat to the shore.

Gracie thumbed the cam on. Her scope had been fitted with it to record what was about to transpire. She wasn't happy with it, feeling it was a matter to trust, but the ROI was so stringent that the legal types probably demanded it. At least it didn't interfere with her sight picture.

A man stood at the bow, holding a line. He tossed it to the woman as the coxswain maneuvered in close, and she wrapped it around one of the vertical posts that supported the dock. He hopped up and shook the woman's hand while the others stood back.

They're the SevRevs. The rest are FL.

Now she had targets if . . . no when . . . they started returning fire. Gracie really wasn't emotionally invested in the Freedom League, but she and the SevRevs had locked horns before, and she'd seen the atrocities they committed. She still didn't enjoy killing, but some vermin just needed to be dead.

Luckily, the boat docked on her side. She had a full view of it as several fighters rushed forward. A woman in the boat grabbed a meter-long case and handed it up to waiting hands.

Bingo.

Gracie turned on her comms and said, “Foxtrot-Sierra-Delta-Four engaging.” The recording from her scope started uploading.

She put the big brother aspect out of her mind, took a deep breath, let half out, then, with a butterfly’s touch, squeezed the trigger. Her Barrett kicked, and the special round crossed the intervening distance in a second, hitting the motor in the back of the boat. Her second round was in its way before anyone realized what had happened, this one hitting cases and containers in the center of the boat, and another second-and-a-half later, her third round hit the side of the boat, right at the waterline.

The Barrett fired a big, 225-grain round, but the M43 round had a surprise. Embedded in the bullet itself was a small but relatively powerful explosive charge. The first round took the motor off the back of the boat and knocked the coxswain on his ass in the process. Both the second and third rounds hit as people started diving for cover or running off the dock. There was a secondary explosion, bigger than that caused by Gracie’s rounds, right in the middle of the cases, causing her scope to dim the scene to compensate. She’d hoped to set off some ordnance but realized it was pure luck that it had.

She looked over her scope. Flames were growing on the boat while the crew started throwing cases overboard. Good discipline, she noted. Probably SevRevs. The other two SevRevs were standing tall on the dock, looking into the jungle. The woman suddenly pointed up to the hill. Whether she spotted either of them or not didn’t matter. Their firing position was the only possible one in the area.

“They’ve got our position,” she told Rancine. “Watch what they do.”

Gracie swung her Barret around. She had one more M43 round in the chamber with the normal M21 rounds in the magazine. She was just about to spend her last round on the still unmanned cannon when she remembered the cam hooked to her scope.

“If anyone gets on that truck bed, zero the bastard,” she yelled at her A-gunner, then swung her weapon away so the cam wouldn’t record whatever Rancine did.

Back on the dock, the crew on the boat was trying to fight the growing fire, and male SevRev was running forward, shouting with a handgun in one hand as he pointed up the hill with the other. And that’s when he made his mistake. He

stopped, aimed, and fired up the hill, a difficult shot at fifty meters, an impossible shot at this distance. Neither Rancine nor Gracie was in any danger, but technically, they had just been taken under fire.

At the same moment the SevRev fired at them, Rancine's Windmoeller fired a single shot. Maybe it was a split second earlier, maybe a split second late. Gracie was just glad that her scope cam didn't record sound.

"Taking fire now," she passed on her comms. With that, she'd just opened the floodgate across the planet.

With a smooth motion, she targeted the cannon. A body lay crumbled in the bed of the truck a meter or so away.

She put the crosshairs on the weapon's breech, slowed down her breathing, and fired. The round reached down and hit, sparks shooting off as it ricocheted and hit the river beyond the truck.

That was the last of her M43's. She doubted her M21 rounds would have an effect, but she flipped her scope's inputs to adjust to the lighter weight and fired three rounds. The M21 was still a hefty round, but Gentry made their weapons to be sturdy and take abuse. The rounds pinged off harmlessly.

Rancine fired again, and Gracie scanned for a target. The crew was still struggling to save their boat. Gracie ignored them. They were not a threat now, and she admired their efforts, fighting a fire with ordnance all around. And then, there he was. On the far side of the dock, feet in the water as he peered over, his eyes and forehead exposed.

Fighters finally started to return fire, but Gracie's firing position was good. With so little of her exposed, it would take a seeing-eye round to reach her. She shut out the rest of the growing fight and focused on the male SevRev. The range wasn't far for a trained sniper, but the target was limited, and it was night. Gracie couldn't gauge any breeze that might have picked up. Flickering light from the fire in the boat made a clear visual even more difficult.

It didn't matter. She was a HOG. This is what she did. She pulled out her Hog's Tooth, kissed it, and slipped it back, never taking her eyes off her target. Once again, she took a breath and let half out, willing her heart to beat slower. Gently, she squeezed the trigger.

As if on a rail, the round arced down, striking the edge of the dock right at the SevRev's nose. Splinters of wood and the bullet itself smashed into his face, dropping him into the dark water. His body floated for a moment before it disappeared under the surface.

Gracie felt the familiar surge of triumph an instant before the energy beam blasted the hill just below her, a lobe tingling her left hand and face, proof as to how close the beam had hit.

She jerked back, scrambling to get solid rock between her and the cannon.

"Pull back now!" she yelled, hoping Rancine hadn't been hit.

She peered around the boulder and almost cried out when the lance corporal bounded down to meet her.

"Sorry! I didn't see her man that thing!"

"Don't worry about it now," she said, grabbing his upper arm and pushing him down the trail. "We've got to bug out!"

Footing was tricky, and they had to slow down or risk falling. Gracie half-thought that Teren would have bolted, but he was standing there, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other as he waited for them.

"What happened," he asked, his voice breaking.

"What happened is that we have to get out of here. We need to get back to the extract point."

He gulped but said nothing, leading the two Marines off the hill. As they reached the bottom, shouts could be clearly heard only a couple of hundred meters away.

"Are they coming for us?" Teren asked.

"That would be a good bet. So, let's go," Gracie told him.

She slung the big Barrett and grabbed her M99. The Barrett was a bigger weapon with far more punch, but it was also a bit unwieldy. The M99, with its hypervelocity darts, would be far better in close in jungle fighting, especially with

her left hand still numb by the near-miss. Not that Gracie ever intended to let it get that far. Her mission now was to avoid contact.

The three took off at a jog along a narrow trail. Leaves slashed at her face, and vines tried to grab her as she ran past. The Barrett, almost as big as she was, banged into the back of her legs with each step. She considered ditching it, but if she did, she was required to set a toad to it, burning it and the scope into slag. More than that, it went against her sniper DNA to destroy a working weapon.

Gracie had a pretty good sense of direction, but she was utterly lost in the darkness under the canopy. She hoped Teren knew where he was going. Ten minutes later, that destination became clear when they reached the banks of the river that flowed five meters below.

“Why’re we going this way?” she asked after grabbing the civilian by the shoulder. “We should’ve cut back into the jungle.”

“I don’t know if I could do that in the dark,” he almost wailed.

As if in response, voices immediately picked up, this time to their left, along the path on top of the river bank. The fires from the dock created flickering lights on the water’s surface. They’d only made it a couple hundred meters toward the beach.

“Shit. Let’s just go.”

Their orders were to go to what she called the “extract point” to Teren, then part ways. They were to then make their way another 800 meters down the beach then swim out a klick for the submersible to pick them up. By following the river to the ocean, they were adding a good four or five klicks to their route, all while being chased by revenge-minded fighters.

They started along the riverbank, and Gracie opened her comms. “Foxtrot-Sierra-Delta, this is Delta-Four. We’re going to need a different pick up at . . .”

Gracie hesitated. She really couldn’t take the time to stop and look at her navcomp to pull a coordinate. “. . . two-hundred meters south of the river and eight-hundred meters out, over.”

There was no answer. She reached up and banged on the tiny unit on her left shoulder harness. “Foxtrot-Sierra-Delta, this is Delta-Four. I’m going to need a different extract, over.”

Still nothing.

Maybe it's the terrain. I'll try again at the beach.

But with her left hand tingling, she was afraid it wasn't the terrain. Energy beams, even side lobes, could be rough on electronics.

A fusillade of fire opened behind them. Nothing struck close, and Gracie didn't know if they'd been spotted or if the fighters were shooting at some wildlife they'd spooked. But it was near enough to goad her along. She'd fallen a few steps back while trying to communicate, and she tried to sprint to catch up. Her Barrett slipped off her shoulder, the barrel sliding between her legs. She shot one leg forward to try and catch her balance, but the edge of the bank crumbled under the impact, landing her hard on her butt. Still grasping her M99 with her right hand, she tried to grab anything with her numb left, but it was no use. Her momentum coupled with the collapsed bank were too much, and she went over, landing on her back half-in and half-out of the water with a splash and a grunt.

With the wind knocked out of her, Gracie tried to gasp for breath while above her, a panic-tinged voice called out, "Staff Sergeant! Are you OK?"

She finally managed to get enough air in to weakly say, "I think so. Just knocked the crap out of me."

"I'm coming down for you!"

"No! I'll climb back up."

Gracie struggled to a sitting position. The Barrett was next to her. She stood and retrieved it. Or at least part of it. As she pulled it free from the mud, there was an awful tinkle sound, and several pieces of the scope broke free to fall onto the very narrow shore.

With her heart in her throat, she tried to power the scope, but it was dead. She shook it and heard the parts rattle.

"Are you coming up? Do you need help?"

Gracie looked up to see Rancine's silhouette leaning over the top of the bank.

"Don't get too close. The ground's unstable."

Before he could answer, a volley of fire reached out to her, water splashing up at her feet. She darted in close to the muddy bank, hugging it. From the sound of it, they were maybe fifty meters behind her. With her right hand, she reached out with the M99 and fired her own volley of fifteen darts. In the middle of her volley, when the fighters should be taking cover, another fusillade reached for her.

They can't hear me fire, and they can't see the darts.

Propelled by mag rings, the M99 was essentially silent. Gracie hadn't dreamed she could hit anyone without seeing them, but she'd hoped it would make them take cover.

"Are you OK?" Rancine asked. "I can't see them."

"Fifty meters back along the river, I think."

"Can you still get up here?"

Gracie looked up. She was sore from the fall, and her arm was half-numb. And from the look of it, she might be exposed half-way up.

"I don't think so."

"I'm jumping down. Get out of the way."

"No!" Gracie screamed, prompting more rounds that whizzed by centimeters away.

"Surrender," a voice shouted out in the darkness.

"Listen, Rancine. At my command, I want you to fire a burst with your Windy. I don't care if you can see anyone or not. I'll use that to make a break for it around this little bend. I think I'll be in defilade then. You and Teren keep going, and we'll meet up ahead where the bank gets lower." There was a pause from above, and she added, "You got that?"

"Roger. I've got it Staff Sergeant," he said, sounding miserable.

"If I don't make it, try and get to the submersible."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Yes, you will. If I'm not there in ten minutes, it means I'm not coming."

“But—”

“But nothing. That’s an order.”

Marines never left anyone behind. That was taken as Gospel. But the fact was that sometimes, the reality of war made that necessary, and she was not going to let her spotter sacrifice his life for a lost cause.

More rounds hit, one splattering her with mud. She had to go.

“Acknowledge your order!”

“I heard you.”

Which wasn’t an acknowledgment that he would obey, but it would have to do. She had no more time.

She switched weapons, got the Barrett ready, then said, “Now!”

She leaned forward and fired three rounds down the riverbank as Rancine fired a full magazine above her. Darting forward, she splashed along the edge of the river, ducking to keep low and grateful that she presented a small target.

Not small enough. A sledgehammer hit her in the lower back, sending her to her knees in the mud just as more rounds whizzed over her head. She scrambled in the muck for the edge of the bend, falling flat on her face as she pulled around a massive dead tree trunk.

Out of the FL fighter’s line-of-sight for a moment, she reached back to where she was hit, just above her left kidney. Her STF armor had worked, hardening up the moment the bullet reached her. It hurt like hell, but she was still alive and kicking.

Well, alive. And for the moment, she’d take that.

She could only take another round or two in that spot before the armor failed, so she needed to keep going. Bad arm, wrenched back, and now after being shot, she struggled to put more distance between her and the tree trunk at the edge of the curve. Ahead, she could hear the waves, and the forest opened up around the river mouth. Up ahead, the riverbank should be lower, and she could link back up with Rancine.

“I’m still here,” she called up to him when intense fire erupted, not right above her as she expected, but farther in. She wasn’t sure with what the FL fighters were armed, but she couldn’t miss the steady return fire of the lance corporal’s Windy.

Move it, girl.

Gracie stumbled ahead, lugging both weapons. She could hear the fighters splash through the water behind her. They weren’t banged up like she was, and they were closing the distance. There was no way she could get to the beach, two or three hundred meters farther, before they cut her down.

But the best defense was a good offense. Gracie turned and sat down in the river, the water up to just below her chest. She reached for another magazine for the Barrett, but to her dismay, it was gone. She must have lost it in the fall. She fingered the telltale in the dark. She had one round left, and that rather made her decision for her.

Gracie raised her M99, aiming at a point just past the tree trunk, and waited. She had to spread the fear of God into her pursuers.

Above her, the firing intensified as it moved farther away.

“Get some, Guppy.”

And then it was her turn. Dark shadows appeared around the end of the tree. She waited as more came around. It was difficult to tell in the dark with only starlight to give illumination, but she figured there were five or six.

Gracie couldn’t see well enough to aim in with her scope in pieces, but the M99 had iron sights, too. She aimed center mass and started firing. Yelling broke out, and she was sure bodies fell, but at least two darted back around the tree to safety.

She had a window. Someone was groaning behind her as she turned and hurried down the shoreline.

I got at least one. Iron sights and iron woman, baby.

It had only been thirty meters, so it really wasn’t much of a feat, but still, she’d taken on six and was still breathing.

And that was when she noticed that the shooting in the jungle had stopped. She felt a cloud of misgiving float over her, but maybe Rancine had given them the slip. He was a trained Marine, after all, not some jumped-up wannabe terrorist.

But she'd be dead if she didn't get the hell off the damned river. Gracie knew she hadn't killed everyone who was on her tail, and they'd get up the courage to come after her. She had a hundred-meter stretch of exposed beach in front of her, and she had to get past it before they came after her again.

She tried to run, but her abused body and the Barrett clanging on her legs were too much, so it was more of a fast walk, every second expecting to feel the round that had her name on it. She couldn't take out her Hog's Tooth, but she slapped it with her left hand for luck.

The gods of war must have been smiling at her, however, or maybe her Hog's Tooth really had power, because as the higher ground sloped to the sea, she was able to dart into the cover of the jungle. Just ahead, she could hear the waves lap on the shore. It wasn't safety, but it was a mental lift. Now, all she had to do was find Rancine.

But she wasn't the only one in the jungle. Muffled voices reached her, and she was sure they weren't from Rancine and Teren. Cautiously, she made her way through the thinning jungle, trying to remain a wraith. And like a wall, the jungle stopped. A twenty-meter wide swath of white sandy beach was all that was between her and the ocean. And out there, a couple of clicks south, was their ride out.

Motion caught her eye, and she dropped to the ground. A lone figure appeared, walking slowly along the beach. Gracie drew down on him, wishing her scope worked. It wasn't Rancine, but could it be Teren?

There was only one way to find out. With her M99 aimed in the center of his chest, she called out, "Teren?"

The man jumped, then asked, "Staff Sergeant?"

Gracie stood and revealed herself, and a very relieved Teren rushed up to her.

"Where's Lance Corporal Rancine?"

"He's dead. They killed him."

Gracie went silent as the tsunami washed over her.

“Bullshit. You just left him.”

“No, ma’am. I swear. I saw him go down.”

“Where? Where did you see this?”

“Right back there,” he said, sniffing and pointing back into the jungle. “Just a little way back. I kept going after he was killed. I didn’t know what to do.”

No. He’s not dead. He won’t be killed by a bunch of fucking amateurs. I won’t allow it!

Without another word, she took off in the direction Teren had pointed. She had no plan. She just knew she had to act, completely ignoring what she had told the lance corporal not twenty minutes before.

The forty meters back, the jungle opened up to a sandy clearing. Five fighters were standing around a still body on the ground. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but one of them reached out with a foot to prod the body.

Gracie put raised the Barrett with her left arm, which was little more than a club, and pressed it between the arm in her hip. With the right, she raised the M99.

The flash of the Barrett lit up the sand and surrounding trees and sent one of the terrorists to the ground. This wasn’t time for single, carefully aimed shots of a sniper. She swept the M99 in an arc, cutting down the other four before they could react. One fell over the body as Gracie advanced, and another tried to crawl away before Gracie put another burst of darts into him.

She reached the carnage and stood there for a moment, afraid of what she was going to see. If she didn’t look, then it hadn’t happened. That might not be Rancine under that body.

Gracie didn’t look up when she heard shouting, probably in reaction to her last M21 round. But she did roll the dead fighter away.

Rancine lay on his back. Even in the starlight, Gracie could see that he’d been shot in the head. Half of his face was gone, the blood black in the darkness.

“Oh, Guppy,” she said with a small cry, tears starting to roll down her cheek. Gracie had lost spotter before, “Rabbit” Irving, and she’d sworn that would never happen again. But here she was.

But she wasn't going to leave his body, at least. Not that. Rancine was twice his size, but that didn't matter. If she could get him to the beach, the water would help. She reached down to pull him into a fireman's carry, but after a try, she knew that wasn't going to happen. So, she placed her weapons on his chest, grabbed his battle harness, and started dragging.

It took a lot of grunting and swearing, and it helped that there were only sand and thinning trees in her path, but she made it, and with an exhausted sigh, dropped her hold . . . and heard Rancine grunt. She scrambled forward and put her head next to his. Sure enough, there was the slight gurgle of breathing. Somehow, he was still alive. For how long, she didn't know, but that gave her a surge of energy.

From the clearing, angry shouts sounded. The fighters had found their buddies. There was no time left.

"Help me, Teren," she said to the man silently watching her.

With his help, they got Rancine to the water's edge, the low waves lapping against them.

"We need to swim out. Come with me."

"No."

Gracie looked at him in confusion. "We'll get picked up. Come on."

"No. This is my home. I'm not leaving."

Gracie wanted to argue, but she could hear the angry terrorists approaching. This was his home, and he was an adult, fully capable of making his own decisions.

"Go, then, and God's speed. And thank you, Teren."

He nodded, then took off at a run heading south along the beach. Gracie didn't watch. She didn't have time. She fought Rancine through the surf, trying to keep him, her, and her weapons afloat. She quickly realized it was a lost cause, and with regret, she let the Barrett sink to the bottom.

And for a moment, she was swimming, dragging Rancine behind. She didn't know if he was still alive, but she had to get distance between them and the beach. Firing erupted to the south of her, as if Teren had drawn the fighters that way, but

other than to hope that he'd made it, she couldn't afford to give that any thought. She had to concentrate on getting past the surf zone.

Kick, kick. Make sure Rancine's head is free of the water. Kick, kick.

Her mantra took over, and she became a mindless machine. She didn't realize she was in open ocean, past the surf. All she could do was to swim farther and farther.

Somewhere, her M99 disappeared. She didn't remember how or where. But finally, she stopped. In the breaking dawn, she could see they were about two clicks out, and suddenly, she was dead. Her arms and legs were lead. She tried to tread water, but with Rancine, she was having a hard time keeping them both afloat. She had to get rid of more weight. Taking in half of the ocean while she did it, she managed to shuck off her boots, then her blouse.

Stripping Rancine was a more difficult proposition, and she had to quit with only his blouse. With the morning now full on them, she could get a better look at his head. A good chunk was gone, now washed clean by the seawater. But tiny tendrils, like viruses, had begun to appear across his tortured flesh.

His nanos were at work, and they wouldn't do that if he were dead.

“Just hang in there, Guppy.”

But for what? They weren't at their extraction site.

The sun, so welcomed in the morning, now became an enemy. Gracie's face started to burn, and thirst was beginning to drive her crazy. She lost her grip on Rancine twice, and once, he slipped almost a meter down before she got him back up.

She knew she needed to do something, and the shore was out of reach for her now, when she remembered reading a novel set in one of the wet-water navy days on Earth. It was crazy, and she didn't know if it would work or not, but she managed to shuck her trousers. Still holding onto Rancine, she tied the ankles together, forming a collar of sorts. Then, ducking her head under the water, she exhaled into the waist. With five breaths, the trousers bobbed on the surface—a float. She slid Rancine's head through the collar, then hung on with her left arm while keeping the waist pinched closed with her right hand.

Gracie had to refill the trousers every five minutes, ducking down and blowing up into them, but without them, she knew they would both be at the bottom of the ocean by now. But once again, to what end? She was losing it, and hallucinations were kicking in. When the whale surfaced beside them, she just stared at it. Would they even bring whales to a planet with native life forms? It didn't make sense.

And this whale even talked. It said, "If you are able, please board."

She laughed. As if.

Then her mind cleared. It wasn't a whale. Against all odds, it was their submersible. Theirs or someone else's. It didn't matter to Gracie. With her last ounce of energy, she swam to the side where a cutout allowed her to get onto it. Sensing her weight, the top hatch opened, and the automated voice asked her to board.

But how? She had no strength left. She thought she could make it, but Rancine?

She took trousers/float off him and let them go. If she dropped him now, she didn't think she could get him.

"So, don't drop him."

She turned him around, and with her butt on the submersible's hull, and her arms under his and across his chest, she heaved. They didn't move. She tried again. The same result.

Gracie started to cry, and that made her angry. She never cried. Not since she was a child. With one surge of anger-fueled strength, she pushed back far enough to reach the hatch and tumbled in, pulling Rancine with her.

"Oh, my God," she said, not believing it as she tried to untangle the two of them as the hatch closed.

Within moments, the sub was underwater, and the rocking stopped. She lunged for the medkit, strapped the cuff on Rancine's arm, and turned it on. The standard military medkits couldn't overcome the damage to her A-gunner, but it might just keep him alive until he could get to a Class A treatment center.

She waited until all the lights turned green before she could sit back. She'd done all she could. And then it all hit. Everything they'd been through. She started shaking and couldn't stop.

"Come on, Gracie. You're the big, tough Marine. Be strong."

She jumped when the speaker turned on. "Staff Sergeant Medicine Crow, is that you?" the lieutenant said.

"Yes, ma'am," she croaked out, her throat raw from seawater.

"Thank God! We've been searching for you all since last night. We've had planes searching the area."

"How did you find us, ma'am?"

"We got your message about the change in location, but when you weren't there, the Navy started doing tide and current calculations. Then they spotted you from orbit, and your submersible was the closest to you.

"I got the readings that the hatch opened and that the medkit was activated. Are both of you OK?"

"Lance Corporal Rancine is in bad shape. He needs immediate care. You need to get him now."

"Hang on. We've got the mother sub on its way, about thirty minutes ETA. They've got a doc aboard, but let me see what else is available. Give me a few minutes. I'm so glad you made it."

"Me, too, ma'am. Me, too."

The lieutenant closed the connection, and Gracie leaned back, letting all the stress of the last fifteen hours—was it only fifteen hours?—finally start to fade.

She looked at Rancine. He was a mess—filthy and sunburned, but the medkit was still green. It might be her imagination, but there might be a little more color to his skin.

"You hear that? They're coming to get us. So, don't you die on me now, or so help me, I'll . . ."

She stopped when he opened one eye and looked at her.

“You’re awake?”

“Looks like it,” he said, his words almost too soft to hear.

“I . . . I . . .” She leaned forward in the tiny compartment and hugged him, pulling him in tight. Again, tears started to form. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“You called me Guppy.”

“What?” she asked, pulling back to look into his face.

“You called me Guppy. Back there on the beach. I heard you. I just couldn’t answer.”

“I guess I did. What does that . . . I’m confused.”

“You told Teren to call you Gracie. Then you called me Guppy. So, now that we’ve been through this, and you just hugged me, I was wondering . . .”

Gracie leaned back her head and laughed. Not the cute little laugh of a schoolgirl, not the sophisticated laugh of a Hollybolly actor, but a full, braying laugh that filled the submersible.

She knew he was going to make it.

“Yes, Guppy! You can call me Gracie!”