



GRIMDARK FUTURE

HOMECOMING

ONE
PAGE
RULES

SHORT STORY

HOMECOMING BY AUSTIN MCILSLEY

Jake sighed as the breeze shifted, and the shape of the distant smoking town became unmistakable. Most of the taller buildings had been heavily damaged by Dwarven guns, or in some cases HDF bombardment. Oddly though, Jake could still recognise the streets, even if they were now scarred by craters and trenches. He saw the nearly untouched transmission tower used for off-world communications that he and his friends used to ride dirtbikes around after classes.

He looked up and saw the broad, squat, and perpetually grubby smile of his friend and squadmate, Kent. He'd always blamed his stature on spending his early years on Hephaestos, some high-gravity mining world. Jake couldn't say whether it had really made a difference to his height, but Kent had certainly come up tough. He made for a steadfast corporal and squad grenadier.

"What's on your mind?" Kent asked.

"I'm just tired," Jake looked away, "We've been marching and weaving around Dwarven ambushes for so long that I think I've forgotten what sitting down feels like."

"Nah," Kent shook his head, "You've been like this since we got the assignment here a week ago. You've been so low that I thought a long walk dodging shells might cheer you up."

"Well, you're always asking me to tell you about where I'm from," Jake pointed his chin toward the distant ruined town. "This is your chance to see it for yourself. Welcome to New Elysia; I joined the HDF to get out of here, but now I'm back."

Kent whistled, nodding. "Well, I suppose I'm lucky no one would ever care enough to invade Hephaestos. If Command ever tried to reassign us there, they'd have to sedate me before I'd step foot on the shuttle!"

A chuckle broke out in the squad at those words. Captain Lywood's expression was stone-faced, but she looked over the squad.

"It's been a long march to get here and we're making good time," she said with a sigh, "We can take fifteen. Provided no one else makes a joke about mutiny."

The squad, even Sergeant Paz, struggled to conceal their smiles.

"Y'know, would it kill them to take us somewhere nice, just once?" Rey piped up, "I'm not sure whether this place had anywhere worth visiting before the Dwarves got to it, let alone now."

Kent bristled, and before Jake could stop him, he blurted out, "Hey, you knock it off! This is Jake's homeworld; show some respect."

Paz laughed, but Rey turned to Jake with an apologetic smile. Jake felt his face turning red.

"Sure, don't mind Rey," Paz broke the silence, "My brother's got a big mouth, but we grew up in the jungles of Quito-3," She laughed, "They make the Dwarves here look like kittens; I've seen meaner creatures on my way to get breakfast beneath the iso-mangrove canopies."

"Actually... Jake, aside from the Dwarves, is there anything we need to be careful of down here?" Kent asked uncomfortably, "Hephaestos hasn't got anything bigger than lab rats. We had to get all our meat shipped frozen."

Jake shook his head. "Nah, you might see a feral boar or two but unless you have something particularly tasty on you, they should leave you alone. With our ration packs, we're perfectly safe."

"You know," Kent said with a sigh, "I'd hoped a *farming* world of all places would at least have better food."

Another round of laughter bounced across the group, except for Jake who looked over his former home. The fields were ash and craters; what was there left worth fighting for if the harvest was gone? He'd always been sick of how all encompassing the harvest and export of grain were in every corner of his life on New Elysia; work, meals, holidays, and even education, all bent themselves to the production of grains for "less fortunate worlds," as his parents had always put it.

Captain Lywood's voice interrupted his thoughts. This time her voice was stern enough that even the seemingly-perpetually slouching Rey snapped to attention.

"We've only got a limited time to make it to our defensive lines in the town before the Dwarf Guilds resume their attack under cover of night." The Captain looked over the group, "So, if you're just going to spend your time complaining, you can do it on the march."

The squad looked back; they were promised fifteen minutes of rest but it had barely been three and they were still a decent distance ahead of the APCs carrying supplies. Still, Lywood had already begun to march ahead and with visible reluctance, Sergeant Paz gestured to the rest of them to follow.

Kent leaned in towards Paz, speaking in what he considered to be a whisper. "What feral volerat crawled into the Captain's trousers and died?"

Jake grabbed his friend's shoulder, signalling him to stop though Rey was already laughing out loud again.

Captain Lywood, if she heard, did not dignify it with a response, but continued ahead.

Paz leaned back, "Look, it's the Captain's first assignment, and I think the situation here is more dangerous than command expected. Let's not make it worse."

Rey pouted and Kent frowned, but silence won out and the squad continued in silence. As they caught up to Lywood, it was clear from her expression that she was a little more at ease than before.

Their path wound around more than Jake remembered, as they weaved to avoid craters and the burnt-out wrecks of trucks and farming equipment. Yet as they arrived at the last valley before the road crested into the town proper, he noticed the shapes of the burned-out vehicles had changed abruptly.

No longer were they just destroyed trucks and harvesters, now he could make out the distinct forms of HDF APCs and Battle Tanks, left as hollowed out husks by weaponsfire and artillery. His home was a battlefield.

"Hey, Jake," Rey said, tugging softly on his shoulder. "Are those good to eat?"

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He pointed to a pomegranate orchard where a few of the trees had miraculously survived the shelling. The heavy red-shelled fruit hung low. Jake looked over, caught off guard as he realised his companion had never seen the fruit before.

"I guess, so..." Jake said, "You've never seen pomegranates?"

"Don't grow 'em on back home on Quito-3," Rey replied with a smirk, "Cover me, and I'll bring you one."

Before Jake could reply, Rey had already broken off from the column. He hurried towards the trees, hoping to grab an armful of the fruits before Lywood noticed that they were gone.

Jake looked forward, Lywood's eyes were fixed on the town, but as he turned back to Rey, the hairs on his neck rose. Squinting, he scanned their surroundings as Rey reached for one of the fruits.

Then, among the craters in the field, he saw a glimmer of movement. Jake raised his rifle, but it was already too late.

A shot rang out, high and sharp.

Jake squeezed the trigger on his rifle, trying to lay down fire, but his eyes turned to Rey. He watched as the freshly plucked fruit fell from Rey's lifeless fingers as his squadmate fell into the field.

The mound of burnt brush the sniper had fired from erupted in a barrage of shots. More shots rang out from the other side of the road: they had been surrounded, ambushed.

Around him the squad broke into action; they had been trained for this. Kent followed Jake's lead, laying down grenades in the direction of the sniper. The rest of the squad split up, moving along flanks as they managed to push back the Dwarves from cover.

Even Paz remembered her training, moving along with the squad and laying down fire.

Soon the Dwarves' guns fell silent; most had managed to retreat under cover as rapidly as they came. The rhythmic sound of weapons fire and explosions was reduced to silence, broken only by the rumble of thunder and the patter of rain turning ashen dust to slick mud.

As soon as the firing stopped, Paz hurried to her fallen brother's side. She searched for any trace of life, but there was none. Beside Jake, Kent pulled off his helmet and bowed his head, murmuring a quick prayer to the God-Queen.

Leaving his head uncovered, given the recent ambush, was a foolish move. Yet, when Lywood looked at him, she only bowed her own head and said nothing. Still, Jake elbowed Kent, who quickly wrapped up and donned his helmet once more.

"An ambush. They know we're coming.," Lywood's voice was doleful as she looked over the field, "I'm sorry, Sergeant. The APCs should be here soon, we can get him into one and give him a proper burial after all of this is behind us. Paz, if you need to, you can stay behind."

Paz shook her head, "There will be time to mourn after the battle."

"Understood," Lywood said, though there was some doubt in her voice, "The rain's already easing up, but the mud isn't going to slow down the Dwarves. We still got a town to save."

"Easing up?" Kent raised an eyebrow, "Captain, I hear thunder."

Jake looked down; the puddles lay still, but thunder still rumbled overhead. Jake's eyes widened as he realized:

"Thunderer Mortars incoming!"

The rumbling crescendoed into the unmistakable staccato of distant mortar fire. Jake noticed again the burnt-out shells of the tanks and troop carriers. "Off the road! Everyone off the road!"

Lywood spun around, already hurrying towards the Field Radio. Jake and the squad hurried for cover, leaping down to the muddy fields on either side of the road. He looked back to see the entire column behind him doing the same, as if cut by an invisible knife: even vehicles were driving head-on into muck.

Though it was barely a few minutes, it felt like an eternity of hiding.

Eventually the mortars subsided. Immediately, Lywood began barking into the radio, demanding casualty reports as squads tried to regroup. She turned towards Paz, waiting for the same.

Carefully, Jake got up and looked around at the squad. The worst of the artillery had been aimed a bit behind them, but it seemed to have largely hit the gap between them and the main column. Everyone in the squad, at least, was unscathed.

"Good work, Private," Captain Lywood gave a nod of acknowledgement to Jake before turning to the rest, "It seems that we got off lightly. Maybe a dozen injuries, a couple dead, but the barrage missed the main column."

Kent clapped Jake on the back but Jake could only frown. Paz's expression beside him was no happier as she finished placing Rey in a makeshift stretcher.

"They did manage to damage some of the APCs with carrying supplies," Lywood continued, "I've just given the order to abandon them; we have to get moving before they fire another round."

"You go ahead," Paz said, "I'm going to stay behind long enough to get Rey on an APC, then march double time to catch up. I owe him that much."

Wordlessly, Lywood nodded and the squad set out again. By the time that Paz caught up, they had come to the outskirts of the town. There were small patches that Jake could recognise, remnants of buildings still untouched by the horrors of the war. Then, just past the next street, an entire neighbourhood might be levelled to little more than rubble and rebar.

As they turned off of the main street towards an old community centre and fairground, Jake noticed the shape of one of the buildings on the corner seemed oddly familiar.

This building was black with soot, everything flammable within clearly having burned in the aftermath of a blaze, but the stonework and curves that had not been destroyed by fire kept seeming more and more familiar the more he looked at it. Peering up, Jake could see one corner of the building had not been as thoroughly incinerated as the rest and he could make out the letters "DUN-" on the sign before the rest had been melted away.

Still, it was enough for him to recognize it.

HOME COMING BY AUSTIN MCILSLEY

"Dunstan's Generators," he murmured.

"I know that voice" a voice came from behind him, "You've bought from me before, or your parents did..."

Jake turned, his rifle raised instinctively. He saw an older man with a week's-old scraggly beard; presumably he'd had a hard time finding razors since the siege. This area was filled with makeshift tents and piles of provisions, evidently one of countless gathering points for those whose homes had been too devastated to continue living in.

"Dunstan?" Jake shook his head.

The man nodded, tapping his chin for a moment.

"You're the Crushers' boy, right?" He said after a minute, "...Jake, wasn't it? Damn it, I'm sorry... I'd have known you right away if you weren't wearing that visor, though after all these years, I figured you weren't coming back."

Lywood stepped forward, placing himself in front of Jake, "I'm afraid we're carrying out an urgent mission, Mr... Dunstan. There will be time to reminisce later."

"C'mon Lywood, we're supposed to be here to help!" Kent interjected, "At least ask them what they need!"

Lywood scowled, but Dunstan stepped forward, "Look, I appreciate you're carrying out important duties, but everyone here is just trying to get out of the town without getting caught in the crossfire. We're loyal citizens of the GHA, aren't we owed something?"

"Everyone?" Jake's voice escaped him.

"In the community centre. There's a few dozen of us who have been getting by in tents," Dunstan said, "You'll see some familiar faces there, if you can recognise us under all the scruff. As long as we stay put, both sides have been content to leave us alone for now... but it's an unspoken understanding at best. No one knows how long it'll last."

"You know Captain," Paz said, "It couldn't hurt to at least hear them out. When I left the APCs, they were still trying to get through the mud and newly formed craters ahead of them."

"The community centre isn't far from here," Jake said, "I suppose it couldn't hurt to assess the situation, maybe gain some intel?"

Kent nudged him gently, "If I didn't know better, Jake, I'd think you were getting sentimental."

Lywood looked behind her; she could see the outskirts of the town but no sign of the column behind them. They had time.

With a nod, she signaled her consent and followed Dunstan to the community centre. There was a collection of maybe thirty tents scattered over the now open building. In the centre, were pallets stacked with crates, labeled with various food; mostly perishables.

"This is what they were able to take in from the fields before the Dwarves reached us," Dunstan said, "It'll keep us very well fed until it starts to rot."

"Keep you fed?" Kent whistled as he looked over it, "It'd be enough to keep our Company fed for a month, easy."

"The forces holed up in the town centre don't know about it. And we couldn't get it to them if we tried," Dunstan said before looking to Lywood, "We'll just need enough to keep us fed until we reach a space port."

"Are you attempting to bribe an officer of the HDF?" Lywood raised an eyebrow, "With fruit and vegetables?"

Jake felt a surge of embarrassment at the Captain's tone, as he jolted up to defend them, but Lywood spoke before he could.

"It won't be necessary. We're the Human Defence Force. What kind of force would we be if we left you defenseless?"

A narrow grin cracked across the Captain's face. The squad was silent; Jake's eyes went to Paz, who was similarly caught off guard.

"If this is your idea of a joke," Kent said, "I'm starting to think I might just take my chances with the Elves."

Lywood laughed and soon, the entire squad was laughing. With spirits high, some of the refugees began bringing food out, sharing it with the soldiers.

Jake, though, turned to the Captain.

"Why the change of heart, ma'am?" He asked.

Lywood paused, and let out a long sigh.

"It reminds me of my home on Tyre-IV," She said at last, "The world is gone now, but I've worked hard ever since I left for the chance to prove myself. I don't think I could follow someone who could look at these people in need and walk away."

As they spoke, Dunstan shoved a bowl into their hands; a mix of local vegetables and a bit of pork floating in boiled water with just some simple seasonings. Still, to soldiers who had been surviving on dried rations, it was a feast.

The refugees around them seemed to be enjoying it as well; it was a very simple dish by New Elysia standards, but Jake's mother used to say that hunger made for the best spice. There were familiar faces and some new; children and arrivals from after he had left, gathered around the warmth of the cooking fire.

Jake considered introducing himself, asking about his family and others, but he wasn't ready for that yet. Dunstan seemed to notice and made sure that he was given space.

"About time we ate something proper," Kent smiled from ear to ear as he began to pour it directly into his mouth.

To the squad's surprise, Lywood nodded. "Fresh food is good for the body and morale. Eat well all of you, we've got a hard fight ahead of us."

"Huh, and here I was starting to think you preferred the old dried up foodsticks they give us..." Kent said. Jake elbowed his friend; the Captain was in a good mood and he wasn't keen to ruin it.

"So, private," Lywood turned to him, "How do you feel about coming back home, now?"

Jake frowned and looked at Dunstan and Kent, but neither of them seemed to know what to say.

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"I don't know," Jake said, "I left because the galaxy, even just the Human Cluster, seemed like it was far too big and strange a place to just spend my life on a farm where nothing happened. It felt like New Elysia would always be there, even if I didn't think I'd ever want to..."

Then there was the familiar whistle of Thunderer's Mortars. Jake dove away from the cookfire, dragging Kent behind a wall with a fixed arm as a round hit the cauldron. There was a clanging sloshing sound followed by a bellow of pain, as the scalding soup splashed across Dunstan.

More mortars rained down.

"I guess whatever ceasefire we thought we had is over," Dunstan murmured during a lull between explosions.

"It's our fault," Jake said grimly, "They must know we're here, and it's made you all targets."

He snatched his rifle and started to move. Maybe New Elysia hadn't been the best home, or the most interesting one, but it was his. He heard Lywood shouting orders behind him, but the words were dulled out by the explosions and ringing in his ears.

He moved in the direction of the shells, charging blindly through the ruins of his old town. He could feel tears streaking down his cheeks. He was going to fight back.

In the distance, he saw Dwarves approaching. He fired his rifle half-blindly in their direction. He saw one fall, but another was steadying her shot. He tried to readjust but was nearly knocked off of his feet by the impact of an explosion.

He tumbled forward, rolling down into a ditch, before catching himself and moving forward. He continued firing as he walked, his movement surprising the Dwarves, who suddenly found themselves on the defensive.

Then, beside him, he heard a clicking noise. Kent stepped forward, reloading his grenade launcher as he moved to find cover behind some scattered rubble.

"Hey," He shouted between rounds, "I'm supposed to be the damned hothead here!"

In the corner of his eye, he saw Kent running in behind him, grenade launcher in tow. The fire had kept the Dwarves suppressed for a while, but they were beginning to regroup. A volley of fire pelted down on them like rain. Kent dived for cover, but Jake was exposed. A searing pain shot through his shoulder as a shot tore through his flesh, but he kept firing. Then, a second bullet tore through his thigh, but Jake fought to stay up as he fired. Then, a round of explosions. Jake looked at Kent, but his friend was still in cover. Then he heard it; the armour had arrived.

Suddenly outgunned, the Dwarves scattered.

As the gunfire receded, the tanks drove on, pressing the attack. But tired and bleeding, Jake collapsed onto the ground. He looked to see an old monument, a memorial left by the first generation of the town's settlers, which had been completely toppled by mortar fire. There was something beneath; an ancient inscription, older than anything Human in the Sirius sector.

It was marked with an inscription, but the words were not in any language Jake knew.

The crunch of gravel stirred him from his thoughts.

Kent stepped closer to examine him, "Jake, you're bleeding."

"He'll be okay, Corporal," Lywood's stern voice echoed out. "We'll have a medic look it over, but it doesn't look like you got hit anywhere vital."

Jake tried to pick himself up but he winced in pain. Even if it wasn't fatal, it certainly hurt.

"That was reckless, Private Crusher," Lywood chided but there was a gentleness to her voice, "You're lucky that I was able to get the column here in time. We should have enough to drive the Dwarves back, and even a few spare APCs..."

"Sir?" Kent raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"Well," Lywood explained, "Thanks in part to the commotion which Private Crusher caused here, I suspect the Dwarves will be too busy to track down a few APCs filled with refugees diverted back to our lines while the supplies which Mr. Dunstan generously offered to donate will be greatly appreciated by the HDF."

Jake smiled as he tilted back his head, his eyes moving back to gaze at the monument.

Lywood looked, her eyebrow raised and read it. She muttered a deep, slow phrase that sounded like a half-remembered lullaby or song. Then she translated it.

"Farewell to our beloved home; though it pains us to leave you, we shall carry you with us until we return."

Jake's eyes widened.

The Dwarves hadn't been invading but returning.

"I hope you have enjoyed this opportunity to see your old town," Lywood said looking forward, "It seems the Dwarves are willing to die for the chance to do the same. Unfortunately, I think you'll be spending some time back behind the lines while you recover... perhaps Mr. Dunstan knows a good doctor?"

Jake laughed softly, even though it hurt, while the medics approached to load him onto a stretcher. Just as they lifted him up and Lywood took her leave, Kent hurried forward and slipped something metal into his hand.

Jake blinked slowly before looking at what he'd been given - a piece of the human memorial that had been destroyed. The fragment he held read "New Elysia," the rest of the iron plaque broken off or melted in the firefight.

Kent leaned over, giving him a hug as he said, "Now when you leave here, you'll still have a piece of home with you."