

THE IRIDIUM INCIDENT

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It was hot and humid. Rivers of sweat ran off Sergeant Bill Jansen's brow as he looked over the top of the knoll toward the small village. The trail had vanished two clicks back, but the last blood track they had seen indicated their prey heading in this direction. He was sure they had killed, or at least put out of action, half of the rebels they were pursuing. The bloodstained tracks indicated a group of ten men, carrying heavy loads. Down from the twenty they had first engaged. Thinking of the good soldiers lost in the fighting, he was not sure it was worth pursuing the rebels further.

This was their turf. The rebels had lived their whole lives in this jungle. Out of the twenty-six soldiers Lieutenant Alvarez had led into this jungle, fifteen had died. For what? Bill did not even remember what had started the fighting anymore. The Third World War had ended years ago and most countries had signed peace agreements. Montague was some diplomat to have pulled that off. At least that is what the history books would say—Bill had never met the man but he was still in the government and making changes that would continue to revolutionize things for the better. Paraguay was the last country still causing a problem. A voice to the left broke his reverie.

“Do you think they're in the village, sir?”

“I don't know, Private,” Bill wiped the sweat from his eyes.

“I hope it's over soon,” Tom whined. “I don't know how much more I can take. We have not had any rest for weeks. This friggin' jungle! If it is not raining, you are baking alive. And the bugs...”

Bill ignored the whining from Private Norby. The man had a right to vent. All of them had lost friends in the last engagement. None of the soldiers liked this situation. They were way past due for leave and the men were strung tight as guitar strings. They would prefer to be sitting around a Maui pool instead of rotting in the jungles of Paraguay, and he wanted to be with them. However, they had to obey the Lieutenant's orders. Since they had not heard from base camp in weeks, Lieutenant Alvarez was the only command left. Alvarez had said the last communication was an order for them to destroy this pocket of resistance. Whatever the cost. Brass had said if they destroyed this band of rebels, a cease-fire might be negotiated and Paraguay would join the United Planet Federation. They could see home again. If they survived.

Sighing in frustration, he tried to tune out Norby and gave a curt nod. The ocular-enhancers attached to his helmet snapped in place over his eyes and he surveyed the village. The oculars automatically adjusted for focus and depth of vision as he moved his head left to right. Still no sign of movement. The comm unit implanted behind his left ear came to life.

“Sergeant Jansen!”

“Receiving.” Norby stopped talking and looked at him quizzically. Until he saw the angle of Bill’s head and the tendons stretched taut in his neck. Then he realized his Sergeant had activated his comm-link and was receiving and transmitting on the officer’s frequency. Norby slipped backwards down the hill, joining the other three soldiers waiting for orders.

“Any sign of them?” Lieutenant Alvarez sounded stressed.

“No, Sir.”

“Our thermal ground scan is detecting movement down there. What does yours show?”

Bill was reluctant to answer. Norby had tripped and broken their scanner earlier and it was beyond repair. Bill hated taking the wrap for another person’s screw up, but it went with the territory. Since his field promotion to Sergeant last week he was learning a lot of things about command he didn’t like.

“Scanner’s out of commission, Lieu... I’m using oculars.”

“What the hell happened to your scanner?”

Bill flinched at the tone of Alvarez’s voice. The Lieutenant had been acting strange the last couple of weeks and it did not take much to set him off. He was glad they had split into two groups. Lieutenant Alvarez would have to wait to chew him out, and maybe he would calm down and forget about it. Maybe.

“I don’t know, Sir. Haven’t had time to run a diagnostic on it.”

“Damn! Then keep your eyes open. Alvarez out.”

“Yes, Sir,” Bill spoke to dead air and wondered again why anyone in the military would seek noncom status. It was often more trouble than it was worth.

Bill increased the sensitivity of his oculars. He had not seen any movement. To relieve his tension, Bill initiated the self-check on his AS-100, watching the readout from the corner of his eye. All systems were green but the plasma launcher. Recharging it was an automatic response that did not require his full attention. If necessary, he could do it with his eyes closed. His weapon had become an extension of himself—a dangerous one. The AS-100 was a laser-guided, fully automatic weapon using aluminum pellets for ammunition. The pellets had a core of plutonium that caused an explosion on impact. Gas-fired, it was capable of firing 60 rounds a minute. Any hit was a death sentence. If it did not blow you to hell immediately, you died from shock or radiation poisoning— either way you were dead. In addition, if that was not enough to kill you, the attached plasma launcher could finish the job. A sudden movement and his attention riveted on one of the huts. It had been so quick that he could not be sure what he saw. The ghost-image retained by his retinas made him think it had been a civilian, maybe a young woman.

His mind was still processing what he had seen when a single shot rang out. Then all hell broke loose. He saw Alvarez and the six men with him running toward the village, firing their weapons at the hut. The destruction was awesome.

There had been no warning. One minute there was no sound but the jungle life. Then total chaos. Bill had no idea what Alvarez was doing, but he knew what was expected of him. Yelling for Norby and the other three soldiers to follow, Bill ran toward the village. Saving his breath for

the sprint, Bill used hand signals to tell his men to ready their weapons but hold their fire. He wanted to know what was going on before joining the firefight. So far, he had not seen any return fire.

The gunfire stopped as Alvarez and his men reached the hut. Bill slowed down when he was within 25 meters and looked around for any sign of the rebels. He saw Alvarez go into what was left of the hut, then come back out and say something to Private Reid. As Bill cautiously worked his way closer, he saw Reid shake his head negatively. Alvarez began yelling at the soldier, but Bill could not make out what he was shouting. Reid, with a look of disgust on his face, nodded his head once, switched his weapon from rifle to...

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