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USSF-AAR-2098-PT-001 | SERIES: LUPUS STELLA | PREQUEL

THE LAST GRENADE

AN AFTER ACTION REPORT

A LUPUS STELLA PREQUEL

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OPERATIONAL AFTER ACTION REPORT

Promethei Terra, Mars • 2098 • Status: ARCHIVED

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MISSION BRIEF

REF: USSF-AAR-2098-001 // PROMETHEI TERRA ENGAGEMENT

OPERATION	Ridgeline Defense, Promethei Terra
DATE	2098, Southern Polar Highlands, Mars
UNIT	Delta-7 Squad - 7 personnel
COMMANDING	CPT Theo Daniel
OBJECTIVE	Hold ridgeline until orbital support arrives
OPPOSITION	Orion Consortium - mercenary armor, comet insignia
OUTCOME	[REDACTED - SEE ATTACHED NARRATIVE]
CASUALTIES	1 KIA (LT Jake Ramsey), 1 WIA (CPT Daniel - left arm)

NOTE: This after action report was filed by CPT Daniel from the medical shuttle during emergency evacuation. Narrative account transcribed from helmet recorder data and direct testimony. All personnel identifiers verified against USSF service records.

ARCHIVAL STATUS: SEALED - DELTA-7 MEMORIAL COLLECTION

AUTH: COL. DANIEL, T.

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NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

REF: USSF-AAR-2098-002 // TRANSCRIBED FROM HELMET RECORDER DATA

The coffee was terrible and Jake said so.

He said it the way he said everything. With that grin. That voice carrying laughter inside it like a frequency you could not tune out. He held the tin cup in both hands and looked at the brown liquid and then at Theo and then back at the liquid as if giving it one last chance to explain itself.

Brother this is not coffee. This is what coffee leaves behind when it dies.

Theo drank his. It was hot. That was all he needed it to be. They sat in the pressurized tent at the forward staging area and the tent walls flexed in the thin Martian wind and the portable heater hummed between them and the light inside was amber and close and the shadows it threw were the kind that softened everything. Made it warmer than it was. Outside the tent the southern polar highlands of Promethei Terra stretched to every horizon. Ice and stone and the long dark nothing of a world that had never asked for visitors and would not mourn them when they left.

Seven of us go out tomorrow, Theo said. Seven come back.

Jake looked at him. His eyes steady. Brown and warm in that amber light. He had the kind of face that made you believe him even when he was wrong. Even when the numbers said otherwise. Even when every tactical projection on Theo's visor showed red.

Every last one of us, Jake said.

Private Reyes sat cross-legged in the corner cleaning her sidearm. Methodical. Her hands small and precise and quick. She did not look up. Corporal Patel was beside her running a patch kit over a breach in his suit's knee joint. The sealant hissed as it cured. Beyond them three others. Deng with his shaved head and the scar that ran from his ear to his collar. Voronova who never spoke unless the silence needed breaking and it never did. And Malik. Youngest of them. Nineteen. Eyes too old for his face. A rosary threaded through his suit's left chest loop where it would press against his heart when the suit sealed.

Theo was twenty-two. A captain. The rank sat on his shoulders like a coat that did not quite fit. He had earned it in the orbital engagements above Luna six months prior and they had pinned it on him in a ceremony he barely remembered because the ceremony was not the thing. The thing was the men and women who looked at you afterward and trusted you with the rest of their lives. A finite and irreplaceable currency that no rank could manufacture and no order could compel.

He looked at Jake across the amber light. Jake who was a sergeant because he had refused promotion twice. Because leading from the front meant nothing to him if he could not be beside the people he was leading. His second-in-command. His brother in all the ways that mattered and none of the ways that biology required.

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When we get home, Jake said. I'm opening a bar.

Theo raised his cup.

I'm serious. Little place in Galveston. Right on the Seawall. Neon sign. Cold beer. One of those jukeboxes that only plays songs older than the building. Call it Ramsey's. Or maybe Jake's. Nah. Jake's sounds like a place that sells bait.

Ramsey's then.

Ramsey's. Jake nodded. He looked at the cup again and took another drink and winced. You. What about you.

Theo thought about it. He thought about Texas. The land south of San Antonio where the hills gave way to brushland and the light in the evenings turned everything the color of copper. He thought about a house with a porch and cattle in the pasture and the kind of silence that heals instead of haunts.

A ranch, he said.

Jake grinned. You. A rancher.

Why not.

Because you'd have to talk to cows Theo. And cows don't file situation reports.

Reyes laughed from the corner. A small sharp sound. Quick as a cough. She went back to her sidearm.

Theo smiled. He did not smile often. When he did it changed the geometry of his face in ways that surprised people who thought they knew him. Jake saw it and his grin widened and for a moment the tent was not a tent on Mars. It was any room anywhere that two friends had ever sat in and talked about the lives they would build when the dying was done.

Malik spoke from behind his visor diagnostics. You really think we're getting home Sarge.

Jake did not hesitate. Brother I know we are. And when we do you're coming to Ramsey's and I'm buying the first round.

The silence after that was not empty. It was the kind of silence that sits between people who are willing to believe a thing because the alternative is not survivable.

Outside the tent the Martian wind scraped frost across the regolith and the stars turned slow and cold above a world that owed them nothing.

They moved before dawn. If you could call it dawn. The sun on Mars was a pale diminished thing. A coin held at arm's length. It rose over the eastern ridge and threw long shadows across the ice plains and the shadows were violet and blue and the color of bruises healing.

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Delta-7 advanced in staggered formation along the ridgeline. Seven soldiers breathing recycled air that tasted of copper and ozone and the faint chemical bite of suit filtration working at the edge of its tolerance. Their boots crunched brittle regolith. The low gravity made every step a negotiation between motion and the planet's indifferent hold. Each footfall a small act of faith that the ground would catch you. That the universe was still playing by rules you understood.

Theo's visor overlay painted the terrain in thermal gradients. Blue for cold which was everything. Orange for heat which was enemy positions and suit exhaust and the distant throbbing warmth of the command node half a kilometer south. A geodesic dome bristling with antennae against the pale sky. The nerve center of the Orion Consortium's grip on Prometheus's water-ice deposits. Their mission was to gut it. To sever the signal. To make the Consortium blind and mute on the southern pole.

Five hundred meters of open ground between the ridgeline and the dome. Five hundred meters of frost and exposed rock and no cover worth the name.

The Orion mercenaries held the middle ground. Their positions dug in along a network of shallow craters and ice berms. Red markers on Theo's visor. Twenty. Twenty-two. More appearing as the overlay refreshed. The comet insignia on their chestplates like a brand burned into metal. Reactive shielding that shimmered under pulse fire. Professional soldiers paid by the hour to kill and they were good at the math.

Orbital support was supposed to break them open. A kinetic strike from the USS Tarkington in polar orbit. Thirty seconds of tungsten rain that would crack the Consortium's line like an egg and give Delta-7 its corridor. That was the plan.

Comms to the Tarkington are down, Voronova said. She was calm the way ice is calm. Her voice flat and undisturbed. Interference across all bands. Solar event or jamming. Cannot distinguish.

Theo heard the words. He processed them the way he processed all information that changed the shape of the world he was operating in. Without expression. Without pause. He filed it. Orbital support was not coming. The plan was dead. The mission was not.

Options, Jake said. He was crouched beside Theo behind the ridgeline and his pulse rifle was charged and his eyes were scanning the terrain ahead. Reading it the way a man reads weather. By instinct. By the grammar of threat and cover that combat writes into the nervous system and never erases.

Theo ran the overlay a second time. The gullies on the left flank offered concealment for a flanking team. Narrow and shadowed and treacherous with ice. The eastern edge of the crater was exposed but higher. Elevation meant angle. Angle meant fire superiority for the cost of vulnerability.

We split, Theo said. Alpha team through the gullies. Bravo along the eastern rim. Converge on the dome. Keep their heads on a swivel.

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Jake nodded. His face behind the visor was composed and sure. The grin was gone now. In its place was the other Jake. The one who emerged when the talking stopped and the killing started. Steady and precise and utterly without hesitation.

Alpha team. Jake. Deng. Voronova.

Bravo with me. Reyes. Patel. Malik.

Jake looked at Theo. Held the look for a beat longer than tactics required. Something in it. Something that lived below language and rank and the clean geometry of a mission plan.

See you at the dome brother, Jake said.

See you at the dome.

The first plasma bolt hit forty meters in front of Bravo's position and vaporized a column of frost into nothing. The bolt was silent in the vacuum. Loud inside the helmet where the suit translated each concussion into a tremor Theo felt in his teeth and his spine and the base of his skull.

He dropped behind a boulder. Reyes and Patel flanked right. Malik went prone in a shallow depression and sighted down his rifle and began to fire. Precise. Disciplined. Each shot aimed at joint seams and visor plates. The boy was nineteen and fought like he was fifty.

Theo fired armor-piercing and watched a mercenary's knee joint fail. The man folded in the weak gravity like a marionette whose strings had been cut one by one. Slowly. Deliberately. A second round punched through a visor. The figure crumpled in silence and lay still upon the ice as though it had always been there.

Jake. Status.

Heavy fire. Drones on us. Hunter-killers sweeping the gullies. We're pinned.

The drones meant aerial scans. Infrared cutting through the dust haze. Theo cursed and signaled Bravo forward. They bounded in the low gravity with long loping strides that made them fast and ungovernable and if you misjudged a step the drift would carry you into a firing lane and the planet would not catch you and the enemy would not miss.

A plasma bolt scorched the rock where Theo had crouched a second before. Frost sublimated into mist that hung in the thin air and then was nothing. He rolled and fired. Two more red markers went still on his overlay.

But more were coming. Reinforcements from the dome. Armored infantry in heavy exosuits that absorbed pulse fire like stone absorbs rain. Their weapons heavier. The bolts brighter. The intervals shorter.

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Malik took a round to his shoulder plate. The reactive shielding absorbed most of it but the impact spun him and he went down on one knee and his vitals spiked on Theo's visor. He got back up. The rosary pressed against his heart beneath the suit.

Captain, Patel called. More contacts east. Flanking us.

Theo saw them. Six. Eight. Coming fast along the crater rim he had chosen for its elevation advantage. The advantage was now a trap. They were pinched between the mercenaries ahead and the new contacts on their right and the math was getting worse by the second and the math had not been good to start.

Alpha team. Jake. I need you to push. Now. Draw their fire west.

Already moving brother.

And Jake was. Theo could see the blue dots on his overlay. Three soldiers bursting from the gullies and laying down suppressive fire that lit the landscape in violet strobes. Deng's heavy rifle booming. Voronova's precise single shots. Jake running point. Always running point. Moving through the thin air in bounding leaps that defied the gravity and the enemy and the simple arithmetic of survival.

The Consortium's line fractured. For a moment. A beautiful brutal moment when the two axes of Delta-7's assault converged and the mercenaries between them did not know which direction to die in.

Reyes advanced. Fast and low. Her sidearm barking as she moved. A mercenary rose from cover and she put two rounds through his chestplate before he could aim. She was twenty-three and fearless in the way that only the young can be. Fearless because she had not yet learned what fear was trying to protect her from.

Then a bolt caught her.

It came from the eastern flank. A bright streak that crossed Theo's peripheral vision and struck Private Reyes in the right side of her torso. The suit's shielding flared and failed. She spun. She fell. Her vitals screamed on Theo's visor and the sound it made inside his helmet was a thin high tone that he would hear in dreams for the rest of his life.

Reyes is hit, Patel shouted. He was already moving. Already low and fast and dragging himself toward her across open ground with no thought for the fire that chewed the frost around him. He reached her. He grabbed the drag handle on her suit and pulled and his boots fought for purchase on the ice and he hauled her behind a low shelf of carbon dioxide ice that was barely cover but was something.

She was breathing. The suit's auto-sealant had closed the breach. The bolt had penetrated the outer plating and burned through two layers of thermal insulation and stopped at the pressure liner. The suit had held. Barely. Her vitals stabilized from critical to serious and Patel was already patching. His hands bloody inside his gloves. His face behind the visor set in an expression of concentrated fury that was indistinguishable from love.

Theo processed this. Filed it. Moved.

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Jake's voice on the comms. How is she.

Alive. Patel has her.

Good. Good. Listen. We're almost through their line. Deng's clearing a path. Sixty meters to the dome. I can see the antenna array. One more push.

Jake's voice carried something in it. That thing that was not recklessness and not courage and not faith but some alloy of all three forged in a furnace that only war could build. It was the sound of a man who believed in the people around him with a purity that the universe did not deserve and could not reward.

Theo made the call.

All elements push. Converge on the dome. Everything you've got.

They pushed. Delta-7 surged forward across the frost and the firing was continuous now. A wall of violet light. The sound inside the helmets a sustained tremor. The Consortium mercenaries fell back toward the dome in a fighting retreat. Professional to the last. Covering each other. But Delta-7 had momentum and momentum on a battlefield is a living thing. It feeds on itself. It carries you past the point where calculation says stop.

Jake was everywhere. He was patching a breach in Deng's suit with one hand and firing with the other. He was shouting encouragement that was absurd and profane and exactly right. Come on brothers. Come on. They don't get to have this day. This day is ours.

And then it was quiet for one half-second. A pocket of silence in the middle of the noise that felt like the universe holding its breath.

The grenade arced in from the east.

A slow bright thing turning end over end against the black Martian sky. Its proximity fuse glowing the dull red of a dying coal. Theo's visor tracked the trajectory. An arc computed in milliseconds. The landing zone was three meters from where Patel crouched over Reyes behind the ice shelf. Three meters from two people who were alive and who intended to stay that way.

Time did what time does in war. It stretched. It became a substance you could feel on your skin and taste in your mouth. Copper and ozone and the chemical smell of recycled air and beneath it all the animal scent of fear that no suit filtration could scrub.

Grenade.

Reyes's voice. Or Patel's. Or his own. He could not tell. The word existed and the grenade existed and the distance between them was closing and the math was simple and the math was absolute.

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Across the battlefield through a haze of dust and fading plasma light Theo saw Jake break from cover.

He saw it the way you see lightning. Whole and instantaneous and burned into the retina before the mind can intervene. Jake running. That loping lunar stride. His rifle abandoned. His arms pumping. His boots leaving the regolith in a bounding leap that carried him through the thin Martian air like something born to it. Like something that had been waiting its whole life for this particular vector. This particular arc.

His visor was open. Theo could see his face. He could see it across thirty meters of frost and fire and the ruin of a plan that had been dead since the Tarkington went silent. Jake's face. That face. Calm. Resolved. The grin not gone but changed. Transfigured into something that was not a grin at all but a decision. A decision that had already been made. That had perhaps been made the night before over terrible coffee in amber light when he said every last one of us and meant it in a way that Theo did not understand until now.

No.

The word left Theo's mouth and entered the vacuum and died there.

Jake landed on the grenade. His body a shield. His chest pressed to the ice and his arms tucked and his helmet down and the grenade beneath him like a secret he was keeping from the world. A secret that cost everything and protected everyone and was the most selfish and selfless act Theo had ever witnessed because Jake did it not for the mission or the rank or the flag but for the people. For Reyes bleeding on the frost and Patel with blood on his gloves and all the lives that would continue because his would not.

The explosion was silent in the vacuum.

A white flash. A bloom of energy that existed and then did not. The shockwave crossed the intervening ground and hit Theo like a wall of compressed nothing. He was airborne. Spinning. The low gravity held him aloft longer than any planet should. Long enough to see the sky. The black Martian sky with its cold indifferent stars. Long enough to feel the shrapnel enter his left arm below the elbow. A searing heat. A sound inside his body that was not a sound but a tearing. A separation. As if the arm had been a word in a sentence and someone had ripped it out and left the sentence broken and incomplete.

He hit the regolith. Hard. His suit's gyroscopes screamed. The auto-sealant hissed and foamed around the breach and the foam was red. His blood misted inside his helmet and fogged his visor and the world went pink and then dark at the edges and then darker still.

Jake's vitals were a red X on the squad roster.

Theo stared at the X. He stared at it while the darkness crowded in from the periphery of his vision. He stared at it while his arm ended below the elbow in a ragged catastrophe of carbon and kevlar and bone and blood that steamed in the thin air and froze in the cold and the pain was a white noise that filled every frequency his nervous system could receive.

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Someone was firing, Deng, Voronova. The battle continued because battles do not pause for grief. The Consortium line was breaking. The dome's antenna array was burning. Malik was up and advancing. His rosary pressed to his heart. His rifle steady.

The mission was completing itself. The nerve center dying. The objective achieved.

And Jake was a red X.

He lay on the Martian regolith and stared at the black sky.

The stars were the same stars that had been there the night before when they drank terrible coffee and talked about bars and ranches and the lives they would live when the dying was done. The stars had not moved. The stars did not care. They were old light from dead sources and they illuminated nothing and comforted no one and they were beautiful in the way that only things completely indifferent to human suffering can be beautiful.

His arm ended at the elbow.

He knew this the way you know weather or hunger. In the body before the mind. The suit's medical suite had deployed a tourniquet and the auto-sealant had formed a rigid shell around the stump and the painkillers were flooding his system and turning the agony into something distant. Something happening to someone else in a room he could see into but not enter.

Someone was screaming his name.

Captain. Captain Daniel. Theo. Theo.

Patel's voice. Or Malik's. He could not tell. The voices blurred. The comms were static and breathing and the sound of people trying to keep other people alive which is the oldest sound in the world and the most desperate.

He turned his head. The movement cost him something he could not name. Through the cracked and blood-fogged visor he could see the battlefield. The dome burning. Antennae toppled. Mercenary positions abandoned. Bodies on the frost. Some theirs. Some ours. All still. All equal now in the democracy of the dead.

And Jake.

What was left of Jake.

The suit had absorbed most of the blast but most was not enough. Most is never enough when you throw yourself on a grenade. What remained was a shape on the ice that had been a man. That had been the best man Theo had ever known. That had been warmth and laughter and steady hands and the word brother spoken without irony and without condition.

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Theo closed his eyes. The darkness behind his eyelids was no different from the darkness of the Martian sky. Both were vast. Both were empty. Both would be there long after every human being who had ever stood on this frozen ground was forgotten.

He thought about the coffee. The amber light. Jake's voice saying every last one of us.

He had not said every last one of us but me. He had not carved out the exception. He had believed it whole and entire and then he had broken the promise himself because keeping it for everyone else required breaking it for himself and that was the geometry of sacrifice. That was the shape it made when you held it up to the light.

Time passed. He did not know how much.

Hands lifted him. Careful hands. Suit gloves gripping his shoulders and his legs and the stump of his arm wrapped in its rigid shell of sealant and foam. Voices in his helmet. Medevac inbound. Hold on Captain. Hold on.

He did not hold on. He drifted. He floated between the frost and the stars in a space that belonged to neither. The low gravity made the stretcher feel like water. Like lying on a river that flowed upward toward a sky that had no ceiling.

Deng's face appeared above him. The scar from ear to collar. His eyes red. Not from dust. Voronova beside him. Her flat calm voice breaking for the first time in the two years Theo had known her. Breaking on a single word. Jake.

She said it and then she did not say anything else and that was enough.

The medical shuttle was a bright clean violence of white light and sterile surfaces and machines that moved on articulated arms with the practiced urgency of systems designed to keep the dying from completing the verb. They cut his suit away. They exposed the arm. What remained of it. A doctor whose face he would never remember said words he would never fully hear. Traumatic amputation below the left elbow. Shrapnel penetration. Vascular compromise. We're going to put you under Captain.

He nodded. Or he thought he nodded. The painkillers had turned the world to gauze and the gauze was thickening.

Someone pressed something into his right hand.

His good hand. His only hand. The fingers closed around it by reflex. By instinct. By the ancient animal imperative to hold what is given to you when everything else is being taken.

It was cold. Small. Metal. A disc with a raised star on its face.

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Jake's medallion. The one he wore on a chain inside his suit. The one he touched before every mission the way Malik touched his rosary. A talisman. A small private faith that he carried against the dark.

Who had taken it from him. Who had pulled it from the ruin of his suit and cleaned it and pressed it into Theo's hand at the exact moment when Theo's hand needed something to hold. He did not know. He would never know. It did not matter. The medallion was in his palm and it was cold and real and it was the last thing Jake had worn against his chest and now it was the first thing Theo held as they put him under.

The anesthetic took him the way the Martian dark had taken him. In layers. The shuttle ceiling dissolving. The white lights dimming. The voices going distant and then gone. And in the last moment before consciousness left him he felt the medallion. Its weight. Its cold. The shape of the star pressing into his palm like a word spoken in a language older than speech.

He held it and the dark came down and twenty-three years later he was still holding it.

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END OF REPORT

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"The dead do not correct the living."

Scott D. Rodriguez – 2026

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