

Sample of Speed of Regret

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The klaxon of the alarm startled him awake. “Battle stations. This is not a drill! Repeat, this is not a drill!” Arjuna heard the point-defense missiles firing. He jammed one leg into his pants and hopped on one foot scrambling to get in the other. He fumbled with his shoes, grabbed his emergency respirator, and dashed into the hallway. People ran every which way. Arjuna raced to the short-range defense radar station near the shuttle port. He found Miguel already there and asked him, “What’s going on? Where’s Hanako?”

“All hell’s broken loose. The Dog-men are attacking. I hear they’ve wiped out most of our orbital defenses, and there’s more of them on the way. Shit, man, this was supposed to be a quiet sector. Wish I hadn’t thrown away that suicide pill. I’d rather be dead than part of one of those Ngaroc ‘experiments.’ Listen Arjuna, if it looks bad, hit me on the head with a wrench or anything, but don’t let the Dog-men take me alive.”

“Take it easy. We’ll get out of here.”

Hanako arrived and embraced Miguel. “It looks bad. I just came from the comm station. They’re wiping disks and shredding documents.”

The crowd huddled near the shuttle bay, each member silent with his thoughts. Every tick of the clock brought the Ngaroc fleet closer. How much longer would it be? Arjuna tried to control his shaking. He had to piss but didn’t want to leave in case they evacuated. He smelled sweat, his own and others.’ Arjuna wanted to believe this couldn’t be happening, not to him. Surely the invaders will be defeated, or somehow he’ll get out of this. But things looked grim. Would he die? If so, he hoped it wouldn’t hurt. What does it feel like to have a hole burned through your chest?

Arjuna felt the ripping sound of the minigun firing one hundred rounds per second at the approaching invaders. They wouldn’t be using it unless the base’s medium-range defenses had been penetrated. He heard a bang. After that the minigun was silent. One of the marine sergeants ran into the room and bellowed, “They’ve overrun the base. Evacuate to the shuttles now.” Arjuna, Miguel, and Hanako joined the rest of the technicians pushing and shoving down the hallway to the shuttle bay. Miguel and Hanako worked their way ahead of Arjuna. Suddenly a jolt knocked him to the ground. Air hissed out of the enclosure. Arjuna covered his face with the respirator and smelled the sour scent of moisture on rubber. He looked up to see Ngaroc troops in green metal battle suits burst through the gap blasted in the wall firing in every direction. Arjuna heard the slap of their projectiles cutting through the flesh and bone of the frightened technical staff. Bodies fell. Severed limbs flew everywhere. Miguel and Hanako were down. Arjuna stared at his friends’ mangled bodies. Sanchez was dead, a gaping hole torn in his chest. Blood pooled on the floor, soaking Hanako’s pants where her once beautiful calves had been blown off below the knee. White bone stuck out of painful raw red meat. Arjuna froze for what seemed eternity. Could he rescue Hanako before the Ngaroc soldiers reached her? The head of the man next to him burst, splattering him with bone fragments and bits of gray brain tissue. A voice called, “Back the other way down hallway N. Come on, get out of there!” Arjuna felt the shock of something collide with his left shoulder. He turned and ran like he had never run before. Near misses pulverized the walls, showering him with bits of plasteel. He made it to the shuttle with Ngaroc soldiers on his heels. The hatch closed behind him, and the shuttle’s acceleration knocked him to the deck as the pilot tore into orbit, vaporizing Arjuna’s Ngaroc pursuers with

the flames of the shuttle's rocket boosters. Once the shuttle cleared the atmosphere, medics strapped Arjuna into a couch. It wasn't until his pulse slowed that the pain in his shoulder became unbearable.

Blood loss made Arjuna dizzy. He grew sick from the shuttle's evasive maneuvers and vomited. Somehow they docked with one of the few surviving Terran starships and made it out of there.

Of the five thousand men and women on Ganga, only 150 escaped. The rest were captured or killed. Arjuna figured the dead were the lucky ones. The flight home took one month in ship's time. Medics patched up Arjuna's shoulder, started him on a regimen of physical therapy, and pronounced him good as new. Yet his shoulder remained stiff and weak. Arjuna tired easily when using his left arm. His name became one more casualty. He could no longer stomach the moniker of the great warrior of the *Mahabharata*. From that point on he would call himself Matthew or simply Matt.

On Earth twenty-seven years had passed since his departure. Interstellar marines had halted the alien advance at Tau Ceti and recaptured Epsilon Eridani along with GJ 1061, at tremendous cost. By the time Matt's transport returned to Earth, the war had been over for two years. Matt discovered that his mother and uncle had died several years earlier. He served the remnant of his term on Vancouver Island. The interstellar navy awarded him the Lorentz medal for bravery and a purple heart.