

DUST: BLOOD AND THUNDER

by Matt Forbeck

Sample file

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“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

— Genesis 3:19

Sample file

Chapter One

Jack Armbruster shivered in the bitter Antarctic winds as he trudged through the knee-deep snow. The thick winter-camouflage gear he wore had kept him warm for the first few hours out on patrol on this nightless January day, but as he stared up through his tinted goggles at the muted disk of the midnight sun, he wondered if he would ever feel warm again. He'd started to lag behind the rest of the command squad, though, and he feared that if he didn't find some extra energy somewhere, one of the platoon's five walking tanks might step on him.

"Keep up the pace, Private." The russet-haired Corporal Gilmore, the Allied platoon's mechanic, patted the young soldier on the back as he spoke in his lilting Irish brogue. "You stop moving out here, lad, you might never start back up again."

Jack gave the rail-thin Gilmore a weary nod. "I grew up in Milwaukee," he said. "I know all about the cold." He stared off toward a seamless horizon obscured by the blustering snow. "At least I thought I did till now."

"The snows came heavy in Bolzano," Sergeant DiGiorgio said in a booming voice that any opera singer in his native Italy would have killed for. "Many nights, I feared we would die." The weapons specialist patted his machine-gun, which he toted like a toy in his massive hands. "You almost pray for a reason to keep the barrels of your weapons hot."

“Let’s not go that far, mates,” Captain Ledger said over his shoulder. “The fights come fast enough without us wishing for them.”

Despite being the oldest and highest-ranking soldier in the platoon, Ledger always took the command squad’s point. Jack envied the Australian’s limitless endurance and raw determination to always get the job done. Nothing ever seemed to slow him down.

Jack reshouldered his radio pack—the platoon’s only line of communication back to the rest of the Allied forces—and listened to the whine of the walking tanks’ servos as the massive machines marched forward across the ice. He tried to match his pace to the beat their metal feet thrummed through the ground. Without any particular cadence, though, he couldn’t find a rhythm to meet, and the length of their legs meant they would fast outpace him anyhow.

“Here you go,” Corporal Costa, the platoon’s medical officer, nudged Jack’s shoulder, and he turned to see her offering him a still-wrapped Hershey bar she’d fished out for him. He tried to smile as he accepted it, but he worried that his lips might crack. It was still warm from being held inside her coat, but he could feel it hardening instantly in the frigid air. “This should give you the boost you need until we get back to base.”

“How long until that happens?” Jack said.

Light sparkled in Costa’s dark, warm eyes. She grinned, her lips full, red, and definitely uncracked. “If nothing happens, we should be back home in under four hours.”

“And if something does happen?” Jack asked.

Costa put her goggles back into place, a wry smile twisting her lips. "Hard to say. Maybe the rest of your life."

Jack bit into the already rock-hard chocolate, cracked off a piece, and let it dissolve in his mouth. He hadn't seen a bit of candy since he'd shipped down here last week, and he meant to savor it. Allied Command had allowed him a short break after basic training to spend Christmas at home with his family, but on December 26 he'd kissed his folks and little sister good-bye and jumped on a train to start his long journey here to the absolute bottom of the world.

"See that?" Captain Ledger called a halt, and the command squad stopped in its tracks. The tanks ground on for a moment, unable to control their momentum as well as the soldiers who walked among them.

Jack shaded his eyes and squinted into the swirling whiteness but couldn't see much past the walkers creaking around him on either side. Then he spotted a small, dark shape in the distance, a shadow the snow threatened to cover in an instant. It was waving at them.

"That's got to be part of our recon rangers squad," Ledger said. "They've found something." He raised a gloved hand and signaled for the platoon's assault rangers squad to move up fast on the right flank. The combat rangers squad spread out in a line in front of the command squad, giving the walkers ample room to thread between them at top speed as soon as they saw something to attack.