

THE HUMANS CALL IT DUTY

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Cap slipped through the undergrowth. He was stealthy, for there were things that would kill him if they found him, men and animals both. He surprised rabbits and bouncers and other prey as he appeared like a ghost through the leaves, and they scattered before him, but he was not hunting now.

The sound of Guns had alerted him from his patrol. They came from somewhere near his friend, and he hurried to investigate. Guns were an indication of hunting, and David was alone, with many enemies in the dark woods. He increased his pace, mouth wide to reduce the rasp of his breath, and squeezed between two boles, then under the dead, rotten log he'd passed on the way out. His patrol had only been half done, and he hoped David would understand.

He drew up short. The scents in his nose sorted themselves. That one was Gun smell, and not from David or another friend. That was the smell from David's Gun. That was the smell of David, and the smell of blood. Cap dropped flat on the forest floor and eased his way under a brushbush. He gazed deeply into the dappled murk, and widened his ears and nose. The Enemy was not nearby.

He moved quickly, striding forward, dreading what he would find. There was a dip in the ground, leaves hastily tossed to cover it. A few scrapes revealed a hand, then an arm. The sweet-sour smell told him already, but he kept digging until he saw the face, then more. It was David, dead. Cold flowed through him as he stared at the body, ragged holes blown through it by Guns. All David's harness and gear was missing. The thing he called a Comm was gone, and Cap knew that was bad. If an enemy had the Comm, he had to get it back or destroy it. He didn't know why, but that had been one of the things drilled into him from an early age. A Duty, it was called.

He whimpered in pain, for David had been his friend his entire life. Somehow, he had to do what must be done, and return to the fenced Home where David and he lived. He wasn't sure what happened after that, but he knew what he'd been taught, and knew he had to do it. First, he reburied David's body, sad and wishing other humans were here. They knew what to say for the dead, and Cap couldn't say it for them.

Standing and peering around, he spotted the route taken by the Enemy. He would come to that soon enough, but first, he had to do what David called a Datadump. That tree there should work, and he trotted toward it. He scrambled aloft until the branches would barely take his weight, swaying in the late evening breeze.

He pressed the broad pad on the shoulder of his harness, and sat patiently. It was a human thing, and he didn't know what it was exactly, only that he was to climb a tall tree and press the pad every day at sunset. That, too, was a Duty. It beeped when it had done what it was supposed to, and he eased back down the limbs and trunk, flowing to the ground like oil.

Now to the hunt.

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The path the Enemy left marked them as amateurs. David and his friends left much less sign of their passing, although he could still follow them easily enough. There were some friends, those who David called Black Ops, who were almost as adept as he, and could kill silently and quickly. He wished for their company now. They were hunters as he, even if human, and would understand his feelings. But those fellow hunters were not here, and he must tread carefully. It was his Duty to his friend to continue doing what he was trained to, and to recover the Comm. After that, it would be a pleasure to kill those who had killed David. That was his Duty to himself.

There they were. He dropped into the weeds and became invisible, watching them patiently. There was no hurry, for they could not get away from his keen hunter's skill. He sat and listened, grasping what few words he could, and waiting for the right moment.

“—odd to find one rebel out like this, along our patrol route,” said one.

“They're all weird, if you ask me. They don't want law, don't want schools, and don't want support. Why anyone these days would be afraid of the government is beyond me,” said another. He felt like a leader, and Cap guessed him to be the Sergeant. There were eight of them, so this was what David called a Squad, and Sergeant was the Squad Leader. They were Enemies. He was sure, because the clothing was wrong, they smelled wrong, and David's people had Squads of twenty.

“It is their planet. Was,” said another. He carried a large Gun, the kind for support fire. He was another primary target. “I guess they were happy, but a strange bunch of characters,” he agreed.

“Well, we've got a prize, and a confirmed kill, so that should make Huff happy.” He was turning the Comm around in his hands. He made a gesture and handed it to another, who stuffed it into his harness. Cap made note of that one's look and smell as Sergeant continued, “He wanted to prove that initiating lethal force was a good idea, and this should help. We'll sweep another few clicks tonight, then pick up again tomorrow. Jansen, take point,” Sergeant said.

“Sure thing, Phil,” said the first one.

The Squad rose to their feet and trudged away. They might imagine they were stealthy, compared to city people, but Cap easily heard them move out, three person-lengths apart, Jansen first, then Gunner, then Sergeant, then the rest. Cap appeared out of hiding, and followed them, ten person-lengths back. He stayed to the side, under the growth, and avoided the direct path they were taking. The Squad had Guns, and he did not, but he had all the weapons he needed, if he could get close enough.

It was only a short time until one said, "I'll catch up. Pee break."

"Shoulda gone before we left, geek," Sergeant said.

"Sorry. I'll only be a few seconds."

Cap watched as the Enemy stood to the side and relieved himself. He jogged sideways along their path, hidden by leafy undergrowth, and waited until the last man passed by his chosen target. He crouched, braced, and as the man fumbled with his pants, threw himself forward. His victim heard him, and his head snapped up in terror. He was wearing the Goggles people wore to let them see in the dark, but it was too late. Cap swept over him before he could scream, unsheathed, cut, and landed rolling. The body gurgled, dropped, twitched and was still.

One.

Cap slipped quickly away, through more brushbushes, and carefully climbed a tree. He wanted to be high enough to see, but low enough to use the limbs to escape if he had to. He peered through the woods, eyes seeing by the moonlight, and waited for the Enemy to respond.

They weren't a very good Enemy, he thought. They hadn't noticed yet. That was good, he supposed, although a part of him was insulted at the poor competition. He dropped lightly back to the ground and moved back to the kill. Sniffing and listening carefully, he made sure no one was nearby, then hoisted the body up and dragged it carefully off. He buried it under a deadfall, where the ants and flies would take care of it, and erased any sign of his passing. There was no time to rest, but he'd taken a few bites before burying the body. He could go on.

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The Enemy had finally figured out that one of theirs was missing. In pairs, they stumbled noisily through the brush, whispering his name, "Misha!" They weren't talking into their magic Comms, yet, that could reach people through the air. They might soon call for others, however, and that made Cap consider things more urgently. From his perch high in a graybark tree, he kept watch over the Enemy's movements. That pair was closer, and separated from the others by a slight ridge. He eased back down and concealed himself under a tangler, where he was unlikely to

be seen. They could see heat, but they would not see him. Even faced with Goggles he could be invisible.

They were heading off to the east. Cap followed along behind at a safe distance. Could he take two? Perhaps he should wait. But there was little time, and the Comm had to be found. It had to. He edged closer.

One paused, pulled off his ... no, her, he smelled . . . Helmet, and drank from a Bottle, leaning against a tree. There was risk from the other, not far away, but Cap took the chance and jumped.

A bite, twist and roll, and her neck was broken. That injury not even people could often fix, and not out here. He heard a yell and the cough of a Gun firing, and heaved himself up and away, bounding into the heavy darkness, the growth a whisper alongside him as he slipped his feet surely into gaps. No noise from the hunter. That was the way.

“Phil! Guys!” the other yelled. “It’s an animal! It got Lisa!”

Two.

Cap shot away under the weeds, found a tree and raced aloft. He could barely see through the tangle of leaves, and was worried about their Goggles. He was hot now, and they had seen him. Did they know what he was?

They were distressed. He knew it from the increasing loudness, the shakes in the voices, the reek of fear from them and their indecision. He would win this yet. He didn’t know all of what he heard, but he knew the harness was recording it, and he caught some words he did know.

“—call for evac!” said one.

“We can’t!” said Sergeant. “The rebels know we are out here, that’s why we walked all this way. We are supposed to find those roving missile teams.”

“I know why we’re here, goddammit! But that thing killed Lisa and Misha!” one argued.

Sergeant replied, “You’re going to call in and abort because of an animal? Any idea how that will sound? And evac is for the wounded.”

“It’s still out there!”

“So now we know. We shoot it when it comes back, add it to the count,” Sergeant said.

“I don’t think—”

“I don’t care what you think!” Sergeant interrupted. “We’ll bivouac here, take a look in daylight if we can, and continue from there. Shoot anything that isn’t human. Var, you and Jaime take first watch.”

“S-sure, Phil,” “Uh-huh,” the two replied, not sounding happy. In a short while, the other four tucked cloaks around themselves and leaned against trees. Var and Jaime walked around the clearing, eyeing each other and the blackness. Cap dropped to the ground and crouched. He meant to kill Jaime if he could, then drag him off.

Jaime had the Comm.

It was halfway until dawn before the chance came. Cap didn’t sleep, simply watched and waited, though the day had been draining and disturbing. Patience was a tool of the hunter. The Enemies tossed restlessly before slipping into disturbed slumber. At the darkest, coolest time of night, Var muttered something to Jaime, then sat against a tree, took off his Goggles and rubbed his eyes. That made him almost blind. Cap moved without hesitation.

He leaped over a log, dropped into a slight dip, and exploded out of it. Here is where it was dangerous, if Var was looking. He wasn’t.

Jaime was just turning, not from suspicion, but from fear of the woods. Cap caught him on the back of the neck and bit, hard. A swiping pawful of claws tore his throat out and quieted him to a wet, breathy sound, and he dragged the body up the slope and into the dip.

A shout, a cough of a Gun, and a Bullet cracked past his ear, like a rotten bluemaple branch snapping. Cap knew what Bullets were, and flinched. He ran as fast as he could, hampered by the limp weight of his kill, and felt a sting in his tail. There were other shouts and shots, but none came close, and he ran until his legs and lungs were on fire. He crawled under a featherfern and pulled the corpse in with him, then opened his mouth wide to quiet his heaving breaths and listened for pursuit.

Three.

The Enemy was shouting now, scared. They hadn’t followed him because they were consumed with their own fear, their fear of him. Cap knew what pleasure was, and that was pleasure. He took a look at his tail, and found some short length had been shot away by the stray Bullet.

It stung badly, and throbbed. He would accept it. He had the Comm, and had done what his friends wanted.

“Jaime has the rebel comm!” one Enemy shouted.

“You make it sound like it chose him on purpose. We’ll find it during the day. We have a sensorpack,” Sergeant replied.

“I tell you that cat thing is hunting us, and knows exactly what it’s doing!” was the response.

“And I tell you it’s a dumb animal. It’s been hit, look. Here’s a blood trail. Grab your gear and we’ll follow it.”

“Are you insane?”

The voices became confused. Cap didn’t understand the words, but the fear was clear. They would look for him, but not yet. Not until it was light. Very well. He could hunt in light, too. Rising, he dragged the body further away. They might follow this trail, and he had to confuse it.

The creek was refreshing and cool, and he followed it upstream for some distance, splashing softly in the rippling pebbled shallows. He dragged his burden up a rocky shelf, back into the woods, and found a good spot, near some firethorns. No one went near firethorns. They would spring and sting their prey with a painful bite. He checked again to make sure the Comm was still in Jaime’s harness. It was. The fabric was too tough for him to tear, but he yanked at the straps with his fangs until he was able to wiggle it out. He paused, turned to the body and ate noisily and quickly, until he knew to stop. If he filled up, he would be unable to hunt. He tore out a final warm, quivering mouthful of flesh, shredded it with his teeth and tongue, and swallowed. Salty and rich, and he savored it. The taste of his Enemy’s death. The rest of the body went into the firethorn bed, where it could fertilize them, and the Comm went several hundred paces away with him. He bit hard, until the case and a tooth cracked, then bashed it against a rock until it was open. It had to be destroyed, and he wasn’t sure how good the Enemy’s tools were at finding it. He urinated in the open case, and buried it as deep as he could in a damp depression that was overgrown with weeds.

He was done. The Comm was safe, and he could rest, then transmit his last Datadump and work his weary way back to Home. Hunger and fatigue gnawed at him to do that very thing, but another part was still awake. That part was sad, angry, and mean. It meant to avenge David’s death, and it did not want to be ignored. And there were only five of them left. Rest could wait. The Datadump could wait if need be. Some Duties were more pressing than others.

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Dawn was breaking, and Cap was near the Enemy again. They looked ragged,

drained, and fearful. He would help them feel that even more. They'd found no sign of either him or the Comm with their tools, and that meant Cap had done well. He felt pleasure, and a hint of satisfaction. They had killed David and taken the Comm, but he had killed three of them already and destroyed it. But it would not bring David back. He whimpered in loneliness.

They were trudging back the way they'd come, and he followed them behind and above, slinking from limb to limb on the overhead path they had yet to suspect. He detoured where the trees thinned, but kept the Enemy always in sight. It was an old game that he knew from instinct and training. When Leopards had been taken from their Old Home to this New Home, they brought their skills with them. The Ripper of the forest might be stronger and faster, but Leopards were better trackers. And Cap, or Capstick, as David had called him since he was paired, was one of the best Leopards in the Military.

Below, Sergeant said, "Look, it's daylight, we should be fine. We'll set mines there," he pointed, "and there. You watch, Cynd, and wake us in two hours. We'll move again, then rest again, okay?"

"I think so," the female Cynd said. Cap watched as the Squad shuffled about the area. They were placing the small boxes he recognized as explosives. He'd seen those in training. They were smaller and different shaped than his people's, but he knew what they were. He paid rapt attention to the placement.

Then the Squad lay down to sleep again, leaving her to stand watch. But she did stand, not sit, and he wasn't sure of his chances.

He watched as she moved around, alert and careful. There was a smell of not quite fear. Eagerness. Worry, that was it. Cap knew how to do this. First, he must move away and out of sight.

Slipping through the growth, padding slowly and cautiously so as not to rustle, he edged around their clearing. There was one box, at the base of a tree, standing on its legs. It took only a moment to bite it gingerly between fangs and turn it the other way. And it was so thoughtful of them to paint the back side yellow.

Another patient turn brought him to two more. The last of the three was stuck in a tree on a spike. It took some figuring on what to do, as it was wedged in tightly. But it shifted a little when he gripped it, and he was able to rotate it around its mount.

After that, it was no trick to get back in the trees, on the high branches. They would take his weight, and afforded him a path to the edge of the clearing. Lower he slipped, quickly and quietly, until he was following a long run over a graybark limb that overhung the area. He crouched on the perch and waited. Whenever she faced away he slipped a few steps closer. Cynd was walking back and forth, and sooner or later would pass under him. The others snored, alertness dulled by fatigue. He

would have a few seconds. That would be enough.

Cynd was walking toward him. She would pass underneath . . . now. Reaching down like a stretching spring, Cap got as low as he could. His paws were bare meters above her Helmut visor, unseen in her restricted vision. He let go with his rear claws and dropped, feeling weight pull him down.

She wore Armor and her Helmet, but her face was exposed, and her legs. He knocked her flat under his weight, felt the breath *whuff* out of her, and locked his jaws over her face. She gasped for air, and he knew she was trying to scream in his mouth, as a yearling would. Her hands scrabbled for a weapon, but he pinned her arms down with his paws, letting the claws sink into the flesh and holding them tightly. As her gyrations increased, he unsheathed his rear claws and gouged deeply into her thighs. Hot wetness splashed, and the body underneath thrashed and thumped. He was intent on the kill, but his awareness was still with him, and he heard another voiceless scream of distress and the sound of gear.

With no hesitation, he rolled off Cynd, and charged away, legs pumping and lungs heaving as he drove around the trees in long bounds. Bullets came after him, and he dodged back and forth, stumbling over a rotten stick, rolling through a patch of ground ivy, and away.

Shouts were followed by loud *bangs* as someone detonated the mines. The explosions tugged at him, wind snapping at the leaves. But if they were bad for him ...

His ears were ringing slightly, but he could hear shrieks and shouts, swearing and confusion. The heavy growth would have stopped most of the metal stings from the mines, but they had to have been disorienting. And frightening. That was what he wanted. He wanted them afraid, wanted them to know, to understand and regret.

This was not their home. This was his. And he would protect it.

There was the sound of pursuit. He listened, head turning, to localize the noise. There was one, that way. He stretched out his hearing again.

Only one, shooting blindly and crying gibberish under his breath. Taken by panic, Cap thought, and the smell agreed. He was coming this way, but only from luck, and there were no others.

He could handle one.

As the Enemy came over the hummock, Cap sprang out of the leaf bed, his deathsnarl tearing the air and terrifying the animals. The Enemy stopped, wide-eyed and color draining from his face. Smell told Cap that Enemy had voided himself, and as he tried to swing his Gun around, Cap took him.

First, he crushed the wrist that held the Gun with his jaws, while scratching for the face to distract him. Bones splintered, the Gun fell, Enemy screamed, and Capstick turned his attention elsewhere. The other hand was bringing up a Knife, and Cap rolled off, pivoted, and leapt back. The blade tore his lip as he hit, but he shattered that arm, also. The Enemy was sheathed in Armor and a Helmet and Boots, but the thighs and the groin were exposed, and Cap sunk his fangs deep into soft, warm flesh. Enemy howled in agony and thrashed, cried and shook, whimpered and twitched, and was still. Cap ate a few more bites to keep his strength up, and trotted off in a circle around the area, ears alert for voices.

Four.

“She has to have a trauma team! Phil! *Abort the goddamn mission!*” Gunner screamed.

“Yes!” Sergeant agreed. “Hold on, okay?” A moment later he continued, “White Mountain, this is Silver Three. Abort! Abort! Abort! Require immediate extraction and medevac.” There was another pause, and Cap knew the message was being turned into a squeal before the Comm sent it, so no one would know they were sending it. The magic squeals only other Comms could hear. If he’d only been able to find friends, all these would be dead. Now they would get away. That saddened him. But he might get another yet

Sergeant spoke again. “Understood, White Mountain. We can make exfil point in thirty minutes.” Click. “Okay, let’s destroy the excess gear and weapons and bury them ... Guys, where’s Jansen?”

They worked themselves into another panic, and Cap again knew pleasure.

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People had good ways to deal with wounds, and Cynd was strapped to a Litter they built. She moaned, and was still alive, but Cap knew he could fix that in a moment’s time. All that were left now were Gunner and Sergeant and one called Wes. Wes and Sergeant carried Cynd, and Gunner led the way. They were heading north again, and Cap used the arboreal highway to follow them. Sometimes he led them. He knew where they would go, for a Vertol could best reach them on the Bald Hill.

The three Enemy were jogging quickly through the forest. Cap slipped into the lower branches, flowing along them like an elemental force, silent and determined. They were sweating and gasping for breath, and had taken off their Helmets to get better vision and cooling. That was good. He could see Gunner curve to the right up ahead, and eyes wary, he tensed for action ... now!

A leap, a tuck, and Wes’ head was in his teeth. He somersaulted over, the

world twisting, gripping as tight as he could, and felt the neck snap. Sergeant screamed, and Gunner tried to fire, but Sergeant was in the way. He moved to the side, and Cap dodged the other way as Sergeant dropped his end of the litter and tugged at his Gun. Cap tasted brains and sprang away, rolling off the path and into the soft, leafy fronds of a downweed patch, which hid him as he slid down the hill and over the edge of the ravine, roots and tendrils snagging him. Guns sounded again, and he winced at pain in his side. He had been hit, but it wasn't bad. Nor would it matter if it had been bad. He was hunting. He had an Enemy to bring down.

Five.

He circled again, listening.

“—cant leave her here!” Sergeant said.

“Do you want to try getting to a weapon before that *thing* rips your throat out? Mother of God, have they bioengineered those things?”

“I'll carry her back, weapon slung, you do the same up front. Drop her if we have to. At least she'll have a chance!” Sergeant said.

“You didn't hear me, Phil, *I'm not carrying anything!* I'm making that rendezvous, and they are never sending me back without a full platoon. You file any paperwork you want. I'd rather spend the war in jail than have that thing rip me to death. I liked Cynd, but she's not going to make it.”

There was the click of a Gun being readied. Sergeant spoke, “Sergeant Second Class Willen Rogers, pick up that litter or I'll shoot you right here!”

“You really are insane, you know that?” Silence. “Alright. Sorry. Nerves. Let's get the hell out of here.” The sound of their feet indicated they were carrying the Litter, and Cap felt pleasure again. He would finish this, despite the wound. He might die as he killed them, but David would be avenged.

They were still heading north, and Cap kept back a bit. Sergeant was watching the trees. He was the tricky one, and Cap would save him for last. He wouldn't die quickly, and Gunner might shoot him while he fought with Sergeant.

Ahead was the upper branch of the creek. They would have to cross there, and that's where he'd kill them.

His side hurt severely, and he licked at it, tongue rasping through the fur. It tasted of blood, and the bitter tang of other damage. But he wasn't dead yet, and there was still things that must be done.

He rose and moved. His motion was tight and slower than before, but he

ignored the pain and glided along the boughs.

Bald Hill, as the humans called it, was not the highest point around. It wasn't really a hill, just a jutting end of a smooth ridge. The creek flowed past it from the highlands, and Cap would have to be ready, as once they crossed the water they'd be where they could be found, and would have clear space to protect them. He urged himself forward, breath gurgling slightly. The wound in his side had hurt his ribs. No matter. He sprang nimbly from tree to tree, skirting the two Enemy and their burden.

This was good, he thought. They must cross here, with the Litter, as the ground sloped instead of dropping off. He would wait... there.

* * * *

The Enemy was close now. He could hear them muttering to reassure each other, and hear their tortured breaths. They would have few more of those. He waited under the cut bank of the creek, just upstream from the crossing. Their voices resolved through the chuckling sound of the creek.

“—get across and we can rest,” Sergeant said.

“Thank God,” Gunner heaved out between strangled gasps. His voice was unclear yet. “We'll need ... ready... for when evac arrives. How do we ... what happened?”

“We tell them exactly what happened,” Sergeant said. “There's enough evidence in the monitors.”

They stopped at the beach and prepared to cross, and Cap took the moment to swim closer. A projection covered him, and he waited for them to splash into the chill water, the same water that tore painfully at the wound in his side.

Now. Their Guns were slung, they were knee-deep in water, and they couldn't move as quickly as he did. He clambered up the bank, unheard over the water, and sprang, muscles releasing like a tensed spring.

He was on Gunner, and clawed his throat out. Six! Sergeant dropped his end of the Litter, and Cynd tumbled into the water to drown, next to the worms of red leaking up from Gunners wounds. Seven! Cap turned, and saw Sergeant raising his Gun. He ducked and leapt, using Gunner as a base and felt the burn of a Bullet through his shoulder. It spoiled his attack, but he clawed Sergeant savagely with his right paw, tearing his arm and chest. He tried to force him under water, and Sergeant fired again with his other hand. He missed.

Cap sprang lightly back to his feet in the rocky shallows, sending agony

through his side and shoulder. Sergeant was scrabbling for purchase, and wasn't looking as he pounced again. He shoved the man's head under water in the deeper pool, and leaned on it to hold it there. Gurgling sounds came, and he knew death would follow soon. He ignored the pain in his ribs, and the new pains as his Enemy cut him with a Knife. He shrieked, but pressed lower, closing with the blade until it could cut no more.

He fed on the pain, and pressed the attack. He could feel his foe weakening, and knew it would not be long now. Exhaustion was taking a toll, though, and he lacked the strength to attack again. Blood loss was making him weak, and spots before his eyes told him he was fading. But his Enemy was faring no better. He slipped under the water again, and emerged coughing, before falling back once more. Cap crept closer, begging strength from his tortured body.

They clashed again, Cap desperate to finish this, his Enemy desperate to survive. As they wrestled, he felt death hovering nearby. Or was that the sound of a Vertol?

It was a Vertol. Cap snarled in outraged frustration. The Gunners aboard wouldn't shoot yet, but he had to leave or die. He drew back, dragging the limp, almost dead Enemy with him, keeping the man between him and potential Bullets. He slipped under water and headed for a moss-spattered rock, needing to get behind cover. Bullets like a deadly hail stirred the water, and he sank as he'd been taught. There was the cut in the bank, and there was the rocky shelf he'd taken on his way in.

Another burst shredded the growth as he fled, while burning with rage at not killing Sergeant. He could not dwell on that now. He had to escape to make his Datadump, survive to fight again. Let the Enemy keep Sergeant and Cynd alive. They could tell them how the fight would go. Not only the soldiers, but the human settlers and their dogs and even the Leopards would fight.

Cap waited under a featherfern, eyes narrowed to cold slits, and held motionless as the Vertol passed over, then again, then a third time. They knew he was there, but couldn't see him. Cap had played this game before, even though it wasn't a game now. Despite their tools, people couldn't find Leopards. Not one time in a hundred.

The Vertol flew over again, even lower, then the sound of it echoed away across the hills. In moments, the normal sounds of the northern forest returned, and Cap raised himself, all cuts and aches and bruises, to end his mission. It was nearly sunset, and he still had to hurry.

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High in a tree, Capstick spent some time recovering from the exertion, feeling his

heart thump, sensing his blood boil, hearing his thoughts roar. His injured shoulder was an agony that he would have to accept for now. At Home, it would need Surgery. His ribs might, also, and the wounds to his skin and tail. Then there was the pain within. He was weak, ill, and hot, but he would rest to recoup his strength and press on. The human doctors could heal him, as they had before. People wore good at such things. His thoughts were interrupted as his harness clicked and began its Datadump, and he heaved a deep sigh. He knew better than to roar in anger, pain, frustration.

David was dead. He knew other people, but David had been his friend his entire life. He could not yet think of existence without him. Loss . . . emptiness ... he had no symbols to describe it properly.

Cap still had a purpose, however, and that would give him strength. But fatigue and exertion and his wounds called to him to rest. He would do that now. Tomorrow he would travel gingerly and painfully back to Home. There, he would be paired with a new friend, and he and that friend would hunt the invaders remorselessly. Perhaps the manhunters from Black Ops would join them. If not, he would teach his new friend what loyalty meant and they would hunt as a pair.

The Humans called it duty. To him it was simply the way things were.