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in flagrante delicto

LCTN: SIERRA HOTEL-B4A (Second Hand)
CORD: SAO-76502.B0305 (296pc from SOL)
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Xhemal sapian, the Albanian spelling, is going to stick because Bob says so. He is the designated authority here therefore what he says goes. For a pack hunter that spends a lot of its time in water the troopers tasked with tracking and observing them thought it was funny that they couldn't swim a lick. Jokingly they started referring to these beasts as 'Jamal raptors' up until they find out that these gorgeous but monstrously-lethal creatures were in actuality sentient beings.

And that was more than a bit unexpected.

The SA's version of taking-coup is to sneak up on someone or something while cloaked and dust them with invasive nano-chips for data collection via the tacnet. Before they could get enough data for analysis the teams watching these creatures knew something was very odd about them so they called for a professional early on, and Bob cannot believe his luck that he got tagged for this duty.

Corporal, Robert Jackson, is not a zoologist but considering the reports the battalion commander was getting from the bush she thought that anthropology was close enough for now. Bob isn't even an avowed professional in the field. Ever since he joined the Annex he's been methodically studying the language and aesthetic differences between the resident population from the Pleiades as compared to the people from the Hyades, namely 83-Tau, and the divergence from their mutual Australian origins. Each and every skillset, ability or field of interest is documented in the SA so the trainers ended up labeling what Bob was doing to pass the time as "cultural anthropology" simply because they had nothing else to go on.

So, for the first time out, Bob is cloaked in the trees with a fire team following what they have been calling a *rape*. Lions come in

a pride, crows are a murder, and in the mind of the troopers these things are most definitely a rape while on the hunt. Bob was determined to rethink that but in view of the speed and nightmarish violence of the Xhemal, in a coordinated attack, silently pouncing on and disemboweling a large prey animal inside what seemed like a few quick seconds, Bob now thinks, *rape, rape is good!*

What catches Bob's attention is the sounds coming from the leader, called Caesar, who seized the prey animal's head and subdued it while the others set to work tending to their predator duties. Instead of the normal raptor vocalizations they've become accustomed to Caesar is mimicking the reassuring warble of a mother-cow of that species. The terrified animal is soothed by this and its panicked cry quickly subsides to a comforted bleating as it breathes its last.

The whole time this was going on the older and larger raptors were instructing one half their size, known as Snoopy, to slash open the belly of their dinner then reach in with the same hind foot to flick open the arteries to hasten death. What's amazing to everybody watching is that most of their communication in the field has been by hand signals, or claw signals to be exact. Bob simply cannot believe his eyes but what else can he do?

Before any A.I. analysis could be initiated, Bob has been sifting through the compiled information and reports, and if it wasn't for the fact that he is here and witness to it all now he would still be in the mindset that the data, reports and video he has pored over the last week was the worst possible self-gratifying science-fantasy jizum. No one in their right mind would believe any of this crap at face value.

He realizes that to believe you'd have to see it for yourself.

To begin with the Sierra Hotel complex is an ungodly mess of orbital chaos. The primary K2 class star, Mithra, has a red dwarf companion at 110au, Sriracha-Ankh, that has a blue-green-purple gas giant, aptly named Melek Taus, that sports a handful of moons with the largest one being a habitable jungle-biosphere of unparalleled variety and beauty. With oxygen levels tipping 34% this world is currently deep in the middle of what would be best described as a dinosaur-fauna Jurassic phase very much like what planet Earth went through tens of millions of years before.

Prophetically named Chermerra, by the 38 member team who originally surveyed the Hyades, when they set off in this direction back in 2129 they were never heard from again. Lost in space for over a century the SA stumbled onto their wreckage here and recovered most of the data they compiled. The mystery of what happened to the crew was solved when golf-ball sized lumps of calcium, discovered in and around the wrecked ship, were found to have traces of human DNA.

In a scant four years *Second Hand*, the mission name for Sierra Hotel, has been used by the Annex to specifically reference this world and the name Chermera has since been relegated to a mountain range.

Every possible life form you can imagine—every size, make or model, from insects to the yummiest of sauropods, are running around either murdering or trying to avoid being murdered. It's as if the food-chain has gone spiraling out of control. Life feeds on life, yes, but this planet is not for the faint of heart or eyes of a vegan for that matter.

One of the largest land predators they've found is currently being called a T-Rex, because your average grunt wouldn't know any better, but when properly evaluated they're more like an oversized Allosaurus by comparison. Now, one would think this beast would be the dominate meat eater around these parts but truth be told it's the Xhemals that rule this roost and for good reason.

The Xhemals are a raptor like predator that are about half the size of the long extinct Utahraptor. They are covered in feathers that give them parrot-like bursts of color that allow them to blend into the forest and hide in plain sight while sneaking around. The feathers are tough and, like *lorica-segmentata*, protect them from slashing blows from prey and contender alike. The encephalization quotient is only 4.85 for the brain to body ratio but cortical neuron connections appear to hover around 10.9 billion which does put them in league with human capacity. So far the SA has been deciphering their language which is comprised of some eighty-three unique chirps, clicks and whistles; and even though an ever so growing dictionary of words are being put together it is transitional verbs and sentence structure that seems to be baffling the translator programs. What flips everyone's lid is that the Xhemal are calling the tracking teams 'sky shadows' which means they already know they're being followed. Worse yet is that they can identify individual members of the three-man fire teams and as cool as that sounds the ramifications make it sound not so cool. The nano-chips have not completely mapped their eye structure and visual cortex just yet so maybe the answer lies there?

The decision makers with Ground Round, *id est* Golf Romeo, the SA corps that deals with stationary assets from bases to mining operations, were surveying remote locations for, what they've been calling, a luxury hotel and convention center apart from the Kilosphere which has proven to be rather old-hat and boring. It was thought that an untouched dinosaur planet would be the ideal location because of the perceived entertainment value, and if it were a world full of dumb animals they would have been right. After having cleared primeval forest, laid out the foundation and airfield, and started throwing up the structural framework for five skyscrapers did they finally realize that maybe they should have scouted the location in detail first.

Confirmed intelligence presents a quirky little problem. So far these creatures are using tools, weapons, fermenting fruit into beer, telling stories and making astronomical observations for God knows what? Us humans did, and these guys are, and if that were known beforehand then the Annex would not have razed some twenty square kilometers of jungle just for the kick-ass R&R theme park of all time. At this point in the project there is no going back, and you would think that the 'little gray shits' would have given some heads up on what they just may find in the one-thousand light-year "Fuck around Zone" (i.e. Fox Zebra) but you can bet this little oversight is going to be a not so minor point of discussion the next time they meet.

So, what to do?

Whatever damage has been done is done as they say, so the general consensus has been to learn as much as they can about these creatures and try to keep their distance as best they can going forward. And if just one of these decision makers had a brain amongst them, as smart as they all are, you'd think they'd know instinctively that direct contact would be inevitable.

Bob's open mouth astonishment, trying to absorb all this, is cut short as the sergeant of the fire team nudges him with an elbow and radios, ["Told ya, Bob. Brutal fuckers, aren't they."]

Bob is watching them use stone hand-axes to speed up the dissection process and asks, "What's with the spears? Don't they use 'em to hunt with?"

["Nope! They use those for skewering the big dumb raptors who are only dolphin smart. I've seen it! Appears to be a culling of the competition if you ask me, but their planet—their prerogative."] After a few seconds the sergeant says, [Four o'clock. He's here!]

Bob turns to look and it takes some time for him to zero in on the face of Fido peeking around the foliage at the second story level, but this is what he really wanted to see today. Now, any spark of intelligence or cerebral imprintation on most animals here would tell them to steer clear of the Xhemal out of simple self-preservation. The average Allosaurus will bushwhack raptors all day long but they keep a healthy distance from the Xhemal, yet this one had the nuts to ignore convention and became a camp follower of sorts. More like a pet than a symbiotic ballast, and one they can't turn their back on.

["Hey, Bob, here's Snoopy!"] Radios the sergeant, and from the corner of his eye Bob notices the little raptor approaching Fido while carrying the heart from the kill.

In the wild *time is of the essence* so predators will gulp down the parts of their prey that take the least amount of time but have the

greatest nutritional value. Vittles, organ tissue, fills that bill and it's usually the liver and lungs to go first. Meat, that is articulating muscle, takes quite a lot of time to chow down and the heart is the toughest piece of all. The Xhemal know that they have all the time in the world because nobody is going to try to muscle in on their kill. What's odd to watch is that they only take what they need and, yes, it is the choice parts; but to them if they perform a civic service and feed others, like Fido, then those beasts won't be rampaging through the thicket with hunger pangs, and another critter gets to live through the night.

That is for the Xhemal to hunt tomorrow.

Fido steps out from behind the trees and, getting a little too excited because Snoopy is bringing him a treat, he takes two closing steps too many into the little raptor's bubble.

With a nasty hiss Snoopy flairs his feathers out in a threat display that is not lost on Fido. He's not afraid of Snoopy, but he is afraid of the others, so he backs off and drops his head—turning it to the side in a submissive posture.

Bob has to remember that he needs to be objective and not project his own bias, feelings and sense of wonder on what he sees. His observations need to be clear and concise but there is no mistaking the smugness of this little sprite of a raptor having an Allosaurus like monster forty times his size kowtow to him.

Snoopy tosses the heart towards Fido who catches it in mid-air, and as Fido chews on his snack Snoopy turns and looks in the direction of Bob and the Sergeant who are up in the trees. After a few seconds Snoopy chirps and gestures for them to come down.

While Bob watches with wide-eyed amazement the sergeant radios him, ["You're new, Bob. Maybe you'll go down and play."]

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The fire team follows the hunting party back to their camp, and after the raptors drop off the goods they head towards the river for a quick scrub down. Bob is curious as to why these creatures bathe before they leave camp, bathe when they get back, and bathe all the time. It appears that they want to eradicate any trace of sent for a more successful hunt, and to get all the blood off when they return, d'uh, but then Bob wonders if they could be bathing for both practical and esthetic reasons? Maybe they just like to be clean?

The camp maintains an artificial cove on the edge of the river for this purpose. It's intelligently designed with stakes hammered into the riverbed as an outside partition to guard against members slipping

out into the fast flowing current. As a passing thought Bob notices that its location is downstream just past a sharp bend. Anyone who knows anything about pipes and pressure know that this kind of locale is a troublesome spot. He has already noticed the tell-tail sign of an eddy forming along the posts but then maybe these issues don't apply to fluid dynamics?

The members of the hunting party slip out of the water and start to shake and preen their feathers, but before Snoopy can make a clean getaway Caesar pulls him close and does an 'ear inspection' on the little guy. Obviously disappointed he squawks loud and points back to the cove so, in a huff, Snoopy trudges back into the water. While splashing and twisting about, trying to get all the blood out of his plumage, he bumps into the stakes and they suddenly give way.

With a shriek Snoopy is yanked into the river by a rip current and starts to fight a losing battle keeping his head above water. In a flash all the members of the hunting party grab one of the many tied bundles of reeds that are lying around and race along the shoreline in an attempt to rescue the little one.

As the fire team follows them, Bob radios to the sergeant, "Life preservers! They're makin' life preservers for Christ's sake!"

Sheepishly the sergeant radios back, ["I was wonderin' what those were for? Guess we know now!"]

After a hundred meters of frantic splashing Snoopy is spent and as the exhausted little beast approaches a whitewater ravine he slips under for the last time. In a furry Caesar launches himself out into the river and lands right where snoopy went down. After a few frantic seconds trying to find him he hits the rocks at the top of the ravine and, while tightly gripping the preserver, he himself shoots down the rapids.

Bob realizes that if they don't do something and soon Snoopy is going to die. He's aware that their standing orders are to avoid direct contact but his conscience will not allow him to do nothing.

["Shit, Bob, what are you doing?"] Realizing that Bob has already flown off to rescue Snoopy the sergeant shouts over the radio, ["Stand down, dude, we have our orders!"]

From overhead Bob has identified the thermal signature of Snoopy in the water, so as he dives into the rapids he radios back, "Fuck that!"

Caesar did not notice Bob dropping into the water but the Xhemal leader definitely got an eyeful when he breaks the surface with Snoopy in hand. The holo-cloak of the JACC fighting suit never works well with water and the polygon razzle-dazzle scattering is neutralized

when the cloak shuts off. Drifting down the river like a cork Caesar fights the rapids for the shore while watching Bob, as some wingless black mass, fly Snoopy over to a small clearing.

Bob sets down in the middle of a grassy depression along the shoreline. The whole time in transit he was holding Snoopy's head down trying to shake the water out. Laying him on the grass, belly down, Bob realizes that the little guy isn't breathing so, thinking quick, he decides to try something and pops the canopy of his JACC.

Bob mutters to himself as he closes one of the animal's nostrils with the palm of his hand, "I am like sooo dead."

It takes three blows for Snoopy to start breathing again. Bob sits up as the little guy starts coughing violently. Startled by Bob hovering over him he rolls away from what he sees as a black tree trunk with a strange fleshy face.

The beauty of this moment is short lived as Bob hears the humorless voice of their company commander taking a less than crappy stab at humor, "Ya know, Jackson. I've enjoyed having you here. Really, I have! So much so I decided to take a break from my normal boring shit and come down here after your little outing to bond with you guys! Ya know, rub elbows with my peeps for a change!"

Snoopy has already scrambled away so Bob stands and turns to receive his dressing down.

As the commander continues his rant gets louder and louder, "But do I get to see the indigenous fauna rejoice in their bounty and sing the songs of their people? Oh, hell no! This is choice shit! I git to see your dumb ass fishing this one out of the water and, if that wasn't bad enough, I catch you givin' 'im the kiss of fucken' life! I'm talkin' about the very definition of *in flagrante delicto*, motherfucker! How do I report on that one, hu? You got any ideas, numb nuts? If you do you'd better share because I'M ALL OUT! This fuck up is goin' all the way to the top and I really-really don't know how to save your swinging dick from this door jamb!"

Just then the head of Caesar slips slowly and quietly between the Deputy Marshal and Bob at eye level. As startling as this would be to the average human being these two are from the Annex and they tend not to startle. The creature is impressed that neither of them freak out or jump back. Anything from his planet would—but these two beings are not from his planet are they.

Caesar turns his head slowly towards Bob and with a snort he nods his head up and down with obvious approval. He then turns towards the company commander and shakes his head with a disapproving scowl. The sergeant did report that both those gestures

are the same for the Xhemal and it's kinda creepy for the commander and Bob to see Caesar doing it this up close and personal.

The Xhemal leader knows instinctively that this happens to be Bob's leader and for whatever reason he thinks what Bob did was bad. To Caesar what Bob did was good and in his mind Bob's commander can back off or answer to him.

Wanting to extricate himself from this unexpected encounter the company commander asks, "You got this. Right, Bob?"

Noticing Snoopy boldly slithering up between him and Caesar, Bob nods, "Ya, we're good. I got this."

With that Caesar looks at Bob then turns back to the company commander and says in letter perfect English, "Ya, we're good."

Caesar did not have a clue what those sounds meant but it got the results he was looking for.

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