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A combat drop for the first time is a strange experience. By now you have ran simulations out the ass, but it does not prepare you for the stark reality that you're actually going in somewhere uninvited and bust on someone else's ass for real.

83-Tau is on the far side of the Hyades cluster away from the Pleiades. It has no official name but Zmeu tops the list. The second moon of the sixth planet, a gas giant, was one of the first planets to be colonized by Earth from way back when and has since become the ultimate seat of both political and economic power in the Hyades. With just under a half-billion residents and more than a thousand cities and townships, scattered over four continents, thirty percent of that population actually live within New Brisbane proper.

New Brisbane was originally a quaint little city on an island called Bribie Eyot that was about the size of Ireland and just off-shore of Queensland Vista which is the largest continent north of the equator. Theta-2 also has a Queensland named region but they called dibs on New Queensland before 83-Tau could, so Vista it is.

With all the quirky Aussie names for everything you would expect that the gas giant and the planet-moon would follow suit but that was not the case. The original surveyors of the system were Russian and because the gas giant is over ten Jupiter masses, bordering on brown-dwarf status, and dangerously radioactive when close up, in a fit of originality it was named Chernobyl by the survey crew. Since there was no clear alternative, Prypiat became the name of the habitable planet-moon orbiting the gas giant and that name stuck for all the obvious reasons. The Russians did plan to return and colonize but the Australians got there first.

Prypiat is a biosphere of noteworthy pleasantness and quickly became the primary off-world destination for anyone looking to start fresh and anew. Facing uncontrolled growth New Brisbane has pretty much annexed the entire island to the point that nobody remembers the island's original name, but everybody knows the Bribie Stumps which is a series of gorgeous atolls and islands that run the entire length of the southern and western coasts of New Brisbane at a point furthest from Queensland.

The Stumps is where the beautiful people live.

Unlike Second Hand, which enjoys 7.3 axial spins (i.e. days) per orbital period, Prypiat follows the norm and, like Earth's moon, is tidally locked to Chernobyl making only one spin per orbital period. Where the Second Hand system has a second distant star making its light-dusk-light-dark cycles a psychotic mess, Prypiat has hemisphere opposing day-night versus day-dark-day-night cycles which are simply askew by comparison. New Brisbane faces Chernobyl all the time and has two light-dark cycles as compared to the outback which has a full on and traditional day-night cycle. Because of this New Brisbane has enjoyed lovely temperate weather where in the outback, on the other side of the planet, things can get a wee bit toasty at high-noon when no clouds are overhead—which is kind of rare because it's frequently cloudy and raining around here.

Time and days are a bit of a mess when not on Earth's time or calendar. Interspace commerce and the military run specifically on standard Zulu time but given enough time the locals adapt to their own orbits and rotational cycles. Where Sapphire has a 32.4 Earth hour day, and Second Hand has a 17.53 hour day, Prypiat has all of eleven wake-sleep cycles of 26.2 hours per lunar orbital period.

When it's high-noon in the outback it's 'high-moon' in New Brisbane where what little light you do get is reflected off the gas giant giving you the equivalent of fifty-five full-moons on Earth. High-moon in New Brisbane is the dead-center of the day-six cycle and right now everybody is out having lunch.

One of the stumps, known as Orpheus Eyot, is right off the main island and at one point they are separated by only one-hundred and thirty meters of a deep naturally formed channel. That's when the tides are high, when the tides are low you have maybe sixty meters of very fast and treacherous channel wash that's not at all navigable by man nor beast.

Like opposites-day midnight and high-moon is when the tides are at their highest in New Brisbane. Midnight is way beyond dark but at high-moon it's like twilight-360 and easy to get around.

Perfect for today's little enterprise.

Orpheus Eyot is used exclusively for the mansion complex where Chancellor Kiplinger and his family currently reside or, more accurately put, are currently held prisoner. This cage, no matter how gilded or blasé in its opulence, is a mélange of rescue preventing technologies (e.g. microwave, radio, photon-scattering, metal, motion, micro-air pressure, thermal and cavity detectors to name a few.) None of the up-to-date-fighting suits, no matter how stealthy or cloaked they may be, like the JACC, stand the remotest chance of breaching this phenomenal array of sensors without notice. A heroic effort was put in keeping the uninvited, including the Annex, out.

The two failings to this elaborate system, the Achilles heel for what it's worth, is that the breach-to-kill decision making process is not exactly full-proof. The decision making itself is in the hands of a single politico and, as luck would have it, that person is everywhere else but on site. That person is also not in the chain of command and as a result this makes it problematic for the person of authority by deferring that order while waiting for the decision maker to make said decision. This messy process takes time and the more seconds you can shave off in your favor through surprise, shock and manslaughter then the greater your chance of success in stalling that decision from being carried out or possibly neutralize the decision altogether.

The second failing is that the indigenous fauna is allowed to come and go on the island, without challenge, and that is usually during high-tide. On just the last high-moon a raunches rich-kid party, as is common in these parts, resulted in a handful of naked revelers skinny dipping their way to Orpheus Eyot. Bio-without-tech does not raise the alarms around here and the resulting mixed daisy-chain on a soft grassy patch by the shore was great entertainment for the security staff. People on a torpedo and alcohol mix hump and kick like rabbits and it took almost an act of god to get the guards to run them off.

One thing that was problematic with the outgrowth of New Brisbane was that all of the predator species that were dangerous to humans had to be wiped off the island. The large herbivorous were mild mannered and stupid and were allowed to stick around because they were practically harmless. The most common one is kind of like a furry bactrosaurus with eye stalks on top of the head. They were originally called *bumbles* by the founding residents that came from Brisbane on Earth, but for the longest time they've been referred to as *jar-jars* and nobody know why that is?

Dogs have been forever banned along the Stumps because they will spook the jar-jars with a hop and a bark. Their walnut sized brains have the imprintation that predators are all quadrupedal so anything bipedal can mingle with these plodding beasts with absolute impunity. Humans can locomote on-two legs with a cricket bat in hand

and whack them over the head all day long and the jar-jars will just look back at them with a gormless stare, but if that human happens to drop down on all fours and give a quick howl the jar-jars will stampede off in all directions. Here that's a class-b misdemeanor.

One reason they've been allowed to roam at will is that they have provided a free lawn care service by chomping away at the grass with a perfect two centimeter cut because of the limitation of their teeth. They also pinch back the low growth on the trees and bushes giving the woodland regions a professionally groomed park-like feel to them. Another reason is that they provide a high-quality and cheap source of barbeque fodder for the local pits. It's hard to imagine something that smells like ass on the outside, especially when wet, would be good eats on the inside. Then again, that's the way it is with most tasty animals.

For this mission the SA snuck in four of the small HWG99 Razorbacks with two slicks and two Warthog gunships. Normally the SA would just drop in all stealthy like, but they were taking no chances on this one so earlier this morning they drifted down from orbit behind commercial traffic that's constantly coming in and out.

Slipping in over the northern coast the four ships drift down along the thirty kilometer zone of grazed-over parkland and estates between the edge of the city and the Stumps. At these extremely low altitudes, low speeds and low light the drop ships are practically invisible in this no-fly zone that is reserved for the locals only if they have the proper permits.

A beautiful people perk.

Two ships, one slick and one guns, wheel off and float inland towards town, here some fifty kilometers away, as the other two set down in a clearing three kilometers from Orpheus Eyot.

As soon as the ships touch down their ramps open with only a light blue glow emitting from deep inside the holds. The second the ramps drop six troopers from each one fly out to take guard positions around the clearing and three troopers, also in JACCs, escort two naked teens from the edge of the clearing and up the ramp of the Warthog gunship. Before they get to the top of the ramp it raises and silently snaps shut.

Inside the hold of the Warthog the normal lights switch on blinding the two teens. As two troopers escort the teens towards the back of the hold, in towards the front of the ship, Deputy Marshal, Kacper Cyzk stops to chat with Jacob and Staff-Sergeant, Michele Kiel, the Warthog pilot who goes by the handle Gun Crazy.

Cyzk is not a happy camper. Last high-moon these two teens

were from the group that were run off of Orpheus Eyot and here they are back for another torpedo and booze induced throw about. This is Cyzk's last mission as a company commander. The last hot mission he was on was at Riker's Island and his company had to sit it out on stand-by. He's been avoiding the inevitable but next week he's being forced into a Battalion commanders slot and this mission would have been his last hurrah commanding a wet-op.

If it wasn't for these two love birds Cyzk would have been in town with his team shadowing Kiplinger's wife and fourteen-year-old daughter. That was going to be a classic 'grab-n-bag' and one of the scenarios he's been training his people on for months. As it is he's forced to send his XO in his place as he babysits these two. Keeping radio silence until the hold closes, Jacob and Cyzk finally get to chat.

Jacob asks outright, "Who's they?"

Cyzk says, "Well, he's Clint Wanganui."

Over the centuries families and races interbreed and the Wanganui family from Prypiat is no exception. Clint's grandfather is half New Zealand patrician and half Aussie Aboriginal. With his family political and business connections he becomes the front-end political power-player for 83-Tau. His son had a child with a blond starlet creating Clint who, like most children of means, has everything they could ever possibly want and is bored to tears with it all.

Kiel comments, "What a gorgeous young man!"

Jacob looks at her, "Slut!"

Cyzk points out, "He's eighteen, ya slut."

Kiel shrugs, "Ya, legal, so? Who's the bimbo?"

"You'll love this, that's Sheron Pilliod if you can believe that!"

Kiel double-takes, "The granddaughter?"

Cyzk laughs, "Ya, the one and only! Twenty-three-thirteens social column misfit of the year by all accounts."

Jacob shakes his head confused so Kiel points to the girl, "That nineteen year old, that's Hartcourt's granddaughter!"

Jacob is wowed, "No fucken' way!"

Kiel contemplates, "Well, we can't shoot 'em now."

It's not like they were going to in the first place but Cyzk had to ask, "Do I get a vote?"

"No, Kacper, we have to be nice." Jacob shakes his head as he steps towards the two naked teens who are now sitting on the deck with the two troopers standing guard across from them.

Jacob squats in front of them and smiles. Sheron looks out of it, pinching her own nipples rather hard—emotionally succumbing to the delirious effects the drug/alcohol combination which is not healthy, but not lethal. On the other hand, Clint's pupils are blown to hell too and yet he seems to have it together better than she does. If Jacob doesn't get a word in and soon they'll start pawing at each other and going at it hard no matter who's watching.

Jacob breaks the ice, "So, you're that bored? How many shots of vodka did you take with the torpedo, son?"

Clint tries to focus on Jacob's face, "You don't know what this shit does for ya, man!"

"Oh, no, I do! I don't think anybody around here wants their ass and eye-sockets violated by the likes of me on that shit."

"You're a fossil, what do you know?"

"A lot more than you think, Biff."

"It's Clint, motherfucker."

"Ya, well, whatever you say, Biff." Jacob stands and thumbs over towards Kiel, "I tell ya what. See that lady over there? She's gonna bring you both a capsule of buzzkill that you and this lovely Shar here are gonna take. If you refuse she has my permission to slap your shit around until you do. Got that, Biff?"

"Ya, well, whatever you say, motherfucker."

Jacob smiles, "Awesome! We are communicating!"

Jacob steps over to Cyzk and Kiel and huffs big, then looking at Kiel he broaches the subject, "You're a Kiel, right?"

Kiel scrunches her face, "Ya, I'm from here. Why?"

"The missing Kiel, the genuine article, right?"

"What about it?"

The light-bulb goes off in Jacob head.

"You're one of them! Interested in hooking some little fishies? Say whatever it takes. They can't record any of this in here. Give them some buzzkill and tell 'em your story!"

Kiel thinks about it for a second, "I can do that, but if they talk won't that stir the rumor pot, ya think?"

"Fuck ya!" With excitement, Jacob stabs at the air with his finger, "Let's stir it for real! This is gonna be great!"

Kiel kind of shies away from that, "How's that...great?"

Jacob tries to chill as he lays it out, "Give them buzzkill. Now, talk to them when their heads clear. You're from their world so they'll listen. Tell them how you just walked away from it all, all the bullshit and all the...you know what to say. Basically, you signed up with us and now you have meaning to your life!"

"What makes you think I have meaning to my life?"

"Well, don't you?"

"Ah, ya."

"Well then, there ya go!" Jacob then urges her on, "When the shooting starts, like in about forty-five minutes..." Jacob dances his fingers towards the cockpit, "You dramatically scamper into the cock pit and run the mission! It'll impress the fuck outta 'em!"

"I dunno, what if this hits the press?"

"One minute to convince you..." Jacob had to rattle off for Kiel everything that was in his head at break-neck speed, "If your family comes after you—you're and adult, d'uh! If the Co-op tries to revoke your citizenship you're only a resident in the Pleiades and that would not fly under their law because if they do revoke citizenship, and you fall heir to the family fortune, they'd have to compensate you for all non-transferrable wealth at fair market value!"

"Where's the plus?"

"That would bankrupt this fuckin' planet!" Jacob drives the point home, "If you do take control of the family business then they'd be forced to allow you at-will come-and-go privileges because your family would insist! Remember the golden rule? *He who has the gold makes the rules*, and your family swings the biggest balls, right! You and your daughter would be safe because in your will you'd name my Jessica as the executor and give her the controlling vote on the board and, let me tell you, she'll-scare-the-fuck outta them! But, on that I'll have to explain later. No time now. Then, to top it off, your open door access would be puttin' the fuck-you screws to them—"

Kiel throws her hands out, "Okay, I'll do it! Just shut up!"

Jacob is surprised, "You will?"

"Shut up!" The lights in the hold switch from normal light to a deep blue as the ramp opens and Kiel, who is now throwing her hands out towards the ramp, urges, "Mission! Go! I'll do it!"

Jacob is amazed, "You will?"

"Get-the-fuck-out! I'll handle this."

Jacob shrugs, "Okay!"

As he and Cyzk step off the ramp Kiel asks, "Jessica?"

Jacob hurries as the ramp snaps shut, "I'll explain later!"

Kiel pulls the buzzkill and approaches the two teens who are just starting to grab at each other, "Here, you two, bite on this."

Kiel has that motherly *don't fuck with me* voice and they both clumsily bite into the buzzkill capsules with a little apprehension.

Within seconds their eyes start blinking, getting their focus back, with Sheron saying as her head clears, "Wow, this *is* real!"

"Wow, no shit!" Kiel squats in front of them, "You know, there is more to life than ruining your life, but you entitled *stumpy bludgers* don't get that, do you?"

Clint is defensive, "What do you know?"

Kiel reverts to her old 83-Tau accent, "Ow'r the Kiel's? You know, on Elcho Eyot? They own everythin' yet?"

Clint looks around trying to get his bearings, "About half of everything. It's been hard times for them krauts."

Sheron asks, "Why ask about them tall poppies?"

"Just curious I guess?" Kiel wiggles her eye brows, "I've been troppo for so long I'd just be wonderin'."

Kiel has a very distinct face, and after over twenty years being *the unsolved mystery* in these parts Sheron suddenly realizes who she is, "Well, I be *gobsmaked*, you're the missing Kiel!"

Clint's eyes bug out, "Tha cooee heiress?"

Kiel nods, "Matter of fact, fair dinkum."

Sheron adds, "Said you *gone walkabout* before I was born!"

"Bonzer of a walkabout!" Kiel is surprised because that didn't take long once they got their brains back, "But, I tell ya what I learned being away from the Kiel's, a dust kicker in tha bush is jolly off better than Pom Sunday in the Stumps."

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Snoopy's breaching crew, consisting of fellow Xhemal sapiens named Jinx, Gwascious and Mooch, still need time for their eyes to adjust to the odd lighting conditions. They have only three kilometers of parkland to traverse, 130 meters of water to swim, and two kilometers of orchards, meadows and topiary to sneak through just to get to their jumping-off point. On the sims that's thirty-five minutes on average and forty-five minutes max. They are taking a big chance

that the jar-jars won't react to them, but if they do they'll have to come up with a work around and that'll add to the clock.

Not scrub the mission per se.

Hopping off the slick, five minutes before they launch, some jar-jars enter the clearing, so Snoopy tells Jinx, "Babe, run 'em around and let's see if we spook 'em or not?"

With Jinx racing off to harass the jar-jars, and getting no reaction from them but polite glances, Snoopy asks Cyzk who has just stepped up to them, "You got the sticks?"

"Ya know?" Says Cyzk taking a bundle of weapons from one of the troopers beside him, "Making the escrima sticks was easy enough, but the bō staffs with one end sharpened was a pitched bitch!"

Snoopy apologizes, "Sorry 'bout that."

Cyzk continues, "To knap those tips with a god-damned laser without charring them was a cock-sucker!"

Snoopy jokes, "And I thought all of you liked sucking cock."

Cyzk grins, "Ever I get desperate maybe I'll consider it."

"Ah, a straight man!" Snoopy shoots a finger-gun in Cyzk's direction and gives a double-click with his tongue in cheek.

That was so stupidly cliché that Cyzk almost pissed himself as he hands the bundle over to Snoopy, "I made three spears and three sets of escrima, just in case. Knowing you, Snoop, I figured you would want both going into this."

Just then Jinx runs up and says, "Those are some dumb fuckers aren't they! If I were hungry we'd be barbecuing."

Snoopy is examining the quality of the bō staff-spears and he says to Cyzk, "Thank you, Kacper. These are really-really nice!"

"Thanks, Snoop."

Snoopy assures him, "I will hit my mark."

Jacob asks, "You guys ready?"

Snoopy thinks about it and wonders, "Remember the tacnet you ran for me where your 'Ten-Klicks' asks a 'Sergeant-Sargent' if he was 'ready-Freddy?' To this day I still wonder how your people made it out of that mess alive?"

Jacob asks, "Cold feet?"

Snoopy assures him, "No! It's just that I realize that anything that goes down here can't compare to that."

Jacob points to the escrima sticks and the bō staff/spears and says, "And if Ten-Klicks were here she would look at what you're doing with these sticks and say the exact same thing."

"No shit?"

"No shit!" Jacob points to the coast, "Ready Freddy?"

"Just get your ass in there when the shooting starts!"

With that the four Xhemal race off for Orpheus Eyot.

The jar-jars are constantly walking around with branches in hand because after they strip the leaves off they almost always forget to drop them. They're that stupid, and to take advantage of that level of stupid the Xhemal get to enjoy attacking with some of the nastiest non-shooting and non-metallic weapons in history's arsenal. Snoopy and crew were already masters at throwing spears on Second Hand but over the last few months they've become rather proficient with the bō staff and escrima techniques.

They would have considered an old school long-bow for standoff attacks but arrows, no matter how effective they can be, are not instant kill weapons by any means. A bow would also be a dead giveaway to any observer so the sight of a few simple sticks in their claws should leave doubt in the guards mind as to what their purpose would be, and hopefully enough doubt until it's too late.

The first two kilometers they take in a flat out run that eats up only three minutes of the mission clock and that was expected. They quickly reach the observation-post where a six-man squad of SA troopers have been standing by for them.

They communicate with hand signals only where the sergeant holds her fist up indicating for them to stop. When they do she holds up two fingers signifying two-hundred meters, and points her hand to her right. She then holds up her fist then points towards the coast.

Snoopy repeats the hand signals and when done the sergeant gives a thumbs up followed out by the move out signal.

Snoopy and crew slow trot towards the east and just short of two hundred meters they run into a whole heard of jar-jars that are strung out towards the coast. This is way better than they expected because the little jar-jars run around the big ones in play so this allows them to dart from beast to beast all the way to the channel. While doing that they shave six minutes off the mission clock.

The large jar-jars are four times the size of a Xhemal so when a big one drops into the channel with a huge splash Snoopy and the rest of his team dive head first into the water like torpedoes.

Here's where the training rubber meets the road.

The Xhemal couldn't swim until Jacob got a hold of them. Like a greyhound, if you don't teach them right they'll drown, and the Xhemal who have tried swimming in the past thought 'fish' and promptly sank. Fish swim by twisting their body side to side to propel themselves through the water which doesn't work for everybody. As an alternative Jacob has them think 'porpoise' and *voilà!*

They learned to keep moving and constantly blow bubbles out their nostrils so water wouldn't get in. Like a school of dolphins they repeatedly breach the surface to breath as they negotiate the channel, and inside seventy seconds they slip out of the water on Orpheus Eyot. Under the cover of a dozen jar-jar who are shaking the water out of their fur after their own leisurely crossing, Snoopy thinks to himself, *that was too easy*. The way that the other three are looking at him Snoopy believes that maybe they are thinking the same.

The Xhemal blend in well with the local foliage which is mostly dark greens, browns and black to begin with. The orchards, however, are not so obliging. The orange and grapefruit trees, transplanted from Earth, all have trunks painted white and here that's more out of tradition than practical need. The jar-jars love the fruit and the leaves so they come on a regular basis looking for anything that has dropped below three meters which is the limit of their reach.

The number of these beasts pacing around the orchard is a blessing because in this darkness the Xhemal look like juveniles of that species. They get through this area and have shaved another couple of minutes off the clock. The problem now is they are significantly ahead of schedule and there is no way to communicate back to anyone where they are. If they transmit anything via the tacnet they'd be found out with the sensors that are around them.

The *get our asses outta here* signal is when someone starts shooting and the goal is to put that off as long as possible—or when they secure both Kiplinger and his son then open a com-channel.

They have two meadows and a topiary garden to negotiate to reach the jumping off point next to the living section of the complex. With that Snoopy uses Xhemal hand signals to ask the others if they should press on or hold back to eat up the clock?

All of them elect to go, so go it is.

They cut right through the first meadow and skirt around the edge of the second one to reach the topiary garden. With the topiary sculptures one would think they would fence this off to keep the animals away, but these are made from non-indigenous thorn bushes and not at all agreeable to the jar-jar's diet.

They are now eight minutes ahead of schedule. Not exactly what they expected but they can't hold back with only one-hundred meters to go. Snoopy and Jinx both ready a bō staff to be used as a spear and they step lightly towards the building. Snoopy notices that there is one guard on the roof, three stories up with a rail gun configured for sniping, and another guard is on the walkway by the entrance with an old style shotgun carbine.

Snoopy knows that there are four of the guards with the wife and daughter so there are either seven or eight on duty here. Snoopy gives the hand signal for Mooch and Gwascious to hold as planned while he and Jinx slither up undetected below the walkway.

Now in place Mooch and Gwascious step out in plain view just twenty meters away from the two guards and chirp quietly to get their attention but not obviously so. Both guards are curious about these strange creatures and are not sure about what they're seeing.

The door guard touches the mic hanging on his ear, "Hey ya ratbag, get out here and take a squizz at this."

A few seconds later another guard steps out and asks, "Better be good you pommy bastard, I'm at me-eats."

"Look, mate, that-thar a boomer?"

He looks out at the two Xhemal, and not knowing what to make of them he says, "Well, thay ain't bander, ya poofter!"

The guards are leaning against the rail so Snoopy gives Jinx a nod. She hops up and swings the flat end of the bō staff down on the head of the door guard with a dull thwack. Then, in one smooth swing around her body, she whirls the sharp end around and thrusts it into the other guard's throat and drives it through his spine.

At the same time Jinx was spearing the second guard Snoopy steps out and, with his middle claw hooked onto the flat end of the bō staff, he throws it towards the guard three stories up. Using his finger like an atlatl, which boosts the speed and power, the spear point hits the guard under the chin and it drives itself through the top of his head which kills him instantly.

Before the two guards Jinx nailed could hit the ground both Mooch and Gwascious, with lightning speed, leap up over the rail and each kick a hind foot out and into a guards chest. They drive their huge claw down a through the ribs and belly which spills their guts on the deck. All the while Mooch and Gwascious are disemboweling the two guards Snoopy catches the rail gun dropped from above.

Snoopy hops up over the rail while slinging the weapon over his neck and shoulder. He grabs the head of the door guard and bodily

lifts him one-handed and thrusts his face towards the rental scanner by the door. Between the scan and the RFID read of the chip on the guards person, the magnetic lock opens with a quiet snap.

They made it in without shots fired or the alarm raised.

With the escrima sticks up and ready, Snoopy takes point with Jinx and Mooch in flanking positions and Gwascious pulling anchor with the shotgun.

The first room they come to is the guards ready room so Jinx and Mooch race in. They find two guards having lunch and, as if on cue, they both double-twirl their escrima into the guard's heads and clavicles. Then, to be sure, out come the claws and the two bodies are eviscerated in seconds. Jinx slings a machine gun and Mooch a shotgun and the both slide back into the hallway with sticks ready.

That's five down and suddenly another guard steps into the hallway right in front of Snoopy who swats his weapon away and slams a foot into the guard pinning him to the door jam.

The guard yelps with the air being kicked out of his chest, to where Snoopy swipes his clawed foot down—filleting this one just like the others.

Snoopy realizes that there are at least one or maybe two left, so he drops his escrima sticks and pulls up the rail gun. Jinx and Mooch do the same, and after making sure they're weapons are hot Snoopy points for Mooch to follow him and Gwascious to follow Jinx. Snoopy gives a single finger sign that he's going after Kiplinger.

The Xhemal have only three digits on each hand. Though they look like they have three fingers one of them actually pivots around and functions like a thumb. The heel of the hand has an interesting curve and bumps to it, giving these appendages incredible gripping abilities although giving signs with numbers over three make it problematic at best.

Snoopy gives the two sign twice over and points to Jinx who understands that she is going after the son. Guns now at the ready they break with Jinx and Gwascious heading down one hallway to the boys room as Snoopy and Mooch race towards Kiplinger's office.

Snoopy and Mooch turn the corner and outside the office is a guard with a holstered side arm. Snoopy swipes the butt of the rail gun against his face and kicks him through the door into the office. Just then they hear a machine gun and shotgun going off from far away so they open up on the guard who just slammed into a conference room table. The shotgun blast kills him instantly, yes, but the rail gun round has an explosive tip and that blows him to pieces from the waist up. As body parts spray across the conference nook

Snoopy and Mooch burst through the door with guns ready.

Sweeping the room, and seeing only Kiplinger sitting at his desk, Snoopy calls out to Jinx over the tacnet radio which just opened up, "You got the boy? Tell me you got the boy!"

Over the radio Snoopy hears Jinx say, ["K-Four secure."]

Snoopy could kick himself for forgetting protocol and the code for Kiplinger, so he transmits, "K-One secure!"

Ranch Kiplinger, transplant from the wilds of Gamma-Taurus and current Chancellor of the Hyades, suddenly faced with a pair of talking five-hundred pound raptorial monsters, with guns, who just kicked in his door and blew away his guard, asks with infinite calm, coolness and magical tanuki sized balls, "Smashing entrance, gents, but I don't see you on me queue for today."

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Lunch for Kiplinger's wife, Hannah, and their daughter, Maya, would be nice if it wasn't for all the guards everywhere. There used to be only one or two but over the last six months there are now always four or more making a mess of their mother-daughter outings.

Hannah knows something is up but Kip is being tight lipped about it. She knows it's because of his job, and it's an important job, but in hers and Maya's minds it's time for a change.

Coming here to New Brisbane was a kick...at first. Now they both long for home because it's real and sincere unlike Prypiat. The class divisions around this place are just despicable and, depending on where you live in the metropolitan area, you're either a *stumpy*, a suburban middle-class *brisber*, or an inner city low-rent *garbo*.

The continents, away from New Brisbane, have a more down home culture that they can relate too, but they're not allowed to venture out there. On the continents everybody is armed to the teeth because of the sheer variety of predators running amok in the outback with the bander, a smilodon/hyena hybrid, topping that list.

This little outdoor café is the one Hannah and Maya frequent during high-moon shopping expeditions because the food is Thai and on the dark patio side they can lunch without being gawked at.

Maya sips on her tea, "Primus fucken' Hyadum...I can't believe I miss that place. Two years of the Stumps is enough." She looks up at Chernobyl, "Oh, to have real daylight for a change."

Hannah is supportive of Kip, and yet she surprises herself by vocally conceding to her fourteen-year-old daughter's point of view,

"All the poshness gets wearisome, yes. I'd have to agree for once."

Maya looks at her mother with a flat stare, "Poshness? I'd have to say pretentiousness! Gawd, that Pilliod lady is a toss-up if you ask me, but her daughter Sheron is down right trampie!"

Hannah laughs because she knows what she's about to say will push Maya's buttons, "My lil' didgeri, most everyone is a trampie nowadays. Where 'ave you been?"

Maya throws her 'talk to the' hand out, "Uh, uh! I'm planin' for a future, mum, not a ho-rep!"

Hannah smiles big, thinking, *'that's my girl'* as she notices a faint shadow passing over her table.

Usually a reconnaissance team will man the Observation Post, track the targets and constantly feed information back to the mission controllers. Ultimately their job is to ally-ooop the incoming wet-teams towards nailing the mission objective. This is a highly disciplined and critical job that usually results in a big-win cheer by proxy. When all is said and done they pack up and slither off all quiet like...like they were never there. Recon has always had the greatest impact on mission success, but for all the kudos and stroke that comes with the function it provides the most unsatisfying 'sitting on the sidelines' post-mission downer for all the obvious reasons.

Cyzk's people have spent weeks running around the stumps shadowing the Kiplingers yet today, by virtue of where they are following the wife and daughter, they get to grab-and-bag on this one. The wet-team has to support recon for a change.

Because of the shadow Hannah looks up, and then over at the guards who instantly are abuzz touching their ear mics—then suddenly she hears a series of muffled 'poooft-snick' sounds around them. All of the guards drop like sacks of potatoes with a little spritz of mist hanging in the air where their heads were residing.

Hannah feels the hand of a cloaked trooper touch her arm so she pulls back while saying, "Oi now, rack off!"

With a little hiss Hannah and her daughter suddenly collapse in their seats. Two of the squad members throw a cloaking mesh over each one and scoop them up gently and without a sound. Within five seconds they have slipped them over the rail of the café and fly off into the trees of the neighboring park unseen.

Most of those taking lunch on the dark patio did not notice the commotion in this light, and if they did there is always movement somewhere or other to ignore. It took almost a minute before anyone noticed the bodies lying around, and that was caused by a waiter who

found out that blood can be slippery when it pools up.

In the hold of the slick they strap Hannah and Maya in. Now uncloaked one of the troopers touch each of them on the arm with a short cylindrical pressure-syringe. With a hiss they start to come too.

As they blink, trying to focus, the XO radios while the ship starts to lift off, "K-Two and K-Three secure and in transit."

Two other troopers put oxygen type masks over their mouth and nose, where Hannah promptly brushes hers off and yells with crazy eyes and a surprisingly vicious snarl, "Fucken' hell!"

Cyzk's XO holds the syringe for Hannah to see, "You put that on your face and breath deep until I say your done or I'm gonna put you out and shove it up your ass! Got me, sis? It's your choice."

Hannah, looking at what she sees as the bitch XO in the eye, yanks on the locked five-point straps. The XO holds out the syringe as a threat so Hannah takes the mask and puts it on.

When Hannah takes a deep breath the XO smiles, "Yo, sister, that's better! Now if we can fix that attitude of yours."

Maya is much more like her father and makes an obvious observation, "Ah, we're being abducted, hello?"

The XO wags the syringe at her, "*Au contraire*, you are being rescued is what. So, shut up and breathe."

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Kiplinger and his son, Dylan, are strapped in and just finished breathing the vapor in the masks which is quickly destroying all the neuronet and Co-op nanoids in their bodies and replacing them with chipsets from the Annex. With this they are truly safe now.

As a trooper takes the masks, Jacob steps up and says, "Okay, Kip, the ship with your wife and daughter has just jumped. We're about fifteen minutes behind 'em."

Kiplinger nods, "I wanna thank ya, mate."

Jacob thumbs towards the Xhemal holding onto the racking surrounding them, "Don't thank me, thank them."

Kiplinger, one of the toughest and hardest blokes in the Hyades, is teary-eyes as he calls out, "I wanna thank you all. All-ya'll are me boomer-mates for life."

With that Jinx speaks up, "What about us girls?"

"Sheilas!" Kiplinger smiles, "You be me roo-mates!"

Jacob laughs, "On that, the report from the other ship says that your Hannah is a little on the feisty side. A bit of a spitfire."

"Blimey! Ya think?"

"From what I hear she reminds me of my ex."

"They're all superfund in the head!" Kiplinger then covers the side of his mouth to deflect what he's about to say from Dylan's ears, "She was a kangy at me mates buck-night. Couldn't pass on that one, now could I? Stuck with 'er ever since."

"At least you don't work for yours." Kiplinger gives him a curious look so Jacob adds, "Ramirez! She's my ex!"

Kiplinger is genuinely surprised, "Bloody hell!"

Cyzk steps up and says, "Okay, Marshal, here's the feed..."

With Cyzk starting to broadcast Jacob puts his hands up and nods to indicate he is stepping away.

Jacob maneuvers around the racking and finds Snoopy sitting on the deck by himself, towards the front of the hold, in deep thought. Normally one would not bother someone like this in post-mission reflection mode, but this was the Xhemal's first time out.

Jacob leans against the wall and then slides down beside him, while keeping respectfully quiet.

Snoopy clears his throat, "You ran the file didn't you."

Jacob just says, "Yep."

"So, waddya think? How'd we do?"

Jacob sighs, "You did good, Snoop. Did good."

"No, really, I need you to be honest."

"No sugar coating?"

Snoopy nods, "I can take it."

"Honestly?" Jacob takes a few seconds to measure what he should say, then thinks, fuck it, "It was a god damned gib fest, Snoop! I have never seen anything like it before. Your team was spot on target! You guys are naturals."

Snoopy asks, "Like you?"

Jacob realizes there was something dark in Snoopy's question, "You didn't care much for it."

Snoopy declares, "I'm not you."

Jacob offers some insight, "I don't care much for it ether."

"Then why do you do it?"

"It has to be done."

"Does it get easier with time?"

"Nope." Jacob shakes his head, "It never does."

Snoopy thinks about it, "Is Kiplinger worth the lives we took?"

"Thousands more, but most people we kill are innocent so that makes it problematic at best."

Snoopy is a little puzzled, "Are you suggesting those guards were innocent? Confuse the fuck outta me!"

"Ya, they were!" Jacob looks over at Snoopy, "They were doing a job, like you were doing your job. Like most everyone who dies in this line of work are just doing a job, and that's fucked up when you think about it. Looking at them as guilty is the lie we tell ourselves to make this job easier to do. Live with the lie...or be honest with yourself."

When Snoopy looks up, Jacob gives him a sobering piece of self-realization, "Innocence? I've done lost that privilege long ago."

Snoopy quietly says, "Sorry."

"Don't be." After some thought Jacob adds, "This ain't hunting, Snoop. The killing you guys do to survive on Second Hand is a noble effort where this is...not so noble."

"You mean necessary."

"Sometimes I wonder but...I continue to do it."

"Because it's necessary."

"Yup."

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