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big six

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TIME: 04:33zulu (local 10:27mst)

The Buzzard Was Their Friend may have been playing for the troops but it's *Mr. Toad's Wild Ride* that comes to Jacob's mind whenever he is riding in the hold of a drop ship. Jacob would rather be flying escort than being trapped in this thing, no matter how protected they may be. At least he's not clamped in the racking and facing rearward like the others.

Flying nap of the earth makes it difficult for most to negotiate the pallet racking inside a Razor. Even with the amplified strength of the JACC, and so many handholds to choose from, staying on your feet is a chore because every ten or fifteen seconds the ship is either climbing to clear an obstacle or diving to avoid unnecessary exposure.

Challenging as it may be the old heads, like Jacob, make it seem easy. It has been an eternity since he's conducted a walk-about preceding a hot pallet extraction. Normally the final VI is done by the ship's loadmaster but this brand-spankin' new Razorback has no loadmaster. In fact, it has no crew at all because it's not expected to survive the next five minutes.

The drop ship that spearheads an assault is believed to be on a one-way trip. Being first in means, you draw the undivided attention of all fire positions and those that react, by painting or shooting at the intruder that is, are themselves locked in by the Warthog gunships that follow close behind. Then when you consider that the target for today is guarded by highly trained Base Defense Forces (BDF), chances are HWG99-02078-36 is destined to become a grease-spot in the sky.

A hell of a mission for a maiden flight.

One might think a hanger-queen would be more appropriate for such an assignment, but fat chance getting seasoned troops to go

in harms way on a flying lemon. Then one may suggest that an older ship, one that has realized most of its service life, might be a better choice but there is no real service life for a Razorback. Except for portions of the airframe, the oldest working HWG in service is as up-to-date as the ship Jacob perceives himself to be trapped in. Also, aircrews and assault teams are not thrilled with the idea of putting their most successful ships up as sacrificial lambs. They actually form an attachment to the older ships and the act of throwing one away like this has proven to be detrimental to moral. In the minds of the troops it's better to have an old bird shot down in an honest fight.

Or, as they say, retired through action.

In terms of budget dollars, the loss of a new HWG99 will end up costing the Annex the equivalent of \$6,110,990,803.15 in United States currency. Of course, when offset by maintenance and support projected over a twenty-year period, the final write off will end up running \$-1,492.95^{US} which is, in reality, a plus on the ledger books for equipment that costs the SA somewhere in the neighborhood of Au0.00 in Sapphire-GES (Gold Exchange Standard) currency to manufacture and deploy.

From the outside this heroic effort to track costs that don't actually exist may seem a bit ridiculous however, unlike most incomprehensible accounting processes, the bean counters of the Annex have devised an ingenious system that provides an unrestricted avenue in which the SA may dump tons of currency into circulation. That is, into the waiting hands of concerns who are both sympathetic to and majority owned by the Annex.

It all started innocently enough in transportation, moving manufactured goods and colonists to the Pleiades with iron, copper, aluminum and other raw materials coming back through the pipeline. Inside seventy years, the original holding company had split up into an economic juggernaut of forty-eight independent conglomerates that openly compete against each other. The real coup for the Annex has been their behind the scenes dominance in a variety of key industries including material distribution, shipbuilding, weapons development and manufacturing.

The payoff is that the mission planners know the outlay of the defensive perimeter of the target and they know how many BDF troops are stationed there. They also know how they are supplied and how they should be deployed, and as Jacob struggles to get to the back row of the racking he wonders if they missed anything. The green troops, in the hold of the Razor, are too young and new to know the difference, but the troops going in would.

Currently, the SA is high in numbers, short on recruits and

long in tooth. With an average age of 36 the old-heads are not keen on the idea of losing too many of their own in a risky assault such as this. That is, without an edge and a payoff.

The song, *The Buzzard Was Their Friend*, fades off just as Jacob reaches the back row. Jacob hasn't heard the tune since he last led troops in a hot drop over twelve years ago. Everyone in his command likes to hear it, obviously by the hootin' and hollerin' goin' on, but Jacob can't stand the damned thing. In his mind it puts a lot of pressure on him.

Traditionally, it's the sort of honor that is reserved only for an unusually popular commander who has been put-out-to-pasture or has died a glorious death. Jacob believes that he doesn't deserve this sort of tribute, but he is very popular so he feels compelled to deal with it.

It does fire up the troops and that's a good thing.

Just then, CIC cracks through the radio, ["Buzzard, we have twenty-one defense fighters over the A.O. but two flights are being lured away from your line of attack. Just thought you'd like to know."]

Jacob smiles, "We were expecting at least ten more than that. Things are looking up!"

CIC cuts in, ["They're still going to be bothersome, Buzzard."]

"Yea, but with twelve gun ships and forty-some Thunderbolts right on my ass I'm not worried about it."

["Ready or not, inside two minutes you'll find out."]

"Thanks for the skinny. Buzzard Chow out."

CIC signs off, and as Jacob turns for the cockpit Anthony catches his eye, but before Jacob can blow past him, Anthony asks what everyone there was thinking, "Marshal, how long will it take for us to know if we'll be called up or not?"

Jacob stops and turns towards Anthony. He then looks at the rest of the green troops who are all now quiet and staring intently at him—ready to hang on his every word. Jacob's right eye twitches because it was not the question he wanted to answer, or think about for that matter. Planning always has to make good for the worst case scenario and the Murder Board cleared the mission as is, but the risk was not beyond these people's comprehension. Jacob feels that it's bad Karma to raise these type of questions at this point in the game, but the query was made so he must honor it.

Jacob calls out loud enough for all to hear, "Did everyone hear the question? How long before you know you'll be called up. If you're called up that means that the assault has stalled. Which also means

that most of your teammates in the assault are already dead. From breaching the perimeter we are talking about four, or maybe five minutes at the most. Your maneuver would be preceded by a full bombardment of the target area. At the very least we will win this engagement but that last scenario is one I can live without." He notices the time and announces, "Thirty seconds people!"

The troops are now dead quiet as Jacob steps over to the hatch of the cockpit. Silence is normal for the last thirty or so seconds towards the end of a drop, but realizing that they, the new guys, are not at any real risk they now fear for their comrades in the ships behind them. A thousand emotions now race through their minds but a sense of relief dominates their thoughts. And as the Razorback bottoms out from a shallow dive and hugs the deck of a long valley, every greenhorn strapped down in the hold, without exception, now feels a twinge of guilt for feeling a sense of relief.

Jacob high-fives Angela as the transparent hatch of the pilot's station opens for him. The hatch closes and Jacob puts up both hands and flashes ten seconds to Angela.

Angela shouts, "Less than ten people. Hang on!"

The back of the drop ship splits open and a drogue chute snaps out and starts to deploy the main chute.

With the material of the canopy spooling out, Angela waves at Jacob with a smile, "Hey Jake, what is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?"

It's estimated that less than 10% of the movies and television programs from the 20th Century have survived the neglect of the last 300 years. Though heroic efforts were made to preserve the bodies of work from masters such as Kurosawa, Coppola, Spielberg and Kubrick, a few of the more obscure gems managed to make it.

And in his best Python-twit voice, Jacob asks, "What do you mean? An African or European swallow?"

With the chute snapping open behind the drop ship, Angela gulps air in mock terror, "Hu? I...I don't know!"

Suddenly, the entire floor of the hold, including the racking, is ripped out the back of the Razor with a violence. Not ready for the immediacy of an actual extraction, more than a few of the new people yelp. As the pallet clears the back of the ship, the hatch to the cockpit opens, and while Jacob leans out to watch the pallet fall behind the hatch to the galley, across from him, snaps open.

Cricket stretches out from the open hatch, "Jacob, how come you know so much about swallows?"

“You swallow, you tell me!”

Cricket playfully sticks her tongue out at him as the drop ship vaults over a rise and banks hard giving Cricket her cue to jump. She lets go and flips Jacob the bird while falling into the slipstream. As two other troopers follow her out of the hatch, Jacob jumps before the drop ship levels out.

The BDF didn't disappoint and just seconds after the four clear the Razor it is saturated by fire. Explosive rounds start pummeling the hull, but before the ship is converted to aerial compost a half dozen Warthogs pop over the rise and open up.

The gunships didn't bother with painting or targeting. Twelve hundred meters of the perimeter is obliterated inside five seconds, followed by a three hundred meter wide swath cut all the way to the landing zone four kilometers in. The assault forces were right on their tail and because of their speed the drogue chutes deploy on the perimeter's edge with the pallets fully extracting a half a click from the landing zone. Before the pallets hit the ground the teams deploy. Hundreds of troopers in JACCs, scores of PacMan robot drones, a dozen Wolverine tanks, and half as many more Badger APCs eject from the pallet racking. The base was not expecting them to land deep inside like this, so the assault teams drop towards a cold LZ in the middle of a really hot AO. Within seconds of deploying, the assault troops group up and those teams scatter in all directions.

From their observation post, three kilometers from the target, Jacob, Cricket and her people, watch the battle as it unfolds, and it's not much of a fight at all. Landing inside the perimeter of the base has caught the BDF by surprise. With the Wolverines tearing-ass through the base and the Warthog's raining hell from above, the whole area is being chewed up from the inside out. With this onslaught it is just a matter of time before the base commander gives the order for his troops to stand down.

In his excitement, and completely out of character, Jacob jumps up from behind cover and cheers, “W00T, Mutherfuckers! W0000-H00!”

Now exposed, a laser, once an effective weapon now used for harassment, reaches out from a bunker and slashes Jacob across his chest. Jacob immediately drops back behind the rocks. He pats out the flames from the web-gear and scrapes a few glowing embers from the top layer of the armor of his JACC.

As the laser thrashes at their cover, Cricket gives Jacob a long look and calmly asks, “w00t? Where in the fuck did you get that?”

Sheepishly, Jacob grunts, “It's just a scratch.”

Cricket shouts, "A scratch my ass!" She whacks him upside the head. The canopy prevented her from actual contact, but the gesture was only to get his attention as she proceeds to read him the riot act, "God damn it, Jake! I'll snort your exhaust on CAP, I'll walk your point and chase ol' Homer straight into hell! Anytime! But this is the last time I sit ringside and F.O. with you! If you weren't wearin' cover I'd be bitch-slappin' your shit about now for drawing fire down on my O.P.! And I don't mean bitch-slap in that nice, weekend sort of way, buckwheat. Do you read me!"

Jacob rolls his eyes, "I read you loud and clear, sergeant."

The laser has stopped so Cricket and Jacob look up over the rocks to view the action.

As they watch a Warthog duke it out with that bunker, Cricket continues to rag at him, "Christ, Jake, in a few years you can retreat to squad leader! Until then make an executive decision. You're the Optimus Prime! The Big-Six in our little clique! Make Rutledge strut his stuff and you get your ass back in the shit!"

The bunker explodes. The one-kiloton bomb that did the deed put out a fireball over a hundred feet in diameter. With that, Cricket and Jacob drop back down behind the rock.

Cricket jabs her finger at him, "Just because we're fuckin' after hours doesn't mean I want you to be hangin' it out in my O.P.! If you haven't guessed I have an aversion to hostile fire! Maybe you don't mind but I don't want to get dead!"

The shock wave finally hits.

At three kilometers it isn't much more than a gentle shove but it could still knock you off balance if you weren't in a fighting suit. Also, the noise from the blast was more like a muffled backfire than what one would expect from a nuke. Even a small one at that.

If they were closer it would have been rather impressive, but at this distance it's just kind of there.

With the dust stirred up, swirling around them and then drawing back towards the blast zone, Jacob tries to smooth her feathers, "How about RECON on the next rotation, hu? No more of this Forward Observer shit. How's that grab you?"

Cricket grins, "It's a deal! I'll go over the fence an' hunt snipe any day over fuckin' off on missions like this."

Suddenly the Warthog that blew the bunker rips overhead. The gunship pilot, Michelle Kiel, turns the ship on a dime and heads back in—banking back and forth to avoid fire.

On the Forward Observer frequency, Michelle calls out, ["Fuckin' Off, this is Gun Crazy. You there?"]

Cricket responds, "Go ahead, Guns."

The radio cracks with Michelle's voice, ["F.O., it looks like Homer is making a break for it. We count thirty plus shadows on an escape and evasion track in the wash at zero-one-four, and heading your way at twelve-hundred meters out from you. Want us to pin 'em down, or put 'em down?"]

With Jacob frantically waving his hands in her face, and shaking his head, Cricket replies, "Stand by, Guns."

["Roger that, Fox."]

Cricket knows what Jacob has in mind.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Jacob asks as they watch two more bombs go off on the far side of the base.

Grudgingly, Cricket gives in, "Okay, shit-head, if you insist. Get into position and keep your head down. I'll call two squads up from reserve."

She whacks Jacob on the back as he cloaks then vaults over the ridge and drops into the ravine below.

Cricket calls out to Michelle over the radio, "Guns, do a fly by every minute or two to slow 'em down. We need time to get reserves into position. You copy?"

["We copy."]

Cricket switches over to Angie's personal frequency, "Hey Ten Klicks, you got your ears on?"

Angela comes back at her over the radio, ["Ya, Cricket, I heard. I'll send third platoon."]

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At the landing zone with the reserves, Angela flashes three fingers towards Sandoval, then spins her index finger in a circle. Sandoval starts barking orders for her squads to form up on her.

Over Angela's radio, Cricket continues, ["I'll give Sandoval the details on the way in. She's got fifteen minutes to get into position, or we'll have to call in Gun Crazy to do her thing."]

"Roger that, Cricket." Angela, turns to Sandoval, "Can do?"

"Can do!" Sandoval turns to third platoon, "Ready or not, it's time to pop your cherry! We got a mission at the O.P. We'll go in

under my call sign, Koopa-Six." She points to Anthony, "Gudici, you're on point. Take us out and let's haul ass!"

Anthony was both surprised and apprehensive to the order. He was now point on his first hot op, and he knows it's clear to the OP but point is still point and the AO is hot.

Anthony leaps up into the air and flies off towards the OP by nap of the earth, and like juvenile vultures hearing the dinner bell the rest of the recruits in the platoon scramble into the air after him.

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Sergeant-Major Alex Rzegocki, of the BDF, doesn't like this situation one bit. He can lead these thirty-four people into the ravine and move quicker from this point on, because of the cover it offers, but this gorge through the mountain is a perfect setup for an ambush. That's where he would be if he were waiting for them. The gunship that keeps ripping overhead and slowing their progress is one of the infamous Warthogs he has heard so much about. The ship has had them dead to rights several times and in his mind, either the pilot is simply inexperienced, focusing on the battle at hand, or the pilot is actually tracking their progress for Spooky lurking up ahead.

No matter, he has brought fourteen civilians and two squads over three kilometers of open terrain, a risky affair, but it is not his style to take stupid chances. Not at this juncture. Then again—this whole getting away thing is one big stupid chance. This is not the sort of thing BDF troops are expected to do, but the Sergeant-Major did spend half of his carrier in the Security Services so if anyone were to get them through it would be him.

Why the base commander, Hershey, wanted to pull two squads away from the fight and escort these people out before it started is beyond him. As he stands forward with his point squad, looking for any sign of Spooky, he wonders why they are violating procedures by taking such a huge risk with these people's lives. He has duked it out with the Annex before and what bugs him is that the SA is totally unpredictable. The passive sensors in their own fighting suits function well, but the battle that's starting to wane behind them makes this a rather difficult task. Then again, the troopers of the Annex have earned the handle of Spooky by not cooperating, by being difficult to spot even under the best of conditions.

At least they may not have to fight it out if they get caught. If they were at war then they would simply die if they half-stepped into the wrong place at the wrong time but this is an *inspection* visit, so the SA will give them one fair warning before they open up. As it is he

ordered his people not to fire unless fired upon however, he did not have the time to disarm the fighting suits issued to the civilians. One old-bastard clearly has some experience with these systems. It goes without saying if this fossil knows the equipment then he'll know how activate and use the weapons.

Rzegocki can control his people, they follow orders, but this one guy is truly an unknown element and that scares him. Not enough to make him overly cautious, but it makes him worry about the safety of his people.

He couldn't give a rats-ass about the civilians he has in tow but that is his mission today.

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Jacob is clearly impressed by the leader of this little band. Hunkered down between two rocks, he watches intently as the shadows of eleven troops slip past him while he is cloaked and stop just a few meters away. Clearly, these people know what they are about because they have not moved an inch, and the others are hanging back nice and quiet like.

Jacob radios to Sandoval and whispers, "Koopasix, do you have them locked in?"

["That's affirmative, Buzzard. We count eleven in front of you, and twenty-four just forty meters behind you. Check that, we have one moving forward, so keep still."]

"Thanks, Koopa, paint on my signal. If this fires up take out the eleven in the front. Hold on the others unless they start shooting or try to scatter. You copy?"

["We copy."]

It was just then that a shadow creeps past Jacob to close in on his buddies. Jacob does not have a good feeling about this guy so he slowly turns his scorpion gun around towards where he believes his center of mass is.

Jacob does not want to kill any of these people but if the shooting starts—this clown is going to get cashed in. Not that he's up to no-good because he could have been asked to advance, but then he could be a discipline problem and decided to sneak up all on his own. Not likely though, but this guy has every bit of his attention and that's enough for now.

He dies first.

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Pete Suiters had no choice but to move forward on Rzegocki's team because scouting the ravine is taking way too much time, and he doesn't feel good about this direction anyway. Obviously Rzegocki is not thrilled either so Pete wonders why are they waiting here.

Without the use of radio, Pete quietly asks Rzegocki, "What's the holdup Sergeant?"

Rzegocki is alarmed, but whispers, "Mr. Suiters! What the fuck are you doing up here!"

Pete suggests, "I take it that a different route is in order?"

"You're reading my mind, Mr. Suiters."

Pete interjects, "I'd ambush us from along that ridge so how 'bout we head north a half a klick and try there?"

"I concur, Mr. Suiters."

Pete smiles, "Well then, let's get on the hump Sergeant-Major. We're wasting too much time here!"

Jacob overheard the conversation and can't believe his ears. After all these years he recognizes that voice. Realizing that he has to act or lose them he flashes a targeting laser on Pete's back for just a fraction of a second and just to get their attention.

Rzegocki spins around and cries out to Pete, "Don't move Mr. Suiters, you've been painted for God's sake!"

"From where?"

Jacob calmly answers, "Right behind you."

Suddenly, the ridge opens up with targeting lasers that touch each and every one of the squad members and the troops behind them. Everyone freezes, except for Pete, who drops and rolls for cover—clearly blowing the invisibility afforded by the holographic cloak. Pete can't be blamed for his almost Pavlovian reaction. In his world movement means life, but this is one of the rare situations where the wrong move may exacerbate the situation and result in death.

Rzegocki shouts, "Nobody fire! Hold your fire or you'll get us all killed! Do you hear me, Mr. Suiters!"

With his weapons raised, and looking for a target to shoot at, Pete grunts, "I didn't come all this way to get caught!"

Jacob, now squatting beside Pete, comments, "Listen to the sergeant, Zooter, or you will die."

To nobody in particular, Pete responds, "I'm dead anyway."

Jacob, with his scorpion gun just inches from Pete's chest, materializes into view and asks, "Now or later Zooter, it won't make a difference will it?"

Pete turns off his cloak off and retracts his rail gun while he huffs, "I guess not, Spooky."

Sergeant Rzegocki radios to the rest of the troops, "Okay, everybody, stand down and disarm. That's an order."

As the BDF troops uncloak and start to detach their weapons from the hard mounts of their fighting suits, Jacob retracts his weapon and offers a hand to Pete.

Grudgingly, Pete accepts the help.

As Pete gets to his feet, Rzegocki turns to Jacob, "Hey, Spooky, thanks for not killing my people."

"I'd rather avoid any unnecessary bloodshed. I take it that your troops do know the drill? If they cooperate, we'll treat them good and out-process them within a week."

"They will cooperate."

"Thanks, Sergeant-Major."

Pete cringes, "Who the fuck are you?"

Jacob smiles, "How ya been, Zooter?"

"Am I supposed to know you?"

Jacob gives a low whistle, "We go way back...Pop."

It was like a wave of joy sweeps through Pete—Jacob is alive! Of all the wet work Pete had to do in his past, here was the one job that got away. What's more, Pete was glad that he did.

Pete grins big, "Where the fuck have you been hiding?"