

## GRTZ : A story by Francis Fish

### Chapter 4: Any colour you like

Good old Henry Ford, if you know who he is, allegedly only used to make black cars. He's supposed to have said *you can have any colour you like, as long as it's black*. This is a complete myth, he made three colours of Model T when he started and didn't make black ones until quite a bit afterwards. This doesn't stop other people emulating their misconception of him; not at all. Politicians love to talk about empowerment and choice, but it's only ever over simple things. Some people call this the *bike shed phenomenon*. Nobody understand complex ideas and processes unless they've studied them, but everyone understands how to make a bike shed (sometimes it's a dog kennel, but you get the idea). This means that management/politicos will argue forever over the shed construction and colour, but anything difficult either gets shelved once they hear how much it costs or gets approved on the nod if it comes from someone's relative or sexual partner, or from someone senior's VIP list. If I choose, I choose to have a decent standard of living and to have services that do what they are supposed to and meet a pretty high minimum standard, that's all I want to *choose*, this is the *empowerment* - I'd like to be empowered not to have to endure second-rate crap. Politicians and managers don't get this, they don't understand that we don't care about much else and would like them to get out of the way.

So, Jensen was going to live and walk again. She made some silly woman joke about it being a good way to lose weight, I smiled my most plastic smile, we didn't gain weight, BigCorp were far too careful about their investments for that. But she had to choose how much mobility she wanted and whether to have prosthetics fitted or new legs regrown. Personally, after seeing the crap BigCorp did with everything else, I'd rather have them regrown. It's well understood technology and they can even give you stronger bones if you want. There were fine but expensive hybrids that acted like real legs but were technology. Usefully they didn't get tired as quickly and were stronger. There was a third choice, where they offered her a discount if she participated in some research allowing them to fit her with various adaptors for different kinds of combat. I was dubious about this, mainly because of our lack of an armourer and not wanting her to end up being walked off off into the sunset, or more likely into a fire, and getting even more of herself shot off.

She opted for the trial, because it meant that she wouldn't end up in hock until she died, and maybe they'd even reduce her time to pay. TTP was how we all worked for GrtZ, once past it you could earn money, or even leave. My TTP was somewhere out there after the heat death of the universe, when the blue shift shows everything rushing back together, because they wanted me to tell them where I'd hidden their money. Problem was I didn't know, as such, and even if they sucked my mind into some simulation I still wouldn't know. One day a trigger would open the knowledge for me, but I didn't know what the trigger was. They conditioned me and then set me to work for them, which was cheaper than prison and allowed them to dangle hope in front of my stupid pig face. BigCorp and I have a hate/hate relationship, and they pull a copy of me out of crystal store and make another if I get killed. I work for them

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because I want to, and I want to because they made me *want*. Doesn't stop me hating them at the same time. I refresh the store just before every mission. They make me. Most of us get stored, each time we die we become even more in debt. This is why they don't bother rescuing you when things go wrong; it's usually cheaper to make another, cheaper for them. It's come full circle, people are finally cheaper than machines as long as their experience and training remain to be exploited.

Jensen and me eventually did have a sexual relationship, but had to be careful. I was always afraid her day wear prosthetics would do something interesting and spectacular and break my limbs off in interesting ways, which put a damper on things. We remain good friends to this day, but that comes later. She wasn't impressed with the boiled eggs thing, but I think it was starting to wane for me as well.

So, once again we tried to get to the village our intel said was a few clicks through the bush. Jensen was having a ton of fun in a gimbal-mounted affair that she could spin round in and made her look like an eight foot grasshopper. She could hop too. I wasn't sure about the autofiring weaponry mounted on it, but can't stop a girl having fun. She shot a few bushes and other things that were moving and didn't have the right friend-or-foe signature until she found the controls to turn down the legs' enthusiasm for going *pow* and wasting ammo. This time I'd put a small fire team in to do some trail breaking for us and make sure there were no surprises laid out in wait. Didn't want another tree debacle. The trees decayed in a way that meant we couldn't get too close to them without being bitten by aggressive toothy insect analogues building nests so we had to take a longer route around them. There followed several hours of sticky tedium as we hacked our way through. I couldn't work out why there were no roads in this place, it had either been a nature reserve, or maybe they used balloons to fly between places or perhaps it was just things grew so fast that the roads had disappeared after we had made the locals go play hide and seek with us.

Eventually we arrived at the village. I had to admit the locals had done a fine job, there was what looked like a landing area where we all stopped for a breather and a bite to eat. Given the surrounding trees I couldn't work out what the hell could land there. The place was eerily quiet, but that was probably mostly the local fauna running away from these strange-smelling bipedal things armed with enthusiastic automatic firing weapons kept panicking and shooting at them. The trees arched overhead and hid the place, leaving a dappled light that was perfectly bright enough to see by, but still a little dark. So what was this open space for? I got paranoia and moved us into one of the empty buildings overlooking it where we made camp and generally spoiled the tidy look of the place. I sent Jensen and the fire team out scouting among the other buildings. They were mostly two stories, built from wood that hadn't been eaten by insects so there must be some way of making them less inclined to make nests.

I found a dataslate waiting for me and had one of the tech guys check it for viruses and other stuff. Nothing there, so I powered it on and looked at the message. There was a mid fifties guy wearing the most ridiculous mutton chop moustache looking

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back at me.

“You can call me Meat Grinder. I represent the people of Zafiria and ask you to leave us alone. If you stay in Kenton you will suffer the consequences of your folly. Good day.”

The slate powered itself off.

“Not the most helpful of people, is he?” Oh, that Handson, such a wag. I shrugged and engaged the tactical speech that we all had in our helmets. For me, with my lovely big floppy ears, it was something of a chore to get the ear piece in under my helmet. The joys of modern military kit and genetic relocation in one happy package.

“This is Manby. Just had a warning from the reb leader. Do take care, children, and watch out for booby traps. He said we would face the consequences of our folly - no idea what it means but we aren’t going anywhere for a while whatever he thinks. Jensen, your team take extra care and turn the wick back up on those weps please. This time I’d much rather it was them than us.

“Team leaders gimme sit rep. How long before food and have we found any water, or even better local beer?”

“Dixon. Cupboard is bare in buildings alpha through delta. Four more to go. Setting traps on outer doors as we go.”

“Manby. No point in letting them creep up on us if they’ve got hidden rooms or some crap like that. Good thinking. Jensen?”

“Jensen. No traps, perimeter being secured. I’m leaving stationary guards with line of site between them. Motion detectors deployed along the way. No activity.”

“Roberts. Started up the cooking. Food in about 20.”

“Acknowledged, The fire team are here with me. I’ll send them to eat and they can spell the perimeter people. Keep sharp. Teams sing out to team leader every 15 for a check. Leaders sing out to me every 30. Anything suspicious shout.”

I was pleased the sims had made them nice and cautious but worried about the message from our fan club. Once again BigCorp hadn’t given us any information about what kind of weapons we might be facing, or why there were no roads, or why you’d have an obvious landing area when there was no way through the trees to get to it. My unease told me I would learn the answer to at least some of these questions soon. I reported back to Sarge and the rest of the crew on long range tactical, which was working this time. Maybe the one from the previous debacle just hadn’t really been meant to have a tree fall on it. Sometimes I can be a little quick to judge.

We ate, we slept, we changed the guard, we broke into their data network to find it empty. We found a water supply that they hadn’t treated with laxatives. Time passed like it always does when you’re having fun. We were even beginning to call Kenton home and were starting to wear a proper track back to the main base, with the

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obligatory spots for romantic dalliance. On the third night that I heard the strangest sound, a crashing and whirring with an undercurrent of a storm force wind fighting its way towards us. Even though it was night we had floodlights so we should have been able to see what it was. I wrenched the comms on and stuffed the piece in my ear again. There was a lot of chatter on the channel.

"This is Manby. Everybody who isn't team lead shut up! Perimeter lead start talking".

"Jensen. Can't see a fucking thing. The trees seem to be moving but there's no weather. Nothing on the weather sat or the overnight projections."

"Manby. Turn on the autoguns and set them to shred anything bigger than a rabbit. Fall back to the buildings and wait in strong point alpha."

"Manby to Dixon. Have we got any eyes in the air? Did you manage to get the high infra red cameras up in the canopy?"

"Dixon. Some. Tactical feed coming up with nothing."

"Manby. Ok, I'm off to strongpoint beta, we've got covering fire and I want tactical online. Be ready everybody and I'll kick anybody who's not in one of the strongpoints before I get there."

I switched to the long range channel: "This is Kenton team, Kenton team. Ears on tactical?"

"Yo Manby." Fucking Foster again, no idea about protocol. A-hole.

"Foster, got any sitrep on what's happening over Kenton? Any eyes, ears, feet, useful organs at all?"

"Noisy. But nothing on radar or infra red. Dark out there, man, dark in the trees. Satellite cover's other side of the horizon."

"Thought we had synchronous?"

"Low level, that can give some details on another orbit. Synch is just for comms.

"No kidding bro. Wake everybody up in case we need reinforcing - something like *now, bro, now.*"

"On it, Sarge is already up and kicking people out of bed."

"K. Keep you posted, our tactical's on channel 6, feed in as much as you have."

"Bro."

I had this conversation while I threw some clothes on and rammed my helmet in the right place. The strong points were at the top of the buildings looking across the whole village and supporting each other. Not impregnable but very costly to take, particularly as we had lots of ammo and weapons that could fire without our help. I know that I wouldn't have wanted to be there.

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I could feel the humming of the autoguns under my feet. I was more than a little worried that the wooden building might not stop bullets as much as we would have liked. The wood was extremely thick, much thicker that you would have thought it needed to be, but armour piercing bullets are still nasty little things that can get through wood, never mind armour. Channel 6 was fairly quiet.

“This is Manby. What are the autoguns reporting?”

“Non-specific movement, tracking this way.”

I started running and reached the strong point in double quick time. There were a bank of screens showing infrared and visible light. We didn't have millimetre radar but I had a suspicion it would just show all this waving about without the wind stuff and not be very helpful. Everyone looked worried and apprehensive.

“Anything?”

“Nothing that makes any sense. Nothing human sized. The trees are swaying and moving together and back.”

“Nothing in the canopy?”

“I dunno. Flashes of infrared, but hard to say anything definite.”

I watched the trees for a while - they were moving really fast, almost dancing. What the hell was going on?

Then the first tree started to bend out of the way and the sky opened up above us. It looked like the trees were walking.

“SURRENDER OR DIE!”

The voice shook me, it vibrated in the hollow spaces of my lungs. I realised the buildings were talking to us. The voice was all around us and my ears were ringing. What the hell?

“Manby! What do we do?”

“Suggest we follow his advice - all our ignorance is gonna do is get us killed. If he can make the buildings speak maybe he can make them attack us. Everybody into the square. Jensen, turn your guns off!”

“Aw ...”

“Sarge to Manby! Stand your ground! We'll be there soon.”

“Manby to everybody. Keep calm and keep away - this is beyond our experience.”

“Manby!”

“You aren't here - this is a tactical command decision. Let's see what goes down. I will leave tactical on, stay on channel 6 but keep quiet.”

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We gathered in the square as the buildings and trees moved around us with an eerie creaking. I was pretty shaken, this was more than I had ever expected. A strong light shone from high above. The trees weren't walking so much as leaning towards each other. I realised we could see people walking across in the distance as they touched, stepping from tree to tree several hundred metres above our heads. They appeared to be unarmed, but anyone who can get a sequoia analogue to wave around like that maybe didn't need a gun.

The nearest tree bent down and gave our attackers a clear path to walk from the canopy to where we stood. It was a motley selection in blue green camo that came down to us, all wearing broad smiles and looking very satisfied with themselves. Probably all male, but hard to tell. I could see some had been genetically relocated but from simian stock, maybe Orang utan. Not a lot of scope for pigs up that high. I had told everyone to leave their weps at the edge of the square - close enough to run to and have a go if things looked like they were going to go bad. We weren't going to sell ourselves cheaply if we were forced to, but on the other hand, what's the point of dying if you don't have to?

I recognised Meat Grinder, he stood some way to the back. The others formed a phalanx around him, probably to mitigate against assassination or maybe paparazzi. I shrugged inwardly and hoped we weren't going to have to test anyone's resolve. I was also wondering why he didn't call himself *tree master*, or green head - what's with the meat thing? I noticed then, as he approached, that his face was at least partially artificial. Maybe he'd fallen into one a grinder and took it up to make himself more scary.

"You are?"

"Manby, commander gen reloc group."

"I am the Meat Grinder."

"You said, in your message."

"So why did you stay?"

"Do I address you as Meat or Grinder? Or is it *the*?"

"Sir."

"Whatever, *sir*, we get threats like that constantly, why would we notice one more?"

"This one was sincere."

"They all are, *sir*, but not everyone can whack us on the head with trees the size of these ones."

He smiled, which was disconcerting as some parts of his face didn't move behind the mask.

"You are not stupid."

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"Not all the time, no."

"Do you know the story of this place?"

I shrugged. "We go where we're sent, we do what we're told to, we leave. They usually don't tell us anything in case we start getting emotional."

"Sympathise with people like us?"

"We aren't robots and they aren't stupid. But they *own* us, and condition us to do what they ask. So it's less painful not to know things that our other selves might not like."

"Sounds cynical."

"Just basic survival, that's the way it is. If I could cry for all the people I'd forced to eat Big C burger's I'd probably drown a small continent."

"So you stay like that", he looked at my ears, "and put up with it?"

"It's better than the alternative."

"I will tell you a story. We may as well get comfortable." He looked around at his comrades, they split up and moved to the buildings. "Follow me."

My team looked at me. I shrugged again and waved my arm in an embracing gesture.

"Go back to bed guys, or get some food. Leave the weps here, I don't want any misunderstandings."

We moved back. I turned off channel 6 because Sarge's squawking was getting annoying.