

GRTZ : A story by Francis Fish

Chapter 3: Lumpy

Planets are irritating. Lumpy. And also big. It's hard to get around them without bumping into things. I know, you were born on one. Well so was I. But who needs all that inconvenient rock and stuff? And the pretty sunsets, yeah. Ecosystems suck, they make you all wet and fed up, sometimes itchy if the fungus gets you. What's wrong with eating healthy plankton and rocks? Oceans only make up a tiny part of the entire mass of planets, why are they such a big deal? All the valuable stuff's hidden in the core, metals and useful things like that.

So we'd been transported in some kind of slow dirigible for several weeks to Island One. This was where the first touch had happened a bazillion seconds ago and I suppose there had once been some fairly large city there before BigCorp made it flatter than unprocessed MegASongZ® competitors' voices before processing, to mix different kinds of flat, but not pain. I had taken my happy crew through more sims, this time we'd all had to do some jungle training and get ourselves acclimated. I hoped that someone was going to be thoughtful enough to equip us with weapons and clothing that would make surviving more than a few minutes feasible.

We settled into our barracks without much incident, but Sarge confiscated my pen and someone else had already used up the eggs. This made entertainment a little thin outside of coming up with ever-more painful ways to die after being utterly defeated when setting up the sims. Jensen, sweet deluded girl, had taken a shine to me and talked to me like I wasn't dead. I didn't want to let myself like her too much in case she became a casualty. This scenario had all the makings of a monstrous mess: no-one knew why we were there and we were still armed with the light-weight stuff we'd brought down from the station. When you combined that with the inaccessible terrain outside the base and the visible carnage in the medical unit I wasn't filled with hope.

The other thing about planets is people who live on them want them left alone and want to *be* left alone themselves. But there's no profit in that. Like someone with medical training, or a Judeo-Christian upbringing, BigCorp felt obliged to mess about and *intervene for people's own good*. The only responsibility allowed is paying for things and taxes. Everything else was cradle to the grave. Oh, I forgot the *boredom* that goes with planets. I mean, what's the point of living where you don't have to pay in order to breathe, and live through the vicarious fun of wondering if you could pay? No profit in that.

The pale blue cloud bots weren't evident here, only back on the station did they have the spare capacity to paint things a lovely pastel. Call-me-Shean kept wanting us to go on patrol and I kept telling him that our station clothing would make us really easy targets for rebel marksmen and *please could you organise some camouflage and heavier weaponry?* Well, we'd been at something of a stalemate for a

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while because of this. I thought that maybe they could send some bots out and start painting the whole place blue, or cover it with adverts. This would soon make the rebels want to go and live somewhere else. Then our clothing might work, before the heat made the stressed paper disintegrate on us to complete nudity.

We had, to remember an irony from a long ago English war, had boots delivered. But the fac making them got stuck on left and shipped them anyway. So, no boots, nothing to kill but time, no clothes that would last longer than five minutes in the heat and would also make us lovely blue targets. All in all, even for BigCorp, it was *galaxy class*. So we pretended to patrol using sims and learned about the deadly fauna and flora by trudging through imaginary jungles. Sarge and I started playing a game where we'd take half the troops and make them rebels and then play the two groups against each other. Then we'd bet on the winners. Tawdry, I know, but it was better than doing nothing.

Finally the kit arrived and there were no more excuses, some enterprising soul had even managed to kid the fac into producing right boots so we didn't have to throw away all the left ones. As usual we had to assemble the weapons ourselves and test them. Casualties from the testing were low and no-one died. I put this down to running the sims for so long. The guys actually knew what the weapons should look like, always useful. Call-me-Shean said he hadn't realised we didn't have an armourer - yeah, right, Shean. After you wrote the letter to his family calling his onanistic frenzy *an unfortunate accident*. I suppose it all blurs into one in the end.

My training success had made me only slightly junior to Sarge, so of course we were volunteered to do turn about on the first real recon missions. We had a bet and I lost, so it was muggins that went out into the creepy valley with his gallant half troop. We knew that there had once been a village about 5k away and our mission was to get there and see if anyone was around. We couldn't fly because the gigantic trees prevented aircraft from successfully negotiating the way down. The mechanised scouts cost more than we did so guess what happened next?

I got the team together at silly o'clock, dawn or thereabouts in these parts. My theory being that the sensible rebels would still be in their beds. This military thing about getting up before you went to bed not being something real people do if they can help it. We left the barracks as quietly as we could and slipped into the brush. The camouflage kind of worked given the trees are different colours from those of dear old Earth, but people were still outlined pretty clearly. I'd given up arguing the rights and wrongs with Shean for whom BigCorp could do no wrong - I discovered later that they conditioned managers above a certain level to be loyal, and he was too stupid to even try to break out of it. At least we'd still be clothed when we got there, nothing more embarrassing than trying to intimidate people waving both heavy weapons and your bits at them while the paper fragments covering your dignity have been left hanging on a bush somewhere.

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The sims hadn't prepared us for the smell, rotting vegetation in these parts smells like cinnamon bubblegum with a hint of ammonia, and of course humans haven't evolved to be repulsed by these smells like they have with their own bacteria. Reports were that they hadn't learned to digest us yet either, so there wouldn't be any horrible necrotising wounds unless we tried really hard to get them or took to throwing our own shit at each other, which seemed unlikely. The ammonia was just strong enough to make you feel slightly queasy and put you off your stride until familiarity made it fade away. It did keep popping back into your head though when you noticed it, very disconcerting.

I was toting the current ultimate general purpose sniper and smart bullet rifle, Up-Kilrz. Not too shabby and it had kit that lets you look round corners and even make the bullets seek targets as best they could travelling near the speed of sound and optionally not explode until they had properly penetrated bunkers or fortifications. I'd practiced with it a lot in the sims but had no idea if it would jam on me and become an expensive stick. Still I had my trusty short katana, they never jam if you remember to flick your wrists properly and stop them sticking in bones as they pass through people.

There was no trail so we had to hack our way through annoying thorns and nettle like things that could get through your clothes, using GPS to get a rough idea of where we were. Less than 100 metres in Rogers discovered the angry bee analogue and didn't die of anaphylactic shock because they bite rather than sting. I sent two people back to throw him in the shower to drown the persistent little things and report to the hospital.

We were making steady progress when the bomb blew in front of us. One of the megatrees started falling in our direction and the dense vegetation trapped us in its path. It was bigger than an earth side sequoia. If we'd had a tank or any kind of vehicle we could maybe have hidden near it while it took the force of the blow. We all started running as fast as we could in any direction progress could be made, working on the principle that screaming panic was better than standing around waiting for the inevitable. I lost about five out of thirty, with another ten or so walking wounded. Jensen's legs were crushed and I managed to get some painkillers and sedatives into her before she screamed herself hoarse or died from shock.

I stood there in the slightly too blue undergrowth that now reeked of a combination of cinnamon, urine and squashed human being and took stock. It was time to retreat after going less than a kilometre, time for a gallic shrug and a whisky or ten. Jensen would be older than god before she paid BigCorp back for the rebuild. The others had crystal backups somewhere and could maybe be restored for an even higher price. The bird DNA made sense now, those guys could run like the wind when they needed to. The restores were another reason BigCorp didn't bother recovering people, they could make you their slave until you were used up and it was hard not to get killed or injured because of their blind faith in their own abilities

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putting you in the way of irate locals armed with hundred metre tall trees. Myself I think they muddle along and just keep trying the same thing over and over again until it either works or everybody's dead. Corporations don't have imagination: people do, and BigCorp didn't work with people, it worked with *resources* like that arse about *human resources* you hear on occasion. Eventually their inertia and stupidity will kill them off, but not before taking a lot of good people with them. That's the way of these blind elephant in musth organisations the universe is cursed with.

One of the bird DNA guys, Handson, hadn't managed to run away from the rest of us. Of course, our comms were all squashed flat or otherwise damaged in the flight from the tree. BigCorp's version of *ruggedised equipment* being a somewhat loose idea that rarely survives contact with rain, sand, any kind of weather you don't see indoors or the operator tripping over a twig. Probably made by somebody's nephew or sexual partner. Not the first time I had found myself in an armpit of a place with no way forward or back without any way of calling for support. I sent Handson skipping rapidly back to camp with the upbeat news that more than half of us weren't dead after the loud bang they may have heard and started gathering what forces I could to improvise stretchers to recover the wounded. My rifle was muddy but serviceable. I spent a while looking through the scope for a target with human infra-red characteristics that I could kill out there in the forest but our enemy were long gone or very good at hiding.

Of course, another tree fell on us as we tried to get back. I returned with about a third of the people I had started out with still walking, and about half in total. Jensen was still alive, which made me happy.

"We don't have a blame culture."

"No, we don't, because we would have to make sure that the blame was properly handed out."

"What does that mean?"

"Well ... lack of vehicles, lack of clothing that wouldn't have left us naked after 100 metres, lack of explosives detectors, lack of comms, lack of leadership, oh yeah and no shortage of feet that aren't left ones. Damn straight we don't have a blame culture."

"We work collectively. I know we had some difficulties initially ... but"

"Yeah, yeah, collegiate style based on trust and assumption of competence. Note the last word, there. I need a drink, and I need to mourn the people I cared about."

"We need your report."

"Our enemy belted the crap out of us with a couple of very big sticks at no loss to themselves. Suggest that next time we send small parties out to secure way stations on the route and use some kit that isn't broken before we even start to keep in contact with each other, maybe semaphore flags or whistling. In other news the sexy

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UpKilrz rifle didn't jam or take someone's face off, but probably because we couldn't find anyone to shoot at with it."

"Some good news to pass on, then."

What *did* they do when they conditioned the managerial class for loyalty? What part of their body did they condition?

I went to the bar with Sarge and drank until I threw up three times. Then I sat with Manby for a while after I was suitable company for grown ups.