

## 2/4 Cavalry: The Lost Planet

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### **The Lost Planet**

*This is a redo of a story, well my first story of when I was starting to write. Naturally after a couple years I've gotten a bit better, but hopefully this will outdo what I originally tried to write.*

December 2739, Friesland

Sitting down Captain Juniper tapped the screen and brought up the readiness rate. Fourth squad was in the chute this time, and began filling in the blanks that General Van Der Kut supplied. Though she expected this mission to be handed to a Kommando team she saw that her unit was more than ready for this kind. And as she looked at the information she remembered she detached Sergeant Nicholson for such a mission a year or so ago. Now she hoped that experience would help with this mission.

“So where are we going?” Staff Sergeant Pryce asked the question that was obvious to him. Even then he was standing in front of her in her office so it didn't matter what the mission was, he and his squad were going, her and the MSG.

“It's a rescue mission in the Independent Planets.” Captain Juniper said as she looked over the data that was sent to her. Accessing the briefing she shrugged. “It's called Talislanta, a... wow, it suffered a nuclear holocaust and supposedly...,” As she accessed the information it reminded her of the extraction from... where was that? Not remembering offhand she read it off to him. “A researcher by the name of Naida Bodden from New Holland decided to go without any authorization there, so we have to pull her out just in case.” The datafile had gone over the war on the planet but she didn't need to spare Pryce that much information. Then again he'd be getting the datafile along with everybody else to read while they were transported to the planet. And the task organization said she'd be going along so it was pertinent that she read it as well.

“How are we getting there?”

“A new assault ship the Kommando is going to field, the Nova if I read the brief correctly.”

*Did you even read it?* He thought as he too accessed the file. It had been a month of training and getting things re-settled for the next mission and this seemed like the perfect time for one, given that the rate had gone down after last month's mission.

“And... one of us is going with you though I have to flip for it.”

“So heads you go, tails Lt. Bradi...?” It was rare that she let the squad leader decide which of the command element was going. In fact it was unheard of. But she had her reasons but she didn't need to explain them to a squad leader.

“Nope, Lt. Bradi isn't ready yet for an op like this, Lt. Hannah can't go because he's at school. Lt. Hoff is well, a tanker and we're looking for infantry, not tankers. Though if we were

bringing vehicles, which we're not, I'd take them along as doorgunners."

It would have been very nice to take along a vehicle or two, it would make the proposed mission much easier, though the designers of the Nova wanted it a purely infantry mission, to test its abilities. And nothing like a rescue mission to do such a thing.

"With respect I thought handing the new ell-tee a new mission is something the NFDF did."

"Noted, though the general wants one of us to go and specifically said for him to not go, due to lack of experience." Though in her mind she thought both Lt. Bradi and Lt. Hannah were experienced enough for this mission. They'd seen the elephant enough to handle a mission like this but they had to go do their own things first. And in her mind they were done with the Nieuw Friesland Defense Force unless something in the universe changed to where they went back to the universe they came from. Though with each passing day it seemed it was never possible so it was time to start looking forward rather than looking back. However, the NFDF did still resonate within the psyche of the Troop; though she had the feeling the universe had its own game in mind when they came this way.

"Understood."

Nodding thoughtfully and in agreement she fished around for a coin. "Heads I go, and tails MSG Magnusson goes." Finding a coin she tossed it in the air and caught it, and then slammed it against the table and looked at the result. Feeling that Lady Luck wasn't smiling on her she saw tails. "Tails it is, but I'll still be in contact as much as possible from the carrier."

The Troop had to get used to operating from the *RNS Arrow*, a Kommando carrier that had been fielded into service, and was supposed to fill the need for better insertion methods on Kush or Mashara. However, since the ship finally was manufactured and completed her shakedown trials, she was declared operational and now was landed at the Friesland main spaceport at Moshtar. Though technically it could 'land' even though its fusion drive kept it floating but for argument's sake could be called 'landed'.

"What is this?" Private Matthias said as he looked at the pill.

"It's an anti-radiation pill that prevents radiation poisoning," Corporal Hammond said as he looked at the packaging. He never had to take one so he was just as clueless as the 'newbie' that was exchanged for Stolley, who had an unfortunate accident with an ATM she was help loading for a range. The whole leg was shattered and most cared about the fact that it didn't explode... Remembering the rescue mission on Charbourg in another time and place this mission felt like it, though from what Pryce was saying it was 'different' than that contract.

"When's do we take it?"

*So many questions!* "When we do man, I though Mashara beat a lot of your turtleness away?"

"Turtleness?" Matthais was still by his own determination still a new person and a lot of what he was exposed to after Mashara confused him. And their origins of words such as 'Via' and other expressions made him wonder if he was supposed to be in this unit even though he was repeatedly told he was. He resigned himself to watch them and wondered when some of them didn't talk to him as much as the others. But he was one of them and they slowly started opening up and he guessed that the more he didn't say was beneficial to them and his unit. But the transfer was unexpected, but he heard Sergeant Nicholson saying he needed to be 'broken in' and he guessed that Talislanta was supposed to be it. He'd never deployed to a nuclear holocaust and some of the 4<sup>th</sup> squad members were talking about a rescue mission that had the trapping like this

so he just settled in for the ride.

“‘Turtleness’ is inexperience. When you start off you’re a turtle right? Slow and not very smart and eventually after a while you become a snake.”

“So am I still a turtle Corporal?” Still he didn’t understand if they were all snakes now or just him, but from Corporal Hammond’s voice it seemed that he was still a ‘turtle’.

“For the most part no, you’re starting to get faster but there’s still time before you’re a true snake.”

“So you’re a snake then?”

“I guess, though it was a traditional name from the past.” Not wanting to delve too much into their past Corporal Hammond smiled and checked his gear some more. “And I suggest you check you’re gear before we head on out.”

Nodding thoughtfully, he still needed to do that. “No problem Corporal.”

“Looks like you won the toss Master Sergeant.” Captain Juniper said as she walked into the offices.

“Great, where and when?”

“Talislanta, and within twenty-four hours we’ll be shipping out from Moshtar. We’ll fly over there, link up with the *Arrow* and be on our way. The general is getting coordinates and once he gets a satellite orbiting the planet, we-, you’ll be going in.” From her pocket she tossed a chip. “That’s the briefing for the mission, make sure you read it.”

“You’re not even coming along?”

“Can’t handle it?”

MSG Magnusson merely chuckled. “Ma’am...”

“Yeah I know, you’ve done it all, seen it all,” While talking she held her arms up and looked towards the ceiling in jest. “But yes, I’m coming along.”

Smiling he wanted to give his non-verbal thought on the subject but refrained from doing so. “Why isn’t the XO or PL going?”

“They’ll be in classes soon so I figure some non-coms can handle the action. And since you won the toss I’ll be on the carrier while you enlisted make it happen, fair?”

“Fair enough ma’am, fair enough...” And after that looked at his office, saw that there wasn’t really anything going on and closed the door, he had a mission to prepare for.

The pilot of the Nova tilted the nozzles slightly and gently applied some thrust to get out of the cargo bay. With the vacuum around the dropship the small thrust input made the craft rise slightly as the computer predicted the best window for insertion. Once clear of the *Arrow* she maneuvered the dropship as it began its approach to Talislanta with her smiling as DJINN did all the work and she merely watched as the planet approached. Within ten minutes the dropship was entering the atmosphere and minutes later the buffeting stopped and she took control of the craft as she guided it to the landing zone, noticing the massive amounts of clouds that formed and then they were in them, hurtling at Mach 2 and dropping as gravity and air resistance took hold of the control surfaces. A slight jiggle and she had control of the Nova, amazed at how it didn’t shake like the old Galaxy class dropship. Still, she had to still maintain watch as it was a big craft to handle and this was her first time on a drop mission with the new craft. Noticing the waypoint marker and as the clouds parted she noted a small village, the sensors already showing radiation levels and also how decrepit it was. The sensors scanned the village and nothing was detected, just a lone village in the middle of nowhere. From her history data the nuclear war had ravaged

the planet, the two governments finally using them in a bid for supremacy and as she guided the craft, stupidity.

However, as the ship flew along it was clear that nobody won, and they were there to pick up a girl that had possibly gotten lost here. "Landing site coming up." She said on the intercom as the sensors searched for any life. So far none and she immediately slowed the craft down and began to bring it into a hover. Having found a perfect location from above she guided the craft easily and shaking her head at the smoothness she settled the dropship down. After some sensor checks of nothing moving and noting the ease of controls she smiled as she switched to the command frequency. "Anvil Six, Creeper Two-One, set on the hide spot."

"Anvil Six, roger." A little bit of static eeked its way into the comms but otherwise it was understandable.

Hearing the engines shut down MSG Magnusson looked at everybody. And while everybody was getting out of their seats he fished an anti-radiation pill and swallowed it with a large sip from his camelbak. "Alright, gear up and Pryce, get everybody their pills." It was imperative that they took them before exiting. The pills on average lasted 24 hours, so once that door was open and then closed, it was on them to make sure that they took one.

"Okay everybody, take your pills." Staff Sergeant Pryce said quickly and watched everybody swallow one. Then he took his and double-checked his pouch with additional pills. The estimate was it wouldn't take long since they had the location of the ship the girl came in on but still...even Nicholson had his doubts while everybody checked their rifles. He wished that they could have brought along their regular weapons but the Relikor Personal Defense Weapons were supposed to be good enough. Firing caseless rounds it was far different than the EM weapons that they normally used and for this planet far more practical as well. Fed from a sixty round magazine it was sufficient for a firefight though they weren't here to start a prolonged fight and it seemed strange with the *Arrow* overhead anyway... "Nicholson you ready?"

"Roger, we're good." Sighing he waited until the door open. Not like Charbourg at all... As he waited he checked his weapon, chambering a round and setting it on safe. Too many unknowns in the place... But then again they'd dealt with Charbourg and its level of warfare, though it seemed here it was just dead. He was sure that the remaining inhabitants were eeking a life out of this rock, but so far he didn't see how. Hopefully they wouldn't have to deal with too many people that should have been dead still breathing and fighting.

"Okay, the dropship is staying here, and we good Staff?" MSG Magnusson said as he adjusted his backpack on his shoulders. Since he was the highest ranking he decided to carry the comm system in his backpack. He managed to get some snacks and some additional pills in the pockets. Also loaded were a few more fully charged batteries, just in case. Staff Sergeant Pryce carried a similar device, just in case if his gets shot or damaged. After adjusting the sling to his liking he let his weapon hang while he stood there. He watched the faces of the troopers, and noticed that Nicholson's team was more relaxed relative to everybody else. Then again they've been in such a situation before and no doubt felt the same as they did before.

After completing his checks Staff Sergeant Pryce nodded to MSG Magnusson. "We're ready." Taking a sip from his camelbak he wondered just what it would be like out there.

"Good," With a grunt he slapped the door mechanism and the ramp slowly lowered. "Anvil Six, Anvil Seven." He poked his head out of the door, along with his weapon at low ready just in case... and nothing but barren rock. At least that part was clear but the desolation of the place was evident, it was too quiet. Rubbing his nose to get rid of an itch he stepped off

the ramp and looked around. There was new growth happening but from the ash and devastation it would take a long time before this planet could be considered habitable again.

“Anvil Seven, Six.”

“Roger, we’re beginning the walk now.”

“Roger, out.”

“Not much for words is she?” MSG Magnusson told the wind as he stepped out slowly, while everybody else, taking his cue followed down searching the area for any threats. Nothing came at them so it must be clear. It was only an hour’s walk to the beacon but he wasn’t in any rush either... Looking towards Pryce to get his attention. “We’ll go as a column.”

“Roger, Matthais you got the rear.”

“I got it.” Michaels said as he didn’t want the new guy the duty of that. Besides he didn’t fully trust Matthais yet, even though he was considered ‘blooded’. Too many unknowns awaited them. Then again he always covered the rear on most patrols so it was more of a known role than anything else. Nobody else complained as they started out and headed towards the city.

“Vehicle.” Ayers said as she scanned the wreck ahead with her weapon scope. Preferring the M6 she still didn’t like the fact that the scope was non-magnifying, even though the squad was at the edge of the city. And what a sight that was, block after block of destroyed buildings lay ahead but she crouched as she eyeballed it. A transport, military looking anyway from the arches and the torn canvas around it. It was an anti-grav model for sure as she couldn’t see any tracks or wheelbases. That was the only reason why she mentioned it. Military training in recognition and common sense as there might be some survivors from a unit. If that was the case then she and the squad would have to play it careful.

After motioning everybody to take up positions Staff Sergeant Pryce crawled near her position. “Any movement?”

“Negative, just a derelict perhaps.” Keeping an eye on the vehicle nothing seemed to be happening except for the light wind blowing over the canvas, blowing it around slightly. The vehicle was in a mottled camouflage and showed signs of weapons fire against it, and the vehicle looked like it settled on the ground rather than crashed. But as she scanned around the vehicle it could have been a number of scenarios before the former occupants either left it or died.

“Alright, keep moving.”

“Got it.” Looking at her arm computer she saw the position indicator show past the vehicle. Nothing here to see and nothing to do with it...

MSG Magnusson only noted the vehicle as he walked by, seeing a couple skeletons lying in the back. The business of trying to survive... Adjusting the backpack on his shoulders he continued to walk along.

“There it is.” Staff Sergeant Pryce said as he saw the small ship in the park. No doubt there were looters but for some reason they didn’t spot any around here. Maybe this was the highest percentage of deaths... it was a city. It was so quiet with the exception of the wind that got to him. Nothing stirred that was alive anyway. Maybe there were animals roaming around? Pulling out a pair of binoculars he scanned around, selecting the various settings and seeing another derelict troop transport. Then he saw movement... “Movement, two o’clock.”

Ayers sighted in and waited until the form... showed up to be some kind of animal, a bear looking thing in her mind as Nieuw Friesland had its share from settlers before. She watched as it loped along, presumably looking for scraps. Apparently it wasn’t too interested in

the group of troopers that were staring at it through weapon scopes.

Everybody visibly relaxed and MSG Magnusson made the sign of 'let's move and get the mission done' with his hands and his eyes. To him this was creepier than most places where the living populated the area. With the living you *knew* things would come at you and have a good rough idea. Here it was anywhere as he picked his way through the rubble, intently scanning the area for anything other than them.

Staff Sergeant Pryce nodded and motioned Ayers to start heading to the small lander the girl used. He had the access code so getting inside wouldn't be too hard, if the girl used the security system at all... And once he set the perimeter minutes later he walked to the small access door and typed in the code, and when the door began to cycle he kept his weapon at the ready as it opened. Nothing jumped out at him and so he entered, slowly clearing the small lander and... nothing, she wasn't there. "Shit."

"What's wrong?" MSG Magnusson asked as he heard Pryce inside.

"She's not here."

"The fuck?" MSG Magnusson said as a simple retrieval mission got more dangerous. Cursing he kneeled near one of the troopers, Nicholson. "Anvil Six, Seven."

*Tell me you have good news* she thought as she opened the comms. "Six."

"Roger, she's not inside the lander, but we're gonna check out the area and see if she's on some kind of foraging errand or walking around."

*Fuck!* Looking at the timer they had plenty of time, but she didn't want to waste it. The general would be calling her within an hour and yeah... she knew it wouldn't be pretty. "Roger, do what you can and report back, out."

Shaking his head MSG Magnusson wished he won the coin toss to be upstairs at the moment. "Alright start checking things, maybe she left some notes."

"Roger." Staff Sergeant Pryce began the arduous task of trying to find some clues, and after an hour, found a possible lead. "Master Sergeant! I may have found something!"

Standing up while covering the approach to the lander he walked up. "What is it?"

"Some notes about wanting to check the east side of the city."

Climbing up he sat on the seat thankful it was something considered 'alive' and saw the display. "Going to head east from here, maybe I can see the effects." He read off of the screen, and looking at Staff Sergeant Pryce he rolled his eyes. "Yeah, nothing like going into a nuke crater."

Rolling his eyes in agreement he shut down the computer. "Looks like we're heading east Master Sergeant."

"I agree, son of a bitch, she should have stayed local." And to him staying 'local' meaning right here and not out and about. There was plenty of ways and reasons to collect data right here and right now. Not wherever she was now.

"True, but even then it wasn't very thoughtful of coming out here alone." He couldn't understand in his right mind why *anybody* would want to come to a nuclear devastated wasteland of a planet. Then again he didn't understand why anybody would want to nuke each other into oblivion. From what he saw so far it just wasn't worth it which made him shake his head to himself.

"Nope, which is why we're out here I guess. How long have we been by the way?"

"One second," Looking at the digital timer. "An hour and a half."

“Twenty-two and a half to go.” MSG Magnusson said as he stood up, age giving him some aches as he stood. “Yeah that was nice. Alright, let’s head east.”

“Roger. You want to fly in this?”

“That’s not a bad idea, but look how small it is, we walk unfortunately.” It wouldn’t hurt to do such a thing but he wasn’t familiar with the controls either. Besides what if some of the survivors attacked? No, it would have been better morally to stay with the troopers and go with strength in numbers rather than take a risk like that.

“Roger that.” Standing up he shut down the computer and stepped outside with MSG Magnusson. “Alright let’s get walking, east.”

Amid the nods he let Ayers still take point through the destroyed carcasses of vehicles and some skeletons could be found. As she walked she looked at the destruction wrought and wondered why it was so important and what was the point in all of it?

After a half an hour Ayers raised her clenched fist and kneeled beside a shattered vehicle. “Sergeant got a bridge.” Adjusting herself as her knee bit into the roadway she rested her weapon on the vehicle, pointing it towards the bridge. There wasn’t anybody there but you couldn’t be too sure. There were more cars and vehicles piled up, the last ditch attempt of the civilians to escape the wrath of the weapons that caught them anyway. And other than the wind blowing slightly there wasn’t anything else that broke the calm, unless she counted the sounds of her fellow troopers as they sat there as well, waiting for something to attack them, but so far nothing did. Other than the wind blowing there was nothing around to disturb them.

Stepping up close to her Staff Sergeant Pryce looked around the squad as well. Nothing but burned out buildings and crashed vehicles plus the dead carcasses of some animals. Shaking his head he looked towards the bridge. There was a considerable open area that they had to cross but they had to keep moving. “Okay I want a column formation on the road to the bridge, then we’ll see if we can cross it.” He didn’t want to use the *Arrow* for help even though it probably could as he knew the ship was sending out recce satellites to ascertain damage and for support to them. But he wasn’t sure if this region was already mapped. Looking towards MSG Magnusson he stood up and walked over. “Do you think they mapped this area yet?”

Listening and realizing it was a good idea, he held up a finger. “Anvil Six, Seven.”

“Six.”

“Rog, we’re towards the middle of the city now and can you give me a satellite image of the bridges of the city?”

“Standby.”

“Meanwhile move it out Pryce, burning daylight.” He had faith in the satellites above but he also needed to keep moving as the area was getting him down, though he expected the main part of the city to do worse to him... hopefully he should never see something like this again...

“Rog.” Motioning to Ayers he made her walk forward again. This was still creepy as the squad walked to the beginning of the bridge, and then they noticed it was destroyed in the attack. There was a viaduct on the bottom and after climbing down they crossed there.

“Anvil Seven, Six.”

“Seven.” Keeping his eyes peeled on the top of the bridge as they walked across the viaduct as quick as possible. It was still streaming water and nobody wanted to take a sip anyway as they had their own supply on their backs.

“Got a scan for you if you’re still stationary I’ll send it.”

“Standby we’re crossing anyway and it’s destroyed.” He motioned to Staff Sergeant

Pryce to the edge of the viaduct, seeing there was a small pathway up towards the other side of the bridge. And from the way it looked they were across the river as it was now a very small creek that flowed thinly on the ferrocrete. Once they were in a defensive position he pulled out the small datapad he had with him. "Six, Seven, send it."

"Standby, sending it."

Minutes later the download was complete. Opening up the file he guesstimated by looking around and found that they were able to continue into the shell of the city that probably was once proud. A small icon showed something that they needed: The position of the researcher was showing on the datapad. After zooming in a bit he was glad they found it or they would have used up the pills just walking around the whole place. Distance showed that she was roughly a kilometer east of their position, which wasn't too far by foot anyway. He had considered hotwiring one of the vehicles but so far they didn't look like they'd be operable anyway. "Good news, her beacon so far shows that she's a kilometer east of us."

"That's a relief, as I thought we'd be here forever." Staff Sergeant Pryce said as he scanned around him. Nothing was moving and the sky was so foreboding that he didn't want to imagine anything else. Though it was partly cloudy there was nothing remotely soothing about the sky, though the blue was a better color than the twisted colors of destruction. But that was of course when he looked around, not above him. Half of him wished he wasn't here but back on Friesland. At least there was life, here was just death.

"Yep, let's get moving then." Pocketing the datapad MSG Magnusson was grateful to have that nugget of information. Standing up he waited until the squad was moving up the small trail and followed in the march, still looking around at... nothing. Still he felt as though eyes were watching him but as he walked along he realized it was paranoia in a desolate place that was getting to him. The air was warm still but he knew he needed a bath, and one that decontaminated them as well. It was almost four hours of walking and everybody was a bit sweaty and the short breaks helped. Though with the gleaned information everybody seemed a bit more animated, maybe there was a slight rush in their step or maybe it was just the fact they had a definite direction? He didn't care as the squad made it up on the shattered bridge while they still headed east.

"It should be... right there." MSG Magnusson said as he looked through the imaging binoculars around the small mall that the beacon showed on the datapad. "Six, Seven."

"Six, what's up?"

"We're almost on top of the beacon for the researcher."

"Roger, anything else?"

"Negative, we're fine and everybody else is doing okay."

"Good to know, Six out."

Smiling and chuckling as the squad was hunched on the wall of a car park he motioned to Staff Sergeant Pryce. "Move out."

"Roger that. Ayers, move out." Though he moved forward to where she was to find an entrance to the mall that supposedly held the researcher.

After ten minutes of walking around the shattered mall they finally came upon a large hole from a window that had shattered. Cautiously the squad entered it and still nothing came at them, though there were plenty of corpses lying about and enough death that made more than a few choke down their nausea as they pushed through the store. A cursory glance at the datapad showed that Nadia was close, though how far was anybody's guess.

“Naida Bodden?” MSG Magnusson said out loud. Looking at the datapad he figured they were close.

Stepping into the main walking area Ayers scanned and looked at Staff Sergeant Pryce. “Which way?”

“Just walk around the mall, she should be here somewhere.”

“Roger Sergeant.” And with that she started walking slower, checking every corner while MSG Magnusson yelled out the researcher’s name constantly. As she walked up some stairs she quickly found herself facing a small pistol directly in her field of vision. Halting she saw a woman on her side, leg apparently broken and angry. Stopping she let her hands up, letting her weapon hang by its strap. “Uh, we mean no harm.”

“Who are you?” The woman asked, shaking her pistol in her face to accentuate the annoyance she had of the situation. Pain streaked her face but she was sitting on the stairs with one leg cocked back and one leg straightened and some blood could be seen.

“Who are you?” Ayers asked while she heard the rest of the squad shuffle in the background. She kept her weapon hanging by the strap as she looked her over.

“I’m Naida, and I would appreciate if your companion wouldn’t shout my name out to everybody.” She hissed slightly again shaking the pistol due to the pain this time.

“Well I’m PFC Ayers and we’re here to take you back.” She didn’t want to alarm the woman as she didn’t know how much of a hair trigger she was on. Being stuck in a place like this she’d be the same way.

“Back where?” Her arms were starting to tire from holding the weapon at the soldier’s face but she didn’t know what her loyalties were, yet.

“New Holland.”

“Oh, well it was a fine time of you showing up now, I could have used you all earlier when I slipped and broke my leg,” Naida adjusted herself and the bandage and promptly holstered her pistol and adjusted herself to lessen the pain, though that wasn’t working too well. “Really could have used you earlier. And are you going to stand there or help?”

Ayers nodded and stepped forward, while the rest of the squad moved around her, setting up a perimeter. “How long have you been here?”

“Here? Two hours at the most, I was collecting samples and I slip, I fall and then I break my leg. I managed to find some stuff to stop the bleeding but no luck with a splint,” Looking around she knew there was a senior person, all soldiers had them. Her father used to be in the army, and she knew he had to deal with them too. “Who’s the senior person here?”

“I am, Master Sergeant Magnusson, we’re here to take you back.” Moving past Ayers he apprised the woman on the ground. Finding her somewhat attractive he leaned against the stairway rail.

“Well, I’m not finished.” Defiance was lacking as she was too injured to really negotiate anything from her position. She noted all of the soldiers looked fairly clean except for some sweating. Their uniforms were of European Space Union pattern and they found her... they had to be legit.

“It doesn’t matter, we’ve been ordered to take you back regardless.” The last thing he wanted to deal with was as stubborn idiot who didn’t see the logic in what they were doing. Or they were doing what they wanted without concern for others. This was one of those times as he looked around the destroyed mall, no sign of life except the squad around him, which made him feel better and safer. “What are you doing so far from your ship?”

“As I told your underling, I’m here collecting samples.”

"I don't see anything here to look at." Though he did notice a small computer jutting out of a pocket.

"Well there is, all around you devastation, far as the eye could see." Naida said as she rested while the others applied a painkiller, which helped.

"Master Sergeant, I have a couple troopers out looking for something to splint her leg."

"Good, let me call it in that we've found her and arrange for a pickup." He wasn't in the mood to travel around a place like this and just walk on back, it took so long to get here he wasn't going to let an injured scientist slow them down simply because she wanted to come out here for herself.

"What do you mean, 'pickup'? I have my own ride a kilometer away."

"And we've been walking quite a few ourselves to get to this spot, so we're getting picked up."

"I don't have to go."

"Yes, you do as the brass wanted us out here to find you, and not worry too much about what you found here." MSG Magnusson walked away before the conversation could get worse. Scientists: Their search for knowledge was to be rewarded but sometimes it made them too stuck up to see that going in without an escort would have gotten her killed. And while he stood in the opening of a shattered store he shook his head and worried about the present. "Anvil Six, Seven."

Nothing.

"Anvil Six, Seven."

Static. He was sure that the radiation levels hadn't affected comms, maybe he needed to go outside. Motioning to Ayers to follow he did just that. "Anvil Six, Seven."

"Seven, Six."

A wave of relief washed over him as he was glad it was just the mall. "We've found the good doctor and we're getting ready for a pickup."

"Can't you make it back to her ship?"

"Roger, however she is severely wounded and figure it would be easier if our transport came to us."

"Regardless somehow you need to get the information from that ship as it is still of strategic importance to get it."

"Understood, we'll get back to it and see what we can do." Still of strategic importance? Shaking his head he wondered of what importance an irradiated rock was to the higher ups back on New Holland. Then again such data was worth something and now they had to do another small mission just to get to it. But he didn't feel like walking back. They still had to find a suitable landing spot for the Nova to pick them up, and it wasn't going to be here that was for sure.

"Roger that, Six out."

Sighing MSG Magnusson glanced at Ayers. "We gotta go back to her ship and get the data from it."

"Great." Ayers said as she continued to scan the area for any threats. So far none yet other than having to walk back to the small ship. It seemed pointless and she was more in the mood of leaving this place.

"Great indeed, let's get inside and tell your squad leader what's going on."

"You know we don't have to walk to get the information." Nadia said as she floated on

the painkillers that were administered to her. If her leg wasn't broken she could have walked on and still collected more data. She had listened to the conversation between the Master Sergeant and the squad leader. Grumbling in annoyance at the pain she felt she adjusted herself some more.

"We don't?"

"Nope, I send the data wirelessly already, though I'm sure with the radiation the signal is degraded but I know I send it all through my little datapad," Patting her pocket where she kept it she wasn't in any mood to make the walk back to her ship, at least not in this condition. If she hadn't broken it she'd be walking back now. "So basically is what I'm saying all the necessary information is here."

"That's good, I'll let higher know." MSG Magnusson strode outside and was thankful for that tidbit of information. "Anvil Six, Anvil Seven."

"Seven send it."

"Yeah looks like we got a break. Apparently the package has it with her so we're moving to look for an extract."

"Good, can you hook up the data and send it now?"

"I sure can, standby." Without hesitation he walked back to Nadia. "We're going to upload the data now instead."

Shaking her head in mirth she realized that if something happened to them now... and with a frown still unbuttoned the pocket and handed the datapad over. "Don't delete it."

"Well I need to access the information first." He handed it back.

"It works better outside doesn't it?"

"Satcomm yeah, we need to..."

"Somebody help me."

MSG Magnusson shook his head. "I got her, just move the perimeter closer."

"No problem Master Sergeant." Staff Sergeant Pryce said as he made the hand signals necessary. While nothing had bothered them he still didn't want to make too much noise.

After helping Nadia reach the outside he leaned her against the guardrail of the patio platform and unslung the radio. "Okay, give me the datapad."

"I got it, and I know this type of system." Nadia said disdainfully and hooked the datapad to the comms. After playing with the touchscreen she began to send the data to she assumed (correctly) to above them. Moments later the datapad beeped confirmation it was uploaded and she pulled it from the comms. "Good, now I don't suppose you have a plan?"

"Well, let's get inside first and then we'll work on a landing zone for the dropship."

"That's good, as we can leave as soon as... how big is it?"

"Fairly large, you know of a spot?"

"No, I was just curious if it was able to take us back."

"It will be." Turning his attention to the map on his datapad there were few choices. "Creep Two-One, Anvil Seven, radio check."

"This is Creep Two-Zero I hear you loud and clear."

"Roger, Anvil Seven out." That was good, the comms still worked, now he had to find a good spot to land... Scrolling east more on the map he found a likely area. It was the harbor that was more than likely a good spot, though they had to crawl through most of the wreckage of a warzone or just the obliterated remains of a city, to be more precise.

"Anvil Seven, Six."

Fumbling with the datapad as he was startled by the call. "Seven here."

“Rog, we got the upload and looking to destroy the scientist’s ship.”

Agreeing was one thing as they didn’t want any inhabitants coming over to visit, though if they wanted the data so bad they could take it from a live person. But as he looked around at the devastated wasteland there probably would be no chance of that anyway. “Roger that we’re working on an evac position, standby.”

“Roger, let the scientist know that we’re dropping a small rod on it.”

“Understood Six.” He turned his head to Nadia. “I hope you don’t have anything else important in that ship.”

Nadia thought of what else was important but to her the data was the most important thing. “No, not at all, why?”

“We’re going to destroy it from space.”

“I see, technology always advances when it comes to war.” She didn’t need to mention the world around them and how the ‘advancement’ of technology brought about its destruction.

*Indeed it does* MSG Magnusson thought to himself bitterly. Unfortunately most of the higher tech developments came to killing though he acquiesced it also helped people live longer. But as he looked around again he didn’t see any progress here. “Six, Seven cleared to drop, nobody’s near it.”

“Roger that, dropping in one minute.”

“Understood.” Looking at Nadia and gesturing with his head to look. “Want to watch it?”

Nadia laughed incredulously. “What? And see more destruction? No thank you.” With that she resigned to sit back down and nurse her injured leg. The painkillers were doing wonders for the pain but she knew they were going to start walking and needed something to help her. “Also, I know we’re going to be walking somewhere, but uh, I’ll need some kind of crutch or something.”

“Good point, Pryce!”

At the sound of his voice Staff Sergeant Pryce ran over. “Yes?”

“Nadia here is-,” A loud THWOK sounded in the air and he looked at the explosion of the rod impacting the landing site a kilometer away. Shaking his head he turned it back to Staff Sergeant Pryce. “Going to need some crutches, see if you can’t find something around here inside this mall.” He was going to suggest Sergeant Nicholson’s team but bit his tongue, it wasn’t his job and Pryce knew what to do.

“Full effect, nice hit.” Captain Juniper said as she looked at the reconnaissance satellite feed of the now destroyed landing ship that Nadia brought here. General Van Der Kut was very specific in that she not get back on that ship and she had to do what she had to do. If she owed the government then she did. But for now there was other business to attend to and that was the recovery of one of the warring government’s satellites. Turning away from the feed on the bridge she had another matter to concern herself with. “Do you think we can retrieve one sir?”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to maneuver to take one of their satellites back without denying them coverage.”

“Okay sir.” Even though she was the ground commander she still had to defer to the captain of the ship.

“Matter of fact in ten minutes we’ll be able to snatch one out of the sky.” Pressing the messenger system he instructed the cargo bay crew to suit up and prepare to take on one of the satellites. Not only was the ship tasked for support but also for limited information gathering,

and it was doing that as they floated above Talislanta.

“Yes sir.”

“Roger Master Sergeant.” With that he walked away and found Sergeant Nicholson “Hey I need your team to find something for the scientist so we either can carry her or she can use some crutches.”

Sergeant Nicholson nodded and twirled his finger in the air. “Bravo team form on me.” After waiting for them to come to him. “We gotta find the scientist some crutches or find something to use to help her move. If it comes down to it we carry her but we’ll wander around the mall and see if we can’t find anything,” He stood up and walked down towards the interior of the mall. “Follow me.”

Staff Sergeant Pryce nodded and readjusted the perimeter slightly but was satisfied that Nicholson took his team without delay.

“I see them Staff, good job.” MSG Magnusson said as he watched the smoke twirl up which was visible over the horizon of derelict buildings. He looked at the time and now it was almost three hours on the ground. It was a good thing that there was a beacon as he wiped the sweat off his brow or they’d be here forever. And a place like this? No way would he would have wanted to. Though his mind noticed that most of the buildings remained largely intact which led him to think that either neutron bombs were used? “Nadia, do you thing neutron bombs were used?”

“I would think so, though most of the surrounding area is still relatively... ‘clean’ if that’s what you mean, as residual radiation isn’t too bad. Matter of fact given a decade or a few years it’ll be habitable again.”

“So there-“

“There was a war so make no mistake... ‘Master Sergeant’, there was a nuclear war and apparently you missed most of the other details without asking.”

“Such as?”

“Well, obvious military targets were hit with nuclear weapons while it seems that the cities and most large civilized areas were hit with neutron bombs, at least that’s what I think anyway.” She had seen most of the devastation only ten hours ago before touching down on the planet. Apparently from what she could tell there was a lot of scarring but she wouldn’t be surprised if there were survivors. And given the human race’s proclivity to survival, there would be survivors. She just didn’t want to deal with them that was all. Dealing with these people was enough. But in their favor they were here to bring her back to civilization. Though it did come at a price. The institution she belonged to didn’t approve of her wanting to come here in the first place and she wasn’t too thrilled about her project. But she wanted to see man at his most destructive and she got more than she bargained for.

“Understood.” He himself didn’t want to argue as he really didn’t know what was going on here. Well he understood so far and was grateful that he didn’t live in a society as bad as this one. Nuking their planet? For what end? Shaking his head he seemed to have offended Nadia. “Wasn’t shaking my head at you, just at the thought of this planet, one irradiated rock that’s all.”

“Goes to show you the lunacy of politics and how far people will go when they are left unchecked.”

“I think you’re right on that one.” MSG Magnusson agreed completely with that last phrase. Given the Troop’s unwritten ‘no politics’ rule (especially after dealing with Second Squadron’s) he was glad that the politics of the Dutch Protectorate wasn’t as bad as here.

Sergeant Nicholson hated this place as he scoured the destroyed shops for anything that may be used for a brace or a crutch. Most of the interior was ravaged but he saw clumps of skeletons (presumably hiding from the blast but didn't make it) and other human debris around the area. The rest of his fireteam was behind him but compared to Charbourg (where the country was purely devastated by war) this was almost a breeze. Still, he managed to find something that would help. And apparently it was another person who was using crutches that died from war's devastation. Picking them up he figured they would have to suffice for Nadia, though he preferred they use a stretcher and get her out that way. But, as he looked around some more he did see an ambulance in the distance. "Two-Four, Two-Four Bravo."

"Two-Four."

"We got some crutches, break. But we see an ambulance; do you want me to go to it?"

"Negative, bring the crutches. As soon as you get back we're heading out." The idea was to not go into a hospital as they didn't see any on the way here and that would just add to the time they were on planet. A few hours were good enough for a rescue but a day? Sheer lunacy in his mind as he stood there waiting.

"Two-Four Bravo, roger." And after closing the comms he walked over to the crutches and headed back with his team to Staff Sergeant Pryce.

"Ahh look at that, some crutches." Nadia said not wanting to ask the question of where Sergeant Nicholson got them. And as she was handed them she shook her head. "I don't want to know."

"Know what?" Sergeant Nicholson said as he retracted his arm.

"Where it came from." Nadia said matter-of-factly, there was too much reality in the situation as it was and this wasn't any different.

"Satellite secure sir." The helmsman said offhand. The *Arrow* was maneuvered back over the ground team for tactical support.

"Good now bring us back over the team down below."

"Yes sir."

"Okay, now we head here." MSG Magnusson pointed on the datapad to Staff Sergeant Pryce. "It's another kilometer to the east but it should land us in the small harbor they have. If we have to we commandeer a boat and we do a pickup somewhere else, or off the boat, doesn't matter but once we get there the Nova should be able to pick us up."

Nodding as he understood and looked at the map from where they were to the location was fairly simple: Head east and they'd hit the city and the harbor. Not too difficult. "Got it Master Sergeant." Motioning for them to head out they had to keep it slow for Nadia who had to suffer the crutches. At a kilometer her arms would be shot but she'd have to endure. The whole walk was only a few kilometers at best but to them it felt like forever.

"We stay in the mall as much as possible. When we use stairs we have to double up on Nadia and help her up or down."

"Thanks." Nadia said as she started the trek down the mall.

After finally finding an exit out of the mall there was nothing but flat land and a whole lot of empty cars and other vehicles. Staff Sergeant Pryce had an epiphany and walked to one of the

vehicles.

“What are you doing?” MSG Magnusson asked as he saw him try and start it without any success.

“EMP, or Electro-Magnetic Pulse Staff Sergeant, there’s no way you can start the vehicle,” Nadia said blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes. Resting on the crutches, which were slightly shorter than her she merely shook her head. “Face it, we’re walking, good idea though.” And with a turn she fell in with the troopers guarding her as they continued east.

“Anvil Six, Anvil Seven.”

“Six go ahead.”

“We’re moving east of the mall now and looking for a suitable pickup zone for Creeper Two-One.”

“Roger, Six out.”

“Not much for words is she?” Nadia said as she moved next to MSG Magnusson.

“Oh look a monorail track.” MSG Magnusson said as he looked around what was left of the city. All the windows were shattered and there were crashed vehicles all over the place. Long ago fires raged in this part of the city when it was attacked but now only burned out husks served as a reminder of the horror that engulfed the city.

“So what about it?” Nadia said as she stopped and rested for a minute. While everybody else kneeled she stood up. Getting a nonverbal hint she steadied herself on MSG Magnusson’s shoulder and sat down carefully, her leg still aching and the painkiller was still working.

“We could go up on that, and cross the harbor.” Pulling out the datapad he scrolled to where they were and sure enough the track went across the harbor to more flatter land.

“I see, Nicholson find us an entrance.”

“Roger that Sergeant.” Motioning for his team to follow he walked and after a few minutes found an entrance. “Found one!” He yelled and waved to Staff Sergeant Pryce.

“Looks like the break is over.” Nadia said as she sat up and motioned for MSG Magnusson to help her up. Once she was up she shook her head, and ‘walked’ to the entrance with everybody else. The doors were closed and she watched MSG Magnusson press against the door without it budging. “Maybe security lockdown?”

“Probably, though...,” An idea popped in his head. Nobody would care anyway as he checked his rifle. “Get everybody back.”

“What are you going to do?” Nadia asked as she rested uncomfortably on the crutches.

“I’m going to shoot the door, as it’s only glass, and not that thick.” And without waiting for a response he selected burst and fired a few bursts at the door, with the glass shattering appropriately from the bullets. “See?”

Shaking her head and laughing slightly she rubbed her ears. “Could have warned us.”

“I did,” Winking as he stepped forward MSG Magnusson smiled. “I did say I was going to shoot the glass.” Climbing carefully around the other shattered door he motioned for them to come along. He kicked at the glass on the floor and looked around at the station. It was very well done with the building designed for function and appearance, something some people never got but whoever the building designer was got it right in his opinion. The air was stale and hot due to the doors being closed. With the door now ‘open’ the cool air rushed in and began to circulate fresher air into the building.

“Nicholson take point we have to help her up.” Staff Sergeant Pryce said as he grasped the crutch from Nadia and hefted her onto his shoulder. With Ayers helping and following the

rest of the squad they made it up to the landing platform without incident. Another few bursts from MSG Magnusson's weapon another door was created to the monorail track. After sliding through the hole they all walked on the monorail track and kept heading east. From the higher vantage point the destruction was evident. And from their perspective the harbor wasn't spared as the multitude of ships were barren, just sitting on the water, their owners never to come back.

As they kept walking along the monorail track and as he cleared a building Sergeant Nicholson saw something move that wasn't natural and raised his fist quickly. "People, two o'clock." And he kneeled and trained his weapon on them. They had their back to him and he saw only one armed individual, maybe two and they were one hundred meters away.

Staff Sergeant Pryce while crouching walked over to Sergeant Nicholson's position. "Where are they?"

Sergeant Nicholson pointed quickly as the people were slowly walking the man with the weapon looking around. As soon as he realized that the man was about to look in their direction he crouched on the monorail track out of sight. Staff Sergeant Pryce did the same and waited for a minute and slowly peeked over the side of the track. Still the group was oblivious to the armed party on the monorail track. Apparently the echoes worked in their favor as the group slowly moved south out of the view behind a building as they continued to search the area. Staff Sergeant Pryce stood up and watched carefully, keeping the squad from moving as he crept forward. Looking on the other side of the monorail track he saw it was clear of anybody. And if there was anybody he couldn't tell but he watched the small group continue on its way south. "Seven, Two-Four."

"Seven."

"They're moving south."

"Are they still going that way?"

"Rog, still heading south."

"Standby and we'll wait them out, as the last thing when we get picked up is a gang coming after us." And to his history the first time they didn't shoot at a hostile group. Though he was sure that there were more hostiles in the universe to deal with as he crouched beside Nadia, who did her part by lying on the track as best as possible. Her muted cries of pain annoyed him but he focused on the here and now.

"Understood," Motioning to Sergeant Nicholson to head back down the monorail track he kept an eye on the corner. "Recommend we hole up in the monorail station?"

"Good idea."

After ten minutes everybody was back in the monorail station, the first human contact with the natives left them with a nervousness of the feeling they weren't alone and now had to do something. But they couldn't wait forever and needed to get to a safe extraction spot so they could get off this rock.

"Okay we go now, and hopefully they won't be looking for us." MSG Magnusson said as he helped Nadia on the track again and started a slow walk. He was starting to like the weapon they carried and hopefully he would add it to his arsenal, or at least the Troop would. If he couldn't have his cone bore rifle this would have to do. Though as he walked he had a better idea as this mission was going long past finished. "Staff Sergeant Pryce set up a perimeter, we'll see if we can't get picked up here."

*Not a bad idea* Staff Sergeant Pryce thought as he directed Sergeant Nicholson to do what was told of them.

"Creper Two-One, Anvil Seven."

“Creeper Two-One.”

“Roger we’re ready for pickup, we are three kilometers east of your position, once we have visual we’ll deploy smoke.”

“Creeper Two-One we’re on the way.”

“Okay, Staff Sergeant Pryce we’ll use the red smoke.”

“Got it, how long?”

“Ten minutes or so, but let’s worry about security first.” The sun was starting to begin its climb downwards and MSG Magnusson didn’t want to stay and see the sunset. There would be plenty more elsewhere if things went right.

“Creeper Two-One we have you visual, deploying smoke.” Motioning to Staff Sergeant Pryce to toss the smoke grenade he hoped they would see it. The grenade rolled on the track and finally stopped, and began to billow red smoke. Idly he hoped that the smoke wouldn’t be seen by that group they had seen earlier. Even then they were ready for one armed individual and a group of unarmed people as if that was the only threat then they would have done alright. As he watched the dropship angle in for a pseudo landing he realized that it wasn’t fear of combat, it was the fear of the unknown that kept him from firing at the group. Had there been more lurking around it would have been worse. Only MSG Magnusson’s idea saved them more heartache by getting them out of the area.

A few moments later. “I have your red smoke Anvil Seven.”

“Good that’s us, over.”

“Standby.”

MSG Magnusson watched as the dropship’s engines swiveled and the pilot brought the dropship in a hover above the monorail track. From the looks of it the aircraft wouldn’t be able to set down. “Creeper Two-One you won’t be able to land but your ramp needs to be lowered.”

“Roger.” And the dropship lowered itself some more, the ramp just centimeters above the track.

“Hold it there we’re coming aboard.” Motioning to the squad to hurry up he assisted Nadia in getting aboard as well. After doing a double-check while the ship stayed in a near perfect hover everybody was accounted for and he closed the ramp door while everybody else strapped in, to include Nadia. “Okay we’re all aboard, let’s get off this rock.”

“Roger that, hold on.” After adjusting the ship a bit the pilot slowly moved forward, happy the controls were responsive as the flight control system adjusted accordingly and minutes later it was leaving the harbor and the planet below.

“It’s good to be aboard.” MSG Magnusson said as he took off his clothes. For the return there was a decontamination process set up and appropriately garbed men and women ushered them through the process. One station was showers and others were more washing facilities as each trooper was individually checked for radiation exposure. All was supervised and carefully monitored as each were cleaned and disposed of their radioactive garments. The weapons and equipment was separately cleaned and once the radiation levels were acceptable, were released for medical processing.

Captain Juniper waited at the end of the process and when MSG Magnusson was finally cleared she walked with him back to his quarters. “Have fun down there?”

“Yeah, it was a blast ma’am. Next time you’re going to see how destructive people can be.”

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