

Trans-Hub Command

By Tim Macauley

“Oh baby, you got some tense muscles back here. You got wicked knot on your left shoulder blade. You feel that? Too much tension, sweetie. That admiral...he working you too hard. You deserve more PT. Lucky for you, they send you to us.” Samantha cooed into Lieutenant Shanafelt’s ear. He grinned happily, his eyes firmly shut. He was sporting only wildly vibrant swim trunks that depicted a blue, blocky cartoon character, some pop culture throwback from long ago. He was a week into his vacation, and already he had developed a nice dark tan. With every day that passed, he could feel the stress of combat fading further and further away. He leaned forward on a deck recliner, wincing occasionally at the merciless hands of his masseuse, while two other women, whose names escaped him, gave him his first pedicure. He had wrestled with the ‘manliness’ of a man getting a pedicure, but he was grateful the spa had convinced him otherwise. It was an unforgettable experience to have several relaxation specialists working on him at once.

“Your whickywacker, sir,” a waitress said, presenting a tall blue beverage on a serving tray. She was dressed in a classy Chinese silk cheongsam robe that covered her entire frame. “Here at Copacabana’s Lucky Palace, we make this drink a little extra special. The mixologist adds a drop or two of essence of celery and then garnishes the rim with a sprig of fresh rosemary, aromatized by flame. We hope you enjoy.”

“Xièxie,” Shanafelt said, raising the glass to his lips. He could smell the complex mix of three seemingly-incongruous ingredients all blended together: rum, pineapple citrus and rosemary. It was an extraordinary sensory experience. He tilted the glass and let the effervescent liquid trickl—

GHA-GIZZZZ! A tremendous burst of static assaulted every one of Shanafelt’s senses. His entire field of vision suddenly flooded into a field of white with black crinkly pixels dancing throughout. His eyes flared and his pulse soared, the sudden shock to his system nearly put him into arrest. His body behaved as though it were short for air, his torso rigid and his mouth gasping wide. He could hear a man’s voice talking in the room. It was calm and deliberate. He focused on the voice as the only lifeline he had. His brain recognized it as familiar, but he couldn’t visualize a face or a name.

“Just keep breathing, Lieutenant, and focus on the timbre of my voice. Focus on my words,” the voice said. “The barrage of static you’re experiencing right now will recede in the next half minute and everything will be made clear again. You are in a safe place. No one here will harm you, and you are amongst friends.” There was a slight pause. “Well, friends and business associates.”

“Which one are you?” Shanafelt said with a dry, raspy voice, as though he’d slept with his mouth open. His head rolled side-to-side, like a newborn struggling to support the weight of its own head. His eyes remained flared with a manic look, giving the impression as though he were sussing out the room even though he was still snowblind.

“The latter for now, but we’re working toward the former, if you like our product,” The voice confided. “This is the only downside to our goods. But in all fairness, I did give you a full disclosure beforehand. I’m going to remove the squid peripheral now and your own neural-net will regain administrative control.”

The metallic squid on the back of Shanafelt’s cranial retracted its tentacles and the lieutenant felt an instant relief of pressure. *I’ve had an external squid?!* His brain scrambled to connect the dots. Squids weren’t common at all these days. A relic from the past, harkening to a time before subdural implants, when nanotechnology was in its infancy and neural-nets only a dream. These days, you really only heard them referenced in vice busts. He had seen a news piece recently where the anchor was bemoaning the growing rise in use of squids by the ‘new youth’ generation, who were shirking their responsibilities for the war effort and instead escaping into fantasies while relaxing on the sands of

Copacabana.

Copacabana...fantasies? Oh God. He palmed the back of his head as the details came flooding back to him. He had wire-tripped for his first time. He felt a mix of emotions, remembering the joy and peace of the Lucky Palace—a memory which felt wholly real even now, conflicting with the knowledge that it was all a fabrication. Reality remained a harsh mistress. He felt a deep pang of depression.

“You’re going to crash now a tiny bit, just as we had discussed. But don’t worry, you’ll soon level out.” The voice said. “We’ve got something if you need some ballast.”

Shanafelt’s vision returned now and he looked around the room, confirming what he already knew. He was in a steel-fabricated unit manufactured by the Accord. In an ironic gesture, they had the audacity to call them ‘suites’. There were thousands of suites in New Eden, including several hundred aboard the Arlight, submerged in the brine of the Atlantic Ocean at this very moment. *Better to be in this one more so than others*, he thought to himself. He was sitting in an old office swivel chair, with an extended back and neck brace. He could feel the rough upholstery of the seat beneath him and remembered where it had been patched with duct tape. A large holo-deck table filled most of the room and an assortment of cargo containers filled much of the rest. The air was stale and cold. All but one of the fluorescents in the ceiling had burned out long ago, and the one that remained emitted a sad, tobacco-stained hue. An LRV mechanic’s service light with a small exposed incandescent bulb had been jury-rigged to the wall and it winked intermittently on and off, casting shadows on the otherwise melancholy gray sides of the room.

A tall, dark man stood in front of him. He spoke as he manually retracted the tentacles into the squid.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Lieutenant. You’ll recall my name is Ikinya, and that scrappy, nefarious-looking individual over there is my associate, Cedro.” Cedro tapped two fingers to his brow.

“And THAT was our free five-minute technology demonstration. How was your first foray into wire-tripping? Everything that you hoped for, hmm?” Ikinya asked.

Having regained his equilibrium and normal biometrics, Shanafelt now felt an overwhelming driving desire to return to the Lucky Palace.

“I want to go back. Just....just please, give me one more demo.”

“I’m sorry, lad, we can’t do that. Not for free, we can’t. Cedro and I have got to make our way through this world. The Accord doesn’t house and feed us. The gods have given us each gifts to get through this life....our gift seems to be moving illegal wares.”

Cedro spoke up now for the first time. “Things have been hot lately, boss, what with the recent Chosen invasion. Might be not such a bad idea to stow the squid for awhile.” He was to play the good cop in this charade.

“Yeah?” Ikinya asked, ignoring Shanafelt’s face, which was piqued with interest.

“I think it would be wise if we laid low for the time being, that’s all. You always said to follow my gut, and that’s what it’s saying now.”

Ikinya glanced at the lieutenant. “Suppose we were to rent our squid to you, Lieutenant....”

“Oh yes, that would be very—that would be an acceptable arrangement. I’m sure it would be quite a morale booster for the men. We would be discrete, I swear it.”

Ikinya feigned as though wrestling with the dilemma. "We'd program it to match only your own biometrics, so there'd be no sharing of it, you understand? It would be a morale booster only for you. And we could leave you with three virtuals... 'The Lucky Palace', 'Fighter Ace of the Battle of Athens', and...."

"Maybe an old one? Like 'Memphis 1950s'?" Cedro suggested.

"Yes, a classic. Slow, lazy, uneventful. Absolute paradise."

Shanafelt rubbed his hands together excitedly. "Are there time limits on each?" he asked.

"No, so you'll need to be responsible. Set the timer on the squid before you go in. We recommend no more than three hour stints at a time."

"Oh, wonderful...just...wonderful." The lieutenant had almost a reverence to his voice.

"Of course, there is the matter of payment that needs be discussed." Ikinya said, moving to close the deal. "Normally, our rate is 10 grams for a squid rental, plus an additional 10 for each virtual, but seeing how you're in a position of authority and influence....maybe we can offer the whole package for 30 grams, and in exchange you distribute single-use five-minute demos to other...interested parties. For every customer you refer to us, we'll be sure you get compensated...in grams...or perhaps in newer virtuals...."

"Fine, that would be just fine." The lieutenant said accommodatingly. "Can I tak—"

The pneumatic pumps on the door hissed to life as it suddenly slid open. Cedro moved with shocking speed, grabbing the squid and thrusting it behind his back as six men in full Accord combat battleframes strode into the room. Three of them were assaults, one a medic, and two were dreads. The dread nearest to Shanafelt retracted the sun visor back into his suit. It was none other than the Admiral himself.

"Lieutenant." He said, with a grizzled voice.

"Admiral, sir!" Shanafelt snapped to attention and saluted. Nostromo reciprocated the gesture and then glanced at Ikinya and Cedro.

"Sir," Shanafelt spoke up, "these are the two fixers who assisted us last summer...the two who ran the blockade to deliver fuel cells for pylon 14 during the *bei* offensive."

The admiral made a grunting sound of recognition. "I remember. Fixers!" He let out a sharp bark of a laugh. "Smugglers, more like."

"We prefer 'handymen'." Ikinya said with a pleasant smile. "Handy to know when you get in a bind. It was our honor, truly, to assist you with pylon 14. It's not every day that an ordinary citizen can do their part for the war, to—how do your speeches always put it? 'commit fully of oneself to the glory of New Eden'? A beautiful sentiment. Couldn't be better phrased."

Nostromo turned square with Ikinya and looked him firmly in the face. The admiral's right eye was slightly pinched and both were cupped by shadowed ringlets wrought by stress and age, but they still shone with a bright sea-blue tint and—damn if it didn't make an impression. You could read a hundred stories inside their pools.

There was an off-kilter diagonal spatter of mud that covered one-third of his face, and his hair stood disheveled at such an angle that Ikinya was reminded of tectonic geologic formations, as though the bulk of his hair were one giant rock

slab that had been thrust up and to the side.

The admiral placed both hands on Ikinya's shoulders. "Your people thank you for your service. Now my war council must convene. Stay if you'd like, go if you must. Although it might do you good to hear of the Chosen troop formations we've observed. This being your neck of the woods and all." Ikinya made a short bow of the head and then retreated with Cedro into the back corner of the room.

Cedro looked slightly distressed, on account of the mechanical squid that was presently hidden on the base of his back, underneath his combat-tunic. The invasive device had somehow not powered down correctly and was presently attempting to dock along the base of his spine. It was all Cedro could do to not cry out in pain when the squid thought it had acquired a node and went for a docking. Ikinya discretely pulled two peta-clips out of his pocket. He let the centimeter-wide round discs fall to the floor, crushing them firmly with the heel of his combat boot. It was so rare these days to use physical drives for localized content—that alone was a telltale sign that they likely held contraband. If he'd been caught holding, their situation would have been dire. Possession of virtuals was a Class C crime by itself, but intent to distribute could be a capital offense under present leadership. *Very present*, he thought. *And pylon 14 wouldn't save us.*

The Admiral moved forward to the large holo-deck table in front of him and leaned forward on it with his knuckles. "We fought well today, warriors. We took them unawares at the Shen-dai Valley and pushed hard toward Passeio dos Mortos." The admiral scattershot a topographic map inlay to each of their viewports.

"First, the figures. Taggard?" He glanced expectantly toward the medic.

"We had 21 casualties today, two of which are psych cases that I feared were already liable to break prior to this engagement. Sadly, we had three fatalities. Tanzer, Niskanen and McLellan." He bowed his head and placed his right fist on the roundel of his left shoulder. Everyone else followed suit.

"On the good news front, however....there were 37 Chosen left on the battlefield." He smiled meekly and the room gave a tempered collective huzzah. "We found several pieces of possible intel already and the eggheads at NIMA are already pouring over them for a cipher."

"Admiral," Taggard continued, "your previous observation about the enemy's use of primitive jewelry to denote rank...sir, it appears to be valid. We again found chokers such as this one," He tossed a filthy, crudely-made necklace on to the holo-deck. It was little more than a combat boot shoelace threaded with three incisors, two lug nuts, and a shriveled, curled piece of leather. "Notice the aranhas teeth. Most of their warriors don't have them. But we believe it's more than just decorative in nature, as again, the one who was commanding today's battle also had the teeth to show for it. These...totems...do seem to be their equivalent of chevrons....their need to denote authority, rank."

Nostromo nodded, a grim look festooned on his face. "So they're organizing. They are...in essence...advancing. They gravitate toward hierarchy. This is worth remembering." He held his index finger upright against his forehead and looked around. Several soldiers in the room nodded in silent agreement, all eyes remaining on the necklace.

"Oh and that shriveled little piece of leather...Yeah, that's an ear." Taggard grimaced. "It's unclear which...which side it came from. Which....species I mean....us or them."

Lieutenant Shanafelt still felt wary. He couldn't look away from the ear. Going from the bliss he'd found on the beach to the present meeting was like a reckless glider ride, hitting all the peaks and valleys of human emotions. Already he could see the danger in the lows becoming even deeper once he allowed himself to escape with the squid. Normally,

today would have been 'just a day'....because of the human mind's remarkable ability to adjust to dire circumstances. But now that he'd tasted something better, it caused a paradigm shift. It convinced him that things were worse than he normally perceived them to be. It reminded him of a buddy he'd had in boot camp who'd talked about his experimentation with LSD. His friend said once you tried it, you'd never see the world the same way again, it would expand your mind. You would see things more honestly. *Is that how I see things now? His thoughts wandered. Is this what the world is like when it's honest with me?*

Shanafelt felt a trickle of sweat run down his brow. He mopped his forehead and struggled to collect himself. It was important that he contribute to this war council meeting. He had to be noticed.

"A fine day for the Accord," he piped in, with as solid a voice as he could muster. "We've been busy prepping ordinance for tomorrow's sorties. Your logistical supply chain is solid, Admiral, and Trans-Hub awaits your command."

The admiral found his lieutenant's demeanor often a tad too unctuous for his liking and instead of replying, he turned from the holo-deck and paced slowly back and forth, lost in thought.

"Admiral." the other dreadnaught, Kingsley, spoke up. "Regarding another subject I wish to put forward, with respect, sir, I think you put yourself at too great of risk today." The admiral made a *pffft* sound, annoyed at what he perceived as coddling.

"I'm serious, sir." Kingsley looked about at the rest of the advisors. "The admiral is too critical to our operations to be taking the chances that he took today. His antics...." Kingsley sighed. "Sir, your antics today on the battlefield would be laudable—worthy of accolades and merits—if you were *anyone* but you. You showed the energy of a young buck and complete command of the theater...far be it from me to take you out of your element, sir....to take you away from what seems to get your life's blood pumping the most, but....sir, I spent the entire battle fretting over your safety and covering your flanks. I think you've become something bigger than yourself for the war effort. You *are* the Accord, sir. Your voice, and your likeness...it would be catastrophic, gods-forbid, if something were to befall you."

Everyone's eyes were on the admiral. Ikinya was especially curious to see how this played out. It wasn't every day that he and Cedro got to witness the inner sanctum of the Accord. *All families have drama*, he thought.

"Your concern, Captain, is registered." The admiral said, with rather icy undertones. They were usually on a first-name basis, so the use of rank said much and more. "I will take it under advisement for future engagements."

Kingsley held his stare for another second before acquiescing with a nod and turning away.

"The biggest concern from today," the admiral went on, "is that they tossed it. They bloody well tossed it."

"Tossed it, sir? I don't follow." It was O'Rourke who spoke; assault, 2nd class. "Both sides fought and both sides suffered casualties, but we prevailed."

"They TOSSED it!" He turned and slammed the holo-deck surface with both palms. "They hardly made an effort today. It was as though....as though they were sacrificing themselves for some...greater...endeavor. To what end, I know not." He turned back and resumed his brooding.

"Perhaps they wanted to observe our squad tactics? Perhaps to see how fast we adapted to changes in the battlefield?" Ensign Hildegaard suggested. The admiral didn't deign the suggestion even worthy of a word, dismissing the idea with a wave of his hand, his eyes lost in the shadows of the wall.

“Sir,” Malsey, the most junior assault in the room spoke up, “if I may, perhaps they wanted to see which comm frequencies we use during combat? It *was* curious that SIN coverage went down during today’s fight. Might be they’re getting better with technology and have some form of k-band scanner, able to detect what channels we resort to when SIN goes down.”

“Not bad, son, not bad. What’s your name?” Nostromo looked up at him.

“Malsey, sir. 3rd Battalion, Teresopolis.” It was the third time that Malsey had given the admiral his name, but he didn’t let it faze him. He was fortunate enough to sit in on today’s war council, serving as a proxy for engineer Beck who was indisposed at the moment.

“Well, Malsey, I think that’s unlikely. Our SIN coverage is spotty enough as it is, even outside of combat...they have ample opportunity to test what spectrum we communicate on without sacrificing nearly two score of their infantry.”

“Perhaps,” a voice blurted out from the back of the room, “it was to goad you into pushing deeper into the jungle. To make you think Passeio dos Mortos is ripe for sacking. But in reality...perhaps it’s a carefully crafted trap. Perhaps that base is true to its namesake—the passage of death.”

The admiral looked up sharply at Ikinya and extended a hard, boney index finger at him. He made eye contact with all the others but never moved his finger. “That smuggler there—”

“Handyman,” Ikinya said under his breath.

“—has better insight on the matter than all the rest of you lot.” He paused. “The Chosen are not a mindless collective. They continue to demonstrate forward thinking and non-traditional military tactics. The level of self-sacrifice for the advancement of their greater agenda is admirable, to say the least. If I had 200 warriors with that level of commitment, I could win this war before the year is out.”

Shanafelt felt a shiver deep inside. He knew he should be stressed about the countless number of tasks that awaited him on the morrow—twenty-two combine trailers were expected with supplies, three kilns would be down for maintenance, sixty-seven green recruits would be arriving, and Nostromo had asked him to personally escort a member of the media around the grounds for a puff piece on the force. But right now, all he wanted to do was to slink off to his own hard bunk and shut the world out for a little longer. The smallest of smiles crept up on his face. Damned if he didn’t want to finish his pedicure.

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