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Cantrell stood with the ocean before him and the cluster of huts on the beach behind him. He didn't look back.

The boxy deployment boat squatted in waist-high water twenty meters out. He could see a slice of the men at the front corner turrets through the machine gun slits. The ocean was so clear and the orange-yellow sun so bright he could see beach sand heaped up where the front end had pushed in.

Prow. The word sneaked into the top of his mind like an infiltrator passing barbed wire and sensor drones. The front end of a seagoing boat was called the prow.

He shook his head, like a cow back home twitching its tail to shake off a fly. No need for fancy words.

The line of human soldiers splashed into water warm as a bathtub and the shade of blue that gave the planet the name Azureseas. For a reason he couldn't fathom, Ross sounded it out in his mind. A-zhoor-sees. To avoid any discharge of the boat's

reactive armor, they followed a looping path to the boat's open ramp at the back. Cantrell sucked protein goo from the straw inside his helmet and trudged along. He got deeper and the water seemed to make his legs heavier inside the boots and the shin plates of his battle armor. Little blue crawly things burrowed away from his feet.

He tried not to step on them. They didn't threaten people so why not leave them alone?

He didn't look back at the cluster of huts. He didn't need to. From behind came the smells of fire and smoke. Just like being around the burn pile in a field just cleared of brush back home. There was another smell, like roasted meat, but different. Something fruity in its smell too, like a banana or that yellow thing like a banana his buddy Armando talked about from his homeworld. Plant- something?

This time, the defenses in Cantrell's brain kept the word from reaching him.

Whatever the word was, funny how a creature looking like a cross between a dinosaur and a six-legged chicken could smell like both meat and a piece of fruit.

Cantrell shrugged shoulders bearing his slung rifle and thirty-kilo pack. His platoon had been given its orders. The creatures in the village—

He blacked out for a second or two. His legs carried on without him, brought him another sloshy step toward the extraction boat. Fear followed for a moment, but just a moment. The civilian contractors at the island base told them blackouts were normal, a side effect of hypno training and the trauma care nanobots deployed in their bloodstreams. Nothing permanent. They'd go away after their tour of duty on Azureseas.

The creatures were a threat to human visitors to this planet. He'd been told that but couldn't remember where. They'd built the cluster of huts from palm-like fronds and bark by instinct. Like beavers and dams. Burning the huts and killing the creatures was pest control. Just like plinking tree cats threatening the chicken coop, back home.

And he'd get the same hug and kiss from Nanette when he got back.

And maybe this time, as a man and a soldier, she might give him a little more.

But he wasn't home yet. He trudged on through the water. The boat's engines idled. The gunner at the front right corner kept his medium machine gun trained on the beach but turned most of his attention to the line of soldiers. A thumbs-up. Over the radio, he said, "Good hunting?"

A murmur of agreement and good cheer. "Tree cats," Cantrell said.

In front of Cantrell, Armando laughed. Ravi said all boastful, "No, more like neo-!"

An explosion on the shore. The gunner jerked his head up. All the soldiers in the water twisted around. Cantrell's rifle ended up in his hands without him noticing how.

No creature stirred on the low dunes fifty meters behind the beach. Flames still devoured what was left of the rounded huts. Now, where the biggest hut had stood in the middle of the cluster lay a hole clouded by a lot of white smoke. Little pieces of leaves and bark floated in the hot air of the fires. The smoke spread quickly, like a fog. It hid the sensor drones watching the perimeter. It reached over the beach and the shallow water.

Cantrell sniffed with his mouth open. His helmet allowed some of the smoky air in so the air must be free of toxins.

He remembered his dad grilling hamburgers over charred wood. And for a moment he thought his suit's waste management system leaked, because he picked up the smells of rotten eggs and pee.

He relaxed. Amazing the six-legged dinosaur chickens could combine saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur in the right proportions, by inst-

Another blackout. He couldn't tell how long, but short enough that nobody in line moved.

A voice as young as any soldier's spoke over the platoon's radio net. Lieutenant Liebrandt. "Sensors pick up evidence of an accidental explosion... of... Proceed with remount."

The soldiers swung back to face the boat. Not in unison, because they weren't robots, they were free men. Cantrell turned only when the man in front of him took his next step toward the boat.

As he turned, a little piece of something drifted down, no longer held up by the cooler air near the boat. An air current made it hover for a moment about half a meter in front of his face.

Cantrell reached up and grabbed it and took a step toward the boat, all in one motion.

He glanced at the thing in his palm.

A piece of bark. Dried and crinkly. Blackened edges where it had burned a little. Markings on it a darker shade of the yellow of the berries growing on their island base that gave men diarrhea if they broke standing orders and ate them.

He looked closer. The stroke of the markings reminded him of fingerpaintings made by his baby brother in kindergarten. But what was—

Cantrell saw it. The head and upper body of a dinosaur chicken. One front paw raised. Crude lines but he could see it. Wise eyes, like an old dog wanting to herd with its master once more. Face upturned. Long and pointy ears perked. It reached up for something. Not toward a thing. Toward...

God?

But he only held a picture of an animal. A picture made by instinct by another animal.

Animals couldn't know God—

Even after the next blackout ended, his thoughts stayed fuzzy. Getting too hot in his suit? He sipped water through the straw and told his battlesuit to run a self-check on its climate control system.

Despite the blackout, his grip held tight on the piece of dried bark.

The line of soldiers passed the reactive armor's keep-out zone and turned to the boat's open ramp. Lieutenant Liebrandt and Sergeant Ronaldson stood on the three-meter slab of alloy, near the remount ladder flipped down and over the side. Incoming ripples of water pushed thin puddles onto the ramp and against the officer and NCO's boots. Sarge held in one thick gloved hand a can about the size of a thirty-round magazine with a funnel on top pointing sideways.

"Dammit." A muffled voice, not over the radio. From the second man in line ahead of Cantrell. The heads-up display in Cantrell's helmet labeled the squat figure with wide shoulders as Vasquez. Cruel and crude. Cantrell avoided him when he could.

Why did Vasquez swear?

Cantrell peered around Armando. Vasquez moved his left hand behind his back. He held something tapered. Fifteen centimeters long, streaked yellow and green, jagged on the wide edge. The jagged edge oozed red.

The animal life here used iron in its blood, just like Earth life.

Vasquez had taken a trophy. An ear of a dinosaur chicken.
Against regs.

And wrong, too. A man may kill an animal when he has to, but he shouldn't gloat about it.

The line stopped at the foot of the ladder. The first soldier, Ravi, went up. Sarge moved the can with the funnel up and down. Liebrandt pulled back his shoulders in trying to strike an authoritative pose.

Sarge nodded and moved the funnel-can away. "Clear to remount," Liebrandt announced over the platoon network. Ravi went into the boat's shadowed hold.

The line moved slowly. Men up and down grumbled. Cantrell said nothing. Yes, his feet ached after hours of soldiering while humping a pack, but after discharge and return to New Ozark, there wouldn't be any white sand beaches, warm oceans, and salty air. Without thinking, he swayed side-to-side in rhythm with the gentle waves.

He glanced back at the shore. If you ignored the dwindling fires and stench from the huts, you could imagine a resort hotel or a leisure condo on the sand under the deep blue sky. Maybe he could take Nanette on vacation to a world like this, someday.

The line advanced. Only five men ahead of Cantrell now. In front of Armando, Vasquez groped with his right hand for a zipper on his pack. One of the small pockets near the bottom. Vasquez yanked the zipper and shoved the dinosaur chicken's ear into the pocket.

Cantrell's stomach soured. The piece of bark in his hand. Was it a trophy too? No, but...

He stayed aware, but his mind seized up, like gears of an unoiled machine.

Throw it away-

-I got a pocket too-

Though he wobbled, light-headed, Cantrell's free hand mirrored Vasquez' actions. Zip open. Shove in the piece of bark. Zip closed.

He hunched forward and sucked tepid water and protein goo around hard breaths.

"C'mon up, Vasquez," Sarge said.

The ladder clanged under the soldier's boots. Vasquez waited on the open ramp with a *who-me-officer?* pose.

Sarge pressed a button on the funnel-can. A fan whirred, barely audible to Cantrell. Sarge moved the funnel-can around

Vasquez. He stopped when the funnel faced the zipped-up pocket hiding the dinosaur chicken's ear. The sniffer beeped, loud enough for Cantrell to hear over the slosh of water and the crackle of the dwindling fires on the shore.

"What's that?" Vasquez asked like he didn't know.

Lt. Liebrandt puffed up his voice. "The sniffer detects circulatory fluid of an indigenous life form in your pack."

"I don't know what all those big words mean," Vasquez said in accented Standard. He had to be grinning inside his helmet.

Sarge loomed closer to Vasquez. "Play dumb with me and you will regret it. Toss out the trophy," Sarge said. "And God help you it better be only an ear."

Vasquez stood taller for a moment, until his shoulders hunched and his hands groped for the zipper pocket. He showed the dinosaur chicken ear to Sarge. "You mean this? I didn't know there was a reg against it."

Sarge's voice grew deeper. "Toss. It."

Vasquez shrugged. He flicked his wrist and the ear went spinning into deeper water behind the boat. Maybe some little blue crawly things would lay eggs on it.

Vasquez made his way to a seat inside the boat. Armando went up next. The sniffer found Armando was clean. Of course it would. *He's a good soldier.*

One gloved hand on the ladder's railing, Cantrell hesitated. The piece of bark seemed to weigh down his pack.

Are you a good soldier?

His sweat suddenly sour in his nostrils, Cantrell trudged up the ladder. Sarge worked the sniffer around. The funnel paused near the pocket... and moved on.

"Clean," Sarge said.

Lt. Liebrandt transmitted an interior view of his helmet to the augmented reality rig in Cantrell's suit. Cantrell could see the officer's face, smooth but for a mole on his jawline near his chin. "Good job today, soldier," the lieutenant said.

"Thank you, sir," said Cantrell, certain his guilt came through in his tone.

But apparently it didn't. The augmented reality view of Lt. Liebrandt's face vanished. The lieutenant turned his head to the man at the base of the ladder and said, "Next."

Cantrell trudged into the boat. Two aisles of seats, like the departure lounge at the space elevator station on New Ozark. But less comfortable.

He mounted his rifle in the storage locker, then found a seat next to Armando and slipped off his pack. The piece of bark in its pocket seemed to double the pack's weight. The pack raced down his shoulders and thudded on the deck.

He slumped into his seat and pulled the pack under. Clearing the aisle. Really, hiding the piece of bark.

Armando lolled his head back, not wanting to talk. Gratitude trickled through Cantrell. He didn't want to talk either.

Cantrell frowned. A thought lumbered through a mental fog. *What's the big deal about a piece of bark? Is there something on it?*

Another lumbering thought. *Of course not... but hide it anyway.*

He pushed up the visor on his helmet and stared at the far bulkhead. Two hours, forty klicks, across the deep blue sea back to the island base. Most men dozed. A few talked in low and tired tones. Vasquez grumbled to one of his buddies, words inaudible, anger at the lieutenant and Sarge plain in his tone.

Cantrell dozed, or blacked out, or just let his thoughts wander. He and most of the others jolted upright in their seats when the boat's motors whined higher and the boat slewed about. Backing up to dock. The whine of the motors dropped to normal but got an echo. The walls and high ceiling of the pen.

The boat stopped. The ramp eased down with a whish of pneumatics and clomped on the concrete dock. The pen's interior was shadowy except for the orangey brightness of an open man-sized door in the corner.

The sunlight tugged on Cantrell like a magnet. But first...

Sarge and Lt. Liebrandt stepped onto the dock and waited under spotlights mounted high up, where the pen's ceiling met the walls. They waited with four civilians, three men and a woman, clad in cargo pants under white lab coats. The lab coats had blue logos on them. A line ran side-to-side from a brain. Some words, maybe made up or maybe from some dead language.

One of the men, though the shortest of the three, was obviously the leader from the body language of the other civilians and the lieutenant. Stitching on his lab coat named him Dr. Fitzhugh. He cracked his knuckles and turned green eyes cool as a menthol vape on the solders.

Cantrell swallowed thickly and lined up with the other men of the platoon. They filed to the storage locker for their rifles, then out of the boat, past Liebrandt, Sarge, and the civilians. The civilian contractors sometimes did inspections after missions and this must be one. Sarge waved men through. "Come on, back to your racks. Hustle! I want off this boat too."

Lt. Liebrandt and green-eyed Dr. Fitzhugh said nothing. Maybe it wasn't an inspection after all?

"Vasquez," the lieutenant said. "Step aside and wait."

Vasquez glowered for a moment, but when he turned to Fitzhugh he dropped his eyes and slumped his broad shoulders. He shuffled out of the way as the line filed past.

"Armando."

Arched eyebrows arched even higher. Armando bobbed his pointy chin. "Me? Why?"

"Random check," said Dr. Fitzhugh in a brisk voice. "You know it won't hurt."

They all knew the inspections didn't hurt, but nobody liked them. Armando's face fell. He took a step aside.

Cantrell clamped his jaws together. *They're going to pull me out next.* But he manned up and slapped Armando on the shoulder. "See you back at the rack."

Armando nodded. Cantrell went forward. He just knew the lieutenant would call his name... but this time the lieutenant didn't even make eye contact as he went by.

Outside. Orangey rays of afternoon sun were no match for the cold sweat on his cheeks and nape.

Get rid of that pic-spots swam in his vision—*piece of bark.* But where? Leave it on the ground, even toss it in a waste hopper, and someone would notice. Brass and more civilians would come down. The investigation would make an inspection look easy.

Cantrell trudged toward the armorer's warehouse. He shuffled through the line, handing over his rifle, setting down his pack so that a civilian tech could extract him from his battlesuit. In his undershorts and T-shirt in the air conditioning, he shivered even after he pulled on his fatigues and pushed his arms through the straps on his pack.

On his way to the soldier's dormitory, he felt like an enemy lurked amid the maintenance garages and the training sheds, preparing an ambush.

He made it to the wide three-story building and trudged up to the room he shared with Armando. Two twin beds on plastic frames. Afternoon light made an angled geometry-class shape halfway down his bed. Shelves with a few mementos from home, a paper-thin display showing a video loop of Armando's family, a handwritten card from Nanette.

Even the card seemed oppressive. He clomped forward on the plastic-tile floor—

—Ouch—

At least his boots kept his toe from stubbing badly on his trunk.

For the first time in hours, Cantrell felt like he could wriggle out of his anxiety. He shrugged off his pack and kneeled at the foot of his bed. He pulled his trunk all the way out from under, then shifted it and his position as if getting more comfortable. But really, to happen to block the view from the hidden camera in the corner.

He pressed his thumb to the biometric lock. The trunk lid popped up an inch. Cantrell yanked it up the rest of the way. A jumbled mess greeted him. Civilian clothes, toiletries kit, a trucker hat with the family farm's logo. Further down, a printed

Bible pressed on him by Nanette's mother the last time he'd seen her.

With trembling hands, Cantrell pulled the piece of bark out of his pack. He glanced at it and spots again swam in his eyes. Color leached out of his peripheral vision.

What was it about the piece of bark that brought a risk of blackout? He tried to look at it full on, but a blind spot formed in the middle of his sight and turned the piece of bark into a blur.

Was the piece of bark marked in some way?

Why couldn't he remember?

Hurriedly, he shoved the piece of bark toward the bottom of his locker, under the Bible, and snapped shut the lid. A thud as the magnetic lock resealed. The scrape of the trunk against plastic tile. The creak of his bed under his rump, his back. The warmth of sunlight across his bare forearm, abdomen, and hand...

...Warmth on his cheeks. A bright orange glow through his eyelids. Cantrell opened his eyes and squinted against sunlight on his face.

His mouth tasted cottony. How long had he napped? And one hell of a weird dream, about, about, what was it about? And the mission earlier today...?

Cantrell sat up. Alone in the narrow room. Despite the late afternoon warmth, he shivered. Get out of here and join the rest of the platoon in the rec hall. He'd earned it. Today he'd been a good soldier. Today they all had been.