

Lost souls

Basic Survival Techniques. Don't give up. Jobne wouldn't want that. I pulled my foot loose from what seemed to be an eye-socket. I flung it over my shoulder but the splashes of flesh that remained clung obstinately, sadistically, to my ankle. I was tempted to cut my whole leg off. I wouldn't have felt or even noticed it at this stage; just another mutilation in a landscape tearing itself to shreds.

I looked up. That didn't help. Splitting skyline aching my head. There were hundreds of mes everywhere. No skies. No sun. Only piles and tons of debasement reflecting my struggling, mirroring my panic. That was all I could see. My senses blocking out any more detail. I crashed out, juggled about in vain hopes of dislodging the whole slimy reality of it; of hiding into the mind where vision is limited by imagination, which, no matter what they say, can provide nothing compared to the collective destruction woven when we all work together. There was a smell of sulphine destruction, rotting flesh flaked with acid.

Basic Survival Techniques. I knew I should move, hide, run, recuperate, log in to Glotch who was somewhere out in space above me. Glotch. That brought me back to reality, to the Game, the screen of our big Cheed match. It was almost over, me and Glotch, the best of friends, the best there were; no one could beat me, we were the champions and a few more moves and we'd have finally decided among ourselves who would come out on top. Almost over, the last strategy in place, all prepared, cleverly thought out. The End Game. Once I got back we'd sit down and decide. I could almost see the screen, hear the blips, sense the LCD light graze my forehead, imagine the triumph: friends or no friends a Game was a Game. There was just this problem of dying before I could get to the Chead match.

Spears of light hacked my eyes, cavernous open spaces collapsed into my visions. Basic Survival Techniques. Emergency signal. Base instincts. All that

training. And what I really wanted to do was to fall right back into the gore at my knees.

Deep down in my mind I wished I was back home, that it was all over, even the Game. Returned to the ship, comfortably shackled up on Earth world 34. Finished with all this exploration crap, war disguised as advance. They'd promised a brief tour and then a nice fat bonus to live off. Jobne deserved it. There was nothing else, no other option: life wasn't a Cheed Game, you just signed on the dotted line, you will be back before you know it and you won't even miss the few centuries away. I'd promised Jobne. And that I'd return: we had so many things still to hope for.

One last trip and then it would be over. One more tour to do some duty. The Game. Concentrate. Glotch will save you. Emergency signal. Basic Survival Techniques. I felt my hand move for the button to the left of my helmet, the one that shoots it open, plummets it across space and leaves you breathless.

"We've lost contact sir."

The Marsahadm gave no indication of having heard but Sub-T Glotch knew better than to repeat. He waited instead for fresh orders.

"Get it back," was all the Marsahadm finally said, "and quickly. We can't hang around this dump much longer. Nothing down there. Only wasting out time."

"Yes sir!" snapped Sub-T Glotch, before marching off to relay the orders and to be obeyed in turn.

A flicker of panic gored him as he watched the details readout. No response. No emergency signal yet. Basic Survival Techniques. Lost. Unlocatable. It may be just temporary. Or a serious glitch. "Casey", Glotch repeated silently. What about the Game. Technology hissed, screens blazed sheafs of coloured stats and it all smelled drearily familiar, overly polished to hide the burning electricity

underneath. Casey, the only person he felt anything for on this whole damn space monster. You can't lose yourself just before the game.

Feet. They'd sunk into the muck below. My waist was twisting, rustling in a fuss, scrunching through ever tightening circles. Sinking. I have become so small. Jobne wouldn't recognise me lost in this vast trough of vile, chortling, sucking vortex. The Game. Jobne. My belly button tingled before fading somewhere below. Tongue in that socket teasing out memories: heat and flesh and thick blood flowing, strengthening muscles into bonds that bind, stiffening with pleasure. Hot breath in my ear, soothing cough in my throat, a tongue, a liquor wafted before me, tingling on my neck, surging up my nose. Jobne. Forgetfulness is bliss in the hiss of these mists. I had forgot, sold out to my new love swallowing me whole. I could still do it. Basic Survival Techniques. I'd hold out for Jobne. And the Game.

The Game. Logic. Coolness, quick thinking and friendship. That was what I needed, force the screens into view, up front because there is always a move, a means of determining, then undermining your opponent's play. Always a way out, a victory sign hidden behind every cross. Hands were beginning to sink beneath the goo but there was still a sense of a foot far beneath, a slight tinge. Basic Survival Techniques. Sticky, shitty hot fumes, the whiff of fear filling a helmet, fogging up the eye piece.

A quick stinging whiplash snapped neck into paralysis. I was used to motionless, boredom, but this was terrifying. I was left standing, held in some fierce grip crushing my suit until its hard multicoated plastic fibers began to melt into submission. Knowing nothing I remained fully aware, aching, rocking gently in the pleasure of the pain, the stiffling steam of melting plastic and burning metal.

Nothing. Thoughts gliding upwards as I slid into new depths. Back discs ground, belched under the clutching pressure from below. I could see my nose reflected

in the helmet shield, a seething mass, reddening there, just under my chin. Maybe I should shout out or something.

Thoughts slipping, blending into the silt at my feet, feet losing sensations of limbs no longer present. Hands had disappeared into the mire, bloody stumps left seeping into green, smelling the stench of their own self rotting from beneath. A final blow of defiance as the body gave way. Long screams of silent agony. Jobne. The name screeched out in blindness. Such fine teeth Jobne, delicate ivory bone sharp and pointed like stone, lickable lips so close, sweet smelling succor as your tongue bites mine until delicate blood tickles. Run those fingers down my back again, one more time, just there, to graze the cusp of my neck, the edge of my chin. I was moving. Slowly. Seeping beneath. Definitely down. Jobne had convinced me to do it, try out one more tour of duty. That was love. I'd signed on the line and now I was sinking through it.

"We've nailed it." Sub-T Glotch strode over the bridge and repeated the fact to the Marsahadm. "Got a signal sir". Screens beeped in anonymous recognition, lights flaring amber to red, green left aside.

"Well hurry. Have to get off this damn place. Can't waste more time on that idiot." The Marsahadm's face glared, words clipping his anger to an acceptable level of disrespect. Sub-T Glotch hid a shiver. Space running out. Had to hurry. What the hell was Casey playing at? Couldn't just die there: they had to finish the Game. An inopportune moment for stupidities. Glotch could visualize the screens; he had a clear idea of what the moves had to be, it would be close but he could see the winning End Game Becketing him on. It might just work. But you couldn't play alone. Have to make a move now. Opportunities were fading, options restricting.

Tingling neck arched under the pointed grooves of a strong cheek line. Jobne. Come to me now.

The Game. Concentrate on the Game. They can't leave me here. Moves continued to develop in the head. Relax and Glotch would interfere and save: they both knew who would win. Victory smelled hot, despite the gloom all around. The tinkling of blood, slipping down my cheeks, seeping from punctures I could no longer feel: mind long lost in the mists of a distance no longer measurable. The sound chimes loudly in my depths. I saw the eyes, blood licking the teeth, fumes caressing lungs, sirens ringing deep between my ears. An image sensation stabbing deep beyond closed lashes, blurring from the Game board, swallowing its own logic. Jobne could never know about Glotch. The Game was too complex. And Glotch had never been allowed see Jobne. Their screens had been kept well apart. Everyone needs privacy.

Nothing has changed much since then. The mist remains but I don't open my eyes any more. It seems easier, as if one of us has lost interest. I might even be happy. Jobne is finally close, here beside me: he smiles vaguely but I know he is attentive, ready to hold me one last time, cuddle, stroke away the pain, stir me into waves of a different ecstasy, armpit wafting security and peppered perspiration. The Game. I'm almost certain I have found the winning moves. Poor Glotch. He won't have a chance. I can see victory too clearly.

Sub-T Glotch was nervous. The seconds were running out. He had used them too sparingly. Hopefully no one would notice. "Some form of hallucinating life-form ... we're not quite sure sir." He waited for a reaction, hoping that their next encounter was already taking precedence, that they could move on.

The Marsahadm was anxious for closure. "Yes. Yes, we'll send back all the usual reports. They can check it out fully. Let's go. We have a schedule. That fool has no idea how much time was wasted." He paused before he continued. "Casey was it?"

Surprised by the sudden care for detail Sub-T Glotch struggled for a calm confirmation.

"A friend?"

Fortunately, the Marsahadm`s brief pause didn't require more than a grimace in response. They avoided eyes, staring intently at the feed outs instead, glinting screens covering up any slight hint of emotional analysis. Heart raced in a fit of panic recognition. Secrets seemed to have faded, melted into the muck of common knowledge. His breath hissed but he kept it in. Only the screens purred. If the Marsahadm found out about Jobne it could all start to unravel. Glotch wished he'd never seen Jobne on those video feeds, that Casey had been more careful and had kept his social networks more private. There would be no End Game.

"Well Mr. Glotch, don't worry. I suppose this means you are the undisputed Cheed champion."

The Marsahadm's eyes narrowed as if processing exactly what that meant.

"I always favored you anyway. Indeed, some of us have a lot of creds out there backing you."

He released a faint chuckle.

"Yes indeed, a lot of creds. Nice to be a winner, isn't it? We were always betting on you. Knew you'd do it. There'll be good fun on the next rest-up."

He slapped Glotch on the shoulder and moved off quickly to shout orders and get the ship smoothly out of the way.

Glotch stood still. He would have won anyway. He was sure. He removed his glasses and returned to his seat. Time to fire that drone up. Back to work. Pakistan was calling. There were real people out there asking to be decimated from a safe distance.

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