

Rearranging

G'lishi was training with Chris when Max came looking for him. "About done for now Chris?" he asked.

"Sure Max. Want me to go?"

"No, that's alright. You might as well hear too. Save me repeating myself. We've been in a really good groove since the war started. We've obliterated Skelebots by the how many, we've totalled our targets every time we're on the offensive. Just this last battle R.C. took his target by storm with minimal damage and captured the crew of the robot as well as its borg back-up. Now, this sounded crazy at first, but I have to admit the brilliance from a tactical position. Our teams are being scrambled up a bit. Archer is going back to Tolkeen to work in the regular army. R.C. is being temporarily assigned to our Second String under Colonel Sam."

Max paused to let it sink in.

G'lishi was quiet for a bit, concentrating, trying to sort things out. "Is Archer taking the shiny-noisemaker?" he asked Max, hoping the answer was no.

When Max said Archer was taking the Glitterboy, G'lishi sighed, long and loud. "I ran out of firecrackers two days ago. No more loud bangs." Then, cocking his head in curiosity, he asked, "How long is 'temporarily'?"

Max answered, "R.C. will be gone for weeks at the least."

G'lishi sighed again and made a face that Max couldn't fathom. Chris understood it well enough. Given his young age of nearly four months old anything more than a day or two would seem a long time, weeks would be an eternity.

Max continued, "Archer's replacement is a member of the second monster squad that we haven't met yet. His name is Master Sergeant Neodore. He's some sort of man-sized octopus. He is also a highly feared Gunslinger and I'm told nearly as devastating as the Glitterboy in battle. I guess with so many limbs and such inborn practice using them, he's a natural. Now, though he's not gone permanently someone is coming to balance out our numbers with R.C. gone. I thought this was kind of out there but if it's what Nim wants it happens. We are gaining Shisen, the scarecrow."

Chris shuddered. Max told him, "It'll wear off. Soon enough he won't be any weirder to us than Archer ever was. I think this Neodore will take more getting to used to. You know, I ate a normal Earth octopus once."

G'lishi was puzzled. Sure, Shisen was a little freaky, but there were worse creatures in that group. That Dragon-Wolf, for example. G'lishi shuddered just thinking about it. Max and Chris gave each other a quick look since G'lishi's reaction was considerably delayed.

Max's mention of eating an octopus prompted G'lishi to ask "How did it taste? Was it nice and crunchy? Maybe I should eat more things, I don't think of it most of

the time, maybe I'm missing all sorts of good flavours! ThosI said she liked eating people..."

Off on a tangent, G'lishi enthused about eating. It was fairly easy for Chris to bring the conversation back onto track, he being used to G'lishi's distractibility.

Max came up to R.C. and started talking. "Good work out there on the battlefield. I was very proud to see you hardly took any damage and you managed to take those men and that borg alive. That's excellent work."

R.C. who happened to be messing with one of his side arms flipped up his multi-optics band and saluted Max. "Thank you Sir. I seem to be getting better at this stuff, but I don't know if I deserve that much credit. I may have got the job done, but I sure as hell didn't do it very, umm, elegantly Sir. Crashing your ride to get within reach of the target isn't exactly a mark of finesse" {R.C. was feeling slightly miffed at himself}

Max continued, "I have something more than my pride to give you R.C. Because of your quick thinking, commitment, and daring in the face of what could have been significant odds I am raising you up to the rank of Sergeant. That puts you ahead of Archer on the rank scale and equal to Rick Hunter and Joe Foreman. You're new basic pay rate is 1,900 credits each month. That's an increase of 150 credits."

R.C. stared back at Max, mouth slightly agape {bit of shock here} "Your kidding, right Sir...?" he said, "You're

not kidding, are you?

"Hot damn, maybe I ought to crash this thing near really dangerous stuff more often" {by this point, R.C. was definitely happy, having realised this wasn't some joke}

Max continued, "There's going to be some restructuring going on R.C. Archer is being posted to a permanent position in the Tolkeen army. I might add that his rank hasn't gone up. You are going to be teamed up with Rick and Joe for a special mission. That's part of the reason why you've been moved up two ranks, but not all of it."

"Not sure how I should take that, Sir. While Archer and that big-ass gun do kinda grow on you after a while, I can't honestly say I am going to miss having an eleven-foot tall shiny-as-hell target drawing heat down on us.

"Now what's this about a special mission?"

Max said, "Your mission involves a trip to the heart of the Coalition. You're going to the Chi-Town Fortress. Your role in the group is as technician, lock-pick, and whatever else they need you to do for them. Colonel Sam is going with you guys and heading up the operation. I want you to come and meet with him at my tent."

Seeing that this was likely going to take a bit longer than he first expected, R.C. requested a moment to stow the stuff he was working on. He kept the optics band on and then followed Max. Max noticed that R.C. was not nervous like one would expect, but actually seemed

almost eager.

Max opened the flap of his tent and ushered R.C. inside. Colonel Sam was sitting in a foldout chair in front of Max's table. A map was spread out in front of him. He motioned for R.C. to come and sit in the other chair. Max rounded the table as R.C. sat down. The Colonel began to explain things, "We have a package to deliver to the Chi-Town Fortress. I cannot disclose what the package is at this time, but it is not one that the Coalie boys are going to be wanting us to deliver. This mission is going to require many things including stealth and a lot of fore-planning. To that end I want you to go back to Tolkeen and gear up. Detection equipment, cameras, diagnostic tools, sensors, whatever you think you're going to need."

Max handed R.C. a cred card. He told R.C. "We're dipping into a discretionary fund with this card. Don't go hog wild or anything, but get what you think you're going to need. Plan for something like ten video sites, and say thirty other sensor checkpoints."

Colonel Sam picked up again, "We're going to want to monitor certain places. Everything is going to need to be capable of transmitting to wherever we're going to set up our surveillance post. I don't care if we have to set points to retrieve data also, plan for that too. You've got seven days in Tolkeen to do whatever research you need to do to get the right stuff and to get the stuff."

Max butted in, "Use that same card for your meals

but I want an accounting of every credit you spend. That's every credit whether it's a candy bar or a circuit board."

"I have a list," Colonel Sam said handing R.C. a disc. "It has names and addresses for a couple guys that might be able to help you get stuff fast if there's a problem. The last guy on the list is your emergency contact in the city. Things are getting rough in the city of Tolkeen. Tempers are flaring, monsters of worse and worse temperaments are running around by the day almost."

R.C. looks thoughtful for a moment. He scratched his head with the credit before realising what he was doing and stowed it in a handy pocket. "Since I am fairly sure you aren't going to tell me what's in the package (and I probably wouldn't want to know, for safety reasons as well as piece of mind), can you tell me how big it is?"

"You don't need to worry about that. I'll be handling it personally." said Colonel Sam.

"A couple of other questions, to help with the shopping list. How large of an area are we going to need to cover with surveillance? Are we looking at a specific facility, or a large area of individual sites? What kind of surveillance are we looking at, Sir? Do we need video, audio, wiretaps, grid or comp hacks? And how heavy is the traffic going to be through the area? Are we going to need a lot of heavily concealed stuff, or will quick work do?"

Sam explained, "We're going to need some of everything. This isn't going to be an easy cakewalk. We have to be prepared for several different scenarios. We'll need to cover different spots at the same time, find out schedules, and monitor where people are. All sorts of things. I don't know the traffic situations; we're kind of blind on that front which is a big part of why you're involved. I have to figure concealment will be necessary."

"What is our travel plan, Sir? Can we move this thing light, or are we going to pretend to be a merchant convoy? Also, how much space are we allotting for gear and equipment that one might want to bring along?"

Max said, "This is going to be fairly light. Only a small amount of room for repair materials. Other than a truck we're arranging for it'll be the armour on your back and whatever you can pack in a saddlebag or something. Your surveillance equipment shouldn't take up too much space but most of the truck bed is yours."

"Do we have contacts C.S. side. I mean in the city, Sir? How deep are we taking this into Chi-Town, sir. Is this a burbs only drop, or are you crazy enough to want to walk this thing into the big city proper?"

Max rubbed at the stubble on his chin with the tips of his fingers. "I hadn't really wanted to say anything about that but I guess it's needed to formulate your basic strategies. You're going right into the Chi-Town Fortress eventually. As to contacts, I'm afraid you're on your

own. We could not afford to involve anyone else in this project for fear of detection. We're seriously worried about the C.S. thought police."