

## Pannakot

Excerpt from *Requiem of the Human Soul* by Jeremy R. Lent

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My first sensation coming through on the other side was a brisk, cool breeze against my skin. I looked around. I was on some kind of military base. That was obvious. I was standing on tarmac. There were nondescript buildings all around... noise of machinery and people yelling orders at each other... dozens of VRUs around me instantly recognizable as soldiers, all decked out with uniforms, helmets, high-tech glasses, guns.

I raised my head and looked beyond the troopers - and caught my breath in awe. Beyond the base were some forested slopes. Beyond those slopes were some barren, brown steep hills. And beyond those hills were mountain peaks that looked like something out of a fairy tale. Spectacular. Sharp, jagged peaks, towering over us even though they were miles away, covered in snow, creating a crisp, clear outline in the horizon against a deep blue sky. They seemed so vast, so serene. Like they would have nothing to do with the bullshit we were all engaging in. From the same earth, but from a different reality. I hated to take my gaze away from those peaks, but I reminded myself, I wasn't here for the scenery.

I turned around and saw Naomi and Harry in their VRUs. There was another VRU standing with them - it looked like a young man.

"Hi, pleased to make your acquaintance. My name's Russell Dean. I'm second lieutenant, GE Regiment 4-21, Central Division. I'm going to be your escort for the trip to Pannakot." The VRU called Russell Dean had a relaxed, southern American accent. He walked snappily and cheerily over to me and put out his right hand. His left hand was holding some kind of laser gun. I reciprocated and we shook hands. His grip was firm and precise. Real military.

"We're going to give you guys full coverage, we got Code Green clearance for y'all. That means you'll get full audio on all team communication. If we want to talk together, turn down the dial on your left forefinger and then we'll hear each other more easily."

I looked down at my hands. I had gloves on and they were certainly high tech - filled with buttons, dials and gauges. I briefly wondered what they were all for.

"Let's get going. We're due to take off for Pannakot in four minutes, and counting. There's our transport. It's a LAM."

He pointed to our left, and I saw a plane of some kind. It had long wings and various helicopter-looking blades.

"By the way, LAM stands for Low Altitude Mobility. It can get us anywhere over difficult terrain, it can fly as low as you like or as high as you like, it's speedy and it's quiet. We use a lot of them around here."

We clambered into the LAM. There were eleven other soldiers - or more precisely - military VRUs already inside. It was surprisingly comfortable for a military aircraft. Everything seemed

clean and well organized. The other soldiers gave us all a cheery nod. They were relaxed, joking with each other. It seemed like they were going on a sightseeing tour.

“Why is everyone going to Pannakot today?” I asked Russell. I was determined to find out as much as I could. Given that Naomi and Harry were hardly enthusiastic about coming on this trip, I wasn’t expecting them to pipe up with any questions. If I was going to find anything out, I needed to do it myself.

“Yeah, it’s an exciting time here in the Chitral Valley right now. Last week, we managed to snag a Rejo alive – that’s a rare event.”

He saw the look of confusion on my face.

“Oh, Rejo is the name we use round here for the Rejectionists. Usually, they suck themselves down the drain before we can get our hands on ’em alive. But last week, we found one sleeping and managed to capture him.”

I assumed that “sucking themselves down the drain” was a euphemism for suicide, based on what Yusef had told me the other day about Ashok Prakesh, whom I had sent to his death through the neurographic scanner’s invasion of my brain.

“So we got this Rejo under 24 hour neuroscan. He’s fighting hard against it, but there’s not a lot he can do when the neural coordinates lock in.”

I thought of the visit I’d received from the Department Agents who had tried to get the picture of Yusef from my brain with their MNI.

“So we already got three hot spots identified in the last 48 hours. One of them’s in this little village called Pannakot. I didn’t even know the damn place existed until yesterday.”

“What’s a hot spot?” I asked Russell, the second lieutenant.

“It’s an area the computer identifies as a high probability site for a tunnel entrance. Where the Rejos are hangin’ out. The imager scans the Rejo’s brain for visual images and then tries to match them against a database of the area. When it comes up with a possible match, we send GE troopers in to scan the chimps and see if any of them squeal.”

Russell saw that I was completely puzzled by his last description. On my right, I saw Naomi roll her eyes and look up at the ceiling in disgust.

“Oh, sorry for using GE slang. I know you guys from “political central” have your way of talking. The “chimps” are the Primals. You know, they’re called chimps because their DNA is closer to chimpanzees than to us. Hard to believe, huh?”

Now I understood why Naomi was so disgusted. I was barely able to control myself. This bastard opposite me... calling me a chimp. If he’d been there in the flesh, I might have punched him directly in the face. But what was the point of hitting a VRU made of high-tech plastic and electronic circuits? That was hardly going to accomplish what I needed. I steeled myself and kept going, as though I were another d-human prick checking out how well the GE troopers were doing their job.

“So how do you get the chimps to squeal?” I asked, trying to hide my nausea.

“Well, when we get to a hot spot, we herd up the chimps and put them through an MNI one-by-one. That way, we try to close in on where a tunnel entrance might be situated. By the way, an MNI’s a mobile neurographic imager, in case you didn’t know, pal.”

Yes, I thought to myself, I knew only too well what an MNI was, pal.

“So, is it dangerous, herding up the chimps?”

Russell chuckled. “Well, it sure would be if we were here in the flesh. These chimps have some pretty high tech weaponry. They get them from the Rejos they protect. Y’know, the Rejos have some pretty good funding. You’d be surprised what they can get their hands on.”

“But we gotta be careful even with our VRUs”, Russell continued. “These are sophisticated bits of machinery. If a VRU takes a hit, that can be fifty million bucks down the drain. That ain’t chump change, even in Nashville, Tennessee. We have a saying in the GE: “If you’re VRU gets hit, you get hit.” What that means is, you’re liable to miss your chance for promotion. A couple of badly damaged VRUs can ruin a GE trooper’s career. So, you try to protect your VRU as if you’re here in the flesh. And you need to be careful with these chimps. They can be dangerous. Even the women and children. You never know what they’re up to.”

“So is that where you are – Nashville, I mean?” I asked.

“Sure, pal, that’s where the whole 4-21 regiment is located. We have a giant virtual reality center outside Nashville. We’re all there right now, in our skins, hunting down Rejos in the Chitral Valley. It sure beats doing it in person. At the end of the day, we go have a drink with the guys, enjoy our kids at home. I’ve got a six-year old. I wouldn’t miss him growing up for anything.”

All this time, while we were talking, Naomi and Harry seemed paralyzed in a fixed grimace. Every now and then, I would sneak a view past them, at the countryside outside our LAM. It was awe-inspiring. One moment, we’d be flying through a deep valley with sheer rock walls on both sides of us. The next moment, we’d pass over a cliff face and see vertical waterfalls crashing down next to us. How could we live our lives in such a mean, nasty world – I thought to myself – while such natural magnificence exists all around us?

All of a sudden, the chatter in the background between the other GE troopers changed character. They were getting excited. Something was going on.

“We got a squeal in Pannakot,” I heard the breathless words coming through on the audio channel.

“Oh boy – did y’all come at a good time!” second lieutenant Russell Dean was sharing his good cheer with all. “We’re going to be heading straight for a fresh squeal. Maybe we’ll find a tunnel entrance while you’re on SCUOP with us. That’ll be something to tell the folks back home about!”

I started to hear directions coming in on the audio, presumably meant for the LAM pilot.

“Come in above the main drag, then take 278 degrees, target GPS six fifty-four slash seven nineteen,” I was hearing on the audio. “Get a visual on a chimp settlement complex, six mud huts. Link up in hut number four.”

The rest of the GE troopers were getting positively excited, grinning at each other. I guess they all wanted to be the one to find the tunnel entrance and catch another Rejo before he could suck himself down the drain.

Moments later and the LAM found itself outside the “chimp” settlement complex. We clambered out and entered mud hut number four. What a different world we had just walked into.

Mud hut number four was surprisingly big inside. It was dark, but it didn’t take more than a second for my military VRU to adjust itself to the darkness. Everything was different. I felt I’d just gone back in time a thousand years. I could smell the smoke of a fire, and saw food cooking in a big clay pot over a fireplace in the corner. On the other side of the hut, there were nine or ten local people. It looked like an extended family. They were wearing traditional clothing, some with beautiful old weavings. The women had brocaded shawls around them, with faded reds and yellows. The men wore baggy white pants and decorated waist-jackets. There were a couple of old men, an old woman, a few younger men and women, and some children. One woman was holding a baby who was crying.

Next to this group was another grouping, comprising two GE troopers, who looked Chinese judging by their VRUs, and one of the local men. The local man had around his head the tentacles of a MNI – something I recognized only too easily. He was wailing, as though some terrible event had occurred. He kept swaying his body forwards and backwards. I noticed his hands were tied behind his back, so it seemed to be the only movement he could make. I thought of my ordeal the other day at the hands of the Department Agents and I instantly knew the meaning of his wailing. The MNI had forced him to give up the location of the tunnel entrance, and he was suffering the same sense of betrayal that I had felt giving up Yusef. He knew it wasn’t his fault, but meanwhile the information had come out of his own brain.

One of the Chinese MNI operators started barking out directions to our platoon of new arrivals.

“Tunnel entrance somewhere behind that wall,” he was yelling, pointing to the wall behind the group of local people. “Get them outta here. Get them neutralized. Move it. Before they can signal the Rejos. The entrance will self-destruct if we don’t move quick.”

The leader of our platoon started shouting at the group of locals. “Get to the side.” He was screaming at the top of his voice. “Move it. Move away from that wall. I’m counting to five. Anyone still at that wall at the count of five is history.”

For a second, I wondered how these people would understand him, and then I realized that, of course, the words were being automatically translated into the local dialect as soon as they were uttered by the VRU. So the locals knew exactly what he was saying.

The adrenaline everywhere was palpable. The GE troopers were all aiming their lasers at the group of locals.

“One. Two.” The platoon leader was counting at the top of his voice.

One of the younger men, too brave for his own good, started to yell back at them.

“You bastards. Get out of our home. May God spit on you and your children!”

“Three.”

A GE trooper took aim at him with his laser gun. “One more word and you’re vaporized!” he screamed.

“Four.” The platoon leader was shouting each number louder than the last.

The group was already moving away from the wall and the young man backed down, spat on the ground, and started to join them.

Suddenly, a little girl caught my attention. She must have been about ten. She reminded me a little bit of Sally at the age when her mother died. The age when she’d put her arms around me to try to comfort me in my loss. She had a face of innocent beauty. I had the feeling she was the daughter of the young man who had just cursed the GE troopers.

The little girl started running towards the troopers. I saw she had something in her hand. I couldn’t tell what. It seemed like some sort of stick.

“Sayyida!” I saw her mother cry out to her.

“Five”. The platoon leader yelled out.

The little girl raised her hand towards the platoon leader. Everything happened in the same second. There was a flash. The little girl collapsed on the floor.

“Aaaaiiiyyeeeggghhh!” Sayyida’s mother let out a terrible cry of pain and rushed to the little girl’s lifeless body. The sound of her cry cut through me like a blade of ice. It was only too clear. One of the troopers had shot Sayyida with a laser gun.

There was pandemonium. The whole group was now huddled over Sayyida’s dead body. The women were wailing. It was the worst sound I’d ever heard in my life. The men were howling. Cursing. Calling to Allah.

“May God strike you all down until you are dirt in the ground!”

“May the Heavens rain down pestilence on your family!”

“You followers of Satan! Go back to Hell where you belong!”

All these screams were being translated into my audio in perfect English. But the sounds and the feelings needed no translation. This was a terrible, terrible moment. A beautiful little girl was dead. Killed for what?

One of the men suddenly held up a piece of firewood. He had forgotten all fear in his overwhelming anger. He walked towards the GE troopers, brandishing the piece of firewood.

“This is what she was holding, you evil bastards! She was trying to give it as a gift to you, you followers of Satan! Hospitality – that is what we teach our children from birth. She saw how

you were acting to her father and she thought, if she could give you a gift, you'd treat him more kindly. This was her gift. A piece of firewood. It's all she had. You evil murderers of innocence!" He screamed all this at the top of his voice, while the sanitized automated translator gave it all to me and everyone else in calm, grammatical English.

"It looked like a gun, chief," the guilty trooper who had shot the laser said in a plaintive voice to the platoon leader. "The pre-hap showed up as a gun, like she was going to shoot at us."

The pre-hap? What the hell was that? But I had no time to ask. Events were moving too fast.

"What's the big fuss about one dead chimp!" one of the Chinese MNI operators yelled from the other side. "We're losing precious seconds before the Rejos self-destruct the tunnel entrance. Get them the hell outta here now."

As if on cue, a loud but muffled bang suddenly shook the hut. The ground vibrated and shook, as though an earthquake had just occurred. This was followed by another muffled bang, only a little softer. Then another vibration of the ground.

"Shit! They got the tunnel entrance. We've lost the squeal. Operation aborted!" the Chinese MNI operator yelled out in disgust.

"You assholes let the chimps screw us all again!" the other Chinese MNI operator shouted at our platoon.

The first MNI operator continued. He sounded like he was superior in position to the others. "SCUOP 17-352 Central Region aborted. Proceed with settlement obliteration."

Our platoon herded up the local tribespeople, who by now had retreated into muttering curses among themselves. Resignation had trumped anger. We all filed out of hut number 4. One of the tribesmen was carrying the little, dead body of Sayyida. The platoon, the tribespeople, the MNI operators, all of us walked up a path, on a slight incline until we were a hundred yards or so from the grouping of huts. Then, moments passed while we all stood there, looking at the huts.

"Proceed with obliteration!" This time it was our platoon leader who called out the order.

Two of the GE troopers aimed some kind of grenade launchers at the huts and shot. A moment later, there was a loud explosion and all six of the mud huts exploded in a ball of flame and fire. The fire immediately engulfed the whole complex. Moments later and we could feel the heat of the fire, bright and furious, in our faces.

The group of tribespeople started wailing again. Only this time, they were no longer cursing the troopers. They were praying to their God.

"God is great."

"God has created heaven and earth."

"God is with us in our suffering."

"God Almighty! Be with us in our loss!"

Again, their wailings were translated into calm, American sentences that seemed so out of place in this scene of horror.

What the hell was going on? What the hell was happening? Why? My mind seethed with anger, with horror, with a terrible sense of the loss of Sayyida. Where were these tribespeople going to live? Why did the troopers obliterate their huts? I could barely keep myself under control. But I had a job to do. I had come here to understand better what Yusef had been talking about. Well, I sure hadn't expected a lesson as brutal as this one.

As I was looking at the burning huts, one of the tribesmen must have seen that I was acting differently from the rest of the troopers. He was standing, just a few feet away from me, and out of the blue, he caught my eye.

He looked at me, not with anger, but with terrible sorrow. He seemed to understand that I was not like the rest. He was old, his face was lined. I could see the years, the decades of suffering that life had carved into his skin. He held out a scrawny arm to me and waved it over to the burning huts, and then to the man holding little Sayyida.

"See!" he said to me. "See what has been wrought on us! How do we endure? How do we endure?"

He shook his head, in disgust. Or in wonderment? I don't know. And then he turned away from me and walked back to his group. Was he sent by Yusef? I asked myself. Or was it just a chance encounter? To this day, I don't know the answer. But his words struck deep in my soul.

We made our way back to the LAM. In silence. Each in our own thoughts. The troopers disappointed that their "squeal" had failed to result in finding a tunnel entrance. Naomi and Harry, presumably, worried about the effect this experience would have on their "Primal witness". And me. I felt a hard anger, steel in my heart. I thought of what Yusef had been trying to explain to me. The suffering of his people, fighting for humanity. The hypocrisy and cruelty of the d-humans. Now, I'd seen it for myself. But I wasn't going to remain silent. I was going to glean every bit of information I could from our cheery second lieutenant, Russell Dean.

On our way back, through the awe-inspiring scenery, the disappointment of the troopers, the grim silence of Naomi and Harry, I kept quizzing Russell Dean about what had happened. To him, I was a UNAPS observer, and he'd better answer my questions honestly.

What was a "pre-hap"? I asked. Pre-Hostility Anticipation Protocol was the answer. Pre-HAP, my second lieutenant explained to me, was the way modern military technology got an edge over the enemy in real time. When a trooper experiences his virtual reality, he's not actually seeing reality as it is, but rather as his supercomputer is predicting it *will be* a second from then. Ninety-nine percent of the time, Russell told me, this worked great. Sometimes, though, the computer gets it wrong. In this case, the trooper who shot little Sayyida was actually seeing her holding a gun and about to fire at them, because that was what his Pre-HAP had anticipated. So, Russell explained with his cheery ethical ease, the trooper really had no choice – he was just responding to what he'd seen.

I kept my cool, as Russell casually told me about the unfortunate occasional side-effects of Pre-HAP, but explained that this was far, far, better than permitting their precious VRUs to be shot at and damaged by real guns. So, what's the life of a "chimp", I thought to myself bitterly, against the risk of a damaged VRU? Obviously, that's an issue the programmers of the Pre-HAP computers had long ago answered very clearly.

And finally, I discovered why the GE troopers obliterated the houses of the local tribespeople.

"You gotta do something to get these chimps to understand they can't just protect the Rejos with impunity. What the hell do they think they get from the Rejos? Nothing. If they only helped us track down and clean out the Rejos, they could get back to their chimp lives, doing their cooking, drinking their goats' milk, and whatever the hell else chimps do to make it through the day. We gotta punish those pesky critters for protecting the Rejos. Well, we're not gonna kill them in cold blood. But at least if we blow away the huts they use to hide their Rejos, then maybe they'll think twice the next time a Rejo comes along and asks them for help."

"Do you think maybe you just alienate them more, and make them feel more support for the Rejos when you do that?" I asked the second lieutenant, Russell Dean.

He just shook his head, as though I were asking him about the mystery of creation.

"Hell, there's no telling how these chimps think. Don't ask me. All they ever do is curse us and pray to their goddam Allah. All I know is, it's official policy. When a SCUOP operation is aborted, the next thing you do is always "settlement obliteration". That's just how it gets done round here. Don't ask me. Ask one of your friends in New York at the UN. They're the ones who set the policies. We just do what we're told."

He sickened me. They all sickened me. I was seething with rage inside. But I was cold on the outside. Steel. Yusef was right. If I could make a difference in this battle, I had an obligation to my race, an obligation to Sayyida and countless more like her and her family, an obligation to fight for us all.