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short arm inspection

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2307ce-SEPTEMBER-15-SUNDAY
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From Cocytus, better known as Cue Ball, Betelgeuse looks like a stop sign lit up by headlights on a dark rural night. Shotgun holes and all. The galactic equivalent of the end of the road, in spite of the retina searing glare you would expect from a star this size, the great Alpha-Orion glows cold, red and sickly.

Betelgeuse is dying.

In its short life this massive star has gobbled up most of the hydrogen in its core and has bloated into an obese sphere as wide as the orbit of Jupiter. Astronomers are thrilled to be studying a doomed star up close but their excitement is checked by the fact that none of them will be alive when it finally collapses and goes supernova some 1,500 years from now.

One conciliation is that they've been able to collect samples from the hot spot that radiates intensely just below the surface of the star. At one time Cue Ball was the twelfth planet, and the hot spot just so happens to be the remnants of a gas giant that was swallowed up during the stars expansion phase. Layer by layer the planet was stripped away until all that remained was a core of predominately white-hot carbon—compressed into a diamond shell ten times the width of the Earth.

It's amazing how the occasional absurd idea made in jest becomes realized.

So successful were the probes used to study the interior of Betelgeuse that the Annex quietly supplied the scientists with a Cobalt Bluer retrofit. The blast from the retrofit-bomb was about as significant as a ladyfinger going off in a bonfire but the weapon did manage to blow tons of the material out into space. And through a

front for the SA, the Orion Trust, a portion of the haul was auctioned off. Just enough to make astronomy the only self-funded natural science for many decades to come, and just enough for the science dweebs to turn a blind eye whenever the Annex was up to some sort of mischief—for many decades to come.

In fact, all known star maps and navigational databases show Betelgeuse as having ten planets in orbit, one planetary core being slowly digested near the surface of the expansion sphere, and two faint magnetic anomalies deep inside the star. It's believed that these are the footprints of two smaller iron-silicate planets long consumed, but the probes have failed to survive those pressures and temperatures long enough to find out. Nothing in the record even suggests an eleventh planet. Not to say that such a planet couldn't exist in the local Kuiper belt, but if by chance the question were to be put to an astronomer, any astronomer, they would double check their data-sets and maps then simply dismiss the question as a waste of their time.

That is, if anyone thought to ask.

Large and spectacular stars never provide a stable enough system to encourage the evolution of complex biospheres. With very few exceptions, like Sapphire, planets capable of being *tera/bio*formed to support human life will usually be found orbiting lone and insignificant stars. At 421 light years Sol is barely visible to the naked eye, but it's just that kind of bland and mediocre star that has the most potential for development and colonization. In short, the planets and moons around Betelgeuse are so inhospitable that only a handful of scientists actually inhabit this system. Nobody ever just drops by, and the few commercial carriers who *puke*d their tractors, and managed to limp in on a prayer, have all asked the same question verbatim, "Who do I hav'ta fuck to get out of here?"

At a balmy 17°k, Cue Ball is having a heat wave. With an orbital radius of 93au the outer crust, an ocean of frozen nitrogen, is spotted with pools of liquid hydrogen that are already boiling off because of the near vacuum at sea level. The H² vapor makes the ragged surface slippery and treacherous and cuts visibility down to less than five thousand meters—making this planet, the one that doesn't exist, the perfect environment for squirreling away raw materials, hoarding armaments, and training recruits.

What looks to be a hole in space creeps across the cottony whiteness below. Minutes later a shadow appears on the surface of the planet caused by said hole. Cue Ball has no moon, and cavities and voids don't float around just 'cause, but there it is—a hole and its shadow in tow. In silhouette against Cue Ball this featureless object is a seven-kilometer wide battle station code-named, Carrie Nation.

Its original name was Augustus but the station has been referred to as Carrie Nation for so long that only a few old timers actually remember it. Like many military organizations the Annex will issue code names for secret operations or projects. With a randomly assigned two-character code the mission planners for the SA will come up with some name or phrase that will best describe or mislead as to the nature of the secret. Accordingly, CB became Cue Ball, CN became Carrie Nation, JW becomes Jerryworks, and so on.

The names of Augustus's sister stations all suffered the same fate. Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero have always been referred to as Mata Hari, Lizzie Borden, Annie Oakley and Mae West, respectively. These five stations are the Annex's most valuable assets and, like Cue Ball, they have never been listed in any official inventory. For decades the Co-op has been trying to zero in on the SA bases of operation and they would absolutely freak if they found out that those bases were heavily armed and mobile.

Like the battle platforms Carrie Nation is charcoal black and virtually impossible to see with the naked eye. Nicknamed Jehovah's Yo-yo, when backlit by the pristine whiteness of Cue Ball one can't help but be held in awe by its sheer size and simplicity of design which amounts to two shallow saucers connected by a central hub. Both of these disks are 900 meters thick at the center and gradually taper off to a sharp edge. The sides facing each other are flat and serve as flight decks. Separated by a 450-meter hourglass shaped hub the smaller battle platforms can easily slip in between the disks and link up to the hub for a quick resupply or repair.

To reduce the possibility of a visual acquisition the station keeps one of its curved surfaces facing Betelgeuse by rotating slowly as it orbits Cue Ball. Normally they would opt for a flat polar orbit, and completely vanish from sight, but the ground stations are studying the effects of solar winds by having the Carrie Nation eclipse Betelgeuse every 96 minutes.

Red giants tend to be much cooler on the surface than main-sequence stars but, in their death throes, some cast off matter at such a staggering rate that, in the case of Betelgeuse, everything out to more than a thousand astral-units is feeling the heat. Betelgeuse pulsates on a cycle which produces a recurring *weather front* that thaws out and refreezes the hydrogen ice on Cue Ball every 460 Earth-standard days. Thus, the surface of Cue Ball is obscured by clouds, is extremely hostile, and the Annex isn't really interested in the how or why the cycle works—just as long as it continues.

It's all for science. The astronomers, orbiting the star at 20au, have proved that they can keep a secret or two so why not put out a little?

Maybe someday there will be an itch that the Steel Annex can't reach?

As the Carrie Nation approaches the night side, a small Razorback punches out from the clouds in a twisting 3g climb in AG. The atmosphere is thin and they could have used the pulseblades in thrust mode however, the trace amounts of oxygen escaping from the exhaust would undoubtedly react with the free hydrogen—adding to the already spectacular plume of heat and massive contrail of water vapor. Not the thing you'd want when trying to keep a low profile.

With the clouds of volatile H² far below, the pilot flips the Razorback over, switches off the anti-gravity pods, then kicks in the pulseblades. Accelerating at a steady 6g's the ship quickly catches up to the Carrie Nation. At fifteen kilometers out the drop ship flips a 180° and blasts away to now slow itself down. Acceleration is still acceleration, and at full thrust the ship shudders violently to a crawl.

Slipping over the edge of the flight deck, the artificial gravity takes hold, and at 0.15g it ain't much, but without the benefit of aerodynamic lift the Razor drops like a rock—slamming onto the deck and scaring the living crap out of the recruits inside.

Anyone can drive a Razorback, but few can actually fly the thing, and as shit-hot as this pilot is you'd think she was trying to kill all those on board because flying and landing backwards would not be considered the norm. Fortunately for everyone this apparently suicidal maneuver is well within the Razor's flight envelope but the recruits don't need to know that just yet.

It's time for them to scream.

Careening across the flight deck, every time the ship bounces an unholy screech and grinding radiates up from the landing gear. It feels like the gear is going to fold up, but the Razorback is designed to take this kind of punishment and more. After the third bounce, the recruits continue to scream, but now they start to laugh and throw their hands up as they would on a roller coaster.

The pilot thinks to herself, *Very good! Now it's time to really fuck with 'em.*

The gear rotates and twists the ship around so that it's rolling along sideways. This evil maneuver imparts a severe wobble on the fuselage, and grips the recruits in wide-eyed terror. Now mute, they grab the racking and wait for a wing tip to dig in—thus ripping the ship apart and exposing them to the merciless vacuum of space.

Few can survive explosive decompression for long and if you wind up as part of the unlucky bunch, by not getting killed outright that is, you have maybe a minute before the effects are irreversible.

Most people lose consciousness inside twelve seconds and it's just as well that they do because prolonged exposure can lead to nitrogen bubbles in the blood, an uncomfortable ballooning of the abdominal cavity, involuntary defecation, emesis, with a chaser of fibrillation. Followed by paralysis and hemorrhaging and seizures—oh my.

As it is the Razor seesaws to a stop and the recruits start to breathe easy, but not too easy. They know the ship has landed on something in orbit but they don't have a clue how big this thing really is, and if the recruits could look outside they would definitely lose their cool if they saw the lumbering hulk of SA14 floating overhead.

Sandwiched between the flight decks, Iron Man looks like some mosquito godhead jabbing its proboscis into the life-blood of Carrie Nation. Virtually identical to and three months older than the Phoenix-Marauder, SA14 is at the end of a seventeen week retrofit. The gravitational fields from both flight decks compete for the mass of the battle platform but instead of one deck winning the contest over the other, and killing everybody, the ship is stabilized by low-frequency electromagnetic fields. These fields are under constant adjustment, and if you were to watch the ship for more than a few seconds you would notice that the thing is actually swaying back and forth, and up and down. Staring at this is mesmerizing and has such a detrimental effect to your sense of balance that during visual inspections, troops up on the wet-deck find it sporting to take bets on which of the maintenance crew conducting the daily VI will be first to fall back on their ass. Great sport when you are watching someone else make a fool of themselves, but not so attractive when the fresh meat is tossing their cookies all over the interior of your drop ship.

One trauma at a time they say.

The electric motors in the landing gear torque up and the pilot steers the Razorback towards an elevator near the base of the hub. Just slightly larger than a football field the surface of the lift can easily accommodate the smaller HWG99 with lots of room to spare. As a final gesture to mess with the recruits, the pilot locks the wheels up and skids the drop ship to a stop on the elevator.

The elevator immediately drops to the maintenance hangar below. At the bottom of the shaft the Razor rolls backwards into an open air lock. As soon as the ship clears the fifty-meter wide opening to the lock, two huge doors quickly slide shut and the compartment explodes with air. The second the atmospheric pressure hits 12psi the ramp of the drop ship snaps open and slams onto the deck of the air lock with a loud clank.

One hundred and twenty yellow jump suits race down the ramp, and the only thing we hear is the patter of the recruit's feet as

they quickly fall-out into four lines of thirty. As the last of the recruits pile out, Deputy Marshal, William (Bill) Nguyen, marches down the ramp in a red jumpsuit. Close behind him the pilot, Chief-Master Sergeant, Nicole Burke, follows in a JACC fighting suit. Both stop at the foot of the ramp and wait.

Across from the formation is another fifty-meter hatch that leads to the maintenance deck. Its two 180 ton doors silently part allowing Chief Deputy Marshal, Scott Rutledge, to step through.

In the freezing cold air the recruit's breath condenses and in the few short seconds it takes Scott to reach Bill, in his peripheral vision, Scott notices that all the recruits exhale in time with each other. No one has taught them to do this but they have been standing in formation in cold air locks so often that they've started doing this all on their own. Fewer than one out of thirty companies coming out of basic manage to develop this extreme level of cohesion.

It's a sign that the drill instructors have done their jobs well.

Scott stops in front of Bill and, without any exchange of words, both turn towards the formation. Bill follows Scott as he marches off to harass the first *maggot* in the back line. A skinny blond named, Angela Simmons.

Angela's wholesome youthfulness is in stark contrast to Scott's black skin, peppered hair, and ragged scars that run along his cheek and neck. His truly good nature is overshadowed by a brutal facade that has earned him the handle of *Vader* oh so many years ago when he-himself was a drill instructor. Scott hated being a DI and is glad that he only has to switch into his old DI mode when he takes delivery of new recruits like now.

The voice of a DI is a bitch for most people to master but Scott is one of those rare naturals at it. His guttural *Tony-the-Tiger* voice rattles your bones, rakes your soul, and makes your genitals want to claw their way back into your body.

At 6'6" Scott has to lean down to shout at Angela, "All right, Vapor Lock, can you tell me what kind of asshole your D.I. is?"

After six months of being screamed at recruits tend to overcome their fear of drill instructors. Understanding that there is no way to win with a DI recruits look for subtle ways to piss them off. That is, without drawing too much flak for their efforts. Angela is no exception and she suppresses a grin, "Sir? This recruit thinks he's an asshole. Sir!"

"You failed to qualify your response, maggot! Drop and give me twenty!" Angela drops to the ground as Scott turns to Bill and barks, "D.I. Nguyen, kindly instruct this dumb-fuck on the importance

of adjectives, and demonstrate the qualities of asshole that have been bestowed upon you!”

Bill squats beside Angela as she starts to pump out twenty pushups. A Vietnamese born in Texas, Bill’s smiling face and country drawl cuts through the DI façade, “Listen up recruit, an asshole can be many things. They can be rancid, insane, or simply real. They can be big, and they can be fucking, and they can be serious. They can even be fucking serious—”

Scott snorts into the face of the recruit standing in front of Angela, “Your turn fecal head! What kind of asshole is D.I. Nguyen?”

Part of the ethnically nondescript mulatto-majority of North America, Zach Nelson smirks, “He’s a D.I. asshole. Sir.”

Scott feigns outrage, “What! Are you for real, son! Did you forget to preface your response with Sir, or are you trying to be a difficult asshole! Maybe your synapses are not firing properly! Maybe the sudden gravity has a detrimental effect on your cerebral displacement! Grab your ankles, recruit, so we can get blood to your brain and maybe then we can identify what kind of asshole *you* are! I believe that I need some help in this task.”

As Zach bends over to grab his shins, Scott turns towards Bill and calls-out, “D.I. Nguyen, have you properly instructed Vapor Lock? If so, then direct her to crawl forward and study this asshole! I do not possess the faculties to determine what kind of asshole he is, but maybe she does.”

With a nod, Scott gestures to Nicole and she follows him as he marches around to the front of the formation. As they step away, Bill motions for Angela to move forward towards Zach. From a pushup rest position, Angela drops to her knees and scoots up.

Bill shouts, “Recruit Simmons, you are to hold your nose five, I repeat, five centimeters from contact with recruit Nelson’s hindquarters. Your mission is to observe and report! If recruit Nelson elects to break-wind, you are hereby authorized to bite the offending orifice in self-defense. This is your post until properly relieved.”

Bill hops up and fires off at the recruit to Angela’s right, “As for you, maggot! Your mission is to orbit these two recruits and keep watch. Recruit Simmons is authorized to administer her incisors for each flatulence ventilated by recruit Nelson. If by chance y’all witness her kissing his ass without provocation, call out immediately so I can get *my* place in line! Carry on.”

Halfway along the front line, Scott stops. He takes one step back, turns, and squares off with a big Italian named Anthony Gudici. The DI’s for the SA practice focusing their eyes past whomever they

are shouting at. One benefit is to maintain rock-steady eyes, and the second benefit is to give the recruit the diminishable feeling they are about as substantial as vapor.

Equal in stature, Anthony is unfazed as Scott's eyes bore through his skull, "Your turn stallion. Tell me what kind of asshole is D.I. Nguyen?"

Even with a heavy accent, Anthony's command of English and relaxed aura makes his response almost conversational—and defiant, "Sir, D.I. Nguyen has performed his job to the best of his abilities and, in this recruit's opinion, is not an asshole. Sir!"

"God-damn-it! The Annex has expended beaucoup capital in an effort to impart qualities into D.I. Nguyen so that he can share them with you! My query is to determine if said efforts have been invested wisely! If not, I'm gonna chuck you shits out the air lock and start with a fresh batch of butt-fucks for D.I. Nguyen to workout on! You are directed to answer the question!"

"Sir, the recruit stands firm by his first response. Behaving like an asshole is not the same as being an asshole, and this recruit believes that D.I. Nguyen is not the asshole here. Sir."

Scott leans in and grunts, "Okay, bad-ass, then tell me who *the* asshole is! And you had better get it right or it'll hurt."

"Sir, this recruit has known the Chief Deputy Marshal for ninety seconds, and he believes that the C.D.M. is a major-fuckin' asshole." Anthony notices Scott's eyes pull in on him, so after a defiant one-second delay he closes off with a snappy, "Sir!"

Scott wants to laugh, but this kid has pulled his focus; and just for that, he's obligated to make an example out of him.

Scott converts his laugh into a scream, "*What!* Are you fucking blind! Do you see clusters on my shoulders, maggot! Do I look like a bag-o-shit Major! I concur that I may very well be a fucking asshole, but there is *no* officer corps in the Annex! You have but three seconds to withdraw the insult or you *die!*"

It's all a game—a very serious game. Anthony knows that his small victory will be short lived, but never forgotten. Scott knows it as do all the recruits in formation. They know it. Anthony decides to passively accept whatever punishment Scott elects to inflict upon him. Any punishment is better than backing down because that tends to invite a more serious retribution.

"Time's up, shit head!" Scott steps to one side and shouts, "Forward—hu!"

Anthony has been ordered to march and standing out in front

of him is their drop ship pilot in a JACC fighting suit. He has just seconds to make a decision, and his only two options both suck. Unable to march through the pilot, because of the fighting suit, if he bounces off—he fails because he did not overcome the obstacle. If he stops short, or tries to circumvent said obstacle—he fails because he was not instructed to do so.

Either way, Antonio Frederico Gudici loses.

Only three steps out, and Anthony hears a merciful, "Halt!"

He stops just a half-step from what would have been total humiliation. Scott knows it as do all the recruits in the formation. They know this too.

Defiant-yet-compliant is what makes a good exec, and the SA is always on the lookout for people who possess these qualities. Nicole steps back as Scott comes around to look Anthony in the eye—and to tie into his head via the tacnet for a private little chat.

With a subtle click in Anthony's brain, he hears Scott's voice as if he were actually speaking by mouth, <"Hey, dumb-shit, with that attitude of yours, you're on a one way ticket to making Chief. That is, if I don't manage to kill your ass first. Think you can handle it, boy?">

<"Sir, I can take on anything you dish out. Sir.">

<"Do you believe in God, son? If so, start prayin'.">

Scott steps around Anthony to address the formation, and his voice softens just slightly, "I've heard it said that good judgment comes from experience, and that experience comes from exercising poor judgment. This recruit's judgment is in question! Recruit Gudici, here, has just volunteered to be point-man on your first hot-drop! The odds are stacked against him, but he has insisted on volunteering for this hazardous duty. So, when you follow this recruit's ass into the valley of death you just may see him die! It will be a learning experience for all! Don't waste it."

"Mr. Rutledge," Scott turns around to see Jacob Graves pushing a cart full of black jumpsuits in from the maintenance bay. "I'm ready to address the recruits however, maggot yellow makes me wanna hurl."

Scott turns back and shouts, "All right, shit heads. Molt!"

Confused, the recruits just stand there; so Scott grabs the collar of a recruit's jumpsuit, rips it open past her waist and shouts, "Get the fuck out of these jumpsuits, *now!*"

In a flurry, 120 recruits scramble to strip off their jumpsuits as Bill snakes through their formation shouting, "Drop the maggot

yellow skins where you are, and secure a black jumper from the cart! After that, fall back into formation! Let's move! Move! Move!"

Like pigeons on the wing, the naked recruits sweep past Scott, and then Jacob to get to the cart.

Via the tacnet Jacob opens a techlepathic channel into Scott's mind to comment, <"Rutledge, you are such an asshole.">

<"Thank you. Sir.">

<"And don't call me Sir.">

<"Yes, Sir.">

Jacob sees Nicole in the corner of his eye. That is, he notices the dark visor that obscures her face. Instead of being obvious he concentrates on the recruits who are now zipping up their black jump suits while they fall back into formation. It has been eleven years, eight months, twenty-nine days, and a handful of hours since he last saw her. That's not to say he's been keeping track, it's just that it also happens to have been the last day of the war. At one time he and Nicole were lovers, and Jacob is sort of curious as to what she has to say to him after all this time. He hasn't been avoiding her, but he suddenly feels a twinge of guilt.

Then again, the net does work both ways.

"Listen up!" Scott barks, and with their undivided attention, he continues, "This is absolutely your last chance to reconsider the Steel Annex as a career choice. Just fall back to the drop ship and we'll take you anywhere you want to go. With the fat severance package we offered you earlier today you can start a new life for yourself! No questions asked."

The recruits stand unmoved, so Scott makes one last plea, "Be advised, the worst is yet to come. In less than a minute your person will become an asset of the S.A., and this decision of yours is forever! There will be no way out of it. You will be committing yourself to a life of endless boredom and sudden death! I suggest you back out now while you can."

No one budges.

Scott breaks into a smile, "In that case, I want you to meet your senior commander. The most feared man alive, Field Marshall, Jacob Eugene Graves."

Scott pivots and moves back to stand beside Jacob. Jacob looks over at Scott and gives a low whistle, "With an intro like that, I don't know whether to puff up or burst his bubble. He obviously doesn't know my wife."

Everyone gives the customary under-the-breath chuckle that is expected by superior commanders who take a poor stab at humor.

"At ease." Jacob sighs, and the recruits quickly snap to parade rest. "We're gonna stop riding you people around and start treating you like human beings again. You've made the cut. That's the good news. Now the bad news. Your gonna hav'ta start from scratch. A lot of your training up to this point has been running patrols from useless outposts with obsolete equipment. I hate to tell you this but the S.A. has absolutely no operational bases that are planet side. All assets, both combat and logistical support detachments, are mobile and highly armed. So, why the six-month circle jerk in the Ninth Circle of Hell you ask? Well, first is so you wouldn't have any practical experience with our advanced systems. That is, so we wouldn't have to kill you if you didn't make the cut."

No one reacts to that last statement but something inside tells them that the threat was not an idle one, and after a few seconds of silence Jacob continues, "I let that one sink in 'cause, like Mr. Rutledge said, there is no way out from here. If you haven't figured it out yet this ain't Star Trek, kids, we play for keeps."

"What the training here on Cue Ball did give you is truly priceless. You now have an intimate knowledge of your opponent not attainable through any lecture or text. You have experienced how Homer lives, the air he breaths, the chow he eats, and the head he shits in. You have learned his drills, ran his maneuvers and stood his watch in his bunker with his raggedy-ass issue. And when you scope ol' Homer, and waste his ass, you will know only respect. He and his kind are fuckin' heroes! They deserve no less."

"Someone once said that the greatest virtue of a soldier is survival. Why is that?" Jacob shrugs, "Consider the alternative. Heroes die! That's what they do! Heroes become casualties, and what are casualties?" No one responds so Jacob throws his hands out and shouts, "Anybody!"

Angela calls out from the back of the formation, "Sir, they are expended assets. Sir!"

"Exactly!" Switching to DI mode, Jacob lunges forward and barks right in Anthony's face, "They're fucking dead!"

Jacob steps around Anthony and starts to stroll through the formation and, cut from the old-school, his eyes lock on theirs as he goes their lines, "Do any of you people have a clue what my problem is right now? No? Then I'll tell y'all what it is. I'm surrounded by a bunch of God-damned greenhorns who think they're heroes! Didn't Cue Ball give you any insights? Any clues? We've been teaching you how to die! Don'cha git it? All the swinging balls and all the firepower

in all the universe won't prevent you cluster-fucks from getting dead if you gung-ho your assets into Homer's killing-zone! To survive on operations you must reacquaint yourself with fear. You must rely upon it. You must embrace it! Show me someone who is not afraid and I will show you a corpse!"

Jacob starts back for the front of the formation, "Whatever madness possessed you to abandon your worlds and inheritance for this shit does not matter. You're mine until death do *you* part! If you people are not willing to do a one-eighty, and become survivors, then kill yourselves now!"

Turning to face the ranks, Jacob's predatory gaze has an unnerving effect on the recruits, "Each and every one of you will be faced with countless opportunities to die. Don't make me pick an' choose for you."

And just as quickly, Jacob switches out of DI mode, "I would like to take a minute off-track to make a few announcements. D.I. Nguyen will not be taking charge of your company, as is the usual practice with the senior drill instructor. Mr. Nguyen has been promoted to Chief Deputy Marshal. He will be filling the battalion commanders slot vacated by Mr. Rutledge, here. Mr. Rutledge has just now been elevated to Deputy Field Marshal and will assume command of the Thirty-Sixth Mobile Field Division. Gunnery Sergeant, Angela Simmons, has been promoted to the rank of Deputy Marshal and she will take charge of this company. Your company will be attached to Mr. Nguyen's Third Battalion. First of the Thirty-Sixth. These changes in T.O. are in effect now. Questions?"

Asking for questions is not just a formality. The SA takes the practice seriously but these recruits are not aware of that fact yet. Jacob would prefer a question or two, but that would be against a boot-recruits natural instinct to avoid drawing too much attention to themselves. All stand silent, many still in Pavlovian maggot-mode waiting for the next shoe to fall.

Jacob clears his throat, "One last thing. Normally we give you a pep talk on how bitchin' your assignment is. We really don't have anything to say about SA36 except that we've spent the last six months working out the bugs, and that when you board her eighteen hours from now she will be combat ready. SA36 is the first of the Trung series of battle platforms to become operational. We call her the Iron Maiden, and one look at her an' you'll understand why. She's big and scary. Our analysts have billed the Maiden as *the ultimate in force projection*. Well, that remains to be seen, but with your help we intend to prove them right. Welcome to the Annex. Marshal Simmons." He motions for Angela, the recruit known as Vapor Lock, to come forward and take the floor.

Angela breaks ranks and stomps around from the back of the formation, all the while shouting, "You people have a lot to absorb over the next year, and everyone here is depending on *you* to get your shit screwed down tight! I honestly believe that the only stupid question is the unasked question! The reasoning is, *my life* depends on *your* ability to recognize your own ignorance! I think it's a shitty deal for me but that's the way it is! So, if you don't understand something you need to ask! If you still don't get it you are hereby ordered to ask again and again until you do! In our world ignorance is not a crime but failing to rectify it is."

Angela is amused by the recruit's reactions. You can almost see the confusion, disbelief and fear in their faces. If you happened to have tied into the company tacnet frequency, you can hear the actual screams echoing in their heads such as, <"This was the idiot that almost killed us all!">

Present a mental patient with someone who is nuttier than themselves, and the patient tends to pull it together. They may not be able to hold it together for long, but there is a moment of self-awareness like, *At least I'm not that crazy*. Take a training company and plant a Gomer Pile amongst their ranks. Faced with such a liability even the worst of the recruits tend to pull it together.

Non-hackers quickly discover they can hack.

Starting off on the wrong foot the Gomer Pile, or Vapor Lock if female, is quickly identified as a colossal screw-up by the DI's. In a few short weeks the company, as a whole, becomes responsible for each and every one of Gomer's transgressions and is punished accordingly. Tired of the endless harassment the *team* is compelled to drill, coach and if need be, beat Gomer Pile into shape. Through their efforts the Gomer Pile is *reborn* after a fashion.

Forcing the recruits to make a peer out of a pariah is decidedly an ass-backwards way of teambuilding, but this program has proven itself effective by cutting the washout rate to practically zero. Also having been a squad leader, and a DI at one time, the Gomer Pile helps keep watch over the company. As a result the fatality rate during the first cycle of training is now at an all time low of 0.5%. One death in two hundred may be high by some standards, but the harsh environment of Cue Ball is unforgiving.

Angela squares off with the formation, and while waiting for the commotion on the companies tacnet channel to die down she summons three troopers, standing by in JACCs, to enter the lock from the maintenance bay. The vision of the fighting suits streaking in and flaring out to land behind her quiets the recruits.

With their now undivided attention, Angela almost manages a

smirk, "I take it y'all didn't appreciate my little air lock stunt, hu? Or can you say, lock an' load? I could tell you didn't like that one either. Be advised, there is no second chance in the field. If you fuck up chances are you're going to die! Unfortunately you will probably not die alone. That's a statistical fact I want you to always keep in mind."

Angela reaches back, and one of the troopers hands her a rail gun. It is a bull-pup design with the magazine in the rear stock, heavy optics, and a grenade launcher tube atop its long-slender barrel. Angela raises it over her head.

"I would like you to meet a dear friend of mine for over fifteen years. Battle rail gun, model BR1-C3. This fantastic weapon fires the four-point-seven-five kinetic energy bolts and a variety of explosive, smart, and the ever popular rocket-assisted munitions."

Angela strips the magazine out of the BR1 and tosses the weapon to Anthony, "The basic design has been a fixture on ground operations for over sixty years, and the C3 model has filled so many roles that we've retired almost all other intermediate squad weapons. Unfortunately the time of the BR1 is at an end. You will be trained on this marvelous weapon but none of you will have the opportunity to field it but, before you get all teary eyed like I'm am, check this out. This is the Jerryworks Armored Combat Cybernetics fighting suit model ten-forty. This new build is one mutherfucker of a machine, and we're talking all sixty-four kinds of 'em..."

As Angela continues with her colorful lecture on the virtues of the latest JACC, Jacob notices that the drop ship is already on its way out of the lock—through an access tunnel to the left of the formation. With a cursory glance to his right and left, he also notices that Burke has already gone. He could kick himself for playing games, and not getting her attention when he first came into the lock. All he really wanted to do was to find out how she was doing over a cup of coffee or two. Now he'll have to wait and find the right moment to run into her real casual-like. Maybe she and his wife are still on speaking terms? It's a reach, but there is always hope.

"Which way did she go?" Jacob whispers to Scott.

Scott does a quick look around and shrugs.

Jacob nods towards the tunnel, and without disrupting Angela's lecture on the JACC, Scott and Jacob slip away from the formation. As they approach the tunnel, Jacob suddenly feels sorry for the recruits. Tomorrow morning, while donning their newly issued JACCs, they'll be nursing the mother of all hangovers. Hangovers that he'll be springing for.

Jacob follows Scott into the tunnel, and out of sight of the

formation Jacob speaks up, "Burke's got a case-of-the-ass. I can feel it in my bones."

Scott stops and turns back to Jacob, "You two have a history, and I want no part of it." He raises a fist and points back at himself, "But, do you want to know what *my* case-of-the-ass is? Your silverbacks didn't want the job so you saddled me with it! It reeks. I was lookin' forward to a reread before sixty and you knew that!"

Scott doesn't want to be a division commander, but Jacob's regimental commanders didn't want the job either. Since the Senior Deputy Marshals voiced no objection, Jacob was allowed to move Scott over them, and into the division commander's slot. As a Deputy Field Marshal, Scott becomes their commander, but the SDMs are happy that they get to retain their field commands for another five years or more. Unless Scott dies, if that were to happen they get to bicker on who gets stuck with it.

At one time Scott was Jacob's exec so he was a natural choice for him to make for division commander. Unlike the commander/exec relationship in most organizations, the relationship in the Annex is more like a marriage.

With that in mind, Jacob sees no point in trying to beat around the bush, "Can you blame them? No one wants the job, therefore you get the job. You can thank me later."

Jacob looks up the tunnel to see if he can spot any sign of Burke. "You'll need to find an exec."

"I already found one *hell* of an exec."

Realizing that Scott has just suggested Nicole, who goes by Red Hell, as his exec, Jacob cringes, "You can't be serious!"

To lure Nicole to SA36, Scott made a promise to her that, as his exec, she would get the first available field company that split out after training. Angela's company will be busted up after the next year, and Nicole would be slated to get her own company out of the shuffle. As a Deputy Marshal she would take a big step back in rank, but Nicole is tired of running the show as a chief. Scott gets an outstanding exec for a year and Nicole will soon get back into the action—if any action were to be had.

If it were handled in the right way, Scott knows that Nicole would not refuse the opportunity to continue on as a Command Chief. Yes, it's primarily administrative, being an exec for a DFM, but it still places her third in command on SA36—over the rest of the silverbacks. She has locked horns with each of them in the past, and they are not going to like it when they find out that she will be the intermediary between them and Scott.

Scott will have a great time watching them squirm but, for Jacob, it can be a bad omen.

"Am I set in stone?" Scott asks about his new job. "If so, then my selection has been made. Burke 'as got the talent I want, so you just keep it to yourself until I bring her around. Don't tie my hands on this one or you can fuck the promotion."

That says to Jacob that Scott has already extended the offer to Nicole, so why fight it?

"It's your call. I'll support you on it." Jacob pats Scott on the shoulder, "Look, let Bill know that I've reserved the alpha lounge on the wet deck for the new guys. They can take liberty at nineteen hundred hours and it's on my tab. Invite the D.I.'s and your staff. Ya'll deserve to cut loose."

"Then cut loose we shall."

Jacob steps past Scott, and starts to head down the tunnel after the Razorback, "Be advised. If by twenty-one hundred hours I find one sober person from this cycle—it's your ass! You read me?"

"My ass has always been there for you, good buddy."

Another come-on.

It's been the running gag between Jacob and Scott for over twenty years. Heterosexuals are now an anomaly—the minority in what they still call *western* societies. With the neuronet the lifestyle of the predominate omnisexual is not a mystery to Jacob. He isn't exactly phobic about guys putting the moves on him, he accepts it as complimentary, but it does give him the creeps somewhat.

What actually bothers Jacob about those of his own gender is their aroma—the way they smell. Jacob has always politely declined counseling but the shrinks of the Annex that have evaluated Jacob's tacnet recordings for after-action reports have all described him as—*outwardly clinical during actions*, but *keen to his senses*—which is their way of identifying the few and far between troopers who maintain self-control but are driven by some underlining primal rage. If one were to observe Jacob directly this would probably explain why his nostrils constantly flare out during combat.

It's not the idea of being with a guy that Jacob has an aversion to, it's the pheromone flags that are broadcasted by those of his own gender that he and most avowed heterosexuals recoil at. And if those flags were transmitted deep inside his bubble, Jacob will experience fight-or-flight anxiety.

Jacob simply ignores the comment but it steels his resolve to get back at Scott one of these days.

All kidding aside Scott worries about Jacob, and before returning to the air-lock, and the nuggets being lectured too, he mutters under his breath, "Watch your six."

A hundred meters into the tunnel and Jacob finally catches up to the drop ship. He sees an elevator up ahead and, suddenly feeling uncomfortable, he bolts for it. Jacob stops short of the open elevator door and sniffs the air. He doesn't even notice this behavior of his, sniffing the air like that, but he's suspicious as to why that the door continues to remain open. With a chill running down his spine, Jacob turns and quickly heads back towards the air lock, and just past the open ramp of the drop ship—he bounces back as if he were a mime that just walked into an imaginary wall.

Jacob doesn't have time to react. The flicker from an invisible arm reaches out and presses against his chest. In one smooth stroke Jacob is vaulted off his feet and up into the open hold of the drop ship.

As he goes airborne Jacob shouts, "oh—Shit!"

At the top of the ramp, Jacob struggles to lift himself off the deck. Looking up he sees the distorted ripple highlighting a cloaked JACC. This visual giveaway by the holographic cloak only comes when a fighting suit is in quick motion, and from the way it looks this invisible figure is bearing down on him with a purpose.

After the span of over eleven years, a breath short of one fifth of his life, Jacob again hears Nicole's soft yet haunting voice, "Half stepin' again, huh Eugene?"

Like Bambi in the headlights, Jacob is frozen. Not from fear, but by the visual mosaic of the thousands of intersecting polygons that make up the holographic cloak.

He opens his mouth and only gets one word out, "Burke?"

The ghostly figure slams into Jacob, and in this low gravity he flies over twenty meters back into the hold. Tumbling onto the deck he jumps to his feet and belches, "Fuck you Burke!"

"That's the idea."

The ramp snaps shut and the lights flood the hold in combat red. Red or blue light, either or, not only allows the eyes to adjust quickly to dark conditions but it also defeats this type of holographic projection. To avoid the fuzzy checkerboard look, Nicole shuts off the hologram, and her JACC materializes just three feet from Jacob. Without any warning the artificial gravity inside the Razorback is neutralized. The soles in Nicole's fighting suit makes her stick to the deck but Jacob, sans the gecko like footwear, starts to float and he bounces off the ceiling in slow motion.

As Nicole pops her helmet off, Jacob pleads, "Burke, honey, let's talk about this."

Nicole tosses the helmet away, visor and all. Then reaching out, she rips Jacob's jumpsuit apart exactly the same way Scott did to the recruit earlier in the air lock.

Defenseless and exposed, Jacob switches to clinical mode, "At this point in our relationship, I feel that a display of indignation would be considered a, oh...pointless exercise?"

Nicole grabs Jacob and snarls, "Cut the crap!"

She sounds hostile, but the look in her eyes expresses a warm passion—not the scowl you would expect with such a comment. In this light you cannot see the crystal blue of those eyes, which are an oddity for a redhead, but after all these years Jacob remembers and is caught off guard by the sadness in those eyes.

Nicole is a *Barbie Doll* clone, a being who possesses beauty and physical perfection that's matched only by her insatiable appetites. She's got that Seven-of-Nine thing going on, but with hips and a heart. Designed and bred for the flesh trade, she is a slave to touch, and the melancholy she projects provides Jacob with the insight that all of her relationships since they last knew each other have failed to quench her undying thirst for intimacy. A dysfunctional pattern of codependency, which has compelled the NCL model of clones to off themselves by the time they reach thirty or forty years of age. Nicole is forty-two, and is having a difficult time coping with herself.

What Jacob did not remember is what he had felt for Nicole and what drove him to face almost certain death by jumping from orbit over eleven years ago. Call it suppressed, or call it denial, when he catches a whiff of her scent, a unique cross between mango and Darjeeling tea, it's like someone kicks him in the chest. Now, being kicked in the chest is no mystery for Jacob, but what is a mystery are the emotions that have burst forth from the core of his being like an aneurysm. There is nothing warm and fuzzy about the realization that you have spent more than a decade away from your one true soulmate. Jacob is abruptly and rudely awakened to the fact that he is still in love with Nicole, and that knowledge hurts like a bitch.

Nicole pulls his face close to hers, and though her verbiage is harsh her voice is surprisingly seductive, "I'm at three-fifteen Kelvin, with six hours left in the window. So, either you do me, or I'll do you." She thrusts her fist towards his face, "Fucking or fisting? It's your call, Little Boy."

"Well, I guess I'm fucked."

"Good choice!"

Nicole takes his head in her hands and pulls his lips to hers. The immediacy of it was predictable, but what is totally unexpected was that this is the most fulfilling kiss Jacob has ever experienced in his entire life. So tender and deliberate that his resistance completely melts away.

Nicole lets go of his head then reaches down and rips the jumpsuit wide open. She breaks the kiss and whispers, "Short arm inspection." With a smile, she lightly flicks the tip of his nose with the tip of her tongue, and then in counterpoint she barks in his face like a DI, "Attennnnn-hut!"

Grabbing Jacob by the hips, Nicole raises his body overhead.

Pulling her head back, she calls out, "about face!"

"Wait a minute!" Jacob protests as she flips him around.

"Forward hoooo!" shouts Nicole as she drives her face into the tattered remains of his jumpsuit.

As Nicole seizes him, Jacob screeches, "Bur-urke!"

Nicole has proven herself to be demanding, but never has she manhandled him before. Helpless and bewildered, Jacob cries out, "What will Tiger say!"

Nicole pulls away for just a second, "Fuck her, I have."

That's true, they have, and Maria would convey that invitation if she were asked.

Few people have any hang-ups about who their sexual partners are nowadays, but if Maria knew what her husband actually felt for Nicole the betrayal would be unforgivable. Jacob would instinctively deny it if he were to be put-to-the-question, but that would never happen in today's world. People have learned to not ask for what they don't want to know, and if anything were to be brought up Jacob's one honest defense would be that Nicole was clearly the antagonist and he was given no quarter.

No avenue of escape.

With a firm grip on him, Nicole drops her arms and in one smooth action the JACC blossoms out—peeling away to expose her upper body. She slips her arms out of the sleeves of the fighting suit, then reaches up and again grabs his hips with a force.

Jacob's eyes bug out, "Whoa! Come on, get off!"

Once again, Nicole comes up for air, "Don't mind if I do."

She pushes off with her toes, and the lower half of her body slips free from the JACC. From off the transparent Alon-door to the

cockpit, Jacob notices the reflection of them floating in the air.

The JACC secretes an olive oil like compound that coats the body to prevent abrasions while maintaining a skintight contact. With this thin film of lubricant on Nicole's alabaster skin, she glows like a burning ember in the combat-red light. As if from some Hieronymus Bosch nightmare, she appears as an inviting devil-whore who has lured her prey unaware, and is now ripping through his belly and feeding off his vitals.

Now, there's an image for ya, Jacob thinks.

Sometimes the truth bites. Nicole has an agenda and a schedule to keep and Jacob understands this as though he can read her mind. She desires a child and he has been selected to be the mechanism for sire. A tool. In many ancient cultures, Nicole's theft of Jacob's essence would prove as sinister in intent as would be consuming his flesh for real. In today's cultures, her assertiveness would be universally condoned—even applauded.

Jacob deserves to feel cheap, but he doesn't, and that's what really bothers him.

As they slowly rotate in the zero-gravity, Jacob pulls Nicole close to reciprocate. Now is not the time for regrets, and with surprisingly little effort he manages to file them away for later.

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