

5

velemas solo que mal acompaño

**TIME: 21:10zulu (local 35:30mst)**

Jacob's head hits the deck with a slam. He looks up from the grating and sees Maria smiling at him. Brushing her hands off, she walks away. Maria could have broken his neck by using his body weight to compress his spine but she thought better of it. Sure, he'd be good as new inside six weeks but this latest transgression did not warrant the expense to fix him up.

Maybe next time.

The crowd milling around the elevator lobby know better than to take exception to Maria's exchange with Jacob. This is the third time in as many months that she has exercised her prowess with judo on him. This sport favors the smaller opponent and a big lug like Jacob makes an easy target for a little sprite such as Maria.

Her face is replaced by Scott's grinning mug.

He offers Jacob a hand up, "I heard you've been doin' cartwheels all afternoon with Burke."

"That's not what this is about, Wakow."

Jacob takes Scott's hand and gets to his feet. He rubs the back of his head and grimaces. Not just from the pain, but from the loud music and flashing lights blaring out from the main dance hall on the wet deck.

Calling it the wet deck is an understatement. At night it's more like party central and every station and battle platform has one. Each wet deck is a unique and elaborate maze of lounges, game rooms, and dance halls that lead back to a bathhouse known as the free-for-all. The free-for-all is not open for business between Sunday and Wednesday so most everyone tend to migrate to the main dance hall or to the lounges that sport actual windows. On the five battle stations, unless you frequent the bridge or airlocks, this is the only

place you can satisfy your need for an outside view in real time.

Jacob shakes his head as Scott brushes him off and asks him with a laugh, "Then why would Ramirez be flippin' you like a pancake all of a sudden?"

"Remember when I jumped on Sapphire? Well, last week I gave the Historical group access to my files for that cycle. Some dumb shit posted copies and they're scattered all over the place by now."

"So?" Scott shrugs as he follows Jacob towards the hall.

"So...it's not the jump, or the fight people are pathing, it's what we were up to afterwards. Remember? Maria an' I were kickin' it all the way back to Cue Ball."

"No shit! I gotta get me a copy. I've got to know what it's like to rock-n-roll with the Tiger!"

"Hey look. They've got Maria's track in tandem with mine, so do me a favor and don't path hers."

"But girls have all the fun!"

Suddenly, Jacob spins around and taps his index finger in Rutledge's chest, "I know you all too well. You'll be rewinding that shit in your head for months so, in the spirit of keeping the peace between us you keep your hands to yourself, cocksucker."

Scott steps past Jacob, "Don't knock it till ya sock-it."

Jacob fumbles along behind Scott, "Knock it! I'll knock your God-damned teeth out if you ever make a grab for it. I'm happy being in the minority, okay! I shouldn't have to walk around with a sign saying *hetero* or a disclaimer *grabs ankle only as a figure of speech*, or some shit like that!"

"All you polars are all the same, Paranoid and phobic all of ya." Scott stops and spins around to poke Jacob in the chest, "And don't be telling me you haven't pathed any of Maria's tracks!"

"Well...sure I have."

"An' you liked it, didn't you!"

Jacob throws his hands up and stomps past Scott, "You omnis are all alike. Shit, I get to critique myself, don't I?"

Scott shakes his head and he follows Jacob into the hall, "Bullshit! What other wet-dreams have you pathed? Tom an' Jerry? Maggie Air-Tight?"

"Who hasn't pathed Maggie!"

Which is a half-truth for Jacob.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> century version of *Behind The Green Door*, as the first N2 recording with tandem tracks, *Air-Tight* became an instant classic in the carnal genre. Because it was cast by troopers of the SA the top echelons frowned upon it but, since the distribution copies didn't lead to the identities of the participants, there was nothing they could really do about it except acquire a copy for their own libraries.

Jacob doesn't have the nerve to tell Scott that he was actually one of the cast members. Young, dumb, and in love, Jacob was willing to do anything for Maggie. He has no regrets about his involvement but, luckily for him, the years have managed to obscure his identity. Now that he is a somebody—nobody recognizes him. Only his fellow platoon members at the time knew about his role and only two of them are alive to tell of it. His company commander also knew but Bob has kept it to himself as well. Not that the exposure would have hurt Jacob's career, its just that everybody has remained silent on it because the novelty would wear thin in short order.

Scott grins, "You liked it!"

"Maggie, she liked it."

"It's still participation."

"By proxy."

"Who the hell are you kidding!"

Jacob stops, spins around and flips Scott the bird. Pointing the finger straight at Scott's face, Jacob mouths the words, *fuck you!*

Scott couldn't pass up the opportunity before him. He immediately latches onto Jacob's finger with his mouth and starts to suck on it.

"Oh, yuck!" Yanking his finger away, Jacob leaps back while frantically wiping the saliva off, "You freak!"

Scott belly laughs, "Anytime sweetheart!"

"Back off, fuck face."

Scott purses his lips slightly, "Any you who wants to swing it in my direction can fuck my face anytime." He turns away, slams his bear paw of a hand on the bar, and bellows, "Barkeep!"

Incensed, Jacob steps up behind Scott. He leans in close and snarls in his ear, "You understand, I ain't your good-buddy!"

Scott looks at Jacob, and bats his eyes, "You know that when you whisper in my ear like that, and your hot-hot breath drips down my neck, it just makes me all horny and shit. Look!" Scott caresses his own chest. "My nipples are gettin' hard."

Scott then gives Jacob a little peck on the nose.

Jacob jumps back and furiously wipes his nose off on his sleeve, all the while shouting, "Fuck me runnin'!"

Swallowed up by the half-naked revelers, Jacob is suddenly taken aback as hands start to grope him and tug at his clothes.

Fortunately, the hands are all female.

Nobody's rank or position ever matters on the wet deck, but at least Jacob's heterosexuality is respected for the most part. The few straight males are easy to pick out in a crowd. The wet deck protocol dictates that they sport a simple stud or loop in just the left ear or risk being accosted by others of their own gender, and even though Jacob doesn't have a pierced ear everyone in the Annex knows who and what he is: Buzzard Chow, One-Two-Three, Jumping-Jack, Carrion, and last but not least, Azrael (aka Mortis Angelus).

But, from this day forward, in the minds of the troops, he will no longer be the man who walks with God and swaps spit with Death. What these people see with their knowing glances is the man who has subdued the Tiger Bitch herself. The man they witnessed—no, they experienced via the neuronet—rendering Tiger Bitch into a whimpering and bleating mass of protoplasm.

For some unknown reason this is perceived as an amazing power by the rank and file, and for the first time in twenty years Jacob is looked upon as desirable. From the dozen or so hands feeling him up one young blond gets bold and presses herself against his body. He recognizes her—she was one of the recruits he reviewed this morning. She was the little maggot who's eyes bugged out when he yelled in her ear, *Until death do you part!*

She had to have been at least twenty-one to sign on with the SA but she doesn't look a day over sixteen. Already she and all the other recruits have gotten into the spirit of the wet deck and they have no problem mingling with the veterans and old heads. In the Annex no one is an FNG. A *fucking new guy* that is. Either you are in or you're not and that makes a difference. The command structure is respected in its totality but it has very little meaning here. Everyone here on the wet deck fraternizes on the same level. Unfortunately the higher in rank and position you are, the greater the responsibilities, and the less time you have to be an average Joe. Jacob almost never comes to the wet deck to play because it's hard for the troops to perceive him as just another guy lookin' to have a good time.

What amazes Jacob is that after over two decades he has suddenly become an object of desire again. Not that he wasn't desirable after all this time, it's just that the troops here can actually

look upon him as human, and not *the-destroyer-of-worlds* as they led themselves to believe.

But as memory serves—he did destroy a world.

Over twenty years ago the Pandemonium had orders to neutralize a Co-op base at Nu-Ara to prevent an invasion force from launching against the Pleiades. Jacob was the only one in the third wave of fighters that got through the layered defenses and the last weapon he had available in his Thunderbolt was a spider.

With so few options, he cut the thing loose.

The missile accelerated to 1.6 times the speed of light before it reached the target—where between a *pico* and a *jiffy* the half-tonne weapon should have reverted itself back to its basic atomic parts when it pancaked on the mesosphere—thus lighting the air on fire out to a thousand clicks in all directions and destroying the base. It was a calculated but necessary risk that backfired because Jacob, on a whim, set the thing to do a forced jump at 200 kilometers just to squeeze a few more clicks out of it before it became unstable. Tragically, the spider managed to slice completely through the atmosphere and punch a hole through the planet's crust. The force of the impact was equal to that of a mountain the size of Kilimanjaro falling from space. It would have been better if the planet were vaporized outright, but as fate would have it that's not the case.

Over 1,370,000 died from that single shot, but not all at once. Horrors upon horrors unfolded over the next week as UN relief efforts stalled and only a handful of the resident quarter-million colonists, five children, were ultimately saved. And with as much determination that went into suppressing the identity of the shooter everyone in the Annex knew who pulled that trigger. None of the news services ever really covered this event, and no one in the Annex talks much about it, but each and every trooper that has been asked stands firm with the conviction that they'd have done the same thing regardless of the outcome. And then, without exception, they have all said in one way or another, 'I'm glad it wasn't me.'

Innocent lives snubbed out just to meet an objective, but that's the nature of war.

All this flashes through Jacob's head as this little blond rubs against him in rhythm to the industrial-metal. Her tunic drops to her ankles revealing her creamy skin, wasp like waist, and full hips. She immediately starts thumping her ample rear against Jacob's thighs in time with the down-beat. Too short to bump where it counts the flagging is effective just the same.

"Are you game!" she grunts.

Jacob thinks to himself, *Gamy is more like it*. He hasn't had time to freshen up since Nicole cut him loose an hour ago. He could take this young lady back to the bathhouse and jump into one of the hot tubs with her. Though the free-for-all is not open for business, and he's not the Big-6 of this station, he's a big enough 6 to get his way.

Then it hit him like a knife in the heart. He doesn't remember her name but he remembers that night, oh so many years ago when he was twenty-something and on his first extended leave. Back in the days when the Annex and the Cooperative were amicable. He remembers a three-day layover on New Era (Nu-Ara 4), and a bar where an indigenous blond bombshell put the moves on him. Even though he knew it was a weekend deal he has regretted it ever since. Not because he was involved with anyone in particular at that time, but because he did not go back to get her out of there. He didn't know why but he just felt that he should have.

After blowing the planet up the thought of having killed this girl was unbearable so he had a therapist hypnotize him to quash the memory of her.

The guy didn't bury it deep enough.

Jacob doesn't know why but he does not intend to let this opportunity slip away. Always in control, Jacob throttles down both his guilt and his lust and with some urgency he takes this young lady by the arm and shouts over the music, "Hold that thought!"

First things first. Focused and determined to settle a pressing issue, Jacob lets go of the girl and negotiates a path through the dancers towards the far corner of the hall looking for Tiger Bitch. He could have pinged the net to get an exact location, he can do that at his level, but he knows where she is and he knows she is pissed.

As predicted, Maria was in the corner table by the window. With her are Cricket, Angela, and Bill. Jacob approaches the table and points to one of the empty chairs across from Maria. She shrugs, so he takes the seat.

Maria looks long and hard at Jacob and thinks, *How can someone so top notch in his professional life be such a cluster-fuck in his personal life?* She realizes that what he did was not intentional—it was just plain stupid. The latest in an endless string of stupid.

Resigned to save face she quietly grimaces, "So, *Pandejo*, you want to get yur shit out of mi-casa, or do I?"

Cricket sighs, "Let up on the guy. He ain't done nothin'."

"Ain't done nothin'? By now I'm spread eagle and doin' the drill press in the minds of half the personnel on this battle station and

you call that nothin'!" And in her best East Los Angeles chola accent, "I tell you what I call it!"

"Hey!" Jacob cuts her off, "Really, how bad can it be?"

A hint of rage sparks off in Maria's eyes as she declares with a venom, "*Velemas solo que mal acompaño.*"

Jacob translates this as—*it's better to be alone than with bad company*. She has said it to him before but this time he thinks she means it. For the last ten years his relationship with Maria has been more like holding onto a tiger by the tail. Drop your guard and you'll get mauled.

Just then, Scott plops into an unoccupied chair beside Jacob and spares him from the claws. He sets two pints of dark ale and two shots of black rum on the table.

Sliding a pint and a shot towards Jacob, he grins big and laughs out loud, "I've got my E-Ticket for tonight, baby!"

The salvation was short lived.

"What's an E-Ticket?" Cricket asks.

"Show us Scott." Bill prods as he polishes off his beer.

Scott pulls out a business size data-card and holds it up for everyone to see.

The size, look and feel of a typical business card, the cards used today function like the mag-cards of old, but instead of only 500 characters of simple typed-text, these cards hold over 1.32 teraphits of data. The compressed neuronet recording of Maria and Jacob is a quarter that and easily fits on the embedded media.

Scott smiles at Maria, "I git—to ride—the Tiger!"

Angela makes a grab for the card but Scott snaps it back.

"Let's see it, Scott!" Angela wags.

"Little white girls hav'ta wait their turn."

"Why don't you two just go path it together?" says Nicole as she steps up to the table.

Bill and Cricket perk up, and Bill goes, "Can we come too?"

Cricket turns to Bill, "Can we come too?" She slaps him up side the head with a smirk, "Asshole."

Scott beams, "Share the experience I always say." And, in the spirit of giving, he nudges Jacob and extends the offer, "Care to come along?"

Jacob mumbles, "go away."

Scott starts snickering as Angela glees, "Lets go!"

The four of them hop up and dash out of the lounge followed by Nicole slipping into the chair vacated by Angela. They hear Scott call out before being swallowed up by the crowd, "Thanks, Red-Hell!"

Maria glares at Nicole, "You gave those shit-heads the file!"

Nicole smiles, "Ah, not so Maria." She pats Jacob on the hand and announces, "Jacob Eugene, you are now the co-star of two, count them, two wet-dreams. What are you gonna do now?"

It's bad enough that a file with him and Maria is floating around, but now a second file is out the door with his and Nicole's encounter from just that afternoon.

Jacob's response is icy, "I am not amused."

Maria gives Nicole a genuine grin, "You slut!"

"I prefer harlot, but slut is applicable."

"I'd say it's dead-nuts on." Jacob digs with his nostrils flaring.

Maria scolds him, "Now, Jacob, you be nice to her."

Looking at Jacob, Nicole smiles, "By the way Maria, your track has a longer running time. Ten years has made a difference."

"He's getting old, Nicole. Nowadays ya gotta pump 'em full off torpedo just to keep him goin' for the long haul."

Flustered, Jacob stands to leave, "Okay, I'm done. I'm gonna go check up on my kids."

"Kids? Plural!" Maria slaps Nicole in the arm, "Nicole, you promised I'd get to see his face when you told him about Jessica!"

Jacob is suddenly pissed off. He could understand Nicole withholding information about their daughter—conceived just days before Nicole got shot down—but not Maria. Jacob wonders how long Maria has known, but the lazy smile on her face answers that question.

"You knew all along!" Jacob hisses.

Maria shrugs, "It's not my place to tell you these things."

Nicole interjects, "You should have kept in touch."

Jacob turns and stares at Nicole. Nicole stares back and amazingly, there is no real hostility between them. Just a mutual disappointment.

Maria leans back in the chair and again gives her stock evil grin, "I wish I could say it's even between us, Jacob, but it's not. I



hope it hurts.”

Jacob redirects his stare at Maria, so Nicole chimes in, “For your edification, Maria, the boy figured it out on his own. He says it was my tits that gave it away. You wanna see?”

Maria glances at Nicole, “I thought he was a leg man?” Looking back at Jacob, she feigns hostility, “You’ve been lying to me all this time!”

“Uncle!” Jacob throws his hands up and turns to leave.

As Jacob stomps away, Maria laughs out loud, “If I think of any more personal traumas you’re entitled to I’ll let you know!”

Jacob takes the long way around the dance floor to avoid the revelers doing the *Time-Warp* of all things. While they were in the middle of the pelvic-thrust Jacob fails to notice the little blond as she trots out to meet him. Oblivious to her presence he doesn't feel the touch of her hand to his as he sweeps past her. As he walks away the young lady considers chasing after him but decides against it.

*Live each day as if it were your last* is engraved on the granite panel beside the entrance to the wet-deck. Before Marshall Nguyen cut the recruits lose inside he pointed this saying out and said, “For one day you will surly be right.”

What Bill said earlier that night struck a chord in her more than with the other recruits so, thinking that she'll run into Jacob at some future date, she shrugs and slips back amongst the dancers looking to score some action but, first, it's the end of the song and *time* to tumble to the ground...

Scoping out the little blond while she picks herself up from off the dance floor, Nicole thinks maybe she should get the jump on this girl before Jacob comes to his senses and returns for her. Obviously there is something there, some potential between those two and Nicole wants to muscle in on it. After considering several opening lines in her repertoire she settles on the direct approach. Her normal MO always seems to work for her.

Just then, Nicole is snapped awake by Maria rattling off in Spanish, “*Boca cerrada y las moscas no se meten.*”

Nicole looks at Maria and goes, “Huh?”

“Get your tongue back in your mouth! You’re too fuckin’ obvious.” Maria then puts out her hand, “You know what, don’ change your style now. If you want the little pork-chop, just whack ‘er over the head and drag her off like you do the rest of ‘em. Stick with what you know ‘cause it works for you.”

"You're right, I should." But instead of *gettin-after-it* as they say, Nicole reaches over the table to take Scott's shot and ale. She then slides Jacob's pair over to Maria, "Ever try one of these? It's a Murder Board."

Maria shakes her head *no* as Nicole drops the shot glass, rum and all, into the ale and hoists the pint into the air in mock salute, "Cheers, babe!"

Nicole takes a couple of gulps, and licking the foam from her lips, she grins, "Yummmmm, spunky!"

Maria follows suit and almost gags on the concoction. Forcing down one mouth full, she coughs, "I guess it's an acquired taste."

"I thought you were a swallower?"

"Darlin' is my middle name, but this shit is nasty!"

Nicole sits back and admires the smoky quality of the glass.

Streaked with dark veins and splashes of blue, it's like most of the bar glass now used on all of the battle platforms. Chiseled out by lasers from the chunks of excess diamond harvested from around Betelgeuse, this pint and shot glass by themselves would fetch a king's ransom on the open market. All twenty-one battle platforms and the five battle stations have a stash in their holds almost equal to that of the Carrie Nation's—which in itself amounts to 215,000 tons of the stuff. The Orion Trust auctioned off a whopping quarter-ton of the raw carbon crystal and made off like a bandit.

And they were pawning the scrap.

Six hundred meters below where Nicole is now sitting is a single block of the stuff the size of a small barn. Nicole wonders what would be offered for that rock as she gently sets the virtually indestructible drinking utensil on the table.

Curious, Nicole asks, "So, how you two getting' along?"

"Which one? Fat Man or Little Boy? They're both dicks in my book." Maria tries another swallow from the glass and her brows frown at the heaviness of it, "How can you stand this bitter shit?"

"It's an acquired taste."

Maria pushes the drink back and belches, "You know, if I didn't have this intolerable need to get laid, I'd waste him."

"He does make good lookin' kids."

"I've done about all the breeding I'm gonna do."

"Then, I guess it's love."

“Hey!” Maria takes exception, and pokes at the air between them, “If you ever see me give one of those big, doe-eyed, can’t-live-without-you looks for his ass. Do me a favor, I beg you.”

“What’s that?”

“Shoot me.”

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The door of the lift slides open. Jacob steps out and hangs a left into a dark corridor leading towards the family complex. The corridor is illuminated from above by a ghostly hue that simulates moonlight. Like all ships in the SA, Carrie Nation is on zulu time (Atomic Coordinated Time) and right now it’s midnight. It’s a nice touch to have night and day inside the ship the way they do, but the real purpose of this is to help maintain the natural clocks for the flora that sprouts out from the walls of the corridor.

Narrow troughs, like high-tech rain gutters, fill most of the open wall space throughout the passageways of the habitat sections. These gutters are chock full of flowering plants and ivies that not only ease the starkness of the interior of the ship, but intermingled with them are production plants that generate an excess of what is called vertically farmed fresh fruits and vegetables.

The plants were genetically altered to reduce their spatial and resource demands. With more than seventy years to perfect their techniques, the quality of this produce matches or exceeds that of the imports from traditional planet side farming operations. The one complaint from the troops is that they are required to detour from this superior quality fare and eat at least three of the CWR-RAT (sewer rat) field rations each week.

The troops take it in stride, rotating the stock of emergency rations the way they do, and it’s not that they can really tell the difference between plant synthesized fecal material, and the dreaded CWR (Cyclic Waste Recovery) synthesized fecal material, but it gives them cause to complain. It’s in the nature of the rank and file to have something to complain about, and it’s a good sign that this one issue is the best they can come up with.

Forty meters in and Jacob stops close to the door to his and Maria’s quarters. He looks up and takes a huge whiff of the air. The holographic glow of the Earth’s moon splashes on his face as the sound of artificial crickets complete an illusion that is duplicated in all the tunnels and walkways in the lodging facilities.

The only visual give away are the robotic arms that silently

attend to the foliage during the night cycle. Reaching down from tracks hidden by the holographic sky, he notices that these robots are starting to harvest the grapefruit that are growing out from among the decorative ivies. He has been watching one grapefruit swell and ripen over the last several weeks, so he decides to pick it before the robots get to it.

With grapefruit in hand, Jacob steps up to the door and the sentry lock instantly recognizes him via the tacnet. The door slides open, Jacob steps through and it hisses shut behind him.

His quarters are more like a split-level condominium than the bunk-an'-a-trunk arrangement you would expect on a combat ship. He steps down the stairs to the family room and he sees his three year old son, Diego, stretched out on a sofa and asleep with his head on the lap of an eleven year old red-headed girl, Jessica, and for as much as Jacob would like to believe otherwise—a total stranger.

He hears screaming, and looking to his left he watches the toothed tongue of a three-meter tall *Alien* punching through the head of yet another two-bit actor who the director pegged-in just so he could line up this shot. Jacob remembers this as the 13th of the series. Produced about a hundred and seventy years ago, it's the one sequel that most resembles the original film.

Jacob couldn't resist commenting, "Bet'cha they'll feel that in the morning."

Jessica huffs—suppressing a laugh.

Jacob tosses the grapefruit on the sofa and scoops up Diego in his arms and smiles, "Thanks for watching him. I appreciate it."

Jessica doesn't look up, "Not when you get the bill."

*That's abrupt*, Jacob thinks to himself as he cradles his son. Poked in the chest by a toy, Jacob pulls it out from between him and Diego and he sees that it is an *Alien* action figure. The toy starts shrieking as the mouth opens and the toothed-tongue shoots out. Jacob lets up off the button on its back and the plastic figure stops screeching. The tongue retracts.

Diego mutters, "Alien."

Jacob shakes his head in wonderment, "Whatever happened to Loony Toons, or Disney? You know, Mickey Mouse!"

Jessica does not look up, "Fuck, Mickey Mouse."

"You ought to check out Wile E. Coyote. Now, he was definitely beyond cool. Always gettin' blown away or squished by an anvil, or something like that."

“What’s that buzzing noise?”

Jacob glances to his right and left, “What buzzing noise?”

“The meaningless drone of small talk.”

Jacob believes that she has a right to be bitter, but he refuses to be dismissed like that, “So, you’re Jessica.”

She looks up at him, “Jessie, but it’s Burke to you.”

*Holy crap!* Jacob thinks, *This girl is worse than her mom!* Trying to avoid excuses, he blunders into making an excuse right out of the chute, “Okay, Burke, then listen up. I didn’t know about you before today.”

“You sure don’t know a lot for a dinosaur.”

“And you got way steady nerves for such a small mammal.” Jacob shakes his head in amazement, “Impressive for eleven.”

“Like Aunt Maria say, bitch begat bitch.” and she flipantly gestures to herself.

“I think maybe you should secure that shit.”

“What are you, my father?”

Jacob has to think about it for a second then asks, “What do you want me to be?”

“I’ll get back with you on that one.”

More screaming so both turn and witness the Alien add to its cinematic body count.

It wasn’t exactly the father-daughter encounter Jacob had in mind but at least it’s a start so, instead of prodding Jessica further, he carries Diego up the stairs and into his room.

Wading through the typical three-year olds mess, Jacob lays the boy in his unmade bed and covers him up. Sitting down beside Diego, Jacob leans over and kisses the child on top of the head only to have him sigh, “Alien.”

Jacob’s eyes roll back and his shoulders sag in defeat. Suddenly tired, Jacob yawns. He scoots the little guy over and curls up beside him. After Jacob settles in, Diego pulls Jacob’s arm around him and puts his small hand on top of his father’s.

Jacob never really thought much of children before Diego. Becoming a father has had a dramatic effect on him. This child’s love for Jacob is unconditional. It doesn’t matter who or what Jacob is because Diego accepts him without reservation. When Jacob used to live on Earth he didn’t give a damn when he heard stories about

children being abused or hurt. Now that he's a father, in some bizarre way, every child has become his own.

With this thought, Jacob's consciousness slips away. As his mind wanders the muted screams from the movie reverberates up through the floor to encroach on his dreams.