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the lesson for today

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The screaming is for real.

Force-regress is the term used by the SA. Retrograde-action is rarely if ever used anymore, and then only when one is intentionally pulling troops back to divert them elsewhere, or to lure an opposing force into a trap.

This just so happens to be a flat-out retreat.

Dozens of troopers in fighting suits are scrambling for the cover offered by a tree line behind them. Caught out in the open they have no choice but to try for it or die and, as expected, they are getting cut down for their efforts.

To draw fire away from the last two still running back across the killing zone, Anthony Gudici vaults out from behind the foliage and blasts away at the opposing tree line. This selfless act was not only futile but also foolish. The two had their legs shot out from under them before Anthony hits the ground so, as the only clear target, all strings of fire immediately turn in to converge on him.

Anthony didn't stand a chance and diving for the ground only delayed the inevitable, and before he could get off two bursts with his boom-mounted scorpion gun a mass of hypervelocity mini-balls splash against his visor. Unlike the Minié balls from the Civil War era, these vicious little things are more like miniature Sputniks—3.31mm balls of depleted uranium with four wires trailing behind for stability. Sabot driven from their weapons in masse this death spray sounds more like a rain-stick when hosing down the canopy protecting Anthony's face.

Within a fraction of a second this sustained fusillade weakens the canopy and caves it in. Now free to invade the interior of the

JACC, the mini-balls streak in and bounce around—first attacking Anthony's face and then his body like a Cuisinart set on purée.

Out of nowhere, Jacob steps over Anthony's still twitching corpse. Jacob's Hawaiian shirt and baggy shorts are totally out of place with the slaughter that rages around him.

Jacob taps Anthony on the shoulder with the toe of his sandal and says, "Get up."

With no reaction Jacob calls out, "Bill, release him."

The back half of the destroyed JACC is instantly erased and the gore that makes up Anthony's head snaps up, and just as quickly—his horrible wounds are morphed away leaving a startled expression on Anthony's face.

As wave upon wave of micro-nuke grenades are exchanged by both sides, Jacob smiles at Anthony, "Walk with me, son."

Naked and feeling exposed, Anthony manages to get to his feet. He has never been *ghosted* in a simulation before and is amazed by the sight of Jacob strolling away through the killing zone. While watching debris from the explosions fly through Jacob's translucent form, Anthony hears a rip in the air.

A grenade has just passed through his head only to detonate against the tree trunk behind him. Anthony thinks how surreal it is the way the blinding white-hot plasma from the miniature nuclear blast envelops him but doesn't consume him. Right now, he is a ghost and ghosts are immune to such physical and thermal influences.

With the violent inrush of air forcing the fireball up and over his head, Anthony realizes that Jacob is almost in the center of the killing zone. As he hurries to catch up to Jacob, Anthony can't help but flinch as he watches the bodies of the two runners, the two he tried to lure fire away from, best friends in fact, get blown to smithereens by heavy weapons fire.

Anthony quickly reaches Jacob and without looking over, Jacob nods towards the enemy held tree line, "What in God's name were you thinking when you decided to rush that tree line, son?"

"I decided?" Anthony is taken aback by Jacob's perspective, "You ordered us to take it!"

"It doesn't matter what I told you to do. I asked what was going through your mind. What was your gray matter saying to you thirty seconds before it got splattered all over this field?"

"Recon. That we need to recon the tree line."

Stepping over a body, Jacob shakes his head and looks at

Anthony, "No, my question is not about tactics. This is about your perspective. Let me ask it another way. Tell me...what you were feeling? Let's try that approach."

Anthony is confused, "Feel? I don't understand, Marshal."

"I ordered you into an obvious fire-sack! You sure as hell had to have felt something! I need an answer!"

"Oh, yeah." Anthony nods with understanding. He stops walking and almost laughs out his response, "That you were a stupid motherfucker, Sir."

Jacob thinks, *excellent, two insults in one!*

Jacob stops walking and turns to face Gudici, and with a grim smile on his face he says. "Then why didn't you tell me that in the first place? As point man you become the de-facto commander, you see the situation for what it is, or for what it can become. You are in control." Finally, Jacob yells at Anthony, "Not me! Why didn't you tell me to get fucked!"

"Marshal, I tried too."

"You didn't try for shit! Or, are you telling me that you don't have an aversion to casualties? How do you expect to lead these people if they think you're gonna get 'em killed!"

"But—"

"Bu, bu-bu, bu-but don't cut it. Look around you. These people are dead or dying because you walked them into a meat grinder! This is on you, sweetheart!"

To Jacob's delight, Anthony is finally pissed off and forces his words through pursed lips, "fuck you."

"What was that?"

Anthony grunts, "Fuck you."

"Who in God's name do you think you are?" Jacob downshifts into D.I. mode and gets in Anthony's face, "You do not have an opinion! You are nothing but a lump of shit!" Jacob jabs his finger towards the opposing tree line and shouts, "You will advance as ordered! Shit on recon, you will take that tree line!"

"Fuck you, Sir!"

"I can't hear you!"

"FUCK YOU!"

"That's better..."

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In the blink of an eye, Anthony snaps to in what looks like the hold of a drop ship. In fact, the simulators used by the SA are not just copies of the latest Razorback assault ships but actual bulkheads of such ships *retired through action*. Stripped down and hard mounted to function as simulators, the atmosphere is authentic—right down to the patched holes in the deck, and the occasional smear of oil, dried blood, and even graffiti.

With their noses separated by the canopy of Anthony's fighting suit, leaning down Jacob cracks a big smile, "I'll make a chicken-shit out of you yet."

Jacob, now in proper black and gray tiger-striped BDU-tactical pants, and a black T-shirt, stands and stomps out of the simulator, all the while calling out, "Cancel the simulation, Bill. I want these people in my lecture hall inside ten minutes."

The rest of the company snaps awake and as they're released from the simulated action, or for the umpteenth time—simulated death, Bill shouts, "All right kids, playtime is over! Let's hit the deck, dismount and get yer butts over to the lecture hall. You got ten minutes, people. Y'all move it!"

As the troops squirm out of their fighting suits, Bill looks over at Anthony who is dragging behind. Scott has taken great care to make sure that when Anthony takes field command, or point, he gets the worst of the available scenarios. Either they are totally uneventful, or everyone dies.

With this in mind, Bill feels a pang of guilt putting Anthony through the ringer yet again, "Y'all buck up there, Gudici. It was stacked. No one wins that sim."

Bill's sympathy doesn't help, but it's appreciated by Gudici just the same.

In simple red robes and slippers, the troops walk out of the simulator and head towards the lecture hall. As they file out, they see Anthony and feel sorry for him. They don't know what sin he has committed to be singled out for such special treatment, but it does worry them. When Anthony is not on the company net, like now, the gossip flies about him.

Why are they trying to break him? is the common question amongst them on the company net, but no here has the balls to ask for real. Mainly because they're afraid of what the answer might be. Afraid that by knowing they may be subjected to the same.

Why risk it?

What the troops know is that there *is* a reason, and they also know that Anthony himself is aware of that reason. Anthony has yet to bitch to anybody about his plight and, in their minds, what the powers that be don't know is that Anthony will not break. His teammates know they will have to kill him first—and it looks like that eventuality would not set well with the company.

Monitoring the reactions of Anthony's fellow recruits has been an important aspect of this process however, one recruit has stood out by not standing out on the subject at all. A one, Zach Nelson, has actually brought attention to himself by keeping quiet on the matter. Tapping into Zach's thoughts, via the tacnet, a practice not taken lightly, Scott and Bill have discovered that Zach has entertained the thought of fragging both of them.

These thoughts have never been discussed with his fellow troops but the actual plan he came up with looked pretty foolproof. Friendly fire incidents, though not as common as they used to be, are usually written off as an unfortunate accident. The Annex has an exceedingly Japanese way of looking at things and, as a matter of policy, they tend to find and fix the problem—not the blame—when something blows up or someone happens to get dead.

Learn from your mistakes and share the wealth is the SA's unwritten rule. If someone fucks up the one mortal sin is trying to cover it up. There are no black marks for admitting to a lapse in judgment, or a simple brain fart for that matter, because you can guarantee that person will never allow that to happen again under their watch. Accordingly, all that Zach needs to successfully frag Scott and Bill is the opportunity, and opportunities are many, and the will to believe that it was an accident to begin with. That's the hard part, but Zach has actually managed to put it out if his mind.

Zach thought it up as a contingency, and only if anything happened to his teammate, Anthony. Zach doesn't even like Anthony all that much. In fact, he doesn't like Anthony at all, but Anthony is part of the team and that's all that matters to him. Zach has demonstrated a level of ownership, initiative, discipline, and a sense of confidentiality that is rare in any one package. As a career goal, Zach has always expressed one desire—to always remain as a grunt in the field and nothing more.

Obviously, that will not be allowed.

Anthony is the last of the company to file into the lecture hall. More like an auditorium than a classroom, forty rows descend a steep grade to a large stage. Front and center on the stage is a long desk that looks more like a sacrificial altar than a work surface, and behind the desk is a monitor screen that encompasses the entire back wall of

the auditorium.

The company's squad and platoon leaders have already taken seats in the middle rows, and except for their red T-shirts, their mode of dress is identical to Jacob's. The recruits, in their red robes, have just settled into the front rows, as is the custom for troopers throughout their second stage of training.

Anthony has taken the first open seat he came to. Isolated dead center in the very back row, his robe, conspicuous against the charcoal black décor, makes him stand out like a sore thumb.

Just as he plops into his seat, Jacob blows in from stage left, and immediately calls out, "Remain seated!"

Half of the recruits, including Anthony, have already hopped up to attention. Realizing they jumped the gun they set themselves back down. The old heads sitting behind them know enough to give their Biggest-6 a second or two to call off the formalities that tend to annoy him so much.

Jacob stops in front of the desk. He pivots left face and practically leans out over the recruits. Through gritted teeth, his voice is surprisingly non-threatening, "Do I intimidate you?"

It was obviously a rhetorical question, but with all eyes locked squarely on Jacob, Zach throws his voice from his seat the second row, "Well, d'uh."

Jacob snorts with a laugh, "Good, I'm supposed to." He leans back against the desk and his whole demeanor changes. More like a psychology professor than the *Angel of Death*, Jacob continues, "However, the lesson for today was?" After a couple of seconds, Jacob shrugs, "Anybody?"

With no reply from the resurrected-in-red, Jacob continues, "The point we're trying to get across today is that it takes a whole lot of balls to walk into a firefight, but it takes some really big balls, I mean *mondo cunicas*, to tell your boss to get screwed. Where were you guys when Mr. Gudici needed *you* the most? You, the collective you, knew better than to cross that field, and you people know that your objective doesn't mean shit if you fail to reach it." Jacob gestures to himself, "My mission and my timetable are moot if all of you die. I was not forward on the line. I'm not in the position to make that call! It is *your* responsibility to weigh the risks in reaching your objective."

Jacob shakes his head with a grim smile, "So, you all failed, and for that incredibly remarkable failure I will personally issue your duties for tomorrow. Your task, or if I may, your punishment will be precedent setting in its scope. Even beyond detailing the recyclers, for tomorrow you will do it for real. We're goin' in hot after some Cobalt

Bluer retrofits in the Hyades—without the mandated forty-eight hour notice to the U.N.”

The screen behind Jacob comes alive with a view of the Iron Maiden slipping into orbit around a planet with battle platforms SA30, SA21, SA16, and SA23 in tow. The recruits stare at the simulation in disbelief as missiles, drop ships, gunships and fighters pour forth, in masse, from the five platforms. Within seconds, far below the assault teams, the nuclear warheads on the missiles pop in the stratosphere. With that, the recruits immediately understand that the targets have been drenched in a massive electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that renders communications to line of sight only.

Realizing that this operation is real and not a *party-raid*, the auditorium explodes with applause, whistles and shouts of approval.

“Mission prefix, Papa-Fox.” Jacob puts his hand out to quiet the recruits. He expected a reaction, but not this level of excitement.

After a few seconds they settle down and he continues, “Mission prefix, Papa-Foxtrot, mission code name is Party-of-Five. Last Monday we received word about some cobalts being retrofitted at the Co-op bases on the lovely desert moon orbiting the fifth planet of Theta-2-Taurus. We confirmed their existence and this morning we got approval for the raid—or *inspection*, which is the actual protocol for this mission. Battle platforms Godzilla, Dashi, Sawney Beane, and the Zapata will rendezvous with the Maiden approximately thirty-five AU out from the target. We'll keep the bulk of the gas giant between us and the objective until the last possible moment, and launch the strike teams the second we drop out of the dash. As you can see, the drop will be preceded by a series of extremely dirty fission bombs that will detonate high in the stratosphere. Taking out their satellites early on, and the residual radiation from these bombs, should make of mess of their communications.”

The view is switched over to a tactical overview of the planet. Five targets are highlighted and labeled 1 through 5. A red line traces the path of each of the five strike teams as they close in on their respective target and objective, or more commonly referred to as an area of operation once engaged.

Jacob points to the screen and continues, “The strike teams will reach the surface, scatter and hit their respective T.O. within sixteen minutes after exiting the dash. Our target is number five. You people will be in the lead ship however, you will not be going in with assault group. Your company will be dropped off by pallet extraction about three clicks out from the target, and there you will be held in reserve. If all goes well we find the bombs and pick you up within a few hours. If not, one of your squads will be assigned to secure an LZ

to support any medevac operations and the balance of you will move forward to contact.”

Via the tacnet, Jacob puts the simulation behind him on pause. As the drop ships freeze in the air—about five kilometers out from the target—Jacob stands and continues, “Before I start answering questions about the mission, I would like to take a moment and make a few quick announcements. This morning your platoon leaders Kristi Venkatesh and Mike Amelung have been transferred to Cue Ball for orientation. Gunnery Sergeant Venkatesh will be taking command of the next training company due to arrive next month. Gunny Sergeant Amelung will be planted into the ranks as the Gomer-Pile for that cycle. If you get a chance this evening please drop both of 'em a note. They've taken on a hell of a big load, and they'll be happy to hear from you. And, just to let you know, I'll be offering them my condolences if you know what I mean.”

Another failed stab at humor that resulted in yet another polite laugh, “Accordingly, we've had some movement in the ranks. As a result of this shuffle, troopers Zach Nelson and Anthony Gudici will be promoted to the rank of Corporal. The balance of you people will be promoted to the rank of private. These changes are in effect now.”

Totally understated.

There is no ceremony, no parade, no pomp, nor circumstance for such things. Just a quick announcement followed by a simple, “Questions?”

In the Annex, promotions are considered burdensome, and in many ways they are looked on as undesirable. There is obviously some stroke in attaining rank, but that pales in comparison to the responsibilities and aggravation that comes with the job. Statistically, half of all recruits will not make rank beyond PFC3, and if for some reason someone is unlucky enough to be tagged as upwardly mobile, most will plateau as a squad leader—if at all possible. Rank is not earned, nor is it an award for excelling in your duties, it's a job and the job is only given to those that can hack it. No one envies any poor slob that goes above squad leader, and all present understand that—as corporals right out of the chute—the die has been cast for both Anthony and Zach.

Anthony sort of expected this, but Zach is not at all amused. As is the whole of his fellow recruits, Zach's perspective on the treatment of Anthony for the last six months suddenly changes, but why Zach was singled out is a mystery to all.

Zach wonders what kind of nightmarish training regimen and challenges are in store for him.

The tactical simulation resumes, and as Jacob sits back on the edge of the desk the recruits watch as the drop ships pick up where they left off. A company marker falls behind the lead ship indicating the pallet drop of the reserve team. Seconds later, the ships over fly the target and five more company markers are deposited in the middle of the target perimeter.

Without hesitation, dozens of hands shoot up into the air. Jacob points to Zach. Zach manages to hide his anger about the promotion, "Ah, Marshall, which target is the primary objective?"

"Our target, number five." Jacob points to a hand in the back of the rows, "Yes?"

"Marshal..." a young blonde stands—the hot little number from the wet deck.

There she is and, yet again, Jacob mentally kicks himself for letting that one slip through his fingers. Nicole has been semi-exclusive with this girl over the last year while she carried their second child to term. Taking the high road Jacob has left it alone, but maybe it's time for him to muscle in on her action?

The blonde continues, "The Razorbacks are over-flying the target, and are dropping *in* the perimeter. That is, without softening it up first. Now, I know that our doctrines contraindicate the adherence to any one method—"

Jacob interjects, "Or madness?"

That scored a real chuckle.

"Well...this seems a little risky, even by our standards."

"Do you have a question?"

"Well, ya. Does this look risky to you?"

"Well, ya, it sure-as-shit does! All combat operations have an inherent risk, and this op is no different. If successful, the payoff will be well worth it."

To come across as more casual, Jacob slides up and sits squarely on the desk with his feet dangling. More hands shoot up, but Jacob holds his hand out and continues, "Look guys, the Security Council is a neutral third party, right?"

That got him an honest laugh.

"The two times we gave notice these weapons mysteriously disappeared before we got there. Forty-eight hours is an eternity, so it's imperative that we catch these people with their pants down. We simply can't afford target-softener beforehand because, as an *inspection team*, we will not fire upon them until they fire on us first.

That sucks, but this facility needs to be taken as intact as possible, and we cannot violate the ROEs in the process. We do not want our actions to start a war here."

Jacob gestures to the simulation behind him as it reruns the seconds leading up to the pallet drops. "We're bettin' the farm that Homer will cooperate, and start shootin' the moment we pop over this rise. That'll be about twelve seconds out. If so, we'll respond accordingly—thereby clearing a path to the drop zone. If Homer holds fire until we're overhead, then the drop ships will get shot up before we had the opportunity to deploy the teams. Either way, we are totally committed. The assault force will drop—or it will crash—right smack dab in Homer's lap. From there, all combat effective troops that make it through the insertion will proceed to their objectives."

Hands go up, but Jacob puts his hand out, "Oh ya, something you should know. Three of you will be assigned to the assault teams for this mission. I don't know who the lucky trio are, but they will be notified before you people turn in for the night."

Hands go up again, so Jacob points to one of the privates in the front row and asks, "Yes."