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a definite strain on the scrotum

LCTN: THETA-2-TAURUS-5A (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93957.0101 (49pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-6-FRIDAY
TIME: 05:45zulu (local 11:50mst)

Cricket was waiting for them.

As the last of the prisoners are escorted back into the base by the ambush team, Cricket intercepts Jacob and Pete who are hanging back at the end of the column.

"No way! This is the guy!" laughs Cricket as she shakes Pete's hand. "For thirty years I hear these wild ass stories about a guy named Zoot Suit and I can't believe that I actually git to have a face with the name. I mean, I'm ticked pink to meet you."

Pete smiles, "Pink! Is it really pink? I'd like to tickle that. Shit, I don't know if my heart could take it."

"You were right, Jake. This guy's a scream."

Jacob pats Pete on the back and asks Cricket, "Could you keep Zoot company while I go find Red?"

"No problem, Six."

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At the landing zone, a Razorback lifts off. As it climbs, the prisoners start moving up the ramp and into the hold of the next ship. At the base of the ramp, Sergeant Cyzk and Nicole are standing with General Hershey, a Colonel Mason, and a major.

As the noise dies down from the launch, Cyzk continues, "Time in transit will be just under six hours. For this we have dropped off two skids loaded with CWR-RATs for your troops to feed on. You may find our field rations surprisingly palatable. The ship also has a

double head, a shower, and eight two-meter screens with a video library that has over a million titles. We apologize we can only offer 2D for the trip, but it's better than being bored for the duration. Anything else you need?"

Colonel Mason snits, "This is a fuckin' joke, right?"

Nicole shoots the Colonel a look, "Captivity is bad enough, Colonel. Is there a compelling reason to make the experience miserable?" After an awkward pause, she continues, "Just give me one. We are accommodating."

General Hershey chimes in, "Spooky, I witnessed the prompt medevac of my wounded and the courteous treatment towards my people. Both orchestrated by you, personally. I can think of no one else who I would rather accept terms by. Command-Chief, is it?"

Nicole gets annoyed when people outside their organization get the rankings of the SA wrong. Most of the time it's intentional. Even though she is technically a sergeant, as the senior-exec to Scott, laterally she does outrank the Colonel. It pleases her that the General did get it right, and that he recognizes the *maverick*, from the bottom-up, non-com command structure of the Annex. Few in his position do. He also had the balls to call her *Spooky* to her face. This was taken as a token of respect, as opposed to his own troops being referred to as *Homer*—which is a put down—and these gestures were not entirely lost on the Colonel or the Major.

"Chief will suffice, General." Nicole tosses a canvas pouch to the Major and declares, "There will be no terms. You and your troops will simply be debriefed and released over the next couple of weeks. Your wounded will be repatriated after they make a full recovery, and that will be determined by the severity of their injuries. We will keep you posted on their progress."

Satisfied, the General nods, "Thank you, Chief."

The major holds out a handful of I.D. tags for all to see. They were obviously removed from the fighting suits of their dead. The general nods, and the major dumps them back in the bag with the rest of them.

Nicole adds, "General, I have orders to evacuate this base immediately. As a result, we will be forced to destroy the dead where they fell. We do not have the time to recover the bodies, and I sincerely apologize for this breach of protocol."

Hershey is not satisfied, "Chief, I'm sure that your handlers are aware that I will lodge a formal protest. However, I will omit your use of EMPs if my troops are afforded the time to collect their fallen comrades."

"My orders are clear, Sir." Nicole shakes her head, "As much as it pains me, I must deny the request. Again, my apologies, Sir."

Cyzk interrupts, "Chief, we have a problem."

Nicole looks over at Cyzk and notices the Razorback that had just taken off is now diving towards the mountain range some thirty kilometers away.

"What is it Sergeant? What is that Razor up to?"

Cyzk barks out, "Chief, the drop ship transmitted that it was heading down range away from the A.O. to terminate its mission..."

A small nuclear blast lights up the sky over the mountains. The blinding light fades and everyone looks up at the fire-ball churning where a drop ship was. For a few seconds everyone stands transfixed at the sight of the fire-ball silently mushrooming up into the sky.

Cyzk continues, "The prisoners kicked in the access hatch to the cockpit and ignored two warnings to abandon it. I am downloading the telemetry and video now."

The General quietly asks, "How many did I lose?"

Cyzk replies, "The manifest reads one hundred and seventy."

Cyzk pulls a data card and hands it to Nicole. She turns to Hershey as the shock wave rolls through. At this distance it's more like a light breeze—accompanied by an almost inaudible rumble.

Grimly, Nicole says, "General, I request that you not review the file until you reach the debriefing facility. I also request that you keep this from your troops until after that time. Their level of anxiety is way high, and I don't want to lose any more of our drop ships by wasting prisoners. Are we in agreement, Sir?"

"Chief, we are in agreement."

Nicole hands the card over, and though they do not have an officer corps, the SA does respect the formalities of other services. She snaps a salute and the General promptly returns it. The Colonel and the Major fail to return said salute—and this is a lapse in etiquette that will be addressed by the General.

As the three officers start up the ramp, Nicole calls out to them, "We call it, Second Hand, General."

They stop and look back while Nicole continues, "Where you are going is a real nice place. More like a resort than a holding facility. In fact there is nothing to prevent you or any of your people from simply walking out of there but, be advised, Sirs. This facility was not designed to keep you in, but to keep the indigenous fauna out. The local predators are exceedingly effective in policing all escapees, so I

strongly recommend that you and your troops stay put until they've been out-processed. We call it Second Hand simply because survival outside this facility is measured in terms of seconds; and, Colonel, that is not a joke. Enjoy your stay, gentlemen."

Nicole turns to walk away. After she takes a few steps the general calls out to her, "Oh, Chief!"

Nicole stops and looks back, "Yes, Sir?"

"Apology accepted."

Nicole nods then marches off towards Scott Rutledge at the other side of the landing zone.

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Scott doesn't show it, but he's annoyed beyond reason.

Interrogating prisoners is the SOP of the day, and professional soldiers know that they don't have to say anything except name, rank and serial number. That's the rule everyone adheres to, but there is a lot to be gained from the exercise just the same. Questioning civilian detainees can be quite another thing altogether because rarely do they know that they don't have to talk. More often than not they'll spill their guts, but sometimes they don't, and when they think they're a somebody, like, say, a member of the diplomatic corps, that can make things somewhat difficult.

Dodson, an ambassador from the Confederation, puts out his hand to his people, "No one answer that!" He turns to Scott and snarls, "Do you know who I am! I'm Ambassador Dodson! Haven't you fucks heard of diplomatic immunity? You have no right to hold us or ask us shit!"

Scott sighs, "Sir, all I care about is who you are and why you're here. Your name happens to be James Dodson, and that checks out alright. Now, I'm glad you have a job, and you think it's an important job, and I'm sure it is. The thing is, Sir...I don't care. Now with that established, you can answer my questions or you can fart in the wind for all it matters, but you will stand down and allow me to do my job. Technically, you are all under arrest until we say otherwise, so...I will ask these questions. You can answer them, or you can stand there and look stupid for all I care."

"Fuck this noise!" Dodson shouts, then hisses, "You can't hold me for shit."

Dodson turns away from Scott, towards the perimeter, and stomps away with a purpose—daring them to respond.

Nicole pulls up beside Scott as he calls out to the ambassador, "Mr. Dodson, I recommend that you turn back. We will not force answers out of detainees, but we will fire on them if they attempt to escape."

"They found the bombs. Where's Graves?" asks Nicole.

While he motions for Sandavol to take care of the ambassador, he looks at Nicole with a deadpan expression, "Your kidding. Try the net."

"Ooh, ya!" and just as quickly as she pings the net she follows with a quick, "He's at the L.Z."

"Then maybe he's at the L.Z.?" Scott rags.

"Okay, I deserved that."

"Naw, you deserve worse, but I let ya off the hook."

"Appreciate it. That was my stupid for the day."

Sandavol locks her flail-gun on the ambassador and pleads, "Mr. Dodson, Sir, if you do not turn back I will fire. You will not be warned again."

Ambassador Dodson flips them the bird over his head and continues on.

Scott draws the attention of the prisoners, "Don't look at the light. It will hurt your eyes."

Without further warning, as promised, Sandoval fires her boom mounted plasma-pulse weapon. A spherical pellet, smaller than a BB, is hit from more than 20 directions by lasers. The layers of fusionable materials inter-react, as advertised, energizing the plasma pulse which is lethal enough. With the liberal introduction of a metallic gas into the reactor-chamber this creates a *spiked* plasma jet that rips out of the nose of the weapon. With the manipulation of magnetic fields, the plasma jet can be directed into various configurations and intensities. For such a soft target, such as a human body, and to minimize the effective range, the gun is set for a 10° dispersion.

With the crack of an electrical report, a blinding, multi-million degree plume of light and gas reaches out and slams into Dodson. Within the blink of an eye he is rendered into his basic molecular components. Only his charred feet and shoes remain as the rest of his body, now part of a very hot and expanding cloud of vapor and ash, mushrooms vertically into the sky.

Dodson was an arrogant son-of-a-bitch as a human being, and as an ambassador he was even worse. Though many in the Confederation will quietly give thanks, under their breath, they will be

quite vocal when they protest his death just the same. Not to say that their bitching will fall on deaf ears, but it's a formality that will serve more as an annoyance than a real bone of contention.

With that knowledge, Nicole shrugs and walks away as Scott picks up where he left off with the prisoners, "Okay, where were we?"

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Something about blunt trauma that, at times, defies reason. Even in the JACC, this girl's beautiful face seems so angelic—with eyes closed and lips parted slightly as if she were sound asleep—but she is just as dead. There were many casualties on this drop, but she was the only one from the Annex to die. Not from action though. She was killed when she didn't clear the pallet she was on that strayed and hit a building—before it hit the building.

Premonitions do not come to Jacob in the form of voices, or burning bushes, but if they did, he knows that he would have something to be concerned about. As it is, gut feelings and hunches are not at all treatable.

Jacob felt compelled to come here. He didn't know why, but now the curiosity was killing him so, while standing over the body, he pulls up her file and found out a lot more than what he wanted to know. What he suspected a year ago was correct, she was originally from New Era. One of the *live five* that made it out. She was the blonde little nugget who made a play for him last year on the Carrie Nation, and he'll never forget it because that was the last time he has been to a wet deck on any platform.

He has seen her around, eyes glued to her ass, and just the day before in the auditorium he set himself to wrestle her away from Nicole—just for the sport of it.

Why she joined the Annex is beyond him, and he would like to have known the reason. Maybe she wanted to find and kill the guy that blew up her home planet?

Then again, maybe it's best that he not know.

Then panic set in. Since this girl was the headliner in Nicole's good-buddy network then Nicole is going to take it pretty hard when she finds out, and before he can think of a way of keeping her away for the now—Nicole's voice pipes up beside him.

"So, was that number six?"

Jacob cringes. Nicole knows the story of Mooch, his cat, and together they've been keeping count of the lives he used up.

"I dunno; I just got swept."

"Swept?" Nicole scolds him as she kneels down by the body, "Thirty years ago we'd be toasting marshmallows over your charred ass, you dumb fuck."

"I've been swept before."

"Not by hopping out from behind cover to shout 'w00t mutherfucker.' They had you owned—dead to rights."

"If they would have been aiming maybe you could say that."

Nicole pauses as she tenderly touches the girl's face, "Okay, fuck head, maybe it doesn't count but, admittedly, that was incredibly y-chromosome stupid of you. Admit it."

"Ya, admittedly it was stupid."

Nicole pulls back and looks up into the sky in deep thought.

"Twenty-eight years old. What a waste." Jacob then touches Nicole on the shoulder, "You gonna be okay? You two were involved."

"Ya...for now but, later, I'll have my breakdown."

"Need a shoulder?"

"No, I got a whole stable of shoulders to choose from. I'll call on you when I need dick to pass the time, okay."

"Fair enough." Jacob then looks down at the blonde, "Twenty-eight...Gawd, how young people look young anymore."

Mentally scratching her head, Nicole looks up at Jacob, "As opposed to when?"

"You know what I mean."

Nicole stands, "You know who she was?"

"Yep, just pulled up her file. I just got one question—"

Nicole cuts him off, "Why the fuck did she join?"

"No, not exactly. Did she know about me and the spider?"

"I told her last night."

Jacob shrugs as best he can in a fighting suit, "At least I had a chance to play it, I guess it doesn't matter anymore, right?"

"Good thing you didn't."

Jacob huffs, "Come on, when did you become territorial?"

"I'm not, it's just that—"

Jacob cuts her off, "You surprise me, Burke. I mean, when

did you not want fair competition?"

"That's not it."

"Then what? What are you trying to say?"

"Last Monday she showed me her mom's picture."

Jacob bodily turns towards Nicole, "And?"

"And...she was a dead-ringer for that hottie you banged at Nu Ara when you were a nube."

"You always liked pathing that one."

"Endlessly! Makes me wish I had a cock for real." Nicole manages a sardonic grin, "I'd put it to good use."

"Fuck off, Burke..." Then it finally sinks in, and Jacob does a double-take, "Wait a minute, what are you saying? Did you pull our blueprints!"

Members of the Annex have their genetic code on file. Both the DNA and mitochondrial genome make up a *blueprint* of the individual, and a simple RFLP comparison test of just the DNA can determine paternity with incredible accuracy. It's not a practice to compare genetics without good reason, and Nicole, in her position, can call one up on a whim.

Nicole sighs, "On the first pass the results showed that she was your issue."

Jacob snorts, "And, you were going to tell me when?"

Nicole cringes, "We were waiting for the detailed comparison to run. That takes a few days. We wanted to be proof positive before bringing it up."

Jacob begins to wonder about the irony of it all. It's like Sophocles has stepped in to become the ghost-author of his life. He had a daughter that he did not know about, and he was aimed towards knowing of her in the biblical sense. Now that he knows her for who she truly is—he is in the unenviable position of having to bury her.

Jacob cringes, "I hope she didn't hate me too much."

"Nope, in fact she wanted to thank you."

That was unexpected, and Jacob can only manage a, "Hu?"

"Her mother was into her own thing, couldn't take care of kids, and was found incompetent. She, and her brother and sister, were sent out to the middle of nowhere to live with their uncle, and it appears that they were on his dessert menu. According to Sophie, here, you saved them from a fate worse than death."

Jacob kneels beside the body, "Fucking pigs."

"See, baby, every dark cloud—"

He cuts Nicole off, "Don't give me that silver lining crap. A lot of people died, and I'd take it back if I could. Even now."

"Hey, chuckle-fuck, reality-check here! A lot of good came out of that shot. Collateral damage be damned, so don't start."

There is no point in arguing with Nicole, but the *what ifs* now race through his head. Over the last year he has seen this girl on the by-and-by, and even though she gave him a big inviting smile each and every time, there was something in his gut that told him to put it off for later.

Full well knowing that his better judgment has already failed him, Jacob fibs, "Just think if I was my old self."

Nicole snips, "You *are* your old self. You just didn't get around to it. That's all."

Nicole pegged him, so there's no point in arguing.

Anywhere would be better than here, but in a moment of resigned introspection Jacob smiles and whispers to himself, "Sophie, I'm glad I met you."

Nicole puts her hand on his shoulder, "You gonna be okay?"

"For now...but, later, I'll have my breakdown."

"Need a shoulder?"

"I got Cricket."

"Just as well, you two have been pretty exclusive."

"More regular than exclusive."

As the medical team approaches to collect the body of his daughter, Jacob has a change of heart, "How much time till their react forces can get here?"

"The window is closing in three hours and ten minutes."

"And the way we're going we'll be out of here in less than an hour." Jacob stands to leave, "Send a handful of squads out to collect their bodies. We got the bombs. We got what we came for."

"Cool!" Nicole chirps, surprised, "I'll get on it."

As Nicole starts to call out the orders, Jacob's altruism is cut short by a text message he was dreading. With a grimace he hops into the air and flies off towards the perimeter to take care of some unpleasant business.

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Sitting in the shade of a smoldering turret gun, Cricket laughs, "Now, I've been to an interstellar war, a super nova—I've even been to Disneyland, but that's the craziest story I've ever heard."

Peter smiles, "I'm not kidding. It's true!"

"I believe ya. I do!"

"Have a nice day, she tells me. That was one shit-hot little number, so I can understand why he took it as hard as he did."

"We all took it hard when Maggie bought it, but those two were in love."

"That's a rare thing."

"Tell me, Zoot," Cricket asks, "Why did this Frog bitch want him dead anyway? I mean, he was a kid for Christ's sake!"

"He was bangin' her daughter."

"Ya, so, I don't get it? What's the big deal?"

Peter smiles, "He was doin' the Frog too! And, believe you me, Madam Riboh is one vicious-jealous bitch to be sure. I know because I used to have that job some twenty years before Jake was hired on to service her."

"So, my boy was a ho!"

"Don't believe his lies, Cricket." Says Jacob as he touches down behind them. "Though I'm still a whore."

"Zoot, here, he's been talkin' shit, but it's all been good shit!"

"I can't believe that, but okay." Jacob turns to Peter, "Like you said, Zooter, the bombs were sitting on the ramp—right in plain sight. No wonder we couldn't find them. D'uh."

"Glad to be of service."

"One other thing," Jacob's tone changes, "We got a little problem here. There's a death warrant out on you. How did you get involved in something like Cobalt Bluer? What were you thinking!"

"How's that go? Good business is where you find it."

"Look, being tried *in absentia* is not without precedent, but they had to have some pretty solid evidence to issue a death warrant on your ass."

"Crimes against humanity, what can I say?"

“You dumb-shit.”

Cricket chimes in, “Jake, can you issue a stay? I mean, come-on, nobody has used one of those things against humanity. Only in combat, and only in deep space.”

Peter adds, “Yet. It’s just a matter of time, Cricket.”

Jacob looks at the two of them and huffs, “Ya, I can issue a temporary stay pending a writ of certiorari. That can stretch it out for years. Plus, I got major stroke, so I don’t see a problem in reducing it to life.”

Peter shakes his head, “Fuck that. Execute your warrant. I can’t go back to Second Hand. A few of the permanent residents will want to make raptor bait out of me if I show up. I’d rather *you* do it.”

Jacob pleads, “If I could let you go, Pete, I would—but I can’t. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Naw, I’m eighty now, and way too old for this nonsense. So, please, do this old fuck a favor and zap me now. Hey, what are friends for? Hell, I’m Vegas bound anyway!”

Jacob sighs, “You’re not giving me very many options.”

Peter wags his finger at Jacob, “By the way, one thing, Ribot, she said she wanted to see you. You should look her up.”

“Do I look stupid? She don’t forgive or forget.”

“She’s changed. Can’t tell ya why, she just has. You have to trust me on this. All she does now is skinny-dip her sexy ass and kick back in her chalet above La Cañada. Go see her. You won’t regret it.”

“Wish we could talk about it, Pete, but we’ll be poppin’ a nuke here, shortly. I’ll come visit you at Second Hand and we’ll work something out. Until then, you tell me what you want. I owe you.”

“Then, leave me here!”

Cricket nods to Jacob, “Like you said, you owe him.”

What a choice Jacob is faced with. Force Peter to come with them, shoot him, or nuke him. None of these options are actually good ones, but what can he do? He pats Cricket on the shoulder and they stand to leave.

“Now, how does that go again?” Jacob ponders, “Oh ya! The Wrath of God, the Midas touch, or to kick until you’re blue. Best take care in what you pray for, least it may come true.” He then nods to Cricket, “Let’s jet.”

As Jacob and Cricket start to walk away, Peter calls out to them, “That’s what I like about you son, you slay me!”

Without warning—Jacob's scorpion gun snaps up and fires a short burst into Peter's chest. At this range, the rounds effortlessly tear through the fighting suit and obliterate his heart and lungs. The suit is so heavy that it continues to prop the body up as the onboard trauma maintenance system fights a losing battle to preserve the dying man inside.

Peter was surprised by the suddenness of it all. From such massive damage, most people fall unconscious and die quietly. Peter is a touch nut and a fighter to the end. In shock, all he feels is a numbing sensation from head to toe. All he sees is his vision narrowing into a tunnel. All the while he knows is that this is it, and the one coherent thought he has, as his life races before his eyes, is being appreciative that it wasn't a head shot.

Only Cricket stops to look back. The pupils in Peter's eyes are blown to hell as blood, oil and gore ooze out from the gaping hole in his chest.

She liked the guy, and it pains her to see Jacob cut him down like that. Granted, he had to do something, but it doesn't make it any easier to accept the fact that this was the easy out for Peter. She admires Jacob's ability to always do the right thing no matter how troublesome it will be for him on a personal level. They will talk about it later, and she'll be all ears as he ties one on, but they still have to get through the day, and debrief, before they have a good cry.

So, after a few seconds, she grunts and turns to follow Jacob who is airborne and racing off towards the Landing Zone...and more trouble.

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It is said that the quietest place in the universe is in the middle of a battlefield—after a battle. This was a universal truth up towards the end of the 20th Century, and a post-battlefield can still be a pretty quiet place, but now the landing zones in and around a battlefield before, during, and after a battle are busy places indeed. The landing zone on the largest moon of the fifth planet of Theta-2-Tarus is no different, and Jacob and Cricket have to dodge a drop ship as it launches.

They set down beside Scott as Nicole and Bill walk in their direction from the other side of the LZ.

Rutledge shouts to Jacob over the roar of the drop-ships engines, "That's the civilian techs on their way out. Still don't know why they were here, but I don't think anybody really gives a shit. The body snatchers are almost finished. We still have one squad out

scraping up the last of their dead. Otherwise, we are way ahead of schedule.”

“Good work, Scott.” Jacob shouts back.

They could easily put the canopies back on their JACC fighting suits, but the air is breathable and, like most of the higher ranks, would rather interface face-to-face than being bottle up in technology all the time.

Scott leans in so he doesn't need to shout as loud, “But, when Ramirez found out that we were collecting the bodies she pinged me up and was shouting *pandeho* this and *muthur-fucker* that with a look in her eyes. Jesus! Man, is she's possessed or what!”

“*El ojo.*”

“*El what?*”

“*Ojo.* The evil eye. She's fuckin' with ya. Tryin' to pinch your balls off. See if you would flinch.”

“You were married to her so let her fuck with you! I don't understand how you still put up with her crap. Being the Ex to Tiger Bitch has still got to put a definite strain on the scrotum.”

“It keeps my feet on the ground, Scott.”

“She wanted me to say something to you but it ain't worth repeating.”

“What did she say?”

“You don't need to hear her shit.”

“Come on, how bad can it be?”

Scott grunts, “With that nasty fuckin' mouth of hers! I'd rather not repeat what she pukes, man. I mean, you've heard enough of her shit for one lifetime, right?”

“Let's hear it, Scott.”

“Okay! She said, *Como te amo.* Satisfied? That's what she wanted me to say to you. Tell me it wasn't a shitty thing to say.”

Jacob has already started laughing as another drop ship launches and clears the L.Z.

Scott laughs, “That bad huh?”

Two PacMan drones rip past as Nicole shouts at them, “Jake, Scott, we got a situation on the perimeter!”

She then shouts into the microphone in her suit, “Command freq.” There was a perceptible click as the circuit opens so Jacob and

Scott could hear, and she calls out, "Go ahead, Nelson."

Over the radio, Zach describes his situation, ["Copy that Red-Hell. This ain't no spider hole. It's way bigger than a soccer field. Maybe an acre or two. It was totally cloaked from above, and I just fell into the motherfucker. It looks as if a couple of squads tried to torch it then, like...they blasted each other! You gotta see it!"]

"Blow an' go, Nelson! We're poppin' the big one in twenty minutes, so let's move it along!"

["Roger that, Hell, but I got movement just up ahead. The signature is weak, but... Fuck! Where'd it go!"]

Nicole slaps her canopy over her head and leaps into the air with Jacob, Scott and Bill on her tail, "The rest of the squad, you stay put! Nelson, you forgit about that I.F.F. crap. If you reacquire then you lock in an' toast them! You copy?"

["I copy, Red. I'm a taggin' and a baggin'."]

"That's what I like to hear! We're coming in hot, and forty seconds out."

Right behind Nicole, Bill calls up to the Iron Maiden, "Maiden Control, there's gonna be a bit of a delay. We'll keep you apprised."

Over the radio Maiden Control confirms, ["Roger that, Cowboy. So, what kind of shit you guys step into this time?"]

Suddenly Zach shouts over the circuit, ["Negative hot, Red! Say again, negative hot! Hold your fire when you come in! Target looks to be about point zero four cubes. Estimated twenty kilos. Target is active but unresponsive to I.F.F. Negative E.M.R. Zero emissions."]

Nicole is pissed, "You know the Romeo's, Nelson! Don't play with your kill. Git it over with!"

["Like it or not, Red-Hell, it's my call."]

"Then we're coming in cold. And you'd better be right! 'Cause if your not, I swear I'll end your ass! Got that?"

["Five by five, Red. Got'cher assets covered."]

In the hole, Zach is crouching behind a stack of smoldering debris. He has his boom mounted scorpion gun peeking over it and is aiming towards a scorched vehicle by the tunnel opening. He has a solid lock on a thermal image hiding behind it.

The whole area is a disaster. The ground and walls are streaked with plasma burns—with most of the grass in the field being wilted beyond recovery. A wheeled vehicle looks like it had ploughed

into an array of playground equipment, and all of it has been scorched to the point of melting. Worse yet are the charred remains of bodies scattered about. Most frozen eerily in a futile defensive posture.

Trying to identify the thermal image of a living person would be next to impossible in this mess but, once acquired, the signature of an ambulatory person would stand out like a sore thumb. This image is of a very small person; and the swing set, though bent and twisted by heat, is a red flag for Zach to hold his fire.

Without warning, two PacMan drones rip through the holographic ceiling, and hover with their guns ready. Seconds later the ghost-like cloaked JACCs of Nicole, Bill, Jacob and Scott drop onto the floor. All four advance in unison with Scott and Bill in flanking positions. As Nicole and Jacob slip up to Zach's position, Nicole thumps Zach in his shoulder with her fist.

Nicole snarls, "Okay, where is it!"

Boldly, Zach turns to Nicole, "Back off, Chief."

Nicole bares her teeth, "It's now *my* kill."

Bill calls out, "Two-two-eight, Red."

"Thank you, Bill."

Nicole leaps up from behind the debris and immediately locks on the thermal image with the chain gun on her left arm, but instead of firing, she holds back because she notices the faint outline of an object in the target's hand. The outline of a stuffed toy animal draws her attention, so she takes the time to survey the area.

Out of the corner of her eye she notices the swing set, and in the other direction she notices the smoking remains of dead soldiers. None of this makes sense, so she holds her fire as she exposes herself by stepping around the debris mound to absorb the surroundings better.

Taken aback, Nicole shrieks, "I don't fuckin' believe this!"

Fighting back rage, Nicole turns to Bill, "Cowboy, call back that last HWG with the techs and civvies in it, and park it topside. We...we're gonna have a little chat."

Scott looks at Jacob, "We got ourselves a delay."

While Nicole looks around, absorbing the surroundings, Jacob observes, "Red, this is really weird of you."

Nicole wags a finger at him, "Remember the place I told you about, when I was little? The grass field surrounded by rock and glass and the sky was a big blue square. This is it!"

She turns to Zach and scolds him, "Next time your ass is solo in the A.O. you shoot first—autopsy later! Question that again nube an' you will die."

With weapons ready, Nicole stomps off towards the playground with the other three in tow. Bill and Zach fan out as she stops by a burnt vehicle at the tunnel opening. She has a lock on the thermal image as it coyly hides behind the vehicle.

With her boom mounted flail-gun at the ready, she drops her other weapons and calls out, "You can come out now."

A small hand rises up from behind the vehicle and casually flips the bird like Dodson had. Jacob snorts, but Nicole is not amused.

"Front and center, girl!"

Nicole hears a young girl's voice say, <"As you wish."> in her head, but noticing Jacob and Bill's failure to react to that voice she realizes that, of the group, she was the only one that heard it. It couldn't have come from a telecom pathway, one of the myriad of techlepathic channels the SA uses to communicate by thought via the tacnet because, whoever it was, even if they were chipped they could not have linked into the network without the proper codes. But, then, Nicole's concern fell to the wayside by what happened next.

From behind the smoldering vehicle steps a child. She looks every bit like an eight-year-old carbon-copy version of Nicole at that age. Complete—even down to the mole on her cheek. Nicole has never met one of her type before, and the mind-screw by running into another Barbie Doll clone that's just like her can't compare to what the little girl has to say to her via natural telepathy.

<"So, you are a three-one! I am Nicole, version four-zero. Though, I actually go by Nikki. They say I am an improvement. Let us see...I am supposed to have smaller areola, less body fat, and a more intense orgasm! Something to look forward to, I guess.">

Clones mature fast, but to be compliant they are designed to hang back on the intellectual curve somewhat; however, the sarcasm in this child's demeanor and speech is all-adult. It's obvious as the sun in the sky that Nikki is intellectually light-years ahead of anybody else her age, or any age for that matter.

Aware of the challenge this girl represents, Nicole takes a stab at projecting her thoughts without the tacnet, <"You...you did this?">

<"Panic can be such a terrible thing.">

<"Did they know you're a telepath?">

<"Would I be standing here if they did?">

<"But, you did this!"> Nicole points to the bodies.

Nikki rolls her eyes, <"Psy-cho-kineeee-sis. Look it up.">

<"And, they didn't have a clue.">

<"Are you going to ask stupid questions all day?">

<"And you're not chipped?">

Nikki gestures to herself, and says with a smile, "Au natural!"

Nicole shakes her head, "Well, fuck me."

Nikki ponders, "Okay, well, that offer definitely puts a whole new spin on self-gratification."

Scott turns to Jacob and whispers, "Talk about falling down a rabbit hole."

Jacob nods, "Curiouser and curiouser."