

17

juliet bravo

DATE: 2309ce-APRIL-1-THURSDAY**TIME: 15:00zulu (local 07:00pst)**

Jacob and Maria's goodbyes with their new friends and family were pleasant but quick. Only Jessica knew what was up, and only she walks out to their vehicle to see them off.

Jessica hugs Maria, "We'll be half way down the coast when you launch this thing. So be ready to pick us up along the Five?"

Maria smiles, "The trash run has been rerouted for you."

"Thanks!" Jessica hugs her father and whispers in his ear, "Catch ya on the flip side."

Maria and Jacob jump into the ground car and, instead of pulling away along the driveway as one would expect, the vehicle lifts up vertically into the air. At the controls, Jacob requests clearance to downtown Los Angeles and they were given a hold. At a hundred feet up in the air they just sit there silently waiting for altitude, vector and speed.

Finally, Jacob has the flight clearance flash up for him on the HUD display so he engages the autopilot for the preset coordinates to One-Klick. He monitors their flying *Countach* as it quickly accelerates to over 560kph, and even though Los Angeles is in a basin far below the chateau, the vehicle has to climb to reach the landing platform on top of the building.

Satisfied that all is well, he looks over at Maria who sits there with her eyes closed. She seems to be in deep thought or maybe feigning sleep but, either way, Jacob is amused by this and casually watches her for the entire four-minute flight. With the ship now decelerating, Jacob opens his mouth to say something.

Before he utters a word, and with eyes closed, Maria reaches out and swats Jacob in his chest with a loud thud, "Quiet!"

Jacob feigns indignance, "Hey, wha'? What's your problem, woman! I didn't say nothin'!"

"Sush *pandejo!* Let me be. I'm talkin' to the man."

"Who or what are you praying for?"

Maria rattles off, "*Jesus, perdona esta persona por ser tan idiota!*" She opens her eyes and turns towards him, "I'm praying on behalf of the poor bastards we're gonna kill today. Okay?"

Jacob laughs as their ship sets down on the landing pad beside two Warthog gun ships, "Is that necessary? I thought Vatican-Eight rescinded absolution and automatic hell-fire damnation for all us non-believers. Everybody gets saved now. Even the devil himself I'm hearing! Ain't that right or am I missin' somethin'?"

Maria snaps back as their doors open and they climb out, "Right, but a motherfucker has still got to do their time and someone still has to pray for their dumb ass! But, be advised chuckle-fuck, I personally know you're goin' straight to hell. It's just that they'll probably issue you a pitch fork instead of toasting your funky butt!"

Jacob shrugs as they head towards a ramp, "At least it's a job unlike that Heaven thing. Ya know, I don't think I'm cut out for a dress and a harp."

"Harp my ass! The big guy himself, now, he blows a bari-sax! Where you're goin' they have banjos an' accordions jamming out Bolero twenty-four seven!" And in her best Chiquita accent, "Do I have ta *s'plain* everything to you!"

"You're still goin' down, right?"

"Yep! I got three-hundred years to pull."

"Just for passing the bar."

"It'll be a cakewalk!"

"Your people get a thousand for what again?"

"Each falsified billable hour, or portion thereof, collected on."

"Pretty God-damned steep, I'll say!"

"God-damned is right, and deservedly so. Which is why I never put up a shingle in earnest." And then, in a bad German accent, she butchers, "I vant to keep my soul."

While walking down the ramp, Jacob pipes up, "So, you gonna pray for my dumb ass when I croak?"

Maria smiles big, "Tell ya what, I wanted it to be a surprise, but I was able to score you a job as a pinsetter for Satan when you

cross over. No, it ain't exactly belly flops in the clouds but when you consider the alternative."

Jacob scrunches his face, "Pinsetter?"

Maria elbows him in the side as they step out onto the landing, "You'll love it! Don't ever say I didn't care. I went out on a limb for you on this one."

"I appreciate that, darlin'. I think?"

"Like they say, ya gotta know who to blow!"

They are met by Gun Crazy, aka Michelle Kiel, a tall German babe with a huge cup size, and an equally huge appetite for beer and blowing things up. She's a genuine Xiaolin Master with the Warthog, and maternal to a fault, both of which make her perfect for the job of supporting troops on the ground.

The HWGs are nestled into the top of the landing pad so that their ramps drop into the bay below, and Michelle is already pointing Jacob and Maria towards the ramp behind her.

With a stern voice she barks, "We have a ninety second window, and we just lost ten of them waiting for you two. Let's go! Your JACCs are on board."

The three race up the ramp into the hold of the gun ship and find two of the rearward facing jump seats open for Jacob and Maria. Save for just a handful of seats, all the other 150 slots are filled with civilian reporters and camera operators brought in from all over the Southwestern States and Northern Coast, who have *volunteered* to tag along and cover this mission—whatever it may be.

Jacob and Maria strap in just as Michelle slips into the cockpit.

Michelle calls out on a loud speaker, "Hold on, everybody. This is gonna be a wide ride. Fifteen seconds till drop."

The ramp slaps shuts and the only thing anybody can hear, save for the nervous breathing from the riders, is Jacob turning to ask Maria what to them sounds like a bizarre question, "By the way, what is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?"

With a straight face Maria replies, "What do you mean? An African or European swallow?"

Jacob laughs, "What? I...I dunno?"

Then it starts...

When antigravity kicks in it affects the small things first. All of the riders in the hold rise up in their seats but are caught in their harnesses. Then the rest of the ship starts to lift the passengers are

given a short reprieve of weightlessness until their seats, attached to the ship, meets their respective hindquarters. Before the euphoria of the experience can set in they are subjected to a three-gravity crunch as the ship *drops up* into the sky.

From outside it looks nice and sweet how the ship goes straight up the way it does, but inside the acceleration is a little more than uncomfortable. In fact, it's down-right unbearable. Jacob and Maria have gone through this more than a thousand times in their careers, but this is the first time for the civilians in the hold.

Through the tacnet, Jacob and Maria tie into the ships comlink with Basin Control, ["Okie, Alpha Mike, you are clear for your burn towards the east-southeast at ten thousand. We'd appreciate it if you keep it light on the peddle 'cause we still have people tryin' to sleep down here."]

Michelle calls back on the radio, ["No problem, Basin Control. See you on the mail run."]

The engines kick in at ten thousand feet, and with another gravity wanting to pull them out of their seats many of the riders, with heads and arms flapping in front of them, have succumbed to the vasovagal effects of G-force.

Maria calls out to Michelle, ["Give 'em a break, Guns."]

The beauty of gravity drive systems is that you can produce a counter-flow that neutralizes positive G-forces. In that the internal flow can be set to counteract the directional flow and give relief to the cargo or, in this case, the *pink squishies* in the hold.

The retch-fest to follow was not to be unexpected, and as the smell of vomit drifts throughout the cargo hold, causing more retching, Maria and Jacob look at each other and laugh.

Hazing, at times, can be such a beautiful thing.

01010000-01001100-01111000-00110010

The rendezvous point was thirty parsecs from Earth in deep space, but the Warthog had to go all the way out to the Pleiades then double back. The two jumps needed to cover these distances took virtually no time at all but, as usual, it was the pre-jump sequencing that ate up the clock.

First you ping the dumpsite by creating a worm-hole and take a snapshot of the stars on the other side. Run this through the navigational computers to confirm the coordinates, and to make sure you won't run into anything when you exit on the dump. Then you

crank up the MDDSH engines and start building up a charge by using the field itself as a capacitor. While all that is happening you take another snapshot for good measure. When the charge is set you open the final wormhole, splice your displacement field to the end closest to you, and you're off!

Any witness to a jump would think they see the hole dilate and swallow the ship, and the opposite would be true on the dump, but in reality the diameter of the hole, regardless of length, is theoretically smaller than an atom.

It's sort of like the cosmological version of sucking a golf-ball through a garden hose and everyone knows how this thing works, but it's the *why* that seems to stump the physics community to this day. One thing for certain, that makes no sense to the mathematicians but perfect sense to the theorists and philosophers, is that the hole collapses behind you as you blow through it. Science doesn't see how any of this is possible unless they look at first and second dimensional space as simply mathematical constructs and take them completely out of the equation—which tends to make their brains seize up.

It's sort of like *who's on first?* *I don't know* happens to be on first, but *why?* Left field reasoning to be sure...

Like the Flat Earth Society of old there is also a motley collection of forth-dimensional time/space advocates who still believe in time as corporally substantive but, in a science that can prove that nothingness is infinitely heavy in spite of reasoning to the contrary, it is suggested that maybe God has a sense of humor and that we human beings are not supposed to know everything.

Not yet, that is.

Slipping past the Pandemonium, Iron Man, and Frankenstein battle platforms, the Warthog hits the deck of the Iron Maiden and weaves its way between drop ships and fighters that are already loaded, clamped down, and ready to launch. Soon below deck the Warthog exits an air lock, and the ramp in the back opens with a slam.

Michelle trots out and is followed by Jacob and Maria who are already suited up in their JACCS. Behind them they are seventy-four reporters followed by their camera crews with their equipment.

As a secondary set of doors starts to open, Michelle floats up for all to see, "Listen up, everyone! Outside are the three man teams assigned to escort you at the assaults. They will have a placard with your group number on it, so I suggest you link up with them quickly because we got to get you topside ASAP! Like I told you before, stick with your team or you may get wounded or killed. Let me be clear on that point, without the escorts you may very well become a target!

Now, you've all been briefed on how this will go. You'll be able to uplink to your studios at exactly eighteen-forty zulu. That's about five minutes before your ship touches down in the hot zone. Your escorts will give you the particulars about the target on departure..."

As Michelle continues, sixty troopers fly in overhead and enter the drop ship as three of them stop beside her, "The first wave should have their objectives secured by the time you arrive. If not, well, what can I say. You accepted the risk when you signed on. Remember, this is live. Your viewers will see everything as it happens. You can shoot and report on anything you see unless instructed otherwise by your escorts. Any questions so far?"

Dead silence, so Michelle adds, "Okay, groups one through five will go with me on my ship. The rest of you have got fifteen minutes to find your escort. Let's move out, or you will lose out!"

As the reporters and crews start to file out, Jacob turns to Maria and smiles big, "See you after work, darlin!"

Maria smiles back, "Okay, honey, drive safely."

As Maria watches Jacob step out, the reporter named Ashley asks her, "Where are we goin'?"

Maria starts for the drop ship, "Where we take you."

With the reporters in tow, Maria steps up the ramp, and as she crests the ramp she comes face to face with a brooding Nicole, "Was it good for you?"

Nicole ponders, "I expected more out of it."

Maria nods with a *see, I told you so* look, then, "She here?"

"Strapped in and ready to go."

"Well then, let's get this on the hump."

Maria has made it a point to stay away from Fifty-Two's representative, Nikki, but here and now Maria is thrust into a situation where she may have to make a choice that could jeopardize the entire mission. Nikki has been told to stay out of people's heads, and Maria's mind is expressly forbidden to her. Nikki has been given a set of rules that will be enforced and this is a test nobody wants to take. After the cursory introductions, they strap into the racking with Maria sitting across from Nicole and Nikki.

As the lift elevates them to the main deck of the Iron Maiden Nikki quietly taps into Nicole's brain, <"She makes me nervous.">

Nicole grins, <"Shit, she makes everyone nervous but me, and you're not exactly me, are you.">

Nikki takes a stab at sarcasm, <“I have yet to sleep with her, and if that is what it takes then...”>

Nicole gives her a dirty look, so Nikki back-peddles, <“Did I hit a nerve? You know what I mean, big sis. I don’t have a clue as to what she is thinking. She does not project. How does she do that?”>

Nicole huffs, <“Nikki, if you are ever going to listen to me you had better do it now. Do you see how Marshall Ramirez has half a smile? One side crooked up the way she does? That’s a baaad-bad sign, and it speaks volumes to me. It says for you to back the fuck off. I can protect you only so far and this is not a gray area you can play with. Ramirez is off limits.”>

Nikki looks into Nicole’s eyes, <“If she thinks for one second that you’ve taken even a smidgen of thought from her, she will shoot you where you sit and order the rest of you put-down on sight. Stay out of her head. Follow the rules and you will be okay.”>

It was then that Nikki is startled by a loud, *HEY!* She jumps and snaps her head around towards Maria who is smiling big at her. Maria can’t transmit thought without the tacnet, but to test Nikki she shouts in her own head.

Maria then transmits to Nicole, which she knows will be heard by Nikki, <“Sound check.”>

01101001-01100010-01110100-01110100

The CIC is the size of an auditorium and bathed in blue light. Scott Rutledge sits at a workstation and is bored to tears. With rows of technicians all around him to coordinate the plan he devised, Scott realizes that there is nothing for him to do but sit tight and hope for the best. Way out in front of him are huge screens showing the video feeds coming from various commanders in the containers waiting to be cut loose. Feeling useless, Scott looks down at the bridge.

Separated by a transparent Alon floor, the bridge on the Iron Maiden is the polar opposite to the CIC. This place also has a subdued blue lighting, but its stations are more like high tech recliners designed to maintain a balance between comfort and alertness. The pilot’s stations have armrests that are identical to their Thunderbolt fighters in that there are actual manual flight controls built in. Forward is a huge window and below is another glass floor, and both give a grand view outside the ship. Where the CIC is quiet, for now at least, the bridge is abuzz with activity.

The techs in the CIC, as well as the crew on the bridge, are all old heads—many on their second time though the retreat program.

When Scott thinks about it, he is the youngest person there. The average age for troops in the support teams, or “geezer brigade” as they are called, is seventy-three years of age. All of the troops in the Annex learn support functions, but it is these people who do it for real while the *kids* go out to play.

All of these oldsters here are still combat rated, with the most modern JACC fighting suits assigned to them and with decades of experience to boot. In a pinch, they can drop their clip-boards and go pick a fight with the best of them.

And they have.

On a normal mission, these support troops are in everyday practical BDU uniforms. For this mission they are the second line of reserves. All of them but for a small number are in their JACCs and ready to launch at a moment’s notice.

When planning for any operation in the Annex the standard mantra uttered by all is, *what would Slow Trot do?* The most successful, yet least celebrated commander from the old U.S. Civil War days, George Henry Thomas exemplified the qualities of awareness, patience and decisiveness. Scott, like all those given the job of mission planner/coordinator/commander for the SA tries to keep in mind that Thomas was all about taking the *right* risks.

Scott asks himself if this is the right risk. Planning for this mission was like plotting a Knight’s-tour when all he ever played before was checkers. He had tremendous help from Jacob and Maria, but still the responsibility fell on him, and as much as he has pondered how this will all play out his deepest worries are of Angie—who just may be in the thickest of it.

Over the radio, Scott hears Jacob, [“Hey Scott, you brooding up there or wha’?”]

Scott opens the link, “Brooding? I’m sidelined on the biggest op since the war and you think I’m brooding? Well, hell yes! Now I know why you don’t like being the Archangel on the big missions.”

[“You done bitching?”]

“No, I’m just getting started.”

[“Look, Scott, you knew you were going to be stuck up there from the beginning...”]

Scott interrupts, “I know.”

[“...And, yea, I could have easily saddled any of my senior peeps with the job but I wanted my best-est silverback in charge. I’ll make it up to you.”]

“I’ll hold you to that. Git some for me.”

Monitoring the large screens in front of him, watching the other three battle platforms start to pull away for their jumps, Scott is getting incredibly bored. Looking down into the bridge, he watches Command Chief Master Sergeant, Jerald Stark, take his position at the captain’s station. Scott may be second in command of SA36, and the division commander to boot, but Stark runs the Iron Maiden, and he commands the geezer battalion who supports this ship. In this world his word is final and he answers only to the Field Marshal.

Stark, with a portable clipboard monitor in hand, calls out, “One minute, people.” Then after a few seconds, without looking up, he asks Scott, “What’s on your mind, Rutledge?”

Surprised, Scott asks back, “Chief Stark?”

“Haven’t you done enough?” The chief looks up at Scott, “You’ve worked night and day for weeks. It’s time for you to sit back an’ fap and wait. You’ll know when you’ll be needed.” The chief looks away, “If you did your job *right* you’ll be bored for the duration.”

“Whatever you say, Chief. You’re the Captain.”

“I’ll ignore the insult...Sir.”

On the monitors, Scott watches the other three ships blow into dynamic space. One by one, and in complete silence from this vantage point, each ship is enveloped by an expanding wormhole and vanishes. To this day, Scott is still amazed that so much commotion creates no sound at all. To this day he still expects to hear all that “whoosh-bang-pow” like he used to on 2D when he was a kid.

His thoughts are broken when the pilot below announces, “We’re on final! Attack profile sequence to initiate in ten, nine, eight, seven, hands free, people!”

The count always ends at seven. Nobody remembers why, but tradition is tradition. The co-pilot, however, has two dead man switches to hold onto through the final five seconds. If he lets go of both the jump is aborted. Nobody has of yet stopped a jump like this, and it’s been argued that this abort mechanism may be a little more than outdated. More so because if there were ever a problem—you’ve already ran into it before you could even think of stopping it.

It’s nearly impossible to distinguish the bright pinpoint of light projected through a wormhole from stars with the naked eye, but there’s no mistaking it when the hole *yawns*—stretching out to swallow the displacement field with the ship inside. And as quick as the black envelops you that lone pinpoint explodes into a new star-field surrounding you as you are dumped out at the other end.

That was the first jump, and here they are freefalling past Proxima Centauri—probably the least visited star nearest the Earth.

And in just a few minutes they will do it again.

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It's a slightly overcast day in New York, and the freight yard at LaGuardia has been a busy place indeed. Most of the hands are robotic, moving massive freight boxes here and there, but a glut of cargo drops, containers from orbit over the last couple of months, has severely backlogged customs. So much so that the low priority boxes are moved to the back of the receiving yard so that fast-tracked shipments like perishables get moved to the front of the queue.

Scrap copper is definitely a low-low priority, and the twenty containers from the Pleiades sit quietly at the very edge of the perimeter—just as they have for the last fourteen days. At 1:20 PM local time (18:20 zulu time) the stillness around these cargo boxes is breached as the hatches on eleven of them split open. The ghostly hue of hundreds of troopers, and eleven wolverine tanks, all under a holographic cloak, pour out and into the yard.

One company, led by Sandoval, heads south into Queens, while the balance, four companies, race along what was once Ditmars Blvd towards their jumping off points. One company, led by Bill Nguyen, breaks off and holes up just East of Bowery Bay, at an incredibly luscious park that was once the site of the old Edison power plant. The other three companies continue west across the water towards Wards Island. They then turn northeast and streak into the Bronx, following Locust Avenue. At 141st Street two companies, one led by Angie and one by Griego, turn southeast and zip across the water only to duck behind North Brother Island with Angie sneaking hers around to South Brother Island. The last one, led by Cyzk, continues around to Barretto Point, just North of Riker's Island.

From these four positions their ranks split and half of their troops slip underwater to slowly move on Riker's Island.

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Sandoval and her team do not have far to go. Just two clicks south from the containers, a three-minute flight in their JACCs, they find a large warehouse next to a short landing platform the size of a football pitch. They waste no time as they hit the facility. First and Second platoons fan out to surround the area, and the squads from third platoon, the clear winner of this operations rock-paper-scissors

challenge, leap over the fence. Four squads wait as the first two squads, and six PacMan drones, dive through the hologram that makes up the surface of the landing platform.

Below the illusionary platform is a soccer field. The actual platform is retracted to let the natural light in, and today it's business as usual with two teams of children running around and battling it out over a ball. On the sidelines a handful of adult staffers are shouting and cajoling them to do better.

If any of them were to be looking towards the North end of the field they may notice the rippling effect from twelve cloaked JACCs and the six drones dropping through the hologram. Not that it would have made much of a difference, but at least they would have time for the thought, *What the fu?*, to go through their minds—right before the hypervelocity rounds did.

As if from a chorus of zippers the bolts from the squad's penta guns rip through the air, and like melons dropped on concrete the heads of the adults burst apart.

The children on the field don't have time to react as the next set of shooters leapfrog past them and fire on the handful of adult staffers coming out of the tunnel. Those who did manage to utter the words "What the fu!" before they themselves died.

The next four squads, led by Sandoval, rip past the first two and blow into the tunnel. With Anthony Gudici at her six, her squad secures the tunnel as the other three squads split into groups and start methodically sweeping the rooms on both sides.

It used to be called a *rolling point* back in the day, but now it's just standard operating procedure. If the point man reaches a defensible position (i.e. cover) or if they happen to engage a target (e.g. make a kill) the next one in line automatically assumes point and continues the sweep or otherwise presses the attack for that matter. Short muffled "zits" from the rotary-barreled penta guns punctuate the air at around 90 decibels and these shots signify yet another dead staff member and another trooper slipping into point position.

Children, as singles and in small clusters, race out of the rooms already swept by the SA yet, except for the occasional terrified screams from these children, the tunnel has remained relatively peaceful, but this did not last for long.

When the teams reach halfway down the main tunnel, a wave of about thirty children pour into the bottom of the tunnel and, like a tsunami, they stampede uphill towards Sandoval. She, Gudici, and the rest of the team hop up and with their AG on they hug the ceiling just as three old style battle-mechs, pre fighting suit technology, stomp

into the tunnel behind the last of the fleeing children.

The mechs fire over the heads of the children. Sandoval and her team are high and cloaked and the staffers in the robotic mechs didn't think to fire into the ceiling until it was too late. As one string of rounds stitches the overhead tiles, Gudici opens up on the lead mech with this chain gun. This makes short work of the mech-driver, as do the rounds from Sandoval who blows away the other two drivers before they could redirect the strings of fire on her people.

All three of the mechs wind down as the drivers slump dead in the cockpits with their bodies shattered and bloody.

Gudici and Sandoval drop in front of the mechs for cover, as Sandoval shouts for their anchor to take point, "Koenig, your up!"

Koenig drops from the ceiling and starts to trot towards them just as a staffer reaches around the corner of the juncture, at the back of the tunnel, and opens up with a rail gun in automatic fire. Miniballs spray the area—missing the children, now at the high end of the tunnel and spilling onto the soccer field, but they managed to hit Koenig in the shoulder, hip, and canopy. Koenig is spun around in the air just as Sandoval cuts loose with her scorpion gun—clipping the staffer in the scull and spinning her back to where she came from.

They hear blood curdling shrieks from around the corner.

Sandoval slips in towards the juncture and peeks around with the camera on her chain gun attached to her arm.

What was once an attractive thirty-something is now flailing about in the side tunnel in what is sometimes referred to as a dance of death. She is quite dead but her brain is firing off a cascade of crazy signals that force her corpse to toss about in violent and grotesque postures. The children are screaming as they back off from the corpse that seems to defy gravity as it bounces around the tunnel.

Sandoval points to Anthony, then thumbs back towards the juncture, "Put her down and hold the position."

As Anthony reaches around with his scorpion gun and fires, Sandoval hops back to check on Koenig—at the same time gesturing for the secondary team to take the lead, "You're up!"

Before she could ask, Koenig says, "I'm good, sarge, really!"

"Everything working?" Sandoval asks meaning her suit.

She nods, "Think so."

"You know the drill. Hang back as anchor until you are proof positive your shit is one-hundred percent or someone goes down."

"On your six!"

Everyone has already tied into the video feed from Anthony's gun so Sandoval calls out to the secondary team which is straining at the leash to move on, "Hit it, Two!"

Team two steps up and slips into the side tunnel.

At the next doorway, to their right, the point flips her cyaxle cannon around into a cafeteria and opens up on a group of staffers across the room. The balance of second team rolls into the room and fire on them as well.

Eight more are dead so Sandoval's team is back up. Followed by Gudici and Koenig, she rushes in and is confronted by two dozen children sitting on the floor, who are surprisingly quiet and calm with all the corpses lying around them.

One stands and faces off with Sandoval, and before she could say anything the child reaches out to offer a handshake, "Hi, I am Nikki. Undoubtedly, you are looking for me."

Sandoval takes her hand, "So, you're Fifty-Two."

"Actually, I am number Twenty-Nine of the Fifty-Two, but Nikki will suffice. We all go by Nikki in fact."

"Nikki it will be." While pointing to Nikki, Sandoval calls out, "Gudici, you've got the package. Koenig, sweep the kitchen. Team two, you follow Koenig in and watch her six."

As Koenig and Team-Two approach the kitchen Nikki looks up at her, "Beth, or would you prefer Sergeant Sandoval?"

"Beth is fine."

"There is one in the cooler who is trying to hide her signature, and there is one more thing—"

Koenig calls out from the other room, "Sergeant, we got a hostage situation!"

From the other room we hear a woman scream, "Back off! Back off or I'll kill him! I swear I will!"

Koenig tries to calm her, "Whoa lady! Let's chill!"

She frantically shouts back, "You want to kill me! How can I keep calm when you want to kill me?"

Sandoval has already stepped into the kitchen, and tries to calm her down, "Let the kid go and we'll talk."

"Talk? There's no talking here! You're killing everybody! You are not going to let me go, are you!"

Koenig nods, locked on her head, "Say the word."

With a grim smile Sandoval nods, "Ma'am, the simple truth is you are not going to be allowed to walk out of here. Do we have to hurt the child too? Let him go and I swear I'll make it easy on you."

The woman starts to sob as Nikki taps Sandoval's arm, "Beth, can I talk to her? I know her. She is a good person. Really, she is."

Sandoval thinks for a second and grunts, "I don't know why I'm gonna let you do this, but...go for it. If she makes a move—"

Nikki pats Sandoval on the arm, "Do not worry, we will be fine. I believe you can trust me."

The lady's demeanor softens as Nikki steps up to her and her squirming hostage, "Staci, you were raised in this nightmare, and now you are working in it. Do you really think you can live with all these memories haunting you?"

Staci blurts out, "No, I can't!"

Nikki reaches into Staci's thigh pocket of her scrubs and pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter while giving her a concerned look, "No, honestly, I do not think you can but these people can make it go away." Nikki pulls a cigarette out and offers it to her, "So...do you want it to go away? They can help you."

Sobbing, Staci lets the child go and takes the cigarette, "Not the head. Give me a minute but, please, don't shoot me in the head."

Nikki takes the gun from Staci, drops it to the ground and lights the smoke for her, "I think they will be agreeable to that." She calls back to Sandoval and Koenig, "Will you give her a minute?"

Sandoval pats Koenig on the back, "Not the head."

Nikki smiles, "Farewell, Staci. I will remember you always."

Staci draws off the cigarette and, with sad eyes, she smiles down at Nikki as she steps away, "Thank you!"

Staci proceeds to puff on the cigarette, and since there is no more shooting going on, that is the *all clear* signal has been given, Sandoval orders Gudici, "Corporal, you take Nikki topside before the reporters arrive and keep her under wraps. We'll police up the rest of the product for evac."

"Under wraps, got it." Gudici leads Nikki away.

With Nikki in tow, Gudici passes through the cafeteria and out into the tunnel, and while passing the dead mechs he speaks up, "That was an amazing piece of negotiation, kid. Real smooth."

Nikki shrugs and looks up at him, "It is kind of sad when you think about it. All she really wants..."

The rip of Koenig's penta gun rings out, short of a minute, so Nikki continues, "Wanted was to spend her last moments in curious introspection. Not being chased like a rat down a hole."

Anthony snorts, "That's what you get for stylin' with the wrong crowd. You take your chances you take your lumps. It's time for these people to pay up. You got a problem with that?"

"No, quite the contrary. I have a strange-morbid satisfaction over this...experience. I find that, my positive reaction, unsettling."

"You brought it on, so deal with it."

"Should I feign a crocodile tear or two to alleviate my predisposed guilt? Tell me Anthony, how do you cope with the killing? I will follow your lead."

"Guilt? It ain't exactly in the job description, kid." He then looks down at her, "You know, I never told you my name."

"No? Hum, you seem like an Anthony."

Anthony stops and turns back to her, "They warned us about you being some mind-bending freak. I guess that's why the Sarge let you talk to that lady."

Nikki gives an embarrassed smile, "Could be?"

"Sandoval should not have let you do that."

"The child would have been hurt."

"Heads up." Anthony taps her in the chest with his finger, "You need to knock that shit off before *you* get hurt. Why not try acting like a kid. You *are* a kid, right?"

Nikki chirps back, "*Devo essere me stesso! Grazie.*"

Anthony laughs, and as they continue up the tunnel he pats her on the shoulder, "Okay, forget about it."

00101010-0011100-01011011-0101101-00111010-0111011-0011110

As Sandoval's team start their assault on the cloning facility, the Iron Maiden blows back into relative space far below the Earth—in fact a whole AU below the orbital plane. With the Pandemonium, Iron Man, and Frankenstein simultaneously hitting the other three points of the compass, they all kick in their MDDSH drive systems and reach the Earth inside fifty-seconds.

The Maiden, slowing to a crawl at 90 miles altitude over the East Coast of North America, drops out of the MDDSH hyper-drive. Suddenly, twelve-hundred troopers in JACC's pour out of the six-drop

bays underneath the ship and, not having to fight a lateral motion, they force-fall straight down towards New York City. The second the last of them drop clear from the reach of the displacement fields the Maiden kicks in the MDDSH and pulls away. The ship pitches up and loops back around for a second pass from the southwest.

Leveling out over Kentucky, just south of Louisville, the Iron Maiden again drops out of hyper-drive. Coasting along at a low speed back towards New York City, a wave of thirty Razorback drop ships and four Warthogs spill off the edge of the main flight deck. This is followed by eight flights of eight fighters that eject from the Maiden's launch ports. These forces split with half of them racing north towards Chicago, and the other half dropping south towards Atlanta.

The maiden speeds up and just outside of Newark, slowing down over Long Island, this launch sequence is repeated one last time.

Sitting in his fighter, model designation ASF47bis known as the Thunderbolt IV, Jacob is amazed by the sight of the Iron Maiden as he flips his ship around and kicks in the AG engines to stop all forward momentum. As the Maiden slips away over the Atlantic he is stunned by how progressively difficult it is to see the damned thing the way it's camouflaged for this mission.

There have been endless studies on camouflage and cloaking, and sometimes the best options are counterintuitive to the nth degree, but this color scheme confounds even the best experts in the field to this day. Powder-Puff Pink may be great for bubble-gum, corsages, and maybe even g-strings but for combat issue, such as fighters and capital ships, it just doesn't seem right.

When the Germans and British both dabbled with it in the 20th Century the color scheme worked better than expected, but only the Brits ever took it seriously. Decades later, when stealth aircraft were being developed for the United States, it became clear that the color was so stigmatized that a general overseeing the project swore that, "None of my boys are gonna fly in harms way in a pick aircraft!"

Nowadays the colors that signify genders have changed significantly. Yellow and red are now considered boy colors, and blue and green are mainly offered up as girl colors. Not because of any social norm but because the sexes are naturally attracted to those colors from a very early age. Pinks and purples still have a lingering stigma attached to them, signifying gay, weenies or pussies, but today's soldier couldn't really give a damn.

Like Jacob himself said when he first started flight training for the Annex, "You paste a big polka-dot bow on this thing, and if it will help prevent my ass from getting shot down, then I'm flyin' with a frickin' polka-dot bow!"

Watching this monster of a battle-platform slip away, but never really vanish from sight because it's just too damned big, Jacob wonders what it would look like from a far distance, or if a dusty rose or mauve would work better. These things race through Jacob's mind, but the only thought he verbally articulated was, *Majin Buu*.

["Buzzard Six, this is C.I.C., come again? Majin what?"] The CIC coordinator transmits over the radio.

Jacob laughs, "Buu!"

["What the heck is a Majin Buu?"]

Jacob suddenly remembers playing Dragonball-N2. By the time he played his great grandfathers copy of the game it was already a hundred years old, and long forgotten. As one of the first neuronet fighting games it was very popular, but few players made it to 9000 or unlocked Buu. His grandfather did and Jacob, at twelve, enjoyed the luxury of playing as this virtually indestructible character without having to work for it. To him it was better than God mode.

He has since forgotten about all this, and as the Iron Maiden fades away and all he could say was to snort a laugh, "Look it up!"

Big mistake because before the end of this day all the troops on the platform will identify the Iron Maiden with this pudgy anime monster. Yet, unaware of this fact at this time, Jacob's attention is drawn towards a totally unexpected text message that flashes up in his inbox from a PVT.Moore.Sophia from the cobweb. That is, the old internet which is still around and in use after 300 years.

It said, *'Kick ass and take names! Be careful. Sophie :o)'*

Jacob has been expecting something from her, but long before now. This is something he'll have to take care of when the dust settles after this mission. Jacob has avoided visiting Stone Garden, no matter how many times he's been invited, but now he feels compelled to go. He's always known that one day he would awake in the Annex's version of *The Matrix*, but now there is someone there that he cannot say no too.

And as his fighter drops towards Long Island, Jacob text's back, *'Thanx! I'll come see you soon...'*

Then it dawns on him, "Bud, you with me?"

["Sixteen teraflops of fuckin' and killin', muddafuck'ah!"] comes back over the radio. ["Waddya want?"]

"Just makin' sure your there, Bud. You've been known to be catchin' z's on the job."

["Sooo, what's your point?"]

"Because, we are going in? Hello!"

["Hum, I hadn't noticed, but did I ask for the wake up call? If I'm gonna be bored to tears I'd rather sleep through this sh it than suffer through it."]

"Cripes! Aren't you in a rare mood!" Jacob scowls.

["As the designated ghost in your fuckin' machine, dude, I think I got the right to be in any sort of mood I want! Be it rare or extra-crispy..."]

Which is a risk of having a *ghost* in support instead of A.I.

Everyone dies, but people now have the option to continue on long after the end-avoidable. Maybe forever even? For a mere pittance (one million dollars, U.S.) you too can have your kernel, consisting of your brain pattern and memories, downloaded to any one of a thousand Matrix like 'ghost-host' worlds. The most popular and competitively priced of these service providers is called the Planckzone, but kink-freaks and otherkin the worlds over pay bigger bucks to go to one of the many underworld dungeons like the notable *Anthrotopia*, *My-Philia*, or the vorarishly creepy *Society of Renfield* to name a few. The in-crowd and upscale clientele almost universally save up for Vegas³, but the super rich, famous, and upper crust of society usually opt for the über exclusive *Taj Mahal* of all places.

The real Taj Mahal, that is, where a cooperative of investors, with the Indian government as a partner, built their facility a hundred feet below the monument's foundation. And as posh as this operation appears on the surface their server farm, however, is, in reality, hidden deep in the bowels of The City of Industry—in Southern California. It goes without saying that this pesky little detail has been omitted from their brochures simply because the current residents may think that the thirty-five million they shelled out for a chip at "The Taj" may be a bit more than exorbitant for an eternity in the San Gabriel Valley. Which to them might as well be Compton for that matter.

Can you say class action? We knew you could...

At least at *le Tour Eiffel* the server farm is close enough to the tower (under the Champ de Mars) to count, but the archaic purity laws still on the books for *langue Française* are zealously enforced by the hosting company—thus making French the de jure *burkha Toubon* in this instance of the afterlife for what is anymore a predominately English speaking country in an English speaking world.

Now, it is said that in these domains you are more alive than alive but those in the know-know that this is all digital smoke and mirrors. One ghost-host world is as good as any other host, discount or otherwise. They all provide you with a picture perfect vision of

you—as you define you—from one day to the next. Perfect worlds with perfect people all around, where all you have to do is to fuck-off and kill-time day after day and year after year, life (that is, post-life) can get pretty damned boring after a while.

A very short while.

In the Annex everybody ends up in Stone Garden when they die and, without batting an eye, every one of them would jump at the chance to get out of this *Matrix* world to work in the real life world for a change of paste.

Corporal, Bud 'Kno' Sheatz is one of the few unlucky residents of Stone Garden. He himself was a combat pilot with four air-to-air victories under his belt. Kills that he doesn't remember. Mission after mission and sortie after sortie, Bud was always the bridesmaid but never the bride. On his last mission a week before Nu Ara, during a fur-ball Bud got his kills before he himself became a grease-spot in the sky while chasing after a fifth. His file for that day was not recovered, so all he had to go on was his ships telemetry and voice recordings to taunt him...forever.

Embittered, he would so readily give up this eternity for just one shot of living it again, and after three years of riding shotgun with Jacob, Bud has come to realize that he has basically nothing to do here. Jacob never panics, he never goes into G-LOC, his situational awareness is beyond acute, and his street-fighter instincts are so unpredictable that even the old A.I. that used to fly with him asked to be transferred to another pilot. A pilot that they could understand, and who could use their help.

So here's Bud, one of the most capable and aggressive pilots ever to have flown with the SA, sitting here idle and about as useless as a fifth-wheel on a tricycle, ["...So, you got a problem with me? Do me a favor and fire me!"]

"Nobody else wants too fly with me after hearing you bitch endlessly. You're stuck, Buddy!"

["Fine! Fuck it! Two more years! That's all I gotta do!"]

Jacob cocks his head to the side and smiles, "I tell ya what, Bud. If after today, and you still want out, then I'll cut you loose. Find yourself another pilot to kvetch too. Okay?"

The stunned silence that followed is cut short by Bud laughing, ["Well now I'm in a better mood! It sure as hell has *not* been a pleasure flying with you, but I think I can find it in my heart to like you again."]

Jacob snorts, "I didn't know you liked me in the first place?"

It was then that a text flash-alert comes up:

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ALERT*ALERT*ALERT
23090401:18:37:03ZULU FOLLOWS AS:
MCXMSN: SAWNEY BEANE C3, JULIET BRAVO MC,
SDM, RUTLEDGE, SCOTT (SA36)
REPORT: ALL 106 PRIMARY MISSIONS COMPLETED
AS PLANNED - WITHOUT FATALITIES. ALL
RESIDENT STAFF NEUTRALIZED. THREE FF
CASULTIES REPORTED. ALL BUT EIGHT
SECONDARY TARGETS HAVE BEEN REPORTED
IN AS NEUTRALIZED.
ORDERS: ALL FORCES TO CONTINUE WITH DROP FOR
PACKAGE AND PRODUCT RECOVERY. LOCAL
JURISDICTIONS TO BE GIVEN CONTROL AT
TIME OF EGRESS.
ORDERS: SA36 PROCEED TO URCHIN GNOME.
ORDERS: SA14 AND SA35 TO SUPPORT SA36.
MCNOTE: SO FAR SO GOOD...
END OF MESSAGE
```

Jacob sighs big. The hard part is just beginning. The New York Police Department will be powerless to intervene on what's going to go down, and the U.S. military will not be able to mobilize in time before the S.A. has already pulled stumps for Dodge. The Co-op on Riker's Island will be another story, and if they stay put then problem avoided. If not, and they may not, then Bill and Angie will just have to contain them the best they can.

Jacob will then have to deal with U.S. air power, and if things go South on Riker's Island—they are going to come in with fangs out.

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01001001-01000010-01010100-01001100-00111010-00101001
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It's a lovely spring day here in Miramar, California. The sun is shining in a happy blue sky, the grass is swaying gently from a soft coastal breeze, and thirty-two pilots from VFMA-134 scramble to get their Bulldogs up'n atom. Most of Marine Air Group 46 may not have been ready for this particular wake up call, but *Smoke* has always been on a short leash, and ready to roll at a moments notice.

Imagine their surprise when they hear that it's not a drill.

Where all of the air forces throughout the world long ago took fragile humans out of the cockpit only the U.S. Marine Corps continued to keep the pilot in the mix. When the SA was formed, and with a little convincing by the Marines, they too put the human element back in the equation. Shortly thereafter combat craft solely piloted by A.I. that squared off with the Annex started to fall from the sky in masse. The combination of human pilots and A.I. working together proved to be a

winning formula for air dominance.

With everybody else struggling to play catch up, reverse engineering their ships to accommodate people again, the SA and the Marines have been so far ahead of the game that only they have systems where the pilot's seat twists and rotates to put them in the ideal position to maximize the g-force they can handle during maneuvers. That is, the excess g's that are not neutralized by the reverse flow of the gravity repulse pods.

That's where any similarity ends.

Where the Annex's Thunderbolt fighter was designed for air superiority over all environments, the Marines designed the Bulldog for one thing—command of the sky in support of troops on the ground, which is always their primary mission. Both fighters are about the same size but where the 'bis' model of the ASF47 is best described as muscular brute force the Marine's F308g is swift, svelte, and nearly impossible to see. Comparatively, these two ships are as different as Jeet Kune Do and Krav Maga in form and style. If a master from each discipline were to duke it out then you can guarantee that someone is gonna die—but you don't know who to put your money on.

Of the eight flights now on alert Bloodhound Flight, the star performers in the Forth Marine Aircraft Wing, are the last to launch. They watch as each of their sister flights are vectored out to potentially rich target zones—the three hot-spots where the S.A. are sending drop ships and fighters. And while sitting on the ramp they have little time to wonder where they were going when they finally get a mission.

Yard Dog, the call sign for Marine base air-controller, radios them up, ["Bloodhound Flight, you want a mission?"]

Captain Moore is disappointed that their Major, the heart, soul and handle of Bloodhound flight, extended his leave and isn't there to go in harm's way with them. With their leader gone she's in charge, and they filled the gap with a Lieutenant Peña—a competent pilot in his own right but way too new to have been tested by the group. Moore would give anything to have her superior, and friend, Peter Ribot, there with them, but now she is in command, and she is straining at the leash to make him proud.

Captain Moore, responds, "We'll take it, Dog."

["Bloodhound Flight, you are clear for immediate launch. Vector three, four-Zero. Annex trash-run from One-Klick has strayed from their flight plan and is following Interstate 5 south of Irvine. Just a stone's throw from you. They are not responding to civilian air controllers. You are cleared for best speed at twelve-hundred meters. Commercial and civil traffic have been diverted."]

The Bulldog fighters launch from the ramp itself, and as they speed to the north Captain Moore asks, "ROE's, Dog?"

["Romeo Echo's are as follows...Observe and report from standoff range. Attempt to detour flight out of U.S. airspace, or force to land if necessary. Fire only if fired upon. Please acknowledge."]

Captain Moore shakes her head at the prospect of what will become an escort mission, "Roger, Dog, best speed at twelve-hundred. Say, Dog, isn't Mach five a little extreme over the coast?"

["That's a big affirmative, Blood. Orders are best speed."]

"Roger that, Dog." Moore switches over to the flights frequency, "This is FUBAR, guys. The one time we scramble for real and the Major misses out!"

All are vocal in agreement but Peña.

Peña has never met Major Ribot except in the simulators and he got plucked from the sky each time they faced off. Eventually Peña became pretty good in his own right but whenever he and the Major duked it out he's the one that got splashed, crashed, and burned. The pang of guilt the Lieutenant feels is overshadowed by the elation that, by sheer-stupid luck, he gets to fly a real mission.

01101101-01110101-01110011-01101000-00100001

In the news biz there are many a far-fetched story to go around, but the fantastical adventure the news editors and anchors just heard from their field reporters—that being spirited away in the middle of the night by the Annex and being given a *limo ride* to the story of the decade was as tall as they come.

Especially since they've been expecting a walk out.

Because of the bleak working conditions, deadlines, rotten compensation and bonus structure nowadays, there has been serious talk of an organized work slowdown, a la *Blue Flu*, to bring their plight to the public eye. When hundreds of reporters and camera operators nationwide failed to show up for work this morning, missing and incommunicado, the news operations had their scabs ready to step in, and pink slips at hand to cull the heard of the dissenters and bad attitudes once and for all.

This particular situation was unexpected, and however hateful their feelings for each other have been—they simply vanished! Unified once again not because this story happens to be sensational, it is, but they realize that this story will open up avenues that will keep them busy and profitable for months or maybe even years to come.

In the hold of Gun Crazy's Warthog the reporters and camera operators appear jittery and excited, all in the same breath as they scramble to link up to their respective news rooms.

Brenda Ashley was finally able to get live feed out and then was immediately put on the air, "We're ready, okay? We're on in five!" Her cameraman pulls his focus on her and nods, as she gets her queue, "This is Brenda Ashley coming to you live from the cargo hold of an Steel Annex combat transport. Ah, It's a drop ship called a hog. That's H.W.G. It stands for High-capacity, Weapons-platform and Grip-transport. We'll be landing somewhere in New York and we've been told that local law enforcement will be on the scene when we arrive. That's all we know at this time. Yes?" There is a short pause while she get a message, "Okay, I just got word that we're going to cut to a statement the S.A. has prepared for us and I'll be back immediately afterwards... Any second now."

On all channels, and on the monitors in the hold, the red and black flag of the SA, a stylized Phoenix with its wings drawing around it in a circle with a starburst radiating in all directions similar to a old Japanese battle flag, fades in. It cuts to Marshal, Robert Jackson, the Beta-6 for the SA who is in a black suit sporting a red dress shirt and black tie. Very simple attire but it says that Bob is all business.

Bob smiles softly, ["This is Marshal, Robert Jackson, the supreme commander in chief of the armed forces for the Steel Annex. At this very moment, we are involved in a rescue operation. We have uncovered one-hundred and six illegal cloning facilities that have been supplying genetically reengineered humans beings. Over the last few decades over a million children have been developed, sold and exploited for medical research, prostitution, and for a variety of military applications. This activity is a crime against humanity and it ends here and now." Bob tapped his finger on the conference room table in front of him to emphasize the concept that the SA has taken ownership of this problem. "Just so you can see for yourself what has been going on we have invited members of the press corps to accompany us on the extraction phase of our operation. They will broadcast live footage without the benefit of the editorial process. We thank you for your patience and we apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you and your loved ones. We will now cut over to the commander of your particular Area of Operation."]

The image cuts to the cockpit of Jacob's Thunderbolt.

Even in his JACC, with clouds streaking by, Jacob comes across as pleasant, ["This is Field Marshal, Jacob Graves, of S.A. Three-Six. Just a few minutes ago, forces of the Annex attacked three cloning facilities on the North American continent. Those are located in the cities of Chicago, Atlanta, and New York. Excluding Australia we

have identical operations being carried out on all continents, and on a planet or two of every member of the Cooperative in the Hyades. At this very moment we are negotiating the transfer of control of these sites over to local jurisdictions however, this is not quite over with. Until it is, and for your safety, we would appreciate your cooperation with our troops as well as local authorities. Thank you.”]

The transmissions cut back to the reporters in the drop ships.

Ashley, speechless for just a second, comes around as she realizes that their ship is starting to descend, “Ah...I understand that we'll be landing in just a few seconds.” Pulled up in her harness with a force, she yelps, “Wow!”

01001101-0101001-01001111-01000010

“I don't understand, Trooper. Was I speeding?” Peter asks as the ramp of the drop ship in front of them opens with a loud clank.

Just a minute ago, outside of San Clamente, their limo was surrounded by three SA troopers who just materialized out of nowhere. They stopped both them and all southbound traffic, and guided this drop ship in for a landing in front of their stretch Mercedes.

Zach Nelson continues to be exceedingly polite, “Major Ribot, Sir. We're here to evacuate you and the children.”

“I don't understand, have we done anything wrong?”

“Oh no, Sir! Our concern is for your safety. The Annex is conducting an operation, and since Marshals Graves and Ramirez were with you the previous night, an A.P.B. went out to detain Madam Ribot for questioning. My command would rather spare her and your party the inconvenience. You and Madame Ribot may choose to decline our offer however, Jessica and Diego must leave with us.”

“I'm responsible for them, trooper.”

Zach gestures towards the open drop ship, “Then please, pilot your vehicle into the hold of this ship and we'll be on our way, sir.”

Jessica pipes up on behalf of Zach and company, “Peter, I know these people. They're okay. You should come with us. It'll be a bit more interesting than San Diego.”

Monique adds, “Son, in all my years I have never been in space. I say let's go!”

Jordon shrugs, “Hey, Pete, it's either go with the nice young man, or play twenty questions with whoever they pissed off.”

Zach looks up as Bulldogs streak in high overhead and start

to orbit their position at twelve-hundred meters.

Zach again points to the hold of the drop ship, "Major Ribot, if you please. We have company."

Peter bows to the will of the group and drives the limo into the hold of the ship. The HWG lifts up immediately, and slowly accelerates as several troopers start to clamp the limo down in the cargo bay. When the car is secure they start to speed up their climb but they keep it under one and a half g's.

From the cockpit of her Bulldog, Captain Moore notices the drop ship launch, and before she could radio for ID the pilot of the Razor, known by the handle Dust-Devil, calls her up, ["Bloodhound flight, this is Dust Devil on the trash-run out of One-Klick. You Marines got your ears on?"]

Moore replies, "I read you five-by-five, Dusty. You look like you're bugging out. If you are then you're making my job easy."

["That's affirmative, Blood. We're haulin' a load of eggs, so our egress is gonna be shallow and slow. You might as well come on down and keep us company. I won't bite."]

Moore thinks about it for a second and radio's back, "Roger that, Dusty. Approaching from your six." She then transmits to her flight, "All right, Blood-2, you come with me. Three and Four, you guys hang back. You splash that bastard if we go down, but whatever you do you keep your fricken' distance. Get close and personal with a Razorback and it'll hand your ass back to you."

Captain Moore comes up from behind and pulls alongside at Dust Devil's two o'clock. Trust is everything, and this non-threatening position, with her wing-man on the other side of her, deflates the situation even more. The Captain also knows that if the situation were to sour then she and her wingman would be the first to go.

Dust Devil radios, ["Blood, we do appreciate the escort."]

00110001-00110000-00101101-00110101-00110101-01100100

Police Inspector McElroy sighs and shakes his head as he watches the last of the seven hundred children rescued from the Queens facility load up into the Annex drop ships, "Hidden in plain sight, who'd have guessed?"

Maria responds on just this side of flip, "Sorry about the mess, Inspector, but look at it this way. All you got to do is tag an' bag! No bookings, no courts, no juries, no early out for good behavior. That's it for this Geisha Hut. Fini!"

"How many of these sites you guys attacked, exactly? What's the count?" McElroy asks.

"One-hundred and six. There are about a handful more. We know of one in Brazil, and two more in the Hyades, but we haven't pinned 'em down just yet. Hopefully we can get to them before they waste the product but I'm not holding my breath."

"You have no idea the headaches this will cause me." McElroy then protests the troopers, with his officers as observers, escorting the reporters into the facility, "Do we really have to have these people in there right now? It is a crime scene for God's sake!"

"At least you have the consolation in the knowledge that we have your people tagging along. When we hand it over to you it'll be your jurisdiction. You can boot 'em out then if you like."

Slightly flustered, McElroy snaps, "It's my jurisdiction now!"

"Yea, true, but I got more guns?" Maria then turns bodily to McElroy and, "Inspector, we're outty in about twelve...maybe fifteen minutes? If you want to interview these kids then I suggest you get a couple of your people in these ships before we close 'em up. Otherwise, you're gonna get what we give you."

McElroy looks behind them at the six detectives milling around, and calls out, "I need two volunteers to go with these people to do interviews. Think of the overtime!"

All six raise their hands so McElroy picks the two closest. One has a pastrami on rye half hanging out of his mouth, and the other spills coffee on himself when McElroy points at them and says, "Okay, you two, go! Record everything!"

As the detectives run towards the closest ship with children in it, Maria adds, "We'll have them back in a week, and we'll give 'em our copies of the interviews. Will that be satisfactory, Inspector?"

McElroy huffs, "Sure about that? Being satisfactory an' all? 'Cause when Councilman Shapiro gets wind of this, heads will roll! He's got a long-long reach, lady."

Maria nods her head, "Speaking of rolling heads, maybe you should send the Coroner out to pay short-eyes Shapiro a visit. Me thinks the perverted little fuck feels a bit light headed today."

McElroy is confused, "Shapiro was involved with this?"

Maria shrugs, "Guilty as charged."

"Everyone knew he got his freak on with the he-she's. They are the in thing they say, but you're telling me that all those kids he adopted *all these years* were fuck-fodder!"

Maria feigns looking at a nonexistent watch on her wrist, "Well, time flies when you're havin' fun! I've got another pressing matter that requires my personal attention. The rest of my people will evac in short order but they'll leave the reporters behind. Sorry about that one but give me a shout if you need anything."

As Maria starts to float up towards her gun ship hovering above them, the Inspector calls out to her, "Marshal!"

Maria stops and spins around, "Yes, Inspector?"

"McElroy."

"Okay, Mic, what can this Spic do for you?"

"Marshal, I got two months left until I retire, and I don't very much relish the idea of ending my career putting band aids on the shit you're leaving behind for me to clean up, but for what it's worth..."

He looks at his feet in thought, but the pregnant pause is cutting into her schedule, so Maria prods him along, "Worth?"

McElroy looks up and gives a solid nod, "In spite of the mess you did good here, and doin' good is good enough for me."

Surprised, Maria smiles back, "If you're lookin' to do good yourself then I can use you on my team. Think about it."

"I'll keep that in mind, Marshal."