

18

over the top

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Riker's Island, like the rest of New York City, has become a plush, grass sown and tree spotted paradise. Originally, the island was an abandoned prison but those facilities were raised a century ago to make the island a base for the Military Alliance Deputation. Since the breakup of that arm of the United Nations, the Co-op has been running the place on its own.

Only six buildings are on the island and they are rather huge buildings at that. Three are apartment complexes, two office buildings, and one short and solid with a purpose unknown to everybody except that it is believed to be a bunker and supply depot for the Deputation. It has been speculated that the Co-op may have several companies on the island, maybe even a battalion, but nobody has been able to verify this. It is also speculated that they may have tanks and APCs in this building but, again, this has been unverifiable.

Of the four SA companies staged far off Riker's Island, half of their numbers have slithered unobserved over to the shores close to the Co-op's facilities. Their movement underwater was so slow that the sensors around the island did not pick up on them until they came out of the water and unclocked.

The soldiers of the Base Defense Force were not ready for this one. They have already scrambled and staged because of the action in Queens, and the sight of over a thousand SA troopers raining down on Manhattan got their attention as well, but those two things did not result in an order to launch from the bunker.

This provocation is a bit different.

The secure boundaries of this facility fall inland at about a football field or two from the shore allowing for civilian activities, such

as picnicking and corporate events, but the appearance of two-hundred troopers materializing at the water's edge resulted in a knee-jerk reaction that, if they would have continued to sit tight, underground, this all would have blown over and the SA would have simply left after catching a few rays in the early afternoon sun.

To the surprise of everybody the troops of the BDF pour out of their bunker—a whole battalion in fact with twelve tanks in tow. Not exactly a defensive contingency when you look at it and this is obvious to Angie and friends. This was supposed to be a containment op but the BDF has showed their hand, and when Bill orders his troops to paint them—things then suddenly change for the worse.

It's a common practice when troops from opposing sides, who are facing each other in a standoff, to flash each other with targeting lasers. It says that *I see you* and someone is going to have to back down, but who? In this situation it was going to be the SA who were destined to back off if, and that's a big if, the Co-op had stayed put and not react or get involved in what was going on in Queens or the United Nations, or didn't do anything else stupid.

Unfortunately, stupid prevails...

Later it will be discovered that a butter-bar lieutenant, green and gung-ho, freaked at the sight of Spooky rising up out of the water at the shoreline and ordered everybody topside. It will also be discovered that this overeducated but inexperienced lieutenant ordered his forces to fire when they got painted by Bills people.

After painting the BDF troops, everyone on the shore cloaks and hunkers down except Angie who is the only one still standing in the line of sight uncloaked. In fact she is in everybody's sights now and, as not expected, one BDF soldier startled by his now panicky and shrieking superior, fires at the one target he could see. Of the burst of fire that comes her way one miniball grazes Angie's left hip but fails to penetrate her suit. The next round punches a hole through her upper left arm, right above her elbow, and spins her part way around.

Even though the remaining rounds from this short burst fly harmlessly into the sky—the die is cast.

In the ranks of the Defense Forces on the line there is a collective 'Oh shit!' when that weapon fires, and for good reason. Less than a second and a half later, six of their tanks are dispatched. When the sabot-assisted darts from the wolverine rail guns hit their marks there is a spectacular, but short lived, cascade of sparks as they slam into the armored hulls. After that, it takes all of a minute as the fire inside—caused by the dart instantly converting from a dense depleted uranium to a super-heated plasma gas by penetrating the armor—to fully engulf the tank like a homecoming bon fire.

But then, nobody has time to watch them burn because the reaming six tanks are hit immediately after the first bunch.

Then the small arms follow suit. The firefight starts off slow enough between the Defense Forces and the SA troopers hugging the ground at the water's edge, but as it picks up Bill orders the rest of his troops on both the Brother Islands to pour it into the mix.

Angie, still standing in the middle of it all, rips her shattered arm away from her suit and transmits to Bill on the radio, "I can't believe these yahoos, Cowboy. They're actually gonna put up a fight!"

Bill, unaware of Angie's injury, responds, ["Oh well, they had their chance! Gimme a hollar if you get in to trouble, Klicks."]

Angie's command squad has already slithered up behind her. The team's Master Sergeant, who surname happens to be Sargent, rolls on his back by Angie's feet and shouts up at her, "Simmons! Will you get your ass down!"

Angie nods and drops, "Okay, Duce, okay! I'm down."

He grabs her stub and scrutinizes it, "You feel okay, Deputy?"

These two have been working together for the last fifteen years and Master Sergeant, Fred Sargent, who goes by Double-Duce or just Duce, addresses her by her rank on formal occasions or when she is being stupid, or mega-stupid like now. Between them, his referring to her as *Deputy* is the same as calling her an asshole.

Scrutinizing the spiral blade that cut her arm off above the wound, Sargent confirms that the stump has been cauterized. It's kinda silly for the sarge to ask if she feels okay because the drugs they take for pain-block and shock mitigation are taken as boosters before each operation. Angie doesn't feel a thing, and he knows that she is perfectly okay with the loss of her arm. She'll just have to go through the process of growing a new one. What amuses him, yet pisses her off, is that this is the third time she has lost the same arm in combat.

Angie remote controls the weapons boom that her arm was attached too, and fires three grenades towards the Defense Forces line, and as the grenades go off, killing the butter-bar and wounding the shooter, she gives the sarge attitude, "What do you think?"

Sargent presses, "I think you need to fall back and let someone else take command point! I'm not saying that you can't do the job, but you are *not* one-hundred percent, Deputy."

Angie looks at her arm and grudgingly agrees, "Okay, God-damn it! You're point, but when you go over the top I'm comin' too!"

Angie then radio's to her people, "Change in batting order.

Double-Duce is taking command point. Stand by." She smiles at Sargent, "Ain't nothin' like a good old-fashioned frontal assault to pucker your butt. Ready, Freddy?"

Sargent smiles back, "What are we waiting for, Klicks?"

01010000-01010111-01001110-01011010-01001111-01010010

The troopers who fell from space are now landing on the roofs of the buildings all around Urchin Gnome—the third build of the United Nations complex, and twice the size of the original one. A hundred troops land on the office tower itself, where Cricket and her tag-team are perched, as the rest drop and spread out to surround the complex.

Hanging over the edge like an invisible gargoyle, Cricket peers down and sees scores of pedestrians who are clearly at risk if they were to stay there.

Cricket radios out, "Okay, people, let's clear the streets."

With her tag-team in tow, Cricket let's loose and free falls towards the street. Flaring out, she and her people land in front of five elderly Jewish pedestrians and uncloak.

One of her teammates block their way and says, "Everybody, for your safety, we need you to leave the area."

The oldest male, a rabbi about 140 years of age, wags his finger at the young man, "He's got that building in a single bound thing going on, but a locomotive he is not!"

Perplexed, the trooper asks, "Loco...what?"

Cricket laughs out loud as the old rabbi kvetches with an exaggerated, "Oy vey!"

The trooper just shakes his head, "Sir, I don't have time to explain, except that if you stay up here you could get injured or even killed. For your safety, if you please, proceed quickly to the subway."

"Young man, at my advanced age, you want to stay above ground?" The old man throws his hands out, "But, we know when we're not wanted."

As they start for the elevator to the subway, his wife stops, turns back and steps up to the trooper, "So, who you after?" She points to the U.N., "These clowns?"

"Yes ma'am."

She glances back at her group, "So when am I right?" She then pats the trooper on his arm, "You look like a nice gentile boy. If you don't mind me asking—what took you so long?"

With three Razorbacks hovering overhead, Maria's Warthog gunship slithers in to land on the street outside the U.N. The ramp drops down and the troops pour out, followed by six reporters, their cameramen and their escorts. Next to file out is Maria with a squad of guards surrounding Nikki who herself is in black and gray pixelated camouflaged BDU. Nicole pulls up the rear as anchor. They stop beside Cricket who is at the main entrance to the complex.

Where outside the United Nations the troopers from the S.A. have sealed off the complex itself, inside tag-teams, thirty troopers in all, have dropped from the ceiling and sealed up the General Assembly. These teams sneaked into the complex last night, and all morning they've been subjected to listening to a heated debate over yet another failing resolution to reform the requirements for planet self-determination, and self-government.

To guarantee that he would be there, Robert Jackson slithered through security with a three man recon team just days before, and right now he can't believe their luck. There was not an empty seat in the GA. No new member states have been added in over a decade, but the issue at hand is like the hot button that brings all members in for a fight. The Co-op's voting block is so strong that, even though the outcome is a foregone conclusion, they have to go through the motions just the same.

The issue is that the members of the Co-op do not intend to relinquish sovereignty over their colonies, and even though they're not in the position to exercise it for real in far off places like the Pleiades, they believe that their persistence may pay off one day.

The day the gloves come off...

Bob, perched high in the decorative rafters over the GA, watches as his people continue to block the exits—letting no one out.

It was then that he heard Maria over the radio, ["Hey, Bob, what's the story? They cooperating?"]

Bob smirks, "After what happened to Dodson. You bet!"

Maria radios back, ["Great, we're coming in."]

"I'll meet you at the West entrance."

Bob floats down and lands just as the doors open.

He steps up to Cricket and asks, "You still up for this?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, Bob."

"You look ready and steady."

"Yea, just hang with me for a few, okay?" Cricket gives him a goofy look, "You know, emotional support."

Bob chuckles and taps his head and says, "Where it counts." He then pats her on the shoulder and drives it home, "Cricket, you *are* 'Sergeant Washington' you hear! Make me proud."

Cricket and her team float up and land at the center podium. The speaker, a member from Sigma-Taurus, in the Hyades, has been doing his best Nikita Khrushchev imitation by hammering his shoe on the podium while vilifying the Steel Annex as a wanton aggressor. It's obvious that the fight that broke out just minutes before on Riker's Island and the presence of the troopers from the Annex in the General Assembly is not setting well.

Through his incoherent shouting Cricket quietly asks, "Please take your seat, Mr. Martinek. My taking the podium is not exactly within the rules-of-order but we are in a time crunch here."

Martinek reaches out to push Cricket away, and this is met by a static shock that hits his hand and throws him back with a yelp.

As one of her troopers pulls Martinek away, Cricket turns to the GA and removes her helmet, "Ladies, gentlemen, I will be brief. Our taking control of the General Assembly this afternoon, though unorthodox, is not outside of the powers given to the S.A. under U.N. resolution twenty-one ninety-eight one-seven-zero-one-eight. Less than an hour ago, teams from the Annex assaulted one-hundred and six facilities that were cloning human beings as sex slaves, and for various military applications. As you may know, cloning human beings for nefarious purposes is still considered a crime against humanity. Over one-hundred thousand children have been rescued thus far, and high-ranking members of many governments have been implicated in these activities. Culpability, according to United Nations resolution twenty-two thirty-two, zero-zero-one-seven-one, will result in the expulsion of that government's mission for the remainder of the current session and the following calendar years session, but not to exceed eighteen months. You, as representatives may appeal, and in the spirit of fair play we will submit to you all evidence that resulted in our findings but, be advised, our instance of the World Court and the I.C.C., though off the beaten path, is well within its rights to issue and execute such warrants, so..."

Cricket gestures towards the one open exit, "Accordingly, when I call out your mission by name, will all members please proceed to the West exit where we will serve the expulsion warrant, and provide you with safe transportation to your home planet."

The GA explodes with indignant disapproval. Cricket makes two attempts to address them over the shouting without success so, to get their attention, her flail-gun points up into the air. The triangular reticle for the boom mounted plasma canon floats in her vision high

over the GA. The helmet and canopy of the JACC has the capability of visual displays, but nobody really uses them. All HUD graphics and information are now superimposed on the visual cortex or fed to the brain through the tacnet interface.

In the cannon, an itty-bitty nuclear fuel pellet is imploded with lasers. A blue plasma fireball leaps out of the canon and scorches the air high above their heads in a wide dispersion. Without the metallic particulate gas all the pulse does is singe a few eyebrows, but the flash and the electrical screech immediately quiets the GA.

Cricket continues, "I apologize for that display, but this is not a matter up for debate. Please cooperate and we will get through this without anybody getting hurt."

With their undivided attention, Cricket gestures to Martinek, "Mr. Ambassador, we will start with you. Will the representatives and staff from Siphnos and Gai in Sigma-Taurus, please proceed towards the West exit."

01001011-01010100-01001000-01011000-01000010-01000001-01001001

At one-hundred and sixty kilometers altitude over the Florida coast, Captain Moore still felt the need to radio out, "Feet wet."

It's been a nice and gentle ride. They have already reached escape velocity but the drop ship still continues to accelerate at a constant 1.5 gravities.

Moore has been monitoring the situation with interest. As it is no fighter from the Air Force, Navy, or Marines has been able to breach the screens put out by the SA. The rules of engagement are strict in this situation. Check their flights one for one and fire only if fired upon however, had they been able to press on to the areas of operation in Atlanta, Chicago, and New York the ROEs would have allowed them to fire on the SA troops and drop ships in action. That is, of course, the ships were not IFF marked as a MEDIVAC, or a transport carrying prisoners or other non-combatants.

If so then the fighters from the SA, who would have been riding their tails on the way in, would be free to fire on them.

Because of the impossible position they were in the command and control centers had the Air Force, Navy, and Marine pilots hold the SA fighter screens in check. Accordingly, those facing off over the last half an hour has spent their time playing cat and mouse in various Thach-weave and Lufberry maneuvers with the pilots of the Annex. With many of these encounters the pilots for both sides have taken advantage of the situation to engage in mock dogfights.

Captain Moore has been monitoring these fighters throwing themselves at each other in high-speed turns and spirals, and she laughs inside as a pilot would occasionally radio, ["Bang! You're dead!"] or ["Splash, Baby!"] to their adversary.

Now with the ground actions over with in Atlanta and Chicago, and the forces of the SA pulling out, to Moore it looks like they were left out of the party, but over the radio they hear Yard Dog call to them, ["Blood, we got a new mission for ya."]

Moore smiles, "We got our ears on. Give us the vector."

["We got two flights of Navy pukes, Sunliners in from the Mediterranean, waiting for you out over the Saint George's. How fast can you get there, Blood?"]

Moore radios back, "How fast have you got?"

["Well, get it on the hump. They're gonna chassé into the Big Apple, and we kinda think you'll want to crash this party too."]

"We copy, Yard! Saint George it is!" Moore then switches over to Dusty's frequency, "Dusty, sorry we can't stay."

["Do you really have to go, Blood?"]

"We got orders ta zoom away, so stay in this groove and everything will be okay. It's not a good idea to come back down if you know what I mean. Fly safe."

["We copy. Fly friendly, Blood."]

Captain Moore then switches over to her flights frequency, "You heard right, guys. Let's hit the deck!"

All four bulldogs flip over and dive towards the ocean blue.

00101111-00111101-00100110-01111100-00111100

Sitting in his Thunderbolt, hovering just a few short meters over the Southern tip of Roosevelt Island, Jacob monitors a simple blip that shows the four Bulldogs plummeting towards the Atlantic then north for St. George where he sees another blip showing a flight of four Navy Bulldogs out from the Mediterranean.

Jacob chuckles to think that these people still have aircraft carriers of all things, but then it dawns on him. Who wouldn't want a floating island or two on Sapphire? Maybe this is something he'll have to bring up later.

Jacob then asks his ghost in the machine, "Ho'okay, Bud, what do you think about this sitch I'm watchin' here?"



Bud perks up, "You—you asking me?"

Jacob deadpans, "Ya, I'm asking you."

There is a short silence as Bud thinks about this, "They should come in with two finger-fours, but there's something we don't see."

"Waddya mean?"

"Well, the Navy is not gonna send only just four of their dogs over from the Med. There's got to be more than we see and if you switch over to infrared—"

"You already did that?"

"What do you take me for, an idiot?"

"No!"

"May I continue?" Put in his place, Jacob goes tight-lipped while Bud continues, "More likely than not they'll have a flight stacked one over another to hide their numbers from the high-eyes. We've done that too and as you can see they're putting out a lot of heat. I'd bet the farm they're flying in synch, low man in control."

Jacob asks, "All the way from the Med?"

"Fuck ya! Why not?"

Jacob snorts, "Give that man a cigar."

After a short silence, Bud snarls, "Don't patronize me, you being the smuggest prick in the smug prick brigade."

Jacob understands his frustration. Bud was an exceptional pilot, and an intuitive tactician. Just the kind of guy he would love to have flying as his Number 3 right about now. Not to slam the other pilots in his flight, as good as they are, but Bud is the kind of guy Jacob would consider an equal.

Jacob smiles big, "Honestly, Bud, you may not believe it but I'm glad you're flying here with me today."

Bud retorts, "Well, honestly, Jacob, I can't wait until I can get the fuck away from you. Your shit bores me silly."

Jacob nods repeatedly, "That may be so, but, maybe we can improve on our relationship how 'bout?"

Bud laughs, "If that means granting a divorce then hell yea! That would be an improvement."

"I got other ideas."

"Then bite me."

Jacob chuckles, "You'll see."

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Over the radio, with withering small arms fire all around her, Angie hears Scott whine, ["Klicks, baby, tell me it ain't so!"]

It's been a hell of a fight up to this point.

Through the exchange of grenades and rail-gun fire, Sargent led them up to the perimeter wall. The second wave leapfrogged past them onto the facility grounds and into a meat-grinder. Finger upon finger of drones threw themselves at each other, and destroyed each other, leaving only the troopers to carry the fight. For second wave it was looking pretty grim—with over sixty percent wounded and ten percent dead, that is until Gun Crazy showed up.

The maelstrom she let loose from above was exacting and lethal as hell—and within seconds she left the BDF with over seventy percent dead and fifteen percent wounded at this point. This pushed the remaining survivors into the two office buildings and out of her reach. The stillness that hovered over the AO after her fifth and last pass gave Sargent the opening to press their attack.

As they jump over the perimeter wall a Private Ozo gets hit. His leg is shattered and the femoral artery is severed with the very first round. The next two mini-balls virtually liquefy his intestines so his JACC cuts his body off at the diaphragm. Ozo will live but it's going to be two or three years before he'll be whole again.

When they get to the courtyard between the two buildings, the defenders open up on them from inside. A mini-ball catches a Private Chase on the top of his helmet, passes through his skull and travels down his spine killing him instantly. Before anybody else could react, Sargent pumps a grenade into the second story window, and when it blows it ejects three of the defenders back out of the window and onto the courtyard in crumpled heaps.

Deader than dead.

With the firefight picking up steam, Angie and her team are forced to hug the ground and use their boom mounted weapons to return fire—and the last thing Angie needs is Scott whining because she got, in her perspective, a simple boo-boo.

Angie sounds a bit harried, "Scott, honey, it's a little hectic right now, so can we do this later?"

["Just don't get dead. Okay?"]

"Love ya, gotta jet!" Angie switches over to Bill's frequency, "Cowboy, what's your twenty?"

["At the wall. Ozo is messed up, but he'll live."]

"Can't say the same for Chase. He just got scrapped."

["Sorry to hear that."]

"Bill, if we don't get out of this courtyard, and soon, then we'll end up just like Chase. You copy?"

["Where do you want it, Klicks?"]

"First and second floors of the office buildings. Hose 'em down if you'd please. When I give the signal we'll force our way into the South tower. Second and first squads enter the North tower. Third squad follows us. You people got that?"

The fire from the reserve platoons at the wall, and the people caught out on the grounds, open up on the buildings just as each of the squad leaders, and Bill, acknowledge the plan.

After almost twenty seconds, and tens of thousands of rounds rip through the buildings, Angie cries out, "Okay, let's mosh!"

The fire is directed up so the four squads jump and run. First and second squads face some resistance, but after a short exchange they easily manage to secure the North tower. The command and third squads, after they slip into the glass atrium of the South tower, after a brief moment of stillness quickly realize that they've ran headlong into another set of difficulties.

01000111-01010100-01000110-01001111-00100001

Each and every mission Cricket has called on has asked for a minute and, as planned, she granted it. Cricket is holding up well, even though the grandstanding at first was vehemently hostile, and directed at her. It was the sixth Representative called out, the one from Theta-2-Taurus, that changed the tone of the proceedings.

As eloquent and humorous as a French Nobleman approaching his end at the guillotine, this guy doesn't lower himself by being petulantly indignant. His tactic is not to deny the charges of collusion at all, but he uses his tone of voice to get an impossible chuckle out of such a serious subject matter.

"...Human trafficking is the most heinous of crimes and miseries, and more so when it involves children bred to satisfy the lust of a perverted client base—who are not smart enough to keep their perversions in the digital realm." The 'tisk-tisk' that followed got a tense laugh. "But, to have an entire people lose their representation because of a few miscreants, and from such an August body mind you..." which got genuine laugh, "Well I say no!"

Here he is cut off and ushered out.

Such was the Swan Song from the representative of Theta-2-Taurus because instead of being escorted to the drop ships, he is walked out and around to the North end of the facility where he loses his head. Grateful he is for the immediacy of this end, and not so much from the pangs of guilt he has felt over the years, many that there were, but mostly by being freed from the burden of facing his own children—and having to come up with a reason as to why he was involved with such wickedness.

Now holding at the seventh warrant for expulsion, while yet another yahoo goes over his allotted minute, an attorney named Karr, enwrapped in a very stylish business suit, approaches Bob and Maria on the sidelines.

Karr announces, "The Secretary General will see you now."