19 a hard on for hope

TIME: 19:05zulu (local 14:05est)

The office of the Secretary General is as huge as it is stately. Walnut drips off everything except the North and East walls which are seamless windows that stretch from floor to ceiling. This office is minimalist and intimidating and reeks of power. Not the sort of power you could say was actually purposeful per se, or absolute by any stretch of the imagination, but the ambiance here as expressed by the receiving area, the multiple high-tech conference nooks, and the cushy sociable pit, is the power of consensus.

The current Secretary General who occupies this office is a one, Michal Pitney, a delicious sixty-eight year old G-MILF who looks every bit like a six-foot-two brunette knock-off of Barbara Eden in her prime. At first glance, Michal, in the tight floral dresses and pumps she normally wears to work, appears more like a *trophy secretary to* than the *Secretary Big-Shot of.* That said, she has been at this job now for almost a decade and she is at the top of her game.

Truth be known she's been good at it since day-one.

As an ambassador to the U.N. from Sapphire she negotiated the peace between the Co-op and the Annex. If that wasn't tough enough as its leader, Michal then accomplished the impossible. She has maintained that peace and she has fought for it at great personal cost. Concessions are part and parcel with the job, requiring some mental gymnastics and a little more than your everyday moral flexibility, but the deals she has wielded and weaved over the last eight and a half years has taken a dire toll on her conscience and almost shattered her faith in man as a species to be protected and preserved.

Michal, looking out the window, watches as wistful columns of smoke drift skyward from Riker's Island just eight kliometers away. She touches the window and swipes a diagonal line creating a digital *window* on the window. She then taps the center of that window and taps the glass in the direction of the island. When she zooms in she

bears visual witness to the bombs and bolts and mini-balls chewing up the landscape, the buildings, the people.

It all makes sense now. The confused reports from every corner of the Hyades, as well as here on Earth gave her clarity as to what the SA has been up to. Michal cannot deny to herself that she had a minor hand in these atrocities, and though her involvement was superficial at best, her blind-eye resulted in a worst-case scenario she could not anticipate nor reel in after the fact. More likely than not the Annex knows she is passively culpable. Her intent was high-minded but choosing to overlook one evil to ward off, in her mind, a greater evil may not dissuade the Annex, who has a vested interest in pursuing the latter of the two, from holding her just as accountable.

Then again, in retrospect, maybe she chose wrong?

With a sad smile and a sullen reserve, Michal throws back her second shot of Croatian slivovica. The stiff shots of plum brandy fail to soften the horrors that unveil themselves before her out at Riker's Island but, hopefully, the cotton-numbness that is starting to creep into her tissues will inoculate her from the music she may have to face.

She didn't have long to wait.

Karr trots in with Bob, Maria, Nicole, Nikki and three SA troopers in tow. He races ahead of them towards a klatch of Michal's highest-maintenance mission reps and hangers-on who are hovering around in front of her desk.

But before Karr can say anything the ambassador for the United States, a Yaqub Ahmed Mofid, calls out to Bob when he sees him enter the room, "Well done, Marshal Jackson, it's finally hit the fan, but did you have to throw in the whole cow?"

Before Bob could reply the Ambassador for Theta Alpha, Bill Blunt, almost shouts as he points towards a monitor showing to the North side of the complex where six headless bodies are lying on the ground. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Bob blinks his eyes, "Ah, my job."

Ambassador Blunt then points to a monitor that shows the goings on in the General Assembly, "Kidnapping and murder!"

Bob shrugs, "It's a job?"

Mofid speaks up, "Marshal, I'm sure you'll present us with all kinds of evidentiary justification for these killings, and the expulsion warrants, but may I remind you that most of the people employed by the Co-op here are United States citizens."

Bob nods, "We are aware of that, Mr. Mofid, but we think you

should get you're people classier jobs like with the Department of Sanitation."

Mofid is a cool cucumber, and this is an odd place for him to be to chide a back-door ally such as the Annex, "Humor aside, Marshal, it is our collective position that the Annex has stepped way out of bounds. You are also well aware that we have air combat patrols up, and the situation may get out of hand if your screens don't prevent our pilots from making it here."

Bob nods and snarks, "At least everybody else had the good sense not to come up to play."

"Hopefully, we can keep this contained."

Blunt pipes up, "And of the people you connected with these crimes how many did you execute without their day in court? I'm dying to know!"

Bob had the numbers ready, "From Externus Warrants we had eleven hundred and seventeen, but two remain outstanding. As for the people and staff members that were caught in the hundred and six facilities we attacked, well, we don't have an exact count just yet but, for your edification, it's about fifty-three hundred. Give or take."

Ambassador Ranch Kiplinger, from Gamma-Taurus, bellows, "Do you really think you're gonna get away with this!"

Michal, still looking out the window after slamming back her third shot, pipes up with a ludicrously inviting Australian accent, "I think they just did, Kip. Explain it to them, Bob."

Bob introduces Maria, "I would like you all to meet Marshal Maria Ramirez. In spite of her notorious reputation, she just so happens to be one of our most skilled jurists. Marshal."

Maria clears her throat, "Pursuant to resolution twenty-one ninety-eight one-seven-zero-one-eight, member states are obligated to accommodate outside jurisdictions in the prosecution of all Externus Warrants as they relate to crimes against humanity. The resolution also gave the M.A.D. and in turn this was extended to the S.A., the power of judicial authority, and review, and the prerogative to sentence *in absentia*. The one judicial challenge to this resolution eighty years ago failed because it was a popular mechanism for the Deputation during their early campaigns. In short, ya'll are shit outta luck and your damage control options are limited."

Blunt was, in the last war, an SS commander, and he grunts with distain, "But you're just a bunch of sergeants!"

Michal speaks up, "If you're trying to insult them it's not working, Bill."

Maria adds, "I suspect you'll probably repeal this resolution. Unfortunately, member states connected to such crimes forfeit their seats for a period of eighteen months. As you can see, ambassadors from all Co-op participants are being removed from the G.A so it looks like it might be awhile before you can vote on it."

Kiplinger snarls with hostility, "We will demand a rehearing, and you know that."

Bob interjects, "Ya, and to get it will require a vote in the General Assembly however, the majority of the remaining members may not be as sympathetic to you guys in the Co-op as you'd think. So, will you and Ambassadors Blunt, Jones, Bianca, Saavedra, Estel, Wanganui and Hartcourt please follow our three troopers here. Your chariot awaits."

They look at Michal who continues to stare out the window without acknowledging their plight. By all appearances she is not going to intervene so, with a huff, they grudgingly step out with the one trooper leading and two following them.

As they leave, Ambassador Hartcourt stops in front of Bob, "We know you have a cloning program too."

Before Bob could say anything Maria steps in, "Planning one. We're still selecting from a body of candidates."

"So, what's the difference?"

Maria smiles, "We're not enhancing them by altering the DNA, we are not programming them into automata. They *will* have a choice, unlike the ones you have planted in the Annex."

"What makes you say that?"

"What turnip wagon do you think I've fallen off of? We've found them before, and we'll find 'em again. Don't worry, we'll find 'em all, Ambassador."

Hartcourt whispers back with a smile and a slight roll of the eyes, "Don't be too sure about that, Marshal."

With him gone this leaves the domestic toadies du Condé from France, Lebedev from Russia, Zemljakovova from the Czech Republic, and Tarō from Japan wondering what to do with themselves without the Co-op throwing around their numbers. It's obvious that a huge weight has been lifted off their shoulders, but the best they can do is too catch their breath and wait to see what happens next.

Mofid is gleefully digging all this but he can't show it as he plays along by asking Bob, "So, instead wasting time with rhetorical bullshit, what can we do to get you people up and out of my airspace?"

Bob replies, pointing to the monitor on the General Assembly, then towards Ricker's Island, "Speed this along, and make them knock that shit off."

Mofid pauses as if he were thinking, though he was already ready for this moment he has to make it look good, "Let me ring some people up and see what I can do."

As he steps away to a side conference room, Karr breaths deeply and asks, "So, our business is concluded."

"Not quite." Bob tosses a file on Michal's desk, "Michal, I've been watching your career with fascination. Lawyer, Legislator, Prime Minister, Ambassador, and now Secretary General. A truly meteoric career, but I'm not here to praise Caesar."

Michal hangs her head. Not so much out of grief but to avoid spilling too much of the brandy she is pouring into the row of shot glasses she had lined up, "I've missed you, Bob. I haven't realized just how much until now. How long has it been? Forty-seven years?"

Bob thinks, "About that."

Putting down the bottle, she picks up the shots, and as she turns towards them, she does a double take when she actually lays eyes on Bob, "Wow! You haven't changed a bit. No, I mean, you have, but...you look great!"

While she starts handing the shots to everybody, both the SA and ambassadors, Bob replies, "Womanhood agrees with you, Mike but, honestly, I prefer you the way you were. You were better in the sack. Aesthetically speaking."

Everybody knew they were roommates at Berkley for two years, and it was speculated that they were lovers to boot, but never did anybody know it for sure until just now. Fact is that these two were truly lovers in love until Michael came back from that last summer break as Michal.

Gender reassignment anymore is a complete process, down to the genetic level even, and irreversible, and their last night together as a man and a woman was to be the only time in his life Bob was ever to have been with a woman. It just wasn't his thing. One could say there was a betrayal of sorts but Michael did bring it up and Bob chose not to listen, so it came of no surprise when Bob stepped out the next day 'for a pack of cigarettes' never to return. He signed up with the Annex that morning leaving Michal to continue on her own path.

Now that forty-seven years have lapsed Bob looks at Michal and wonders if he couldn't have held out a day or two to regroup, thinking, *Cripes, it wasn't that bad!*

Michal smiles, "You are the first complaint I've ever had."

Bob shakes his head as Mofid returns to them, "No, Mike, it's just that I'd rather you stay the way you were." He looks at Mofid and asks, "And?"

"Waiting for a call back. This is gonna take a little time."

Already scanning the file, Karr glances up at Maria and confirms, "You advocated for the defense."

Bob interjects, "I wanted the best for Michal."

Karr nods with understanding, but adds, "What else do you have on the Secretary General? These are just memos."

Maria speaks up, "In fact they're screen prints, but under the Uniform Rules of Evidence, it's enough. I've seen death warrants issued on less. These communications were copy blocked, but this local clown, a Councilman Shapiro, his idea for compiling a whole library of 'don't go to jail' tickets kinda backfired on him and everyone else. And, for your edification, Shapiro was served this morning."

Karr then nods towards Nikki, "The child, a witness?"

"More like a promise." Bob puts a hand out, "This gets weird. When we were at Theta-2-Taurus we rescued about a thousand clones from the Co-op's forward base. There was this one child, and she is unique. You see, she actually arranged for her rescue by setting up that attack and helped arrange for today's festivities."

Mofid, knowing the truth about Nikki, feigns amusement, "This is hard to believe, Marshal."

"Yea, but you talk to her. Hearing what she has to say is eye-opening." Bob looks at Nikki and points to them, "Nikki, show 'em. The floor is yours."

All eyes fall on Nikki—and none of the U.N. crowd wanted to hear from a child, of all things, until she spoke up, "Mr. Tarō and Mr. Mofid, yes, I am pale and scrawny and not that much to look at, but if you are interested as to what the next ten years may bring then look behind me to Chief Burke. She is last year's model, and that should spike your imaginations just a tad."

She looks at the French Ambassador, "Mr. du Condé, if you must know, my training was somewhat extensive, but I hope your curiosity remains clinical until I am of the majority however..." Then with a wicked grin, "When left to your own devices, at most your only crime will be self abuse."

Mofid smirks under his breath, "Ow, she got ya!"

du Condé whispers back at him, "*Va te faire enculer*."

She turns bodily to the Czech Ambassador, whose eyes tear up when she says, "And, Ms Zemljakovova, I am glad you found a noble purpose instead of being snuffed out like most of our kind. At least Shapiro did something right by his victims."

Nikki then looks over her shoulder towards the Russian Ambassador, and with a smile, "Mr. Lebedev, your admiration is noted and, yet, so misguided. I acted solely out of self preservation so let us leave it at that. I assure you I won't be a toy for the Annex."

Mofid asks Bob, "I'm impressed, but one child did this?"

Nikki adds, "Ah, no, all fifty-two of us. It was a group effort." Nikki's eyes smile as they sweep the group, "Yes, that sort of torques your crank just like Mr. Graves said it would."

Tarō recoils, "Oh, my God! Do you know what this means!"

"You are a very dangerous little girl." du Condé wags a finger at Nikki with an almost condescending air.

That, in and of itself, wasn't bad, but it was him thinking ill of Nikki, as in *petit pétasse*, that pissed her off to no end.

Nikki snarls slightly, and before she could zap him with a personal memory of hers—when she was torn, bleeding, and in agony from being sodomized for the first time at six years of age—Nicole puts a hand on her shoulder, "Let it go. He's not worth it."

Zemljakovova laughs, "No, let him have it! The apathetical bastard deserves a taste of what you and I went through!"

du Condé puts his hands up defensively, "*Ça va, ça va!* I was just suggesting—"

Lebedev steps in protectively, "Back off Frenchy."

du Condé rolls his eyes, "*Mon Dieu!*"

"She is dangerous!" Bob almost shouts. Startled, everybody clams up and looks at him, "They are a collective intelligence, and very capable, and very angry. Because of this all of them will be held at Sapphire for the rest of their lives. She, the plural she, will never be allowed to leave that planet. We have already seen to it."

Before the Russian ambassador could say anything, Nikki interrupts, "Mr. Lebedev, there is no point in pursing anything on my behalf. I made this deal, and it is in everybody's best interest that I stick to that agreement, but feel free to visit me anytime."

Nikki then touches Karr on the forearm, "Try *6-U-L-D-V-8* as the password to open those documents. Shapiro was as transparent as he was arrogant."

Karr looks up at Michal, "Madam Secretary, it is clear that Councilman Shapiro's papers were the most damning evidence they had, but give me five minutes and I think we can come up with something to plea bargain with."

"That's not why they are here, you moron!" Michal loses her cool. She turns towards Bob and grimaces, "Stop jerkin' me off, Bob, or execute your fucking warrant."

On queue, Nicole pulls her khukri from its sheath, and Bob puts a hand out to hold her back, "Ramirez, please, the floor is yours."

Maria huffs, "In exchange for their testimony against Shapiro, and hundreds of others, the clones made a demand that Michal be given a chance to help set things right. You see, they admire you—"

Michal, face in her hands, sobs, "I do not deserve special treatment." She looks up, "Give me a reason, Bob!"

Bob cuts this short, "Okay, Michal, on the level."

"About fucking time, Bob!" Michal blurts out.

"Your life comes with a price tag. We'll suspend the warrant, and you remain Secretary General, and this all depends on three conditions. First is that you do not support the Co-ops bid to suspend the eighteen month clause. Play it up any way you want, but you keep 'em talking and not shooting. You're good at that so stick with what you know."

Michal is calmer, "Okay, the next two?"

Bob shakes his head, "Do not challenge our guardianship over the thousands of children we liberated today. They will be going to good homes in the Annex and the frontier states however, we'll send you the records we uncovered of all the children and adults sold into bondage. You can distribute that information to the proper authorities and win their freedom. It will make for good press."

Karr shrugs, "That's an easy one!"

It was then that Bob gives the *coup de grace* that nobody was expecting, "And, consider yourself served."

With that, Maria hands over to Michal a bound document.

Michal has a gut feeling what this document is, so she defers it to Karr who just about caught his heart with his teeth. Not by the sight and sound from the two Bulldog fighters that just ripped past the building, just under Mach speed, but by the title on the document handed over to him.

Karr blurts out, "You can't be serious!"

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It was a hell of a run for the Navy and Marine pilots. Only one flight of Thunderbolts was between them and New York and the lead Navy flight, as expected, was held in check by them out at Asbury Park—leaving the other two to slither around them and into New York overland without further interference.

Those two flights consist of four Navy Sunliners stacked just thirty-five meters above the four Marines of Bloodhound flight. They tore up through Eastern Pennsylvania past Trenton then South Amboy, and up along the Western side of Staten Island. During their approach the combined Number-3 and 4 Bulldogs backed off enough to give the 1 and 2 ships a fifteen second lead to target.

Both the Navy and Marine pilots feel that this has the makings of a trap. They instinctively felt it but now they know it proof positive because the four Thunderbolts that were out over Nantucket Sound, and were racing in towards Manhattan, just slipped into a holding pattern only thirty kilometers away from the target AO. No, these guys could not have made the intercept in time but for them to stand off like that gives creepy-crawly feelings all around.

They have their orders, for good or ill, and when they pass over the Williamsburg Bridge the Navy pilots take control of their ships and climb up to five-hundred meters to cover the bombing run to be made by the Marines on the deck.

Jacob and his three teammates know this drill by heart. Hovering just off the ground at four key locations around Riker's, they are hidden in plain sight—being indistinguishable from civilian traffic and craft. There these four Thunderbolts will stay put until ordered into action or someone calls for help, or if someone decides to start some stupid shit...

Which won't be long now.

Captain Moore and her wingman have only three seconds to flash and fire at the SA on Ricker's. In that her ship has to do an IFF sweep, identify the highest value targets, select one or two of them in coordination with her wingman's ship, select the weapons to launch and by who, and then dial in a yield for maximum effect yet minimal collateral damage. This leaves only the pilots to press buttons after they confirm the information presented to them on their HUDs.

Honestly, there is nothing really to confirm, because the A.I. is virtually foolproof, and will not auto target anything iffy. Attacking in this mode makes the human operator superfluous—and this is so not the Marine way.

Moore, like any other combat pilot, is all about style points. To her, and the rest of her bunch, it would be so much better to go at this low and slow and act like the consummate professionals they've trained themselves to be however, in this situation speed is life when you do not know where the other guys are lurking or how many of them there are.

It so goes against the grain to intentionally fire on someone you would normally consider a friendly. Especially those with the same *esprit de corps* as your own. This was the split second thought going through Captain Moore's mind as she pushes the button to release her bulls-eye bomb.

The weapons launched from the two Bulldogs proceed to buck-and-bronco their way into two tanks loitering at the perimeter wall. Capital targets the SA parked there just for this purpose and obviously so. These bombs are actually capable of 1kt in yield, but this is a surgical strike so they were dialed down to ten tons each, and even though they are scaled back quite a bit it is still a spectacular sight how these weapons convert the tanks into a pair of mushrooming fireballs that roll into the sky.

Bud didn't have to be told twice.

When Jacob lets go of the controls and says, "Bud, she's yours to fly" ol' Bud just doesn't get it at first. It isn't until he sees the next two pair of Bulldogs bearing down, and Jacob going hands-free when it finally sinks in.

Bud takes control and pickles off 4 tiny micropede missiles, one for each of the second wave of Bulldogs, and even though the Navy and Marine pilots can easily evade and outrun these short range missiles coming straight at them they still have to scatter to do this.

Perfect...

Bud kicks in the engines of the Thunderbolt just as they shoot past and is immediately up and locked onto the tail of Navy-4.

The range is too close for their centipede missiles, who need a little bit of elbow room to work well, and too far off for the micropedes, who are usually used for defense against said full-sized missiles like the centipedes, so this encounter is going to be a gun fight and that is not something for the faint of heart.

Jacob can almost hear the Navy pilot shouting for help as Bud matches him roll for roll and turn for turn. Vapor chines burst over the wings and fuselage as the two throw their ships around in topsy-turvy serpentine loops. They are slow enough that Bud could have easily put the maneuvering advantage of the Thunderbolt to good use with an aerial skid, but Bud has something else up his sleeve.

It was Marine-3 who is daring enough to close in on Bud and Jacob, and in retrospect that was a bad plan because what Bud does with the Thunderbolt would normally be considered impossible. Bud is the kind of pilot that doesn't put much stock in limitations and, like Jacob, is a kick the tire and light the fire kinda guy.

Gun slinging, even with maneuverable smart rounds, like the ever popular 7.62x39 rocket assisted rail gun bolts used on the Thunderbolt, still requires substantial skill in lining up a shot and the Marine pilot on Bud's Four O'clock is almost in perfect position for a shallow deflection shot when Bud pulls his trick.

Later, Bud would call it the Jackknife, and it is the first really innovative maneuver since the Harrier-Tuck several centuries before. This is actually an all too common move in the vacuum of space, but totally unheard of in air to air combat.

Bud launches a micropede after the Navy guy to keep him going forward, then pulls a quick roll to the left and out of the sights of Marine-3 who tries to match Bud's roll. Bud suddenly pitches his nose down, and vectors the thrust of his engines down as well. This flips the Thunderbolt ass over in a half somersault—leaving him flying backwards of all things.

Even with his thrust vectored in reverse to help stabilize the ship and provide some forward momentum, and with most of the control surfaces now ass backwards, one would think that Bud would spin crazily out of control but he's been practicing this for quite awhile in the simulators and is now doing it for real. It just takes a little bit of a roll and rudder to line up the shot and when Bud lets loose with the cannon, rounds erupting from below-left at the root of the cockpit, it's the Bloodhound's canard, wing and a big chunk of fuselage on the right side that vanish from sight.

Scratch one from Smoke.

Bud howls with jubilation as they watch the Bulldog spin out of control, and they both cheer as the pilot ejects safely before it smashes nose first into the intersection at 42nd and Park Avenue.

Jacob now takes back control of his fighter, flips it around and turns hard only to witness Navy-3 tumbling into the East River under the gun of his Number-2 man. Then, with a report that the Navy-2 fell to a centipede missile shot by his Number-3, Jacob realizes that the eight to four advantage held by the United States pilots has just been reduced to five versus four.

To top that off Jacob's Number-4 gal, sitting out at Ferry Point, has yet to throw herself into the fight.

Maybe it's time to lure someone her way?

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The atrium of the South tower is quiet for only a quarter minute before the Base Defense troops make themselves known. From the interior windows of the second and third floors, looking down into the lobby, the BDF open fire up on command and third squads and catch them by surprise.

Angie, Sargent and the Command squad are able to duck in the elevator lobby but Third squad, who is drawing most of the fire from above, is trapped behind the long Concierge counter that sits towards the entrance. Third squad is taking a beating and are able to put up only a modest return fire at best, so Angie and her team start popping out here and there and fire at the troops above with little or no effect. It isn't until Sargent gets fed up with the situation when the tables start to turn back in their favor.

Slithering out from behind the security desk, Sargent fires his flail-gun up towards the defense troops at a wide dispersion setting. The plasma cannon scorches the air and kills a hand-full of the Co-op troops outright by burning their faces off in their helmets and blowing their brains out as if their skulls were like head sized popcorn kernels. At least their suits contain this mess but for the rest of them, most now with singed eyebrows and temporarily spotted vision, they pull back from the million-plus degree pulse of heat.

With that the sprinkler heads in the atrium go off, and instead of fresh water coming out, as most people would think, there is a foul concoction of oily-wet soot that slimes everything before the water itself, sometimes stagnant for decades on end, makes its way through. This is okay enough when stamping out a small fire before it becomes a big fire, but what follows here in the atrium is cataclysmic.

With the sprinklers as cover, the head of one Defense trooper pops out to take a quick look down so Sargent lights the place up again. This shot converts the water showering down on them from a hard pelting rain into a super-heated steam and, if that wasn't bad enough, the pulse also torches the oily gunk which, added to the steam, cooks the curious poor dumb bastard through and through.

His suit couldn't contain this and bursts apart.

Flames now envelop most everything in the atrium, thrashing at both décor and people alike, but within seconds it's all put out by the sprinklers. If that wasn't bad enough the blast that just destroyed two wolverine tanks out on the perimeter just over a hundred meters away, shatters almost all the windows of the atrium, inside and out, showering Third squad with glass—killing one and injuring two.

Of the three that are hit by the glass, one becomes a double leg amputee below the hips from the same half-tonne pane that decapitates their Corporal. The third guy gets a five-foot sliver that penetrates him through his back and out his belly. With the trauma mitigation systems of the JACC, two of them will live, but it will be a week or so before they will be conscious and aware of it, and well on their way to recovery.

That is, if they can get them out of here in time.

Bill sends in a wolverine that blasts through the only intact pane of glass by the entrance. Just inside it opens up on the Defense Forces above with a heavy-caliber mini-style gun. In response the troops above start chucking grenades out into the atrium.

Angie has had enough, "Duce! Get your ass back here!"

Sargent was already behind her, "You got any ideas, Klicks?"

Angie does a double take when she see's the sarge. His face is beet-red and just this side of blistering. She notices that the water drops on his visor are on the inside. His suit had to put out the flaming hair and eyebrows lit up from the second shot.

Angie shakes her head in amazement thinking, *and the sarge thinks I'm crazy!* She thumbs back towards elevator landing behind her and belts out, "Fuck yea, we're goin' up!"

Angie leads the five of them around to the South elevator bays and points to the doors of one shaft. Sargent grabs the doors and rips them open. After he glances in to see that it's clear, he throws himself into the express elevator shaft and the rest of the squad files through with Angie as the last one in.

It's like they can read each other's mind. Sargent stops at the fifteenth floor and pushes his pentagon through so it's camera can survey the area. With it clear he rips those doors wide open and they dump into the lobby. Civilians scatter as they weave their way towards the emergency exit and down the stairwell to the next floor.

In the central elevator shaft Sargent pries open the door to one side of the central shafts and peers down. Corporal Zazueta pries open the opposing door for Angie. On both sides they see Defense Force troops hunkered down in the shaft around the third floor.

Angie calls out to Sargent, "You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

Sargent laughs, "Yep, let's do it to it!"

With Angie standing guard, Sargent and his other three teammates each take a door in the center of the lobby. On a count of three they all rip open their respective door, reach in and empty a tube

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of grenades, five each, all set to blow at just over one-hundred meters. The grenades drop and bounce their way to the third floor.

The building shakes and rattles as the grenades start detonating in rapped succession. The force of these explosions is so extreme that four Defense Force troopers are blown out into the atrium—only to be riddled with fire before they hit the ground. Before this mini-holocaust subsides Angie's people dive into the shafts and quickly descend to what is left of the third floor lobby.

On the third floor they have another brief moment of calm, followed by yet another desperate fight for survival.

Mofid steps back out from the conference room, walks up to Bob and quietly tells him, just loud enough for the others to hear, "They're gonna do it. The Whitehouse is demanding a truce but it may take a few minutes to broadcast the cease fire."

Bob nods, "Very good. Thank you!"

Suddenly the British ambassador, Sharpe, blasts into the General Secretary's office and is not able to contain his elation, "Me mates, this is a smashing day!" He stops and, looking on the long faces, he snorts, "You wankers look like you're having a funeral. I should've brought a lily instead of me chit for the pub!"

du Condé hands him the document they were served, and after a few seconds reading the title and the first few lines of the document, Sharpe explodes with joy, "A declaration of autonomy! This is friggen' brilliant!"

Tarō blurts out, "Are you kidding? This mean's war!"

Zemljakovova snips at him, "But, Tarō, you make it sound like that's a bad thing."

Bob speaks up, "It is a bad thing."

All eyes look at Bob, so he elaborates, "Look, the peace the Secretary General negotiated ten years ago was simply a holding pattern for us and the Co-op. I don't want to see this shit start back up anymore than any of you do, but this was going to come to a head one way or another."

du Condé asks, "But, why now? Why not put it off and try to find a peaceful solution? How can you *want* to start a war? This time we all may get sucked in!"

Maria interjects, "Not necessarily."

Lebedev asks, "How so? How do you propose we maintain Earth's neutrality after today?"

Michal adds, "And Sapphire's."

Maria looks at the French ambassador, "Mr. du Condé, you are an adamant supporter of the Co-op. Are you not?"

"Superficially, out of expedience. What do you have in mind, Marshal Ramirez?"

Maria elaborates, "Play them. Vote down the resolution you have on the dock today. Submit a resolution to reinstate their missions and stretch it out in committee, but don't be too obvious. To force the vote it will fast track when it hits the judicial side, and we'll arrange for the courts to find on their behalf."

Zemljakovova asks, "What's that going to accomplish? I mean, if they get back in won't they try to throw their weight around?"

Bob replies, "It's a delaying action. That's all. Michal will fight it but you guys vote for it. Except Mofid and Zemljakovova, of course, the Co-op won't buy that. They will push for a unified military intervention, but you arrange to have the Security Council rule against it. Ultimately, the Co-op will find themselves alone and exactly where they were when this whole thing started twenty-five years ago. They will have to accept the neutrality of Earth and Sapphire, or they'll find themselves in a two front war."

Mofid, who actually came up with this plan, agrees, "You know, it sounds crazy but it just may work!"

Tarō, thinking about it, protests, "This is all well and good, Marshal, but what you did today was abhorrent. Violence is not the answer. It never is!"

Michal speaks up in defense of the Annex, "Ambassador Tarō, to paraphrase Machiavelli, it is those who use violence to mend things, not to destroy, who are blameless."

Tarō throws his hands out, "Where the hell is that coming from? Those are not the words from the Michal I know!"

Michal shakes her head, "I don't agree with what they did today, but children have been set free from a life worse than slavery. Then again, the Annex nor the Frontier is declaring war here but that may very well be the end result."

Lebedev speaks up, "It will be the result."

du Condé adds, "There will be no stopping it!"

Nikki counters, "Yes, there is. Show them discord..."

Everybody looks at this *non-child*, still in total disbelief of her eloquence and vocabulary as she elaborates, "And do not make it look like you are ganging up on them. The more time you string them along the more secure neutrality becomes and, Madam Secretary, I have every confidence that if there is a peace to be won then only you can win it. I believe that so are you up to the challenge?"

Michal almost whimpers, "Maybe there's a chance?"

Mofid brings it home, "It's the deal you must strike with them. Otherwise, you will die, and it starts now. Total war."

"And Earth and Sapphire lose their neutrality." Maria affirms.

Zemljakovova sighs, "Michal, do you really have a choice?"

Tarō pleads, "With you there is hope."

Bob prods her memory, "Remember what I said about hope?"

Michal smiles, "Yea...and I got a hard-on for hope."

Bob steps up close to her, "Then we have a deal?"

Michal reaches out and caresses Bob's face with her hand. She remembers all the days and nights she kissed this face and these lips and she wishes to God that he had chosen differently—oh so many years ago because they would not be standing here and now.

With a deep resignation, Michal sighs, "Robert, you, more beloved of heaven will succeed where I am destined to fail."

Another touch of Machiavelli and this saddens Bob, "Mike, your legacy is secure and there for all to see, and you are praised where I am vilified but, by whatever means, that peace will be achieved. I assure you it will be."

After Bob kisses Michal gently on her cheek, he turns towards Karr and asks, "Mr. Karr, we are done here. Would you be so kind as to accompany us on the way out?"

As Karr nods, Michal pleads, "Please keep in touch this time."

Bob smiles, "Yes, we must. I'll call you, I promise."

They all file out past Nicole who, as Karr steps by, swipes her wickedly hooked khukri knife around and through his neck with a sharp *thwack.* Without looking back her people continue to exit—leaving Nicole standing there with knife in hand, and Karr's headless body crumpled at her feet. The almost mind-blowing abruptness of this leaves Michal and the ambassadors speechless.

Nicole clears her throat, "Madam Secretary, the offer we made you was not extended to your Attorney, Mr. Karr. You can find his warrant, with all the others, on the cob-web at S.A. dot-gov."

She turns, with a precision, and steps purposefully out.

Where Shapiro and Alvarez left Nicole wanting, she finds this kill to be remarkably satisfying.

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The fight on Riker's has become last-gasp fierce.

Sargent and a Private Montaña stop off to inspect the third floor lobby as Angie, Corporal Zazueta and a Private Hewlett drop to the second floor. In the second floor elevator lobby there is a short reprieve before the Defense Forces open up on them again.

Hewlett is covering the atrium side of the lobby while Zazueta and Angie creep toward the other. As they peer down opposing isles in the cubicle farm the thought *oh shit* goes through Angie's mind as a deluge of miniballs rip through the air.

Angie doesn't bother looking back at Hewlett as she dives for the corporal—pulling him around the corner into the cubicle grid. Angie already knows that the private is dead and that the remaining Defense Troopers, now hiding up in the rafters behind the ceiling tiles, are going to be difficult to pinpoint and root out.

She cries out to Sargent, "Duce!"

Sargent replies, ["We're heading your way!"]

"Hewlett, she's gone! They're hiding up in the ceiling! Torch that lobby, if you don't mind!"

Before Angie can finish her sentence, Sargent lets it rip with his flail-gun. The electrical snap and whoosh from the plasma cannon blows out of the lobby and into the cubicles. From the heat and fire the sprinklers let loose and pour down onto the flames. The sergeant fires again and the water in the air, and soaking into the carpet and fabrics, vaporizes. The steam rolls out of the lobby with such violence that all the cubicle walls, chairs and ceiling tiles nearby flutter away like leaves in a strong gust.

Trained to always keep an eye out for both trouble and egress, Zazueta notices an arm reach down from an opening in the ceiling. He grabs Angie and throws them both into a conference room as the trooper empties his weapon in their direction.

The miniballs rip through the walled partitions with ease, but having lost so much momentum going through particle boards that they only bounce off Angie and Zazueta's JACCs as the rounds sweep back and forth through the room. Angie flips her boom mounted cyaxle gun around and fires back. Where the miniball lost too much

energy going through the wall, the 4.75mm bolts lose very little momentum by going the other way.

After three short bursts, through the holes in the wall they see a Defense Trooper take a header from the ceiling and dive into the cubicle debris with a rolling crash.

Angie takes a quick breath, turns to the corporal and grunts, "We've got to get out of here!"

Staying on the ground saves their lives because, just then, a heavier caliber weapon opens up from the other side and tears through the door and wall like Angie's cyaxle gun did on this side. Instead of sweeping the floor on the next pass, as is the normal practice, the rounds stay at waist level while they stitch their way back towards the door. Suddenly, three BDF Troopers charge in through the door while firing back at the people who were just shooting at them. They trip over the tables and chairs and fall on top of Angie and Zazueta.

If the situation wasn't so damned serious it would be somewhat comical how four of them start wrestling about as one of the Defense Troopers starts blasting away through the wall while helping hold Zazueta down by sitting on his feet.

Angie is pinned down by a BDF sergeant who is straddling her waist while holding her right arm and gun mount where her left arm used to be. Angie finds herself unable to fire with her forearm mounted penta guns because they might hit Zazueta.

Her boom mounted cyaxle gun is too long to bring it to bear on the guy on top of her, so she trains it on the gal sitting on the corporal's feet. Three of the rounds hit her in the back but miss her body completely as they pass through her suit. Throwing herself to the ground to get out of the line of fire, one of Angie's bolts passes through her foot and exits out from her knee, then blows a hole through her hand—wounds that effectively take her out of this fight.

The guy on top of Angie crushes the left gun mount with the amplified strength of his suit, grabs a table leg to beat her with, and just as he raises it over his head Angie manages to pull her right arm free and thrusts her penta gun up towards his face but—before she can fire they get an alert broadcast over all their radios...

["Cease fire! Cease fire! Cease fire! All combatants are to stand down immediately! Orders are as follows: By agreement, the Defense Forces are to stand down and the forces of the Annex are to withdraw from Riker's Island. In the best interest of the injured and wounded, anybody requiring immediate medical attention are to be evacuated with the Annex medivac teams..."]

As the terms of the cease fire are broadcasted the sergeant,

sitting on Angie, notices her penta gun pointing at his face with the five barrels of the gun spinning, primed, and ready to fire. The spinning stops with a neat click, and you would think he'd have reason to breath easy again, but he notices the little red flash of a targeting laser reflected in his visor. Looking back over his shoulder, he sees the barrel of Sargent's chain gun pointed at his head from just a body length away.

"Whoa'kay mate!" Tossing the table leg, he stands with a stock Ausie grin, "Me and this Sheila here were just having a tumble!" He puts his hand out to Angie to help her to her feet, "Was it good for you too, Love?"

Sargent rolls his eyes as he steps over to help Zazueta, and the other unwounded trooper attend to the girl Angie just shot.

While Angie rises to her feet she snorts, "I need a cigarette." She looks at the Trooper and notices his sergeant stripes, "Where you from Gunny, Sigma-Taurus?"

"A Sigma2 Banana-Bender." He puts out a hand, "Macquarie! Porter Macquarie's the name, and in fine company I am."

She is taken aback but still shakes his hand, "Pleased to meet you too. Well, in any other circumstances, yes."

"Balls-up fuck of a day, no?" Before Angie could respond he continues on, "I had three queens on the flop when Spooky shows up! Ain't that a poke in the arse."

"Sorry about your card game."

"No bother, we got some trigger time in." Flip gallows humor is a staple in the ranks of the military, but Macquarie takes a second to reflect, "This is gonna start up again, aye?"

Angie sighs, "Yup."

"I had enough of it last time 'round, but the pay is too good to quit." He pats her on the back, "Let's go find you that durry."

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A lot of things can happen in ninety seconds, but in an air battle ninety seconds can seem like an eternity.

Navy-1 and Marine-4 latch onto Jacobs six as he streaks across towards Ferry Point where, as he predicted, his Number-4 launches against the two on his tail. Navy-1 turns hard and drops a cluster-bomb in air-mine mode against the missile but, before they connect, the centipede missile pickles off its six-micropede missiles barely inside maximum range.

As one of the bomblets destroy the centipede two of the itty bitty micropede missiles reach Navy-1 just as they are about to sputter out. One explodes up close and punches a bunch of holes in Navy-1's left wing. No big deal if it wasn't for the other one flying up from behind and into the exhaust port of the right engine—where it blows out the engine and the fuselage surrounding it.

The pilot ejects as the ship spirals out of control and into the shoreline by La Guardia. While watching this Jacob sees a flash out of the corner of his eye and realizes that Marine-4 did not turn and run, as he should have, he loops around the centipede that was fired at him by his Number-4 and turns his gun towards her. Even at full power, she was going too slow to evade Marine-4, who summarily rakes her back with the Bulldog's 30mm cannon shells.

After the Thunderbolt pancakes into the drink with a heavy splash, Jacob calls to her, "You okay Connors?"

From the downed ship, floating in the harbor, Connors replies with a gruff, ["What the fuck do you think? Will you shoot down that bastard for me?"]

Jacob chuckles with his best Curly Joe voice, "Soytenly!"

Just as he turns to chase Marine-4, he gets a report that his Number-3 pilot just downed Marine-2, and was immediately splashed and killed by Marine-1. Then he get's another alert that his wingman blew Navy-4 out of the sky, and had Marine-1 on his tail.

Racing over Manhattan to rescue his wingman, Jacob notices Marine-4 swap places with his flight commander; and as Jacob streaks in he watches Marine-1 slip out and rolls back around to set herself up for a head on pass at his Number-2.

Jacob's wingman, Sergio, calls out with infinite calm and reserve, ["Anytime, Sweetheart. I could use your help over here."]

"Marine One is gonna do a head on so go flat left...now!"

Sergio is in a tight right hand bank, but he suddenly does a flat turn up into the sky. Marine-4 rolls up for the chase, but the real threat comes from Marine-1 who simply lifts her nose and launches a Rabies missile after him.

It was a perfect set up.

Jacob rolls and pitches up to put the reticle of his gun in line with Marine-1's direction of travel, a classic deflection shot, and when Jacob fires Marine-1 is no more. At point blank range the Bulldog is overwhelmed by the Thunderbolt's rotary-cannon and from the now split-in-half fighter a cloud of debris rains down on Central Park.

Then, to Jacob's immense satisfaction, the pilot of Marine-1 miraculously ejects clear of the shredded mess he made of her ship.

Because the missile was fired too close his wingman evades the weapon with ease so, with nothing left in the air except Marine-4 Jacob takes off after him.

Peña, piloting Bloodhound Four, instinctively knows it's time to make himself scarce, so he kicks in the engines of his Bulldog and makes a break for it. Jacob, now hot on his tail, has to nail him while still in the A.O. and, a little too close for a good missile lock, Jacob decides to close in for guns.

Jacob has never seen anybody fly a Bulldog like this before and, in retrospect, it was a brilliant defense. In flying you have the three basic maneuvers being pitch, yaw and roll, and with some aircraft you can toss in forced-drift for good measure. Marine-4 has that yaw and roll thing down pretty good but he refuses to pitch except to reduce his visual profile. Every time Jacob is pulling lead for a shot, Peña rolls and flat turns (that yaw thing) in exactly the opposite direction Jacob was anticipating. Marine-4 then intentionally shoots back through the pipper in the reticle forcing Jacob into yet another coordinated turn. Next he throws the flat turn off by a slight roll and then, quite unexpectedly, he shoots off in another crazy-ass direction. Each time Marine-4 does one of these maneuvers he extends the distance between them making it difficult for Jacob to line the reticle up for a decent shot.

These are not learned maneuvers, but pure innovation on the fly. Every pilot has learned to do something like them as a trick or two but this is the best gamer technique Jacob has ever seen applied. This pilot is obviously scared witless and has reverted to what he learned as a kid. When asked about the fight later on all he would say is that he doesn't remember a thing about it except trying to keep distance between himself and the Thunderbolt behind him.

With the last double switchback, Marine-4 is more than a right angle from Jacob, so Peña pushes his pulseblade engines hard. Within three seconds, the Bulldog is enveloped with a conical vapor chine that flashes over his ship for just a fraction of a second as he breaches supersonic speed.

Jacob has had enough. He kicks in his engines in full reverse vector, thereby putting two kilometers between himself and Marine-4, as well as two Centipede missiles in the air after him. At optimal minimum range they should close the distance quickly, but it will be a race between Marine-4 hitting the edge of the A.O. where the missiles will automatically abort the attack or, as Jacob is curious to see, he'll have to outwit two missiles who will have a serious lock on him.

After the Centipedes cover half that distance the cease fire alert comes over all their radios. Jacob immediately broadcasts the abort command to the weapons and they kill their thrust thereby dropping harmlessly into the water below.

Peña, knowing that the attack on him is now cut short, slows and steadies his Bloodhound in level flight. He is panting hard but by taking deep breaths he manages to calm himself down.

Seconds later the Thunderbolt that was trying to shoot him down pulls up alongside and rocks its wings in a salute.

Peña looks over at the pilot who gives him a wave and a friendly call over the radio, “What’s your name, Smoke?”

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