

51

waifer thin

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What Bob has wanted most since joining the Steel Annex was to become a fighter pilot. 'Was' being the operative word because ten minutes ago word came down from up on high that it's just not in the cards for him. He earned the privilege but he's spread too thin. Flight school would have been a breeze but all those years on Second Hand, having become the unwitting confidant of the Xhemal, has sent Bob careening down the command path like a pinball.

Dancing attendance on the Xhemal being his highest priority.

Currently he's attached to the Marauder, SA15, as a company commander, a Deputy Marshal, but to his frustration he's split 70-30 between his company and dealing with the Xhemal. Bob has gone out on a limb for them so many times that he has earned their undying trust, and because of that they accept him as their designated trustee and representative in all matters human—and no one else.

In a closed session with the U.N. Security Council yesterday afternoon, what was expected to be a simple lateral-pass of Second Hand over to them, ended up being a medicinal dose of butthurt dished out by lil-old nobody, Bob. He was here solo and was coached well, but he strayed from that script because the Xhemal, as a sentient non-human, have their own ideas on how to move forward. They opt for an alliance with the Steel Annex, do not recognize U.N. legitimacy, and since the SA has been autonomous *de jure* for the better part of forty years this "courtesy call" ends up as a diplomatic coup for them.

Bob, currently debating the breakfast or lunch menu options at the stylish corner café at Lexington and 43rd, will find out the full effect of his appearance next week when his old platoon secures the landing site of a UNOOSA mission that is sent to do an end-run around

the Annex and attempt to make contact with the Xhemal directly. Out of the thirty-five people on the manifest only three-and-a-half will survive the hour and twenty minutes it takes for the platoon to scramble, gear up and rescue them. In an emergency meeting on the 21st this catastrophe will be swept under the rug with the deaths accredited to a terrorist attack out at Saiph-6B. What they will not realize until too late is that this lie will lead to a plethora of fabricated shit-press that'll fire up that conflict for real.

Oh well, so much for nation building.

It's a beautiful Sunday morning in Manhattan. The sidewalks are concrete but the streets are now grass, and the floaters swoosh past all quiet like. It is still a very busy place but it's really hard for most residents to compare the noisy-bustle and angry New York of old to the muted-brisk and civil New York today. Natives still have loads of attitude, but it's expected of them. It's the mystique.

What Bob finds the most disruptive and counterpoint to the pleasantness of the moment is the billboards. Still with the billboards and placards and vehicle wraps every which way you look and as far as the eye can see. The one repeating add, if you can call it an add, is an AMBER Alert for a missing eight year old girl, Nicole. These alerts tend to galvanize the populace, and the Shirley Temple smile and fiery red curls on this little girl seems to have struck a chord with the city because it is the newly adopted child of a popular city councilman.

As for Bob, he hates kids and couldn't give less of a shit.

Celebrating his big win at the U.N. he met a couple young studs, Tony and Bret, at a local night club, and after three bottles of wine and an overnight romp with these two, Bob is not feeling quite one-hundred percent today. He was supposed to go sailing with them on their yawl out at Long Island Sound, but he took a rain check to nurse his hangover and move up his departure to the mail run.

While trying to decide between the half-pound burger or the steak and eggs, needing something heavy, he notices a little kid sitting alone at the table in front of him. The child wasn't there a second ago, but here it is watching the floaters go by.

Bob knows something is odd about what he sees but the underlining problem is that he just doesn't care, so back to his menu and after about a minute he decides what he wants. He also feels something amiss so looking over the menu and—it's the kid, staring him down with cold-blank eyes that have a shocking blue hue to them.

He instinctively knows that this is the Nicole everyone is looking for. The AMBER Alert before him is obviously on the run, and by buzz cutting her hair short, trying to make herself look like a boy,

and with the Yankees jacket it's pretty damned convincing. If it wasn't for the little tuft of red hair on her neck she missed with the razor she could probably get away with it.

Nicole flashes a hundred dollar bill and slides it across the table saying, "This is yours. If you buy me something to eat now, and something to go, I'll give you another one of these."

Bob is taken aback slightly, "Cash? Nobody uses cash."

"Yes, it's making a problem for me."

"They're looking for you."

With a weary shake of her head Nicole makes a haunting statement, "I'm not going back...I...would...rather...die."

And Bob, realizing she means it, slides his SA ball cap over to her with, "Put this on." Then asks, "Why are you running?"

Unbalanced, not knowing whether to cry or scream, Nicole holds it together enough to say, "I was hatched and sold! What do you think?" She then whispers, "Adults are monsters!"

"Geisha hut?" She nods yes and sniffs hard so Bob says, "Okay, for now if anyone asks, you're my kid." He leans over with a little tactical knife and says, "Hold still."

The blade snaps out and he cuts off the tuft of hair.

As he sits back she says, "I need to get out of this city."

With the menu on the table the waitress had her cue to step up and ask, "Okay, Mac, waddya have?"

Bob nods, "The flame broiled half-pound sirloin burger with pepper jack. Oh, and a little bowl of balsamic vinegar to dip it in."

"Keep the coffee coming?"

"Please."

"And for you, little Mac?"

Bob smiles, "Whatever you want, Nicco."

"I'll have..." Nicole looks up, "What my dad is having."

She asks, "Want fries with that?"

Seeing the confusion on her face Bob says, "Ya, we'll share. Nicco will have the lemonade too. It's really good, son."

With the waitress snatching the menu and racing away to the next table, Bob asks, "You don't know what French fries are?"

Nicole says, "I don't know what French is?"

"Where have you been?"

"I don't want to talk about that right now." She looks at the SA letters on the hat before putting it on. "Sa, what is saaaa?"

"S.A., it's who I work for."

"Someone I could work for?"

"If your story pans out I think you'll want too."

Nicole nods, "Well, if you're gonna hire me I need to get out of this city. All the tubes and roads are being watched. I have to cross the street with a crowd or I'll get spotted."

"You're in luck. My office is in this building."

"We still got to get outta here."

"We'll go that way." Bob points up, "You'll see."

Bob suddenly is faced with a dilemma not experienced since fishing Snoopy out of the water—he cares. Through the new tacnet he sends a text: *-psbl geisha fugit -send guard my lctn -p1*

After a pregnant pause he asks, "You have a tracking chip?"

Nicole pulls the sleeve of her jacket back and shows that that her wrist is wrapped in aluminum foil, followed by pulling three stacks of 100 bills out also wrapped in foil, while saying, "I hear that this blocks the signals. Well, disrupts them to a point. And if you would let me borrow that knife I'll go to the bathroom and cut it out of my arm before the food gets here."

Bob is impressed because this kid is not kidding, "Leave it. We'll take it out of you. We'll want to analyze it where it is first."

"They'll pick up the signal."

"This building is a giant Faraday cage. Trust me, it's safe."

Nicole then thinks about it, "How do I pay you for doing this? If you get me out of here I'll give you a stack of this money...or, do you want something else?"

Bob is almost pissed, "How 'bout you keep the money and while we're on the subject, how about you keep the 'something else' to yourself because that's *not* gonna happen."

Nicole scowls, "I thought that's what all 'dults wanted."

"I'm actually proud to say that for most adults, no, that's not what we want so, whatever happened to you before, it's over."

There is a slight tremor from the ground and Nicole notices a shadow by the table where no object is standing, and suddenly a face

appears to be floating in the air, "Hey-ho, Jackson! I heard about the smack down yesterday. Damned righteous if you ask me!"

"Ya, well, we wait for the fallout." Bob points to the ground, "Would you mind hanging round in case something gets weird. I want the little waif here to eat before we take her up."

"Righty'o!" Before fading away, the face looks to Nicole and smiles, "You're in good hands, kid. Eat up, you're like waifer thin."

Nicole's little lip quivers, knowing this is real and she has a way out of her dilemma, and seeing this Bob asks something to draw her attention elsewhere, "You ever hear of sailing?"

Nicole, shakes her head, "No."

"It's a boat, I have one, and with it you can go anywhere on the water with only the wind to push you along."

She thinks about it and wonders, "If the wind is pushing you then...how do you magically go against the wind, hu?"

"It's called tacking, maybe I'll show you one day?" He then thinks, "You like dinosaurs? What kid doesn't like dinosaurs?"

Nicole is confused by this stupidity, "I was raised in a square hole in the ground, yea, but I know about dinosaurs."

Bob shrugs, "Maybe I'll introduce you to some."

With the food being delivered, Nicole says, "Ah, d'uh, they're extinct, or haven't you been keeping up on current events?"

"I know a raptor named, Snoopy. He's a friend of mine."

"This a fry?" Nicole is pointing to the potato wedges, and with Bob nodding yes she plops one in her mouth and, nodding with approval, Nicole says something that blows him away, "Well, I grew up with a little non-imaginary friend named, Mr. Purple Camisole. I think you two would hit it off!"

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Three hours later the embassy chief, Jaqueline, is sitting at the tail end of her interview with Nicole, and having just received a text that the genetic test confirms the child is an NCL clone, she looks up and says with a stammer, "Nicole, I, ah, thank you for being candid with me. I think it's safe to say we're going to evac you."

With some apprehension, Nicole asks, "Is...that gonna hurt?"

A visible shiver ripples through Jaqueline. That response was the nail on the head and the limit to her endurance so, not knowing

what to say, she stands and steps out of the room and silently past everyone who was watching the interview on the monitor in the outer office. Within seconds of closing the door to the adjoining conference room they can hear Jaqueline sobbing.

Of all those listening to the horror story told by this child it was Bob who was most affected by it. In spite of his detached and chilly façade, all the memories he buried of himself in foster care have come raging back to the surface with a vengeance.

Bob has to leave, the mail run has been waiting for him, but as he does he simply goes into the interview room and takes Nicole by the hand, then grabs his bag as he heads for the elevator. On the way out they are being shadowed by the guard who is still in his fighting suit with rail gun in hand.

As the elevator door closes the guard, almost in tears, says, "It's okay, Bob. Just making sure she gets on that ship."

At the top of the building, on the flight deck, when they reach the ramp of an aging HWG41 drop ship, that afternoon's designated mail run, the guard calls out to Nicole, "Hey kid."

She looks around and sees the guard giving her a salute. Nicole lets go of Bob's hand just long enough to race back, and since this child so little she could only hug his leg.

Returning to Bob, Nicole takes his hand and they head up the ramp of the drop ship...

Knowing they'll be back.

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