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stranger danger

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
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Back in the old days, before the hot mess that was Saiph-6B, the troopers of the Steel Annex were referred to as ghosts and even shadows, but that was way before they adopted holo-cloaking tech. Camouflage then was from a chroma-diffracting skin that changed their appearance like a chameleon or, more specifically, mimicked the cellular mechanisms of cephalopods such as octopi or squid.

As a CYA this digital-chromatophore pixel matrix that covers the JACC is still in use today, with the AI dialing in the appropriate camo-combo under the cloak, but everybody forgot about that. When not cloaked the normal skin is perfect for dusk, when the local star is dropping below the solar horizon, and at night.

When not cloaked or camo'd up the JACC has two distinct settings to choose from, one being a variable matte-black scale from a sooty gray to charcoal black, depending on the lighting conditions, and the second being an active photon absorption mode referred to by the troopers as *shadow à la mode*.

The cloaking-tech has been strictly relegated to daytime use because it happens to be a radiant technology that projects light. Turn that shit on at night and you suddenly become as conspicuous as any Spy Boy on Fat Tuesday in the French Quarter!

Point being, the cloak in the real world has never been 100% effective like it is in scifi worlds, and the three things that'll disrupt the photo-mechanics are water, motion and proximity. Proximity, *id est* distance, is the easy fix 'cause all you gotta do is to give a wide berth. As for motion, well, this is another no-brainer of a fix simply by going at things slow. The standing rule is 5x50. That is, invisibility to the human eye is achieved at about five kph outside of fifty meters.

Go faster or get closer puts you at risk of becoming deader.

Then there is water, by way of precipitation or standing body of, because when “wet” is encountered while cloaked then you sort of stand out from all the crazed polygonal razzle-dazzle rainbows of photons refracting through said water. Which means your only option at this point is to turn that shit off!

Then there’s the pesky little 15x30 rule! This ratio applies to both the camo and cloak within the 5x50 rule—where one’s cone of invisibility hovers at around fifteen degrees vertically by thirty degrees horizontally. Point to where you want to be invisible too and the suit does the rest! Problem here is that the troopers of the Annex have always had a complete *suspenders-and-belt* confidence in the cloaking tech where the camo by itself sort of freaks them out.

Anyway, after five and a half weeks of busting their asses, getting past the fear and gaining confidence by learning from *the OG*, that being a living and breathing Original Ghost, they come to the most eerie of graduation exercises that is making all of their balls and ovaries climb up into their throats. At this very moment the last of the nine platoons in the recon company to finish their camo-only training is flying over a Co-op field division in the bright of day, that being dusk here in the Civil Twilight zone, without the cloak.

At 99° Latitude, just past the Sriracha Mu terminator by one measly degree, the perpetual sunset from the little red dwarf, arcing over the local horizon, lights up the clouds two-thousand meters overhead. Right under those clouds their JACCs have dialed in what looks to be Mountbatten Pink, and as they drift along with the clouds, in the never ending south to north convection circuit...it starts to rain.

With three F51 Djinn fighters fast approaching, a whole kilometer below them, and the platoon and command squad quietly losing their shit inside their suits, Vossler laughs and says on channel, [“Confidence is key, kids!”]

One trooper asks, [“Chief, give me one good reason why we shouldn’t be high-tailing it outta here like...now.”]

With the rest of the platoon vocally stirring in agreement, Vossler asks the platoon leader, [“Waddya think, Gunny?”]

The Gunnery Sergeant comments, [“Sorry to say, Chief, but with those Fifty-One’s comin’ at us I...feel a little bit exposed.”]

The first trooper quietly adds, [“Can we go now?”]

Vossler is laughing, [“What do you think they see when they look up from down there? Our cloaks are off so in the rain we don’t print, and any shadows we got are miles behind us!”]

The Gunny asks, ["Point is?"]

["Believe it or not, you are truly invisible for once. From the deck or the cockpits of the Djinn you are not here!"]

["Have to admit, nobody in their right mind would be flyin' overhead in the bright of day—especially while it's raining, right?"]

Vossler throws out, ["Exactly! The cloak has been a crutch, an' we're better off without it. Trust me, when you get the hang of this you'll wonder why we ever optioned it in the first place."]

With the three fighters zipping past, far below them, another voice on channel says, ["We're actually getting away with this!"]

["Told ya, everything changes!"]

Another trooper says, ["This is insane, but we're doin' it!"]

["Remember the rules on Taiji, stay low or high, but stay the fuck outta eye level and, above all, stay out of the sun! And, in the TOZ, you'll stick-figure against S'Mu for at least four clicks."]

Another voice goes, ["Yea, all this has been an eye opener."]

Vossler then asks, ["Want an eye opener? I've been savin' this but now's good! Look north towards Sriracha Mu."]

Vossler sends a command and five kilometers out a Pacman drone drops from the clouds. The thing is cloaked but through the tacnet they can all see the data-tag indicating where it is and that it is dropping towards the deck, so Vossler adds, ["That drone is just two kilometers beyond their lead elements on point. It's cloaked and the rain has not reached it yet, but it's there to prove a point."]

Slowing as it approaches the ground, reaching the horizon between the CDF point and the red dwarf, the troops notice its fuzzy shape against the star and open up—blasting it out of the sky.

After a few seconds of silence, Vossler adds, ["That was how Deputy Marshal, Jones bought it. S'Mu is not Sol or Electra. It is not bright enough to wash out *your* silhouette."]

The platoon's Gunnery Sergeant says, ["Chief, I think you finally won us over with that lil' demo."]

["Okay kids, you're on your own now! Ride the clouds till you're six or seven clicks past their point elements and *then* you can drop to the deck. I'll be back at the Punchbowl by the time you regroup and mosey off to your assignments."]

["I wanna thank ya, Voss."]

A trooper asks, ["We be old school recce now, right, Chief?"]

Vossler hasn't heard that reference to old school recon in decades, so as he and the command squad start to rise up towards the clouds above, ["That you all are, newly hatched Recces!"]

A few of the troopers make chimp sounds on their recon channel as others call out with *recces!* and *oorah!*

With the ghostly dull pink-gray of Vossler slipping out of sight, ["Go thee forth an' blend the fuck in!"]

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Back at the Punchbowl, in the underground facility, Vossler steps into the CIC and is surprised to see General Giáp standing there, "Oi, General! Twenty-Ten of Foot is zig-zagging their way west to The Greens, with Sixtieth Armor trailing be'ind `em."

Giáp, with a cup of tea in hand, continues to study the tactical display while saying, "Well now, the knotty cunts are finally smartening up for once!" He then turns towards Vossler and while offering his hand, "We gotta stop meeting like this! People may talk?"

"Joke `em if they can't take a fuck!" Vossler gives his hand a shake and, "They've now got six Divvy's moving onto the Meadows."

"Bet'ya next week is gonna be a rip-snorter of a good time!"

"Yea, you would think that." He nods towards the next room, "Our deacon still here?" Giáp nods, yes, so Vossler asks, "Did ya talk `im out of it yet?"

"There's no talking `im out of this. The Ref's mind was made up the second Colonel Plunket got ghosted."

Eli, in a referee shirt, steps through the doorway while saying, "Whatever—the general, `e gave it his best shot."

Vossler says, "You don't have to do this, Eli."

Eli shrugs, "Step away for a slash an' on the walk back I watched dear Maley turned to pink mist right before me eyes."

Giáp says to Vossler, "They're using Artie like a sniper rifle."

With the general handing Eli an open bottle of Four-Ex, Eli says, "They caught the dog-cunt who zero'd her in, and it took about three hours for that rat-bastard to die."

Giáp blinks, "That was too quick."

"I should've cark'd it with me wife."

Giáp now hands him a StG-880 with a short CQB rail and a drum magazine, "You're the only one that thinks that."

“Loaded up with Sputnik?”

“Four-fifty-fours, for those stranger danger encounters.”

“I’ll drink to that!” He holds the bottle up for Vossler to see and announces, “Me last pint!”

As Eli slow-chugs the bottle, Giáp says to Vossler, “They’re shooting anyone they find carrying a four-fifty-eight.”

Vossler points out, “But, it’s loaded with four-fifty-four?”

“It’s an eight-eighty! Even though he’ll be cleared to carry a weapon at the prisoner exchange, they’ll grab him if they notice it.”

Vossler turns to Eli and, “They may kill you.”

Eli belches and hands the empty bottle to him, “What better rallying cry than a dead deacon, aye?”

Giáp again stresses, “You don’t have to do this.”

Eli shakes his head slightly and, “Matthew, ten : twenty-eight, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Follow? I’m doing my part here.”

Vossler asks, “We don’t get a vote, right?”

“Glad you’re seein’ it my way, so let’s bow our heads, gents!” With them looking down, Eli prays, “Oh Lord, bless me with humility in victory, peace and perseverance in defeat, and gratitude in learning of your wisdom by whatever outcome. In this I pray, Amen.”

Eli then safes the weapon and cycles it into battery as Giáp asks him, “You think this will make the people rise up?”

With a snarky grin, Eli says, “Like the Kraken.” He gives the general a quick salute, slings his weapon then steps through the door while crying out, “Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly... Cheers, ya buggers!”

They can hear Eli whistle *The Mickey Mouse Club* theme song as he exits the facility, so after a few seconds, Vossler looks to Giáp and asks, “You got that hack goin’, right?”

Giáp nods, “In living color.”

The general reaches over to a huge monitor and taps on an icon that pops up into a window. On it they are receiving feed from Eli’s visual cortex, as well as him whistling his happy tune as he climbs up the side and out of the Punchbowl.