

PART

01

saltare cüm diablo

jacc in the box

nicholas ralph baum



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PART 01
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DEDICATED TO:

Jacob Clayton Baum
(the next standard-bearer)

and

Nedka "Niki" Petrovova
(my love eternal)

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FORWARD

Near the end of the 21st Century, with the discovery of hyper photo spatial-displacement drive, humankind explodes onto the stars.

After only a century of expansion, violent disputes over a string of planets and asteroids in the Hyades cluster, called the Steel Chain, necessitate the formation of a powerful voting block in the United Nations General Assembly, known as the Steel Chain Cooperative (SCC). From this new order the Military Alliance Deputation (MAD) was established to enforce their resolutions.

After less than thirty years of operations the MAD was disbanded. Twelve divisions of volunteers were stationed in the Pleiades Cluster, in a newly developing area called the Steel Annex (SA), to police the rapidly expanding frontier. With the traditional lines of communication and supply stretched beyond the breaking point, the SA was soon commissioned to operate with autonomy.

Out of sight—they were quickly forgotten.

Seventy years later, unresolved disputes between the members of the SCC and the frontier states escalate. The hostilities compel the forces of the SA to intervene on behalf of the frontier. In response, the Cooperative reactivates the MAD outside the control of the UN.

What followed was a war that few people knew about and fewer cared to understand.

After 14 years it ends in stalemate.

None of the concessions made to the forces of the Annex were to be honored.

Don't fuck around boy—and if you want to hang around people who do, don't be surprised when the bill comes due.

Hunter S. Thompson

1

boost the juice

LCTN: SOL-3, BUCKEYE, ARIZONA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.987au from SOL)
DATE: 2097ce-MAY-26-FRIDAY
TIME: 19:30zulu (11:30am pst)

For some people suburbia can be wrist-slashingly dull. Take Buckeye, for example. This place is ideal for raising a family but it's not the town for a social butterfly such as Terry. Leon promised they would have more time together if they both moved out here, but the fact is they see a lot less of each other. Two or three times a week if they're lucky. Over the years they have entertained the thought of splicing children, but not now. Things may have been different if Leon's research project wasn't on a fast-track.

Then again, Terry has too much time on his hands and they are surely idle out here in dullsville.

Mill Avenue is more to his liking. He can hear the gyms, the shops and the Rio Salado beckoning him to return. Terry could always cope with Leon's absence when they lived in Tempe. There were distractions to fill his day and when Leon did show up it was quality time for them, and usually one on one. Now, in Buckeye, Terry has been subjected to hosting a dinner party for Leon's colleagues almost every Friday evening. Conversationally, physics is the most dreadful of subjects and when Leon and his staff get together all they talk about is boson this and Kelvin that, ad nauseum. At least in Tempe, after serving dessert and the second round of coffee, Terry could slip away to work on his thesis, take on a film, or rock-out at a bathhouse.

At 43.3°C the cool deck fails to live up to its name. Terry slithers up on a recliner and rolls over to sun his front side. He's the only redhead that he is aware of that can lay out like this. Even though he can tan without freckles, it's only thirty minutes a side or he'll burn to a crisp. Fifteen for Johnson and the twins. After four weeks Terry has managed a warm amber glow that highlights his

washboard abs, and blends in perfectly with his flaming dreadlocks. It goes without saying that all his efforts, and metro primping, are going to be wasted here, in Buckeye, for yet another weekend.

Terry glances over at a notebook PC sitting on the table next to him. A clunker at 16 terahertz, he's kept it since the sixth grade because it has a QWERTY keyboard. Few people type anymore, but retro-tech is in.

On impulse, Terry reaches over and touches an icon of a short, bulbous mushroom. With a stretching sound the icon inflates to three times its length and starts to dance about to a rumba beat. In some places the infrastructure to the internet is so archaic that it takes him all of a minute to link up to the tower. An agonizing sixty-three seconds to suffer through as this deranged mushroom—like some detached penis—bounces around the screen while chanting Leon's name.

Leon practically lives at tower seven anymore.

The nuclear generating station at Palo Verde is surrounded by a half dozen of these miserable, thousand-foot failures, and it is believed that this one will end up being no different. Research on antigravity has produced a variety of practical applications, but nothing that could be remotely looked upon as a booster vehicle. Even though the math says it's so—their efforts have yielded a resounding no; and as far as Terry, and most rational people are concerned, it's just another dead phallus in the desert.

Another group of loony-toons seeking the Holy Grail.

A window pops up on his screen showing the backs of technicians huddled around a monitor. Terry is a neat freak and he usually recoils when he sees the conduit, matted wires and hissing cryogenics inside the tower. Terry doesn't understand how these people can work under those conditions, but for once the chaos doesn't seem to bother him. Maybe it's because this time he really doesn't give a shit.

Suddenly, in the window, Leon slams himself down at the workstation and pleads with wide-eyed craziness, "This is not a good time for me, Red."

Leon really doesn't understand the gravity of his situation, "I'm dying here!"

"I promise we'll move back before the semester starts."

"I'm goin' back today."

"What!"

Behind Leon, a tech shouts over the noise, "Wow, Leon, you've got to see these peaks!"

Leon snaps his head around, "Loose the juice!"

Terry screeches, "Look!" He takes a second to compose himself, "I think you're an ass-wipe for dragging me out here. So, hubby, I'm going back to the Rio until I get my shit out of storage. If you wanna be top with me you know where to look. If y'all can't add an hour to your commute then you can just take your sorry, south-central ass, downtown and file the papers."

The tech shouts back, "Did you say, boost the juice?"

"Yes, God-damn it!" Ready to pull chunks of his afro out, Leon snarls at Terry, "I don't have time to hear you bitch right now, Terrence."

"Don't you cut me off!"

"I'm at a critical stage!"

"And I'm on meltdown!"

"Take a cold shower!"

"Every time after...we...fuck."

Leon has had enough, and as he reaches out to terminate the link the tech behind him laughs out loud, "Look at that spike!"

Before Leon touches anything, the transmission suddenly flickers out. The window drops back down to the mushroom—which hops back to its corner. Terry is so pissed off that he fails to notice the intense flash behind him in the distant west. He slaps the notebook closed and throws himself back on the recliner.

He grumbles with his eyes shut, "The afro has gotta go."

Terry doesn't have a clue that a large tract of desert has just been vaporized. As the heat wave from this multi-megaton blast rolls through Buckeye, Terry's flesh ashes up and his hair touches off, but the sensation doesn't seem to register in his brain. Within the next few seconds, before the shock wave extinguishes his life, Terry calmly thinks to himself, *At least it's a dry heat.*

01010111-01010100-01000110-00111111

Now, on the East coast of the North American continent you have hurricanes, and on the other side of the continent you have earthquakes, and in between you have a tornado season of all things; but the people living in Arizona have always wondered what God had in store for them.

If you were to ask anybody in the Southwest nowadays they would have a definitive answer for you.

Everyone believed it was an impact event, but things didn't exactly add up. All of the radar and thermal images leading up to it failed to confirm a meteor strike; but, then, nobody was looking in that direction at that time. Another oddity was that the crater was asymmetrical—somewhat shallow except for a deep center, which is totally out of character regardless if it were a rock or a bomb. Nobody could come up with another theory that made sense until they went to the project manager's residence, what was left of it, and recovered his spouse's notebook computer from the rubble.

With the recorded conversation, and the telemetry from the tower, the investigators were finally able to piece together what they think happened. It still didn't make sense to them, but all of thirty-some megatons in yield, without a fission/fusion mechanism, was a curiosity to say the least.

They were lucky it was a ground burst. If it would have been a device that had 'popped' a few thousand meters in altitude the shock waves, in resonance, would have taken a huge swath off the western edge of the Phoenix metropolitan area. As it was, the explosion went mostly up instead of out. Also, since most of the residents were inside trying to escape the heat of the Sonoran Desert, casualties were surprisingly few for the size of the blast

That is, if you consider 123,000 just a few.

To avoid being buried by endless lawsuits, Arizona State University gave up 90% of their rights to the technology, and in return the feds would keep a lid on the whole ugly mess.

With the EPA's mega-powerful Alternative Energy Resource Commission stepping in to coordinate the effort, upstaging both the Departments of Energy and Defense, a consortium of universities threw together a shortened version of the tower on the moon. To avoid prying eyes they built the thing in an underground freight shaft at the abandoned Earth Climate Observation Facility located at 0° longitude by 0° latitude. Dead center on the near side this site was open to observation, but everyone figured they could claim another impact event if anyone thought to ask.

01001111-01001101-01000110-01000111-00100001

At eighteen months, to the day, an order was given to 'boost the juice.' The scientists, sitting in a small mission control room at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, watched the telemetry as it spiked—then suddenly go dead. Since the satellites didn't detect an

event their immediate thought was that the experiment was a dud, but when they zoomed the orbital cameras onto ground zero, they were dumbfounded by what they saw.

A brand new crater.

Just under twelve-hundred meters in diameter, the hole was unusually hemispherical. As if it were scooped out by God's own melon-baller there was no causative evidence like compression ridges, ejecta, or the thermal residue from an explosion—or an impact for that matter.

Noticing the Doppler radar going nuts, a technician, a geekish kid attached to the project from ASU, spooled back the surface based high-speed video feed and immediately cried out, "Holy shit!"

When the rest of the crew watched it replayed they all caught their hearts with their teeth.

It was the longest six minutes of their lives. The divot from the moon barely missed the Earth. High over the Aleutian Islands it broke apart as it tore a huge flaming gash in the ozone layer, then tumble off into space.

No one could keep a lid on this one.

2

all bitched up

LCTN: ELECTRA-7 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.02 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2295ce-DECEMBER-17-TUESDAY
TIME: 14:50zulu (local 08:58mst)

Electra, at this distance, glows with the warmth of a distant street lamp. The rainbow crescent of its largest gas giant, with its spectacular rings and lowly moons, dominates the sky. One minor spectral G class star, known as Sol, manages to peek through a gap in the debris and methane ice crystals of the rings. If one had that magical telescope strong enough to focus on the surface of its third planet they just might catch a glimpse of the battle raging over the Verdun salient. That was back in 1916. After three centuries of a technological maelstrom that has produced hyperphoto drive, the neuronet and Cobalt Bluer, the best optics has to offer is maybe a microscopic blue smudge of this planet every six months or so. Astronomers honestly don't mind nowadays.

They've taken their act on the road.

As if pried open by some cosmic speculum, a spatial cavity stretches out across three kilometers to eclipse both Electra and Sol from view. The gas giant and its rings seem to warp around the event horizon giving it the appearance of a miniature black hole, but instead of sucking in this portal belches out a ship and instantly snaps shut. The whole jump sequence takes less than a second and goes without the flash-bang popularized on the action adventures on the 2D and neuronet interactives.

In reality, the genie-blink in and out of dynamic space tends to be uneventful—except on the rare occasion when someone is on the other side waiting to take a shot at you.

Much to the relief of the troops on the Phoenix-Marauder, they pop back into relative space alone and undetected. Just under 12au away from their final destination the ripple near Electra-7 will not

be noticed for another ninety-eight minutes. If the way is clear they hope to be slipping into orbit around Electra-4 long before that. Facing away from Electra the ship stabilizes itself and spools out a cigar shaped antenna. This passive array trails behind at nine hundred meters and scans the local system for any signatures or anomalies. A truce has been in affect for almost an hour and they're in a bit of a rush, but why take chances now?

It's time to look, listen and live.

Christened the Marauder in June of 2202, it is the second oldest combat ship still in active service. Originally a heavy cruiser for the Military Alliance Deputation, it's under one and a half kilometers in length and four hundred meters at its widest point. Its sleek contours and speed made it nearly impossible to see and difficult to hit.

Over seventy years ago, when the MAD was first disbanded, the Steel Annex took twenty of these cast offs and, for the time being, pressed thirteen of the newest ones directly into service in their original configuration. The remaining seven ended up at a 23rd century version of a body and fender shop to be transformed into the eyesores now classified as battle platforms.

Designated SA15, various superstructures were grafted to the aft portion of the hull to house extra fusion cores, the newest MDDSH (mad dash) engines, and up to a division of combat troops. Later on, these additions were covered with thick plates of Chobham and reactive armor; and, as an afterthought, on each side they hung a massive bay to take over the flight operations that were previously handled in the forward half of the ship. Equal in size to the original cruiser, each of these wedge shaped structures could house a couple of fighter and attack squadrons and scores of assault transports.

Fourteen years ago SA15 was ambushed and knocked out of action on the opening shots of the war. As if from its own ashes, the crew managed to conduct repairs on the run and stay just outside the reach of the new (but not improved) MAD who lost eight of its modern cruisers trying to finish it off. From what was supposed to be an easy kill, the very survival of the now Phoenix-Marauder becomes a new chapter in the textbooks on maneuver and stealth.

The seventy eight hundred who fought for this flying junkyard don't give a damn about their hard-earned notoriety. All that matters to them is that they are alive. They're not about to let their guard down now.

Satisfied that there are no surprises waiting for them, the ship reels in its antenna and executes a 150° rotation. Nose down, at 30° from Electra, the MDDSH engines are kicked into what is popularly referred to as warp drive. Gravitational fields tear at each other as

they encapsulate the Phoenix-Marauder in a bubble of static space.

In the blink of an eye this invisible sphere rips the ship away at one thousand and twenty three kilometers a second, but instead of heading forward towards Electra, the ship is now streaking along at a right angle away from the intended direction of travel. The spatial displacement phenomena has locked SA15 onto a fixed position in relative space.

In actuality, it's everything else that happens to be in motion.

Normally the navigational computer would adjust for the transitional shift, but the pilot neglected to release the auto-shift from standby mode. Not really a problem had she opted to preset for best speed. The severe drift towards Starboard would have been virtually unnoticeable at hyperphoto velocities. It's the kind of boner a pilot pulls every twenty-five hundred hours or so. Not quite über stupid like a runway landing without putting your gear down, but one of those little oversights that can kill you just as quick.

To a chorus of, "Oh shit!" the pilot recovers by quickly engaging the drive-management-control. However inelegant punching the throttle may be a recovery is still a recovery, so as the ship accelerates the bridge and CIC crews settle on a pucker factor of three. On a scale of one to ten, three is not all that bad. They agree that had the ship been on the other side of Electra-7 it would have easily been a pucker six or more. It goes without saying twice, had the pilot not reacted as quickly as she did the factor would have definitely been off the scale.

After a hundred million years the Pleiades is still congealing. Swaddled in a cloak of dust and vapor, huge spirals sweep around most of the gas giants and brown dwarfs making this star cluster the most popular destination for the commercial cruise liners. To the sightseer the Pleiades are heavenly eye-candy. To the navigator or pilot the Pleiades is a potentially lethal slag hole.

To avoid having to dodge the garbage floating around Electra, the Phoenix-Marauder drops below the orbital plane. This maneuver adds another AU to the trip, but at forty times the speed of light, who cares? It only takes a hundred and sixty seconds to close on Electra-4. Not exactly a snails pace but the ship is capable of much more.

At half an AU out, directly below Electra-4, the battle platform pulls into a vertical climb and starts to decelerate like mad. Dropping to a low 0.1% sub-light the ship passes the southern hemisphere on the night side and pulls in close as it swings over the top of the planet. At 200 kilometers above the northern pole SA15 comes to a screeching halt, and nose-to-nose, in front of the last of the cruiser retreats, Pandemonium, SA33.

A retired yard-dog destined for salvage, old SA13 was pulled from the mothballs when the Marauder was first wounded. Turned around and re-commissioned as battle platform SA33, the retrofits are identical to those for the recent SA29 through SA32. With the fusion cores, propulsion and MDDSH engines incorporated into the bay assemblies, the aft superstructures were minimized and preserved much of the feel of the original cruiser. These bays are twice the size of the old wedged shaped ones and are configured in a tear drop that terminates like a dagger pointing forward along the axis. Where SA15 is angular and chunky, SA33 is curvaceous and sexy.

With the transitional shift activated the Phoenix-Marauder seems to hover like a helicopter while the pilot adjusts the trajectory to match that of the orbiting Pandemonium. At eleven hundred meters from its rendezvous, the huge ship drops out of hyperdrive. Like the bursting of a soap bubble, the slight distortion that surrounds the battle platform vanishes.

Suddenly, a single HWG99 is ejected from underneath SA15 and is followed by three of the larger HWG98 drop ships that pop out from under SA33.

The latest in the HWG (hog) series of assault transports, now referred to as Razorbacks, are, hands down, the most advanced in armored drop ships. Looking like an ancient SR71 on steroids, the HWG has two stubby wings, no rudder fins and no visible cockpit. The only obvious feature is a pair of wedge-shaped air intakes on the perfectly flat underbelly. Modified to operate in both atmosphere and vacuum, the intakes to the pulseblade engines snap shut and fire.

In scramjet mode, with copious amounts of fuel and oxidizer, flames cannot exist in a vacuum. The twenty-second burn does manage to produce an eerie glow and a constant 6g's. Enough to allow the Phoenix-Marauder and Pandemonium to leap ahead and the gravity from Electra-4 to pull the assault ships down. As they start their terminal decent towards the deep blue waters covering the pole, the troops receive a tacnet alert that Waterworld is no more.

Popularly known as, Sapphire, the referendum to change the name from Waterworld to Sapphire was held up by the courts pending the outcome of the war. Sixty minutes ago, as part of the pre-negotiations settlement, an ambassador for the newly independent parliament of Sapphire submitted a petition with the United Nations to switch from an observer mission to a full membership. The resolution to accept Sapphire was immediately walked from the Security Council to the General Assembly and voted on. There was no debate. The tally was 1,128 for and 0 against with 215 abstentions.

Like the Earth, under the rules of engagement this planet was

declared a non-combat zone. To avoid a pissing contest, both the SA and the MAD referred to it as Electra-4 for the duration of the war. Now that Sapphire has full independence, and a mission with the UN, the Annex can refer to it by its proper name. The Steel Chain Cooperative and its golem, the MAD, will just have to choke on it the best they can. Everyone in the Razors feel real good about this, but nobody feels good about where they are going.

One of their own has already breached the peace. In an attempt to smooth any ruffled feathers they're going in without any gunships, fighters or drones in tow. Razors pack a hell of a punch but a combat drop without an escort is hanging it out.

To avoid the extreme heat usually associated with reentry, the Razorbacks control their decent with old style gravity-repulse. At twenty-seven thousand meters the air intakes to the quantum pulseblade engines snap open and they shriek to life. Maintaining a brisk mach-3 the ships level off just shy of a thousand. Within ten minutes the lead ship spots the columns of smoke over the horizon marking the target along the northern coast of Pangaea.

The only continent Sapphire has to offer, Pangaea covers approximately 3% of the surface of the planet. From orbit it looks like a jagged red scar defacing the perfect blue sphere. Originally bioformed and settled by Australian nationals, the culture is rich but quirky. In true Aussie style they refer to Pangaea as "Scab" with a backhanded affection. No one has proposed making the name official, but many of those annoyed by the tourist based economy now think the idea has merit.

The Razors go low and fan out. Given the thirty second warning, the troopers lock and load by yanking a strip of aluminum chaff from each of their weapons. This procedure is awkward from the confines of their JACC fighting suits, but all manage without any trouble. They're used to it.

Short for Jerryworks Armored Combat Cybernetics, the JACC is a heavily armored and cybernetically amplified space suit. The JACC gives off no thermal or electromagnetic signature, can change color like a chameleon, and cloak itself with holographic projections. Miniature gravity drive planes built into the suit gives the trooper the capability of subsonic flight in most atmospheric conditions and, in theory, the ability to reach escape velocity in the vacuum of space. It has an exoskeleton consisting of sandwiched layers of Kevlar, steel mesh, ceramic bisque plating, and metallic non-Newtonian fluids filling the gaps. The helmet is spherical and rotates in a magnetic cradle with a visor that's so huge it's classified as a canopy. Like a gigantic parrot's beak the canopy arches out from behind the sagittal-suture to about twenty centimeters in front of the chin. Armed with a variety of

integrated rail guns, grenade launchers and fusion-pulse cannon, the JACC is the most versatile weapons system to come along in centuries; but no matter how much of an edge this suit gives the troopers of the Annex all of them realize that they can die just as quickly with the JACC as without it. To survive in a combat environment one requires clear objectives, planning, stealth, surprise, aggressiveness, tactical exploitation, and just dumb luck.

Normally the troopers engage in a verbal form of mummery preceding an attack. They tend to sound off or trade insults—anything to suppress the fear and crank themselves up for the violence they usually face at the end of a drop. Not today. For the first time not one word is uttered as they toss the chaff strips onto the deck. For the first time they hear the barely audible whir from hundreds of miniature servos cycling bolts into the chambers of their rail guns. This eerie sound makes their situation seem all the more hopeless. No one had any illusions that the peace was going to last for any length of time, but eighty-five minutes? Everyone was hoping to squeeze in a little recreation-and-reboot before the killing started anew. *Oh well*, goes through many of their minds as the lead pilot announces, "Feet dry!"

Just below mach-1, the Razors rip over the coastline at an altitude of seventy meters. The three larger HWG98's peel off to orbit the target as the extremely nimble 99 shoots right through the towers of smoke and straight down the center of the MAD base.

Smashed and burning, the facilities look like Shiva and Kali both had a playful romp through it. Instead of twisting and turning as it streaks across the base, the drop ship holds its course rock steady in an almost suicidal tactic known as trolling. The purpose of this exercise is to evaluate the defenses by baiting the enemy to fire. To everyone's surprise no one takes them up on it, so right after the HWG99 blasts out from the other side of the base the 98s immediately tighten their orbits. As these huge drop ships begin to weave and buck in a high-speed lap around the perimeter, the crews quickly notice a familiar figure standing in the middle of the destruction.

Looking like the victor out of a demolition derby, Jacob Eugene Graves does his best to ignore the drop ships that are racing overhead. From inside his JACC fighting suit, Jacob continues to search for new targets to acquire. Jacob can't believe he's still alive. An hour ago Jacob hit the ground and started blasting away. Most everyone got smart and ran off except for a squad of U.S. Marines that just happened to be passing through on their way back to their base of operations in San Diego.

The lop-sided fire-fight was a rout. In Jacob's mind, if these Marines had realized that they faced a single man their tactics, and the final outcome, may have been different. If they had known who they

were facing they would have probably conducted a retrograde action and slipped away with the rest of the base personnel.

As it was, they suffered 100% casualties.

If Jacob had time to think about it, it would make him sick. These are good people—some of the best in the industry. He would rather be shooting along side them than shooting at them. In a couple of days, while in the depths of an alcohol induced stupor, he will cry in his beer and throw up on his own feet, but for right now he doesn't have time to ponder these thoughts. As with post-coital depression he will file it away for later.

With less than seventy bolts for his BR-1 rail gun, an empty penta gun, a single wonton (one-ton) micro-nuke grenade, and only three fusion pellets left for the plasma cannon, Jacob was too short of munitions to have kept going for long. Now, with hundreds of his brethren in JACCs, pouring out of the back of the three Razors, Jacob's icy grip on his emotions slips and he grunts, "Shit!"

Jacob should sound relieved they showed up—not pissed off. He jumped from orbit, just he and his newly upgraded JACC, fully believing he was not going to live through the decent. No one has before. Landing right in the middle of the MAD base, between the maintenance hangers and the supply depot where cobalt weapons were being staged for redeployment, Jacob thought, *Fuck 'em!*

So, the grenades flew.

Now with elements from his own command descending on his handiwork it's Jacob's guilt, not rage, that has slipped from his mouth. He's alive, and that's not exactly the object lesson he had in mind when they got there.

Four of the Troopers orbit Jacob. As they spiral in to land he pops off his canopy and shouts, "Under rules of etiquette, party crashing is a corporal offense! I ought to tan you hides right here! Right now!"

"Stand down, Buzzard." Sergeant Angela Simmons touches down first. She shoves a cigar in his mouth and smiles, "We'll be moppin' up for ya."

"Killer workout! Just like One-Two-Three." says Cyzk as he pats Jacob on the back. He, Griego and Sandoval have taken guard and anchor positions around Jacob. Not to protect him—they've been ordered to contain their commander.

Simmons locks her red laser sight on the tip of the cigar and gives it a carbon pulse. Cutting lasers have little value as weapons but they make great lighters for tobacco products. Simmons is careful to

fire on the lowest setting away from Jacob's face.

"What does Emily Post say about stogies?" she asks as the tip of the cigar flares up.

With the thrust vectored forward, the little Razor screams overhead and lands only 50 meters behind them. As soon as it touches down the ramp snaps open and more troopers stream out.

As they scatter, flying low and fast, Griego thumbs back at the ship, "Bet'cha that's Tiger Bitch."

"Bloody Mary don't drop to mop." Sandoval quips. Her voice is deep and sultry like from a two pack a day habit.

"Why not?"

"Where's the sport on panty raids?"

As the last of the troopers fly out of the small drop-ship, one very short trooper in a JACC marches down the ramp and makes a bee-line directly for them.

Cyzk croaks, "Holy crap, it's Tiger Bitch! She's here!"

"Be cool Buzzard." Sandoval taps Simmons on the arm with her BR1 rail gun. "Let's go, Ten Klicks, before the Tiger has a shit-hemorrhage."

Cyzk, Griego and Sandoval kick in the anti-gravity units in their JACCs, and leap into the air.

As they race away, Simmons pokes Jacob in the chest with a finger, "In the future, you need to call me, asshole, next time you pull a stunt like this."

Jacob smirks, "I've called you asshole plenty of times."

Laughing, Simmons takes off after the others.

Jacob puffs away on the cigar as Maria Lynn Ramirez approaches him from behind. He can feel her closing in. Jacob can't remember when he last saw Maria but they were both company commanders back then. Now she's a Field Marshal, the Fox-6 on the Phoenix-Marauder. At that level it is said that they walk with God and swap spit with Death. In an organization where the most coveted job is squad leader, a sergeant, Jacob's rise to Senior Deputy Marshal, a regimental commander, seems totally inadequate for the situation he finds himself in.

Maria steps up beside him and removes the canopy from her JACC. Jacob continues to enjoy the cigar and makes no attempt to acknowledge her presence. He can tell that the Tiger is not a happy camper. He knows all too well that there is no way to placate her.

Maria radiates an aura that paints her as a hot-blooded Latin, or sometimes as a Chihuahua with an alpha-dog complex. It depends on your perspective. In spite of popular opinion her anger is focused, measured and exacting, and even though she breaks the ice with a friendly enough voice, Jacob feels a shiver go down his spine.

He really doesn't want to be here right now.

"I'm all bitched up, and pondering what to do about it, and then it hit me. I said to myself, 'Hey, Jake is in the neighborhood! Why not drop in and pay him a visit.' You know, a Victor-Romeo here, a lil' grab-ass there. By the way, how's it hangin'?"

Perplexed, Jacob looks at Maria and she gives him an evil grin. Her deep brown eyes and pleasant face seem to belie the true harshness of her personality.

She adds, "It's been a long time since we've rock-n-rolled."

Her grin fades, "But I feel something amiss. Can't quite put my finger on it but the ambiance is not quite right. In fact, I'm in a downright ugly mood. Now can you guess why that is?" Jacob was about to open his mouth but Maria wags a stern finger in his face. "No! No, don't tell me. I have my own thoughts on that very subject. I would like to share them with you."

Maria turns bodily towards Jacob, "I have a problem. Not your average problem I'll let you know. In actuality it's a situation that we hope to contain before it becomes an incident. Just ninety minutes into the cease fire and I have—not an accident. No, nothing that simple. I have the makings of a genuine incident." Maria takes a menacing step towards Jacob and starts shouting, "I hav'ta have some middle-aged, shit-for-brains, deciding all on his own to get some trigger-time in! Where dare I ask? A sanctioned Co-op base! In a no fire zone! We were plannin' to defy the ROEs and drop to collect the cobalts during negotiations—next week! *Not now!*"

"Be advised!" Maria yanks the cigar out of Jacob's mouth and chomps down on it. "If this stunt you pulled expedites a favorable truce I'll personally drop to my knees and blow you till yer kicked-out. If, however, negotiations stagnate." Maria puffs smoke in his face, "I will blow you away. An' I don' mean to simply dress your ass down. Oh no, I'll seriously fuck you up! Heads or tails Jake, the deck is hard. I hope your knees can take it."

Jacob deadpans, "About as far as your elbows can."

That was stupid.

Maria's otherwise pretty face contorts into a rage that would rival that of Medusa—or your average drill instructor for that matter,

"What! I...I'm not gonna wait for it to hit the fan, I'm gonna shit all over you now! Dismount!"

Jacob stands defiant, so Maria jabs her fist in his chest and the blow pushes him back a couple of feet.

She screams, "Out of the fuckin' Waldo! NOW!"

Obviously she isn't kidding, so Jacob pops the suit. First, the orbit of the helmet separates from the magnetic cradle with a heavy snap. Jacob tucks his chin in and pushes the helmet straight up. With the helmet clear he lets it dangle from the cables that are connected to the mantel. At this point the JACC would normally spread open from around his neck and shoulders like the peddles of a flower, but with no racking to pull himself out with, Jacob is forced to lie on the ground and suffer the indignity of trying to twist himself out of the suit. So he flops down, and as would a bug from its pupae skin, Jacob fights to extricate himself while Maria towers over him.

"Senior Deputy Marshall, Jacob Eugene Graves, you are now nothing Graves!" Maria bellows as she notices a tacnet alert flashing in her head.

With millions of microscopic chips deployed throughout the body, the neuronet can uplink the human brain with most computer systems without any physical connection. Functioning like an internalized heads-up-display, N2 (the more common handle) can perform like a simple workstation, or in the advanced mode it can provide a dynamic, multi-sensory experience by overlaying sight, sound, touch, pleasure, pain and more. With the ability to link up with multiple partners and data systems in real time, the corporate, industrial, medical and educational uses are unlimited. As a result of N2, however, thousands of cottage industries have sprung up to feed the insatiable market for new, and more desultory, passive and interactive experiences. Instead of tearing down the ethnic, cultural and gender barriers that have divided the human race for millennia, the neuronet is used mostly as a toy, a sexual diversion, and occasionally as a weapon for the talented hacker.

So much for social enlightenment.

The tacnet is light-years ahead of the neuronet. With advanced CPUs implanted in the cranium, TN functions like an enhanced intra-neuronet, but that's where all similarities end. The tacnet fully maps the brain of the human host and allows for the processing of information as passive thought or memory. With a seamless interface to any data reservoir or weapon system, such as the JACC, the tacnet has intimately tied the common soldier of the Annex to the tools of their trade.

In the most literal sense of the words—they are one with their guns. Seamless and complete.

Frustrated by the unwanted interruption Maria calls up the GEV display. Maria is an old-timer, and like many of the “preTeeN” generation she has yet to completely trust the data/thought transfer provided by the tacnet. In her field of vision the God's-Eye-View display gives her a two-kilometer wide overview of her position. With herself marked as the centered crosshairs, Maria sees hundreds of blue circles, the good guys, surrounding twice as many yellow squares. The yellow squares indicate unknowns or potential targets, and these are mostly clustered on the edge of the perimeter. Red triangles identify verifiable targets, but the twelve or so triangles on display are either flashing to indicate a casualty, or have been changed to a faded-red nulset (Ø) to mark a confirmed kill. Maria instantly recognizes the blue circle in front of her as Jacob, but then she notices another one right behind her.

Maria already knows who it is. Jacob's exec., Senior Chief Master Sergeant, Scott Wakow Rutledge. It drives her crazy that no one has to consciously challenge others via the IFF anymore. The tacnet automatically identifies friend or foe and spoon-feeds you any details through the long-term memory centers of the brain. No one in the SA has bothered to carry identification cards or wear name-tags for over a decade. She misses the days when meeting someone new was like a fresh start. Maria's reputation precedes her like a battering ram, and on a personal level it tends to drag her down like a yoke pulled solo. For today—it's a chip on her shoulder the size of a tree. This guy wants her attention so she's going to give it to him.

All within two seconds of pulling up the GEV, Maria whips around and shouts, “What!”

Scott Rutledge has never met Maria Ramirez, but he's heard all the stories. Unlike most of the tall tales he's heard in life, Jacob's anecdotes have been amazingly factual. Maria has been on many a hot-ops in her career, but she has suffered the constant frustration of being a command executive, and never having the opportunity to get into the action up close and personal. Even though Maria has yet to fire a shot in anger she has proven herself to be the most ruthless combat strategist in the Annex. Like Jacob, she's a living legend, and Scott is left dumbfounded by how little the Tiger Bitch actually is.

And after decades apart from his beloved Jamaica, Scott's natural accent suddenly bleeds through for just a second, “No need to vex, Marshal Ramirez, but if I may.”

“News and hairballs, they both come out laced with puke.” Maria pulls hard on the cigar and blows the smoke up. “Spit it out

sergeant." Then as a passing thought, *I must be an ogre—I just insulted a chief!*

"Sir, we got beau-coop Homer in the bunker behind me. They're standing down, but they absolutely refuse to come out. That is, not while Marshal Graves is still in the A.O."

Maria laughs inside, *Sir! Touché ya Jamaican bastard, I deserved the insult.* To mask her approving smile she shouts even louder, "Why not!"

"One of them recognizes Marshal Graves, and they're afraid he'll start blasting away again. Can't say I blame 'em. From the looks of this place, I'd be slipping in my own excrement too."

Maria glances back at Jacob who now has his arms free and is struggling to get his legs out. It's hard for her to believe that all you have to do is mention this fuck-tard by name and people start making bad choices like the slobs in the bunker.

Shaking her head, she rips a hand grenade from her harness and tosses it to Scott, "Give them five minutes, then nuke 'em."

She turns around and finds herself staring eyes to sternum to Jacob who is now naked and towering over her.

Jacob is 6'3" and Maria's eyes come level with his chest. In a split second she remembers the hundreds of nights she has clung to this chest in bed. She remembers as if it were yesterday. Maria looks up at his face. She then remembers the countless times she's slapped the crap out of this face. Jacob can be such an insufferable prick, which is why twelve years ago she chose to turn down a battalion commander's slot on the Pandemonium on the condition that they gave it to Jacob. A decision that backfired on her when Jacob accepted the promotion on the condition that his entire field company got transferred along with him.

A thousand emotions race through her head, but thoughts of mayhem and murder win out, "Get your ass in my drop ship!"

Jacob and Maria stare each other down for a count of five. The delay is absolutely defiant on Jacob's part, but Maria would require a count of seven before she can charge him with insubordination. Thus, followed by a verbal warning and a second count of seven before she could shoot him.

Maybe next time.

Jacob executes a perfect about face and he marches towards the ramp of the Razorback drop-ship. Maria is totally frosted by how his step borders on a swagger, but then it dawns on her that his approval ratings always skyrocket after these episodes. With the bitter

taste of acid rising in her throat, she swallows hard and screams inside, *The pandejo is going to get away with it!*

Maria turns around, but instead of stomping away, her path is blocked by Scott. The Chief hasn't budged an inch, so Maria immediately throws her hands out and she screams for real, "What are you waiting for? Go nuke! *Kill!*"

"Before I go, C3 got a Delta-Charlie in from New Sydney. You may want to hear this before I go dial-a-yeild on Homer."

Deflating, Maria rolls her eyes. "Jesus! Scab didn't wait for nothin' to pitch a bitch. Let's hear it, Rutledge."

"It reads...to the Forces of the Annex, SA33. Greetings. New Sydney was unaware of the weapons violations by Allied forces within the exclusion zone, and welcomes the intervention by SA33."

Maria blurts out, "This is a joke, right?"

"It gets better, Marshall." Scott grins, "New Sydney hereby authorizes SA33 to excerpt any force necessary to neutralize this threat, but insists that the SA respect the ongoing prohibition on NBC class weapons as provided in the ROE issued 2192. Pitney, Michal J., Sapphire Mission, U.N."

Maria chomps on the cigar and mutters to herself, "Splittin' hairs now."

Reading between the lines of Sapphire's first diplomatic communiqué, and Maria hears Ambassador Pitney's message loud and clear, *No clustering!* Not that it really makes a difference, but the rules of engagement restrict the use of nuclear munitions with a yield over 1 kiloton; and even though Jacob fired off a combined yield of over 12kt within the confines of the base, each of these weapons were well under the 1kt limit imposed by the ROEs.

So far so good.

Maria wants to carpet-bomb with hundreds of these low yield weapons. It's a common practice for resource and area denial, but it can be argued that 'clustering' violates the spirit of the ROE. The practice has yet to be challenged in international court and no one, not even the SCC, nor the MAD, would want this to happen.

Maria does not intend to give Pitney the opportunity, but she still wonders how to go about destroying the base, "If I had a dime for every time someone violated the ROEs." She then wonders, *What the fuck is a dime anyway?*

At that moment, a light bulb goes off!

"We'll do it the hard way." Maria yanks the cigar out of her

mouth and pokes Scott in the chest, "It's hammer time. Get on the horn to Pandemonium and start walking them through on the next pass. That'll be in about fifty-five minutes. Now, I want to see a little more than simple ripples in the mud. I want this place obliterated! Not a brick, not a re-bar, not a trace. All I want on the after action report is a big empty of scorched dirt; and, Chief, if Scab bitches about that then tell 'em I'll be back to split hairs with them. Preferably while still attached to their scalps. You know the drill."

Maria bites on the cigar and reaches down to grab Jacob's fighting suit. As she picks up the JACC by the underarm, she notices an exit hole on the right side of the chest. In a flash she shudders with fear, but realizing Jacob wasn't bleeding from a wound her fear becomes relief, and just as quickly her sense of relief becomes anger. For the casual observer it all looks the same. Pissed off—then really pissed off.

Watching Maria drag the fighting suit towards the drop ship, Scott hears the impossibility of laughter. The Chief glances to his left and only twenty meters away he sees a wounded Marine being picked up by a med-evac team. With a shattered helmet, half of this kid's face is a bloody mess; but instead of quiet resignation, or flailing and screaming, this critically wounded Marine lieutenant has managed to laugh out loud, "He's gonna get it now!"

Impressive.

As the med-evac team carries the kid away, Scott makes a mental note to interview him later. Maybe he can get this Marine to resign his commission and hire him on? Fat chance, jar-heads are corps-centric, but it's worth a try.

Scott switches to the fire-support frequency, "Red Leg Three-Three, this is Vader Six. Do you copy?"

"FIST Three-Squared, available. Mjöllnir is primed and ready to blow. Where do you want it Vader?"

"Fire mission on my coordinates. The A.O. is secure so you are clear to adjust perigee to maximize time on target—"

Maria calls out, "Oh! One more thing, Chief."

"Stand by, Legs." Scott looks over at Maria who is now standing by the ramp of the HWG. He has to wait for her to take one last puff from the cigar.

"Evac the wounded but cut the prisoners loose. All of them. They'll run amok in the outback. New Sydney can fuck with 'em." Maria flicks the cigar away, "I got my own problems to fuck with!"

Maria drags the JACC up the steep ramp that stretches out

from underneath the rear of the Razorback. At the top of the ramp, towards the back of the cargo hold, she drops the suit in front of the open hatch to the cockpit. The inside of the hold is dark and cluttered with the racking used to clamp the troopers in for assaults. Only six meters in front of Maria, Jacob, still in defiant mode, is reclining in the centerline racks. The drop ship pilot, Corporal Cricket Washington, steps out from the shadows.

Cricket (her real name) is an ebony goddess, but all that anyone can see of her, through the transparent canopy of the JACC, is the whiteness of her teeth, "Want me to take 'er up, Marshal?"

Maria thumbs back down the ramp, "Get out."

Cricket looks at Jacob, then at Maria. The three of them went through boot together. They partied together, fought together, and were the only survivors of their original platoon. This is the first time she has seen Jacob in more than a decade, but instead of saying anything to restrain Maria, Cricket simply shrugs and walks out.

Halfway down the ramp Cricket looks over her shoulder and whispers to herself, "Poor bastard."

Alone at last. Maria uses her laser lock-sight to scan the barcode on the bulkhead by the cockpit. Her JACC reads the reflected return, transmits the code, and ties into the HWGs tactical computer. She could have simply desired access and let the tacnet handle it all, but Maria fancies herself as a neurophobe.

In all honesty she realizes that it's a control issue. Maria actually delegates well and resists micro-managing her people, but this obsession for personal control manifests itself by her circumventing the tacnet interface at every opportunity.

Maria hits the manual switch to close the ramp and verbally summons the Razors computer, "Tactical."

The drop ship responds with a female voice, "Go ahead, Marshal Ramirez."

"Plot a course to Carrie Nation, and execute."

All at once the drop ship starts to rise, the ramp snaps shut, and red light floods the hold. "Engaged. Egress sequence in six, five, four—"

"ETA?" Maria interrupts as she reaches for a cleat on the bulkhead and grabs on tight.

"Fourteen thirty-five zulu."

Suddenly, the drop ship blasts off. Jacob is yanked out of the racking and is splayed onto the grate floor. Even without clamping in,

Maria has no problem holding on by the cleat, but Jacob is flung about the hold as the ship throws itself about in wild escape and evasion maneuvers.

After about ten good slams into the walls, ceiling and floor, Maria intervenes, "Tactical, terminate Echo-Three profile."

"Acknowledged." The drop ship stops the violent bucking and levels off nice and smooth. "ETA is now fifteen-forty zulu. Standing by for interface."

"Negative interface. Tactical has the COM."

"Acknowledged." The computer falls silent.

Now that the deck is stable, Jacob pulls himself up to his knees and Maria lets go of the now severely mangled cleat. With the magnetic snap, she tucks her chin and pulls her helmet up and off.

Letting it dangle, Maria breaks a slight smile. "Pathed your telemetry on my way down an' I hav'ta say that jump you pulled off was tits. This, no doubt, makes you an honest-to-God Star Ship Trooper. And that workout was definitely one for the books. Reminded me of One-Two-Three."

Maria pops her suit. The layers of armor in the mantel fan out to expose her neck, shoulders and breasts. She grunts, "The pucker factor was so intense I almost kicked! Almost—but no cigar."

She proceeds to twist and free her arms from the JACC. "Now I can forget the mess we just left behind, and I can forget all the shit it will cause me. And I can forget how you weaseled your way into my slot on the Pandemonium!" (Which is a gross misrepresentation of the truth, but Jacob really doesn't need to know that.) "And I can even forget you getting to play tag throughout the Steel Chain while I was forced into an endless game of hide-and-seek on a crippled battle platform!"

"Now, I can forget all these things, because while you were getting kills, I was winning battles." With both arms free Maria gestures to herself then to Jacob who is now standing. "Think about it, Jake. Me, Field Marshal. You, Deputy nothing. See how it works out in the long run?"

Maria grasps the overhead racking and effortlessly lifts her naked body out of the JACC. Thin and hard, she kicks her legs out and lands on her feet. Jacob focuses on her eyes but he can't help noticing the rest of her in his peripheral vision. He remembers Maria as string bean, but a slight increase in body fat has had a tremendous effect on her shape. With a quick glance at her hips, a nervous ripple shot through Jacob's belly and down into his thighs. The whole setup

wouldn't be such a bad deal if he wasn't in such deep shit with this—the granddame of all inquisitors. In a feeble attempt to suppress his inevitable reaction, Jacob screams inside, *Stand down!*

Approaching Jacob, Maria combs her fingers through her hair. The short, pixie cut springs back to life with just a couple of strokes. "But, I'll never be able to forget the way you maneuvered your ass into my life, and my rack, nor can I forget how you got involved with Burke—my bitch! And then spiriting her away when your company pulled stumps for Pandemonium. And when I lie down at night, I cannot forget the way she would snuggle up to me and coo in my ear. And I cannot forget the softness of her thighs; but now, when I dream, I envision them caressing your face!"

Way inside Jacob's bubble, Maria stops short at half a meter and grins up at him, "And as for Burke—she's okay! Ya, she got splashed alright, but if you would've held off just fifteen minutes you would have found that out. Didn't get so much as a scratch." She looks right and left, then leans in to whisper, "That kinda reclassifies your testosterone saturated firefight from impressive to stupid with that little tidbit. Now, doesn't it!"

Jacob deadpans, "You bitch."

Anyone can be just a bitch. That's easy. Maria is bigger than bitch and the untruth in Jacob's comment was not lost on her. With lightning speed, her hand sweeps around and whacks Jacob in the side of the face with a loud slap. The hit knocks him back a couple of feet and she immediately steps up to close the distance.

"You can do better than that." she snorts.

Jacob managed to roll with it. The strike was more numbing than painful, so without a change in expression, Jacob decides to push her buttons with another obvious untruth, "Ugly bitch."

Maria glances down, "Well, according to the looks I'm gettin' here from my old friend in the peanut gallery, I can't be any worse off than your everyday one-bagger." Maria's hand returns and she backhands him with a closed fist. "Try again."

Now that one hurt. At least Jacob has the satisfaction in knowing that her hand has got to hurt almost as bad as his face.

Jacob now thinks that a substantiated truth will get her to back off, "Psycho bitch."

Maria snaps her hand forward and Jacob flinches.

She won.

Pointing at his chest, Maria crows, "That's better!"

She swings her leg out, catches him behind the knee and pitches him back onto the deck with a simple judo throw. Maria then steps over him and drops her full weight on his diaphragm. While Jacob gasps for air, she grabs his wrists and pins his arms down. He could easily get away from her but why fight it? It's better than getting slapped about.

Looking in his eyes, Maria snarls, "And one more thing. I will never forgive you for taking this away." She kisses him hard.

These two have been romantic, even tender towards each other in the past. This encounter is more like a car wreck in slow motion. After almost a minute Maria starts to work her way down his neck, and like a lioness throttling a wildebeest her bites are firm and deep.

The only time Jacob feels like he exercises control over Maria is during sex. He appreciates her aggressive nature, but he hates the effectiveness of her Amazon date-rape act. Even more effective is the way she smells—a cross between citrus and blueberry. After twelve years it again fills his head and short-circuits his inhibitions.

Catching his breath, Jacob tries to sound detached but fails, "So, this means you'll let bygones be bygones?"

"Fat chance." Maria plants a kiss on his chest, and at the same time she reaches in between her legs and scoots herself back. "In fact, chuckle-fuck, I'm gonna make you pay for the rest of your unnatural life." Straddling his hips, she makes eye contact with him and leers, "Lock and load."

Maria's eyes roll back in her head as she slowly—oh so slowly rocks her hips back. Stopping halfway to pant, she bites her lip in a fight to clear her head. After the longest of moments Maria grits her teeth and drives it home.

Lovers have been plentiful since she last saw Jacob, but few of them have been male. Not that there has been a poor selection. On the contrary, the neuronet generation has gone through a sexual awakening of sorts. For the first time men and women could truly understand each other's architecture and desires, and therein lies the problem. Maria doesn't want to be understood, she wants to be dominated. Whether entwined in an endless kiss by candlelight, or a five-minute freak-out in a maintenance closet, Jacob is the only man she has ever known who can rob her of control.

She likes it that way, but this time she's not going down without a fight.

Unfortunately, she's out of practice. Her back arches as the sensation shoots up through the core of her body like a bolt of

electricity—tickling the back of her throat and making her cough.

It's been forever since Jacob has pathed any of Maria's neuronet recordings, but he still recognizes that little cough. It means that he's got her on the ropes. A little subtle motion and she'll go into seizures. Instead of being a prick by capitalizing on the moment, his usual MO, he holds perfectly still so she can back out from the clouds. Normally he would be considered a nice guy for giving quarter like that, but this time he was an idiot because as soon as Maria catches her breath she leans over and bites one of his nipples.

Jacob's eyes bug out and he jumps, "Hey! Stop that or I'm gonna kick!"

Maria digs her nails into his chest and sits up. Giving her stock evil grin, she whispers, "Payback is a bitch, ain't it."

"No. You're a fucking bitch."

"That is the one thing I admire in you." Maria snickers as she slowly drags her claws down his flanks.

Jacob's hisses through his teeth, "What's that?"

"Situational awareness."

They pause.

Seconds later they burst with laughter.

3

caught up in the moment

LCTN: SAIPH-6B (kappa-Orion)
CORD: SAO-132542.0402 (221pc from SOL)
DATE: 2275ce-MARCH-12-FRIDAY
TIME: 17:10zulu (ship time)

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know, Marshal. He won't talk about it."

"Call me Bob on the wet deck. My rank doesn't apply here."

In a dark lounge on the wet deck of the Marauder, Deputy Marshal, Robert Jackson hands trooper Cricket Washington a whisky on the rocks. After she takes the drink he remembers his manners, "You prefer something mixed?"

Cricket shakes her head no. You may want a mixed drink but in the SA you learn to shoot straight when discussing business. Cricket slams the drink back and, according to protocol, Bob refills the glass. This one you sip.

Bob slides into the chair beside Cricket. While looking out the window onto the jungle moon orbiting sixth planet of kappa-Orion, he takes a sample of the same poison he served her and begins, "As a company commander, the well being of the troops under my wing is of primary concern to me. It may not show sometimes but I actually give a shit about you people and I hope this informal chat doesn't come across as meddling."

"I understand, Bob."

"No, you don't. I have two valuable people dead and a kid who's seen more action inside thirty minutes than the both of us will see in our entire careers. The problem is, he shows none of the classic signs of combat induced stress or personal loss. Not that I take exception to that reaction, abnormal as it may be, but the rest of the platoon has managed to distance themselves from him because of it. Tell me; are they afraid that Jacob will act out?"

"You've pathed the file. Draw your own conclusions."

"I don't have a crystal ball."

"So, what do you want from me?"

"I want your insight. I can't put this kid back in the saddle unless I know that he'll be ready-n-steady in the field."

"Fair enough, but there's not much to tell."

"I have nothing else to go on." Bob sips his drink, "This is not an official debriefing, Cricket. Give it to me in your own words."

Cricket looks down at her drink and sighs big, "We think highly of Jacob."

After an awkward pause Bob tries to gain her trust, "I understand that he and Maggie were very close. I don't know if any of you were aware of this, but she pulled every string to get Jacob assigned to her platoon. A bunch of you recruits from that cycle were added so that it wouldn't look too obvious."

"I didn't know." Cricket lied—the whole platoon knew.

"We considered it a mentoring opportunity." Bob downs the rest of his drink and adds, "We're not totally without feelings."

Cricket stares at Bob and finally volunteers, "They were inseparable."

Bob interjects quietly, "That was a problem."

"We didn't think so."

"That's why I didn't get involved."

"It didn't make a difference in the final outcome."

"I don't know that, and that's why you're here."

Cricket flashes Bob a look of contempt. She understands that Marshal Jackson has a job to do, but she doesn't have to like it.

"It was just another snipe hunt until they walked into the ambush." She looks back out the window and swallows hard, "Mag and her point man, Rogers, they both got flat-lined outright and we lost telemetry a few seconds later. We figured they all got scrapped, but we dropped hoping to at least recover the bodies. What we found was totally unbelievable." She cringes slightly, "I lost count of the K.I.A. when we located the skinny shit."

"One hundred and twenty three."

"Confirmed?"

"It's official, but we don't want to publish that just yet."

Tears well up in her eyes as she shakes her head in disbelief, "I don't pay the dead much mind, but I'll admit it's the hand-to-hand kills that tend to bug me. I saw five of 'em, and something is not right about how they died." After a long pause, she forces herself on, "When we found trooper Graves he was sitting beside Maggie. Well...what was left of her."

Bob has already reviewed the transcript from the autopsy:

Corporal Prather, Magdalena, was struck by an HKEp outside the right orbit along the frontal process of the zygomatic structure. The missile (suspected 3.31mm/MB) has been trace-vectored from a level 1:30 E/SE. The impact resulted in absolute trauma above the third cervical spine.

Which is a sterile way for the forensics geeks to say her head was blown apart.

Bob hates himself for pushing her, "What was Jacob doing?"

With tears running down her face, Cricket blurts out, "Nothing! Not a God damned thing! He was just sitting there. Just sitting there all quiet-like with this look on his face!" She hisses, "It was like ice." She starts to sob into her hands, "I can't seem to get that look of his out of my head."

Cricket was wrong—it was indifference. The fight managed to beat the grief out of him. It was just then that Bob decided to hand a business sized data-card with the tacnet file to her. Wiping the tears away, Cricket takes it from him.

Bob sits back, "After you path it I want you to post it on the net for the rest of the platoon." After a few seconds he adds, "Ah hell, you might as well know. I got orders to send your platoon back out tomorrow morning; but, if you don't mind, I want you and Ramirez to keep Jacob company for the next few days while he pulls light duty. Can you do that for me?"

"Can do." Collecting herself, Cricket looks up at Bob, "Think he'll be okay?"

It's not Jacob that Bob was worried about—it never was, "There's always hope..."

Cricket chimes in with Bob, "And I got a hard-on for hope."

It's Bob's signature line and Cricket, as with the rest of the platoon, thinks it makes him seem more human.

After a few seconds, Cricket asks, "We cool, Bob?"

"We cool."

Taking the hint she stands to leave, but before stepping out the door, Cricket hangs her head, "On Cue Ball, he was voted most likely to die on their first hot-op. No one thought Trooper Graves would amount to much."

"I didn't know that." That was Bob's lie.

Cricket adds, "It really makes you think about how wrong you can be about someone."

And she was gone.

Bob takes a moment to ponder what Cricket had just said. Through the tacnet he pulls up Jacob's file from Saiph-3 and paths it again.

01101110-00110000-00110000-01100010

"Maggie, get down!" Jacob screams—just as the miniball hit.

Normally such a projectile would glance off, or disintegrate on impact, but the ball managed to punch itself through her canopy. It's not exactly a common occurrence, but it happens by and by. At 5,800 meters per second, the 3.31mm kinetic-energy projectile, made of mostly depleted uranium, makes short work of her head. When tissue and bone is hit at that speed, even by an itsy-bitsy 39-grain pellet, the resulting hydro shock can be explosive.

As with Maggie's head, the canopy was also shattered from the blow.

Pinned down in a shallow depression, and with the whole area being hosed over by miniballs, Jacob thought, *Fuck it!* He shoots off an entire clip of mico-nukes, twelve bombs, each with a one-ton yield, almost straight up into the air. At such a steep angle he was betting that they would bounce around in the dense flora and drop close to his position—or on his position if he were lucky, so he thought. Set for remote detonation, he waits until the last one was on its way before popping them all off at once.

To this day, it's still referred to as arc-light. When looking towards the blasts the casual observer would notice short-lived, but intense, arcs of condensation produced by the shock waves. At night the light from the blast will refract through the vapor. A beautiful sight from a distance, but up close it's a cataclysm.

Within the time it takes to blink an eye, everything out to a hundred meters was smashed and burning. In the confusion, Jacob

slips away into the jungle and sets to work.

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Bob terminates the path. With as much action Bob has been in, he doesn't have the stomach to see the horrors that were about to unfold a second time. He recalls the line he wrote in the after action report: *After the initial attack, Trooper Graves policed the AO in detail. No prisoners were made available for questioning.* Which is Bob's way of softening the fact that this kid, reported to be mediocre by his drill instructor, and voted most likely to die by his fellow recruits, just didn't sack the shooters from the ambush—he hunted down a whole field company and slaughtered them all.

It was just then that Bob had second thoughts about giving Cricket the file. As soldiers, killing is a regrettable but evil necessity. That's the part of the job that actually sucks, and then only in a shot glass long after the fact. What would be considered righteous kills by any other standard, if one were to critique Jacob's rampage, with the peacekeeping protocol in mind, he could very well be standing tall charged with seventy-eight counts of manslaughter and two counts of aggravated homicide. Unlike wars or police actions, peacekeeping missions have a whole different slant to them and the ambiguities of the rules of engagement, as imposed by the protocol, are a class unto themselves.

Troops deployed in close proximity to an operation, such as an ambush, are normally looked upon as to be *in position* and not *in reserve* as a slick prosecuting attorney would have you believe. Though seventy-eight troops were not directly involved in the initial trigger action, thus neutral according to protocol, in the confusion they did lay down a substantial volume of defensive fire and made little effort to egress from the area.

A wounded soldier who reaches for a weapon is *fixin' to fight* and isn't exactly the *defenseless casualty* as a prosecutor would also argue. It would be agreed that non-ambulatory, wounded-in-action are not combat-effective in anyone's book; but alone, surrounded, and under a baptism by fire, Trooper Graves had no choice but to see through with the unenviable task of neutralizing two such WIA. Granted, 0.5 seconds is not much time to reconsider your initial urge to make a grab for a gun; however, in combat, with adrenaline coursing through your body, a half a second is an eternity.

Fortunately, Jacob will never face any of these charges.

Truth is, it would be somewhat embarrassing for the Confederation if it got out that their reservist forces, not only screwed-

the-pooch by ambushing *friendlies*, but that a whole company of their more *experienced* troops were wiped out by a single man, and a greenhorn at that. One who said that he was miffed because his girlfriend got scrapped before his eyes.

The press would have a field day with this sort of stuff.

As it is, Bob is left with two challenges: 1. How to avoid censuring Trooper Graves for being “caught up in the moment” as he so readily shared in his debriefing, and, 2. How to avoid issuing Trooper Graves a citation for his exceptional performance on Saiph-3.

The boy deserves a medal, but he ain't gonna get it.

4

short arm inspection

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2307ce-SEPTEMBER-15-SUNDAY
TIME: 15:30zulu (local 25:05mst)

From Cocytus, better known as Cue Ball, Betelgeuse looks like a stop sign lit up by headlights on a dark rural night. Shotgun holes and all. The galactic equivalent of the end of the road, in spite of the retina searing glare you would expect from a star this size, the great Alpha-Orion glows cold, red and sickly.

Betelgeuse is dying.

In its short life this massive star has gobbled up most of the hydrogen in its core and has bloated into an obese sphere wider than the orbit of Jupiter. Astronomers are thrilled to be studying a doomed star up close, but their excitement is checked by the fact that none of them will be alive when it finally collapses and goes supernova some 1,500 years from now.

One conciliation is that they've been able to collect samples from the hot spot that radiates intensely just below the surface of the star. At one time Cue Ball was the twelfth planet, and the hot spot just so happens to be the remnants of a gas giant that was swallowed up during the stars expansion phase. Layer by layer, the planet was striped down until all that remained was a core of predominately white-hot carbon—compressed into a diamond shell ten times the width of the Earth.

It's amazing how the occasional absurd idea made in jest becomes realized.

So successful were the probes used to study the interior of Betelgeuse that the Annex quietly supplied the scientists with a Cobalt Bluer retrofit. The blast from the retrofit-bomb was about as significant as a ladyfinger going off in a bonfire, but the weapon did manage to blow tons of the material out into space. And through a

front for the SA, the Orion Trust, a portion of the haul was auctioned off. Just enough to make astronomy the only self funded natural science for many decades to come, and just enough for the science dweebs to turn a blind eye whenever the Annex was up to some sort of mischief—for many decades to come.

In fact, all star maps and navigational databases show Betelgeuse as having ten planets in orbit, one planetary core being slowly digested near the surface of the expansion sphere, and two faint magnetic anomalies deep inside the star. It's believed that these are the footprints of two smaller iron-silicate planets long consumed, but the probes have failed to survive those pressures and temperatures long enough to find out. Nothing in the record even suggests an eleventh planet. Not to say that such a planet couldn't exist in the local Kuiper belt, but if by chance the question were to be put to an astronomer, any astronomer, they would double check their data-sets and maps then simply dismiss the question as a waste of their time.

That is, if anyone thought to ask.

Large and spectacular stars never provide a stable enough system to encourage the evolution of complex biospheres. With very few exceptions, like Sapphire, planets capable of being terra/bioformed to support human life will usually be found orbiting lone and insignificant stars. At 421 light years Sol is barely visible to the naked eye, but it's just that kind of bland and mediocre star that has the most potential for development and colonization. In short, the planets and moons around Betelgeuse are so inhospitable that only a handful of scientists actually inhabit this system. Nobody ever just drops by, and the few commercial carriers who *puked* their tractors, and managed to limp in on a prayer, have all asked the same question verbatim, "Who do I hav'ta fuck to get out of here?"

At a balmy 17°k, Cue Ball is having a heat wave. With an orbital radius of 93au the outer crust, an ocean of frozen nitrogen, is spotted with pools of liquid hydrogen that are already boiling off because of the near vacuum at sea level. The H² vapor makes the ragged surface slippery and treacherous and cuts visibility down to less than five thousand meters—making this planet, the one that doesn't exist, the perfect environment for squirreling away raw materials, hoarding armaments, and training recruits.

What looks to be a hole in space creeps across the cottony whiteness below. Minutes later a shadow appears on the surface of the planet caused by said hole. Cue Ball has no moon, and cavities and voids don't float around just 'cause, but there it is—a hole and its shadow in tow. In silhouette against Cue Ball this featureless object is a seven-kilometer wide battle station code named, Carrie Nation.

Its original name was Augustus, but the station has been referred to as Carrie Nation for so long that only a few old timers actually remember it. Like many military organizations, the Annex will issue code names for secret operations or projects. With a randomly assigned two-character code, the mission planners for the SA will come up with some name or phrase that will best describe, or mislead as to the nature of the secret. Accordingly, CB became Cue Ball, CN became Carrie Nation, JW becomes Jerryworks, and so on.

The names of Augustus's sister stations all suffered the same fate. Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero have always been referred to as Mata Hari, Lizzie Borden, Annie Oakley and Mae West, respectively. These five stations are the Annex's most valuable assets, and like Cue Ball, they have never been listed in any official inventory. For decades the Co-op has been trying to zero in on the SA bases of operation, and they would absolutely freak if they found out that those bases were heavily armed and mobile.

Like the battle platforms, Carrie Nation is charcoal black and virtually impossible to see with the naked eye. Nicknamed Jehovah's Yo-yo, when backlit by the pristine whiteness of Cue Ball one can't help but be held in awe by its sheer size and simplicity of design which amounts to two shallow saucers connected by a central hub. Both of these disks are 900 meters thick at the center and gradually taper off to a sharp edge. The sides facing each other are flat, and serve as flight decks. Separated by a 450-meter hourglass shaped hub, the smaller battle platforms can easily slip in between the disks and link up to the hub for a quick resupply or repair.

To reduce the possibility of a visual acquisition, the station keeps one of its curved surfaces facing Betelgeuse by rotating slowly as it orbits Cue Ball. Normally they would opt for a flat polar orbit, and completely vanish from sight, but the ground stations are studying the effects of solar winds by having the Carrie Nation eclipse Betelgeuse every 96 minutes.

Red giants tend to be much cooler on the surface than main-sequence stars, but in their death throes, some cast off matter at such a staggering rate that, in the case of Betelgeuse, everything out to more than a thousand astral-units is feeling the heat. Betelgeuse pulsates on a cycle which produces a recurring *weather front* that thaws out and refreezes the hydrogen ice on Cue Ball every 460 Earth-standard days. Thus, the surface of Cue Ball is obscured by clouds, is extremely hostile, and the Annex isn't really interested in the how or why the cycle works—just as long as it continues.

It's all for science. The astronomers, orbiting the star at 20au, have proved that they can keep a secret or two, so why not put out a little?

Maybe, someday, there will be an itch that the Steel Annex can't reach.

As the Carrie Nation approaches the night side, a small Razor, an HWG99, punches out from the clouds in a twisting 3g climb. The ship could have used the pulseblades in scramjet mode however, the trace amounts of oxygen escaping from the exhaust would undoubtedly react with the free hydrogen—resulting in a spectacular plume of flame, and a massive contrail of water vapor. Not exactly the thing you want when you're trying to keep a low profile.

With the clouds of volatile H² far below, the pilot flips the Razorback over, switches off the anti-gravity pods, then kicks in the pulseblades. Accelerating at a steady 6g's the ship quickly catches up to the battle station. At fifteen kilometers out the drop ship flips a 180° and blasts away to slow itself down. Acceleration is still acceleration, and at full thrust the ship shudders violently to a crawl.

Slipping over the edge of the flight deck, the artificial gravity takes hold. At 0.15g it ain't much, but without the benefit of aerodynamic lift the Razor drops like a rock—slamming onto the deck and scaring the living crap out of the recruits inside.

Anyone can drive a Razorback, but few can actually fly the thing; and as shit-hot as this pilot is, you'd think she was trying to kill all those on board because flying and landing backwards would not be considered the norm. Fortunately, for everyone, this apparently suicidal maneuver is well within the Razors flight envelope; but the recruits don't need to know that just yet.

It's time for them to scream.

Carreening across the flight deck, every time the ship bounces an unholy screech and grinding radiates up from the landing gear. It feels like the gear is going to fold up, but the Razorback is designed to take this kind of punishment and more. After the third bounce, the recruits continue to scream, but now they start to laugh and throw their hands up as they would on a roller coaster.

The pilot thinks to herself, *Very good! Now it's time to really fuck with 'em.*

The gear rotates and twists the ship around so that it's rolling along sideways. This evil maneuver imparts a severe wobble on the fuselage, and grips the recruits in wide-eyed terror. Now mute, they grab the racking and wait for a wing tip to dig in—thus ripping the ship apart and exposing them to the merciless vacuum of space.

Few can survive explosive decompression for long, and if you wind up as part of the unlucky bunch, by not getting killed outright that is, you have maybe a minute before the effects are irreversible.

Most people lose consciousness inside twelve seconds, and it's just as well that they do because prolonged exposure can lead to a very uncomfortable ballooning of the abdominal cavity and body as a whole, involuntary defecation, emesis, and a chaser of fibrillation. Followed by paralysis and hemorrhaging and seizures—oh my.

As it is, the Razor seesaws to a stop and the recruits start to breathe easy, but not too easy. They know the ship has landed on something in orbit, but they don't have a clue how big this thing really is; and if the recruits could look outside they would definitely lose their cool if they saw the lumbering hulk of SA14 floating overhead.

Sandwiched between the flight decks, Iron Man looks like some mosquito godhead jabbing its proboscis into the life-blood of Carrie Nation. Virtually identical to, and three months older than the Phoenix-Marauder, SA14 is at the end of a seventeen week retrofit. The gravitational fields from both flight decks compete for the mass of the battle platform, but instead of one deck winning the contest over the other, and killing everybody, the ship is stabilized by low-frequency electromagnetic fields. These fields are under constant adjustment, and if you were to watch the ship for more than a few seconds, you would notice that the thing is actually swaying back and forth, and up and down. Staring at it is mesmerizing, and has such a detrimental effect to your sense of balance that during visual inspections, troops up on the wet-deck find it sporting to take bets on which of the maintenance crew conducting the VI will be first to fall back on their ass.

Great sport when you are watching someone else make a fool of themselves, but not so attractive when the fresh meat is tossing their cookies all over the interior of your drop ship. One trauma at a time they say.

The electric motors in the landing gear torque up, and the pilot steers the Razorback towards an elevator near the base of the hub. Just slightly larger than a football field, the surface of the lift can easily accommodate the smaller HWG99 with room to spare. As a final gesture the pilot locks the wheels up and skids the drop ship to a stop on the elevator.

The elevator immediately drops to the maintenance hanger below. At the bottom of the shaft the Razor rolls backwards into an air lock. As soon as the ship clears the fifty-meter wide hatch to the lock, two huge doors quickly slide shut and the compartment explodes with air. The second the atmospheric pressure hits 12psi the ramp of the drop ship snaps open and slams onto the deck of the air lock with a loud clank.

One hundred and twenty yellow jump suits race down the

ramp, and the only thing we hear is the patter of the recruit's feet as they quickly fall-out into four lines of thirty. As the last of the recruits pile out, Deputy Marshal, William (Bill) Nguyen, marches down the ramp in a red jumpsuit. Close behind him the pilot, Chief-Master Sergeant, Nicole Burke, follows in a JACC fighting suit. Both stop at the foot of the ramp and wait.

Across from the formation is another fifty-meter hatch that leads to the maintenance deck. Its two 180 ton doors silently part allowing Deputy Marshal First Class, Scott Rutledge, to stomp through.

In the freezing cold air, the recruit's breath condenses, and in the few short seconds it takes Scott to reach Bill, in his peripheral vision, Scott notices that all the recruits exhale in time with each other. No one has taught them to do this, but they have been standing in formation in cold air locks so often that they've started doing this all on their own. Fewer than one out of thirty companies coming out of basic manage to develop this extreme level of cohesion.

It's a sign that the drill instructors have done their jobs well.

Scott stops in front of Bill, and without any exchange of words, both turn towards the formation. Bill follows Scott as he marches off to harass the first *maggot* in the back line. A skinny blond named, Angela Simmons.

Angela's wholesome youthfulness is in stark contrast to Scott's black skin, peppered hair, and ragged scars that run along his cheek and neck. His truly good nature is overshadowed by a brutal facade that has earned him the handle of *Darth Vader* oh so many years ago when he-himself was a drill instructor. Scott hated the job, and is glad that he only has to switch into his old DI mode when he takes delivery of new recruits.

The voice of a DI is a bitch for most people to master, but Scott is one of those rare naturals at the art. His guttural *Tony-the-Tiger* voice rattles your bones, rakes your soul, and makes your genitals want to claw their way back into your body.

At 6'6" Scott has to lean down to shout at Angela, "All right, Vapor Lock, can you tell me what kind of asshole your D.I. is?"

After six months of being screamed at, recruits tend to overcome their fear of drill instructors. Understanding that there is no way to win with a DI, recruits look for subtle ways to piss them off. That is, without drawing too much flak for their efforts. Angela is no exception, and she suppresses a grin, "Sir? This recruit thinks he's an asshole. Sir!"

"You failed to qualify your response, maggot! Drop and give me twenty!" Angela drops to the ground as Scott turns to Bill, "D.I.

Nguyen, kindly instruct this dumb-fuck on the importance of adjectives, and demonstrate the qualities of asshole that have been bestowed upon you!"

Bill squats beside Angela as she starts to pump out twenty pushups. A Vietnamese born in Texas, Bill's smiling face and country drawl cuts through the DI bark, "Listen up recruit, an asshole can be many things. They can be rancid, insane, or simply real. They can be big, and they can be fucking, and they can be serious. They can even be fucking serious—"

Scott snorts into the face of the recruit standing in front of Angela, "Your turn fecal head! What kind of asshole is D.I. Nguyen?"

Part of the ethnically nondescript mulatto-majority of North America, Zach Nelson smirks, "He's a D.I. asshole. Sir."

Scott feigns outrage, "What! Are you for real, son! Did you forget to preface your response with Sir, or are you trying to be a difficult asshole! Maybe your synapses are not firing properly! Maybe the sudden gravity has a detrimental effect on your cerebral displacement! Grab your ankles, recruit, so we can get blood to your brain and maybe then we can identify what kind of asshole *you* are! I believe that I need some help in this task."

As Zach bends over to grab his ankles, Scott turns towards Bill and calls-out, "D.I. Nguyen, have you properly instructed Vapor Lock? If so, then direct her to crawl forward and study this asshole! I do not possess the faculties to determine what kind of asshole he is, but maybe she does."

With a nod, Scott gestures to Nicole and she follows him as he marches around to the front of the formation. As they step away, Bill motions for Angela to move forward towards Zach. From a pushup rest position, Angela drops to her knees and scoots up.

Bill shouts, "Recruit Simmons, you are to hold your nose five, I repeat, five centimeters from contact with recruit Nelson's hindquarters. Your mission is to observe and report! If recruit Nelson elects to break-wind, you are hereby authorized to bite the offending orifice in self-defense. This is your post until properly relieved."

Bill hops up and fires off at the recruit to Angela's right, "As for you, maggot! Your mission is to orbit these two recruits and keep watch. Recruit Simmons is authorized to administer her incisors for each flatulence ventilated by recruit Nelson. If by chance y'all witness her kissing his ass without provocation, call out immediately so I can get *my* place in line! Carry on."

Halfway along the front line, Scott stops. He takes one step back, turns, and squares off with a big Italian named Anthony Gudici.

The DI's for the SA practice focusing their eyes past whomever they are shouting at. One benefit is to maintain rock-steady eyes, and the second benefit is to give the recruit the diminishable feeling they are about as substantial as vapor.

Equal in stature, Anthony is unfazed as Scott's eyes bore through his skull, "Your turn stallion. Tell me what kind of asshole is D.I. Nguyen?"

Even with a heavy accent, Anthony's command of English and relaxed aura makes his response almost conversational—and defiant, "Sir, D.I. Nguyen has performed his job to the best of his abilities and, in this recruits opinion, is not an asshole. Sir!"

"God-damn-it! The Annex has expended beau-coop capital in an effort to impart qualities into D.I. Nguyen so that he can share them with you! My query is to determine if said efforts have been invested wisely! If not, I'm gonna chuck you shits out the air lock and start with a fresh batch of butt-fucks for D.I. Nguyen to workout on! You are directed to answer the question!"

"Sir, the recruit stands firm by his first response. Behaving like an asshole is not the same as being an asshole, and this recruit believes that D.I. Nguyen is not the asshole here. Sir."

Scott leans in and grunts, "Okay, bad-ass, then tell me who *the* asshole is! And you had better get it right or it'll hurt."

"Sir, this recruit has known the deputy-marshal for ninety seconds, and he believes that the deputy-marshal is a major-fuckin' asshole." Anthony notices Scott's eyes pull in on him, so after a defiant one-second delay he closes off with a snappy, "Sir!"

Scott wants to laugh, but this kid has pulled his focus; and just for that, he's obligated to make an example out of him.

Scott converts his laugh into a scream, "*What!* Are you fucking blind! Do you see clusters on my shoulders, maggot! Do I look like a bag-o-shit Major! I concur that I may very well be a fucking asshole, but there is *no* officer corps in the Annex! You have but three seconds to withdraw the insult or you *die!*"

It's all a game—a very serious game. Anthony knows that his small victory will be short lived, but never forgotten. Scott knows it. As do all the recruits in formation. They know it. Anthony decides to passively accept whatever punishment Scott elects to inflict upon him. Any punishment is better than backing down. That tends to invite a more serious retribution.

"Time's up, shit head!" Scott steps to one side and shouts, "Forward—hu!"

Anthony has been ordered to march and standing out in front of him is their drop ship pilot in a JACC fighting suit. He has just seconds to make a decision, and his only two options both suck. Unable to march through the pilot, because of the fighting suit, if he bounces off—he fails because he did not overcome the obstacle. If he stops short, or tries to circumvent said obstacle—he fails because he was not instructed to do so.

Either way, Antonio Frederico Gudici loses.

Only three steps out, and Anthony hears a merciful, "Halt!"

He stops just a half-step from what would have been total humiliation. Scott knows it. As do all the recruits in the formation. They know it too.

Defiant-yet-compliant is what makes a good exec, and the SA is always on the lookout for people who possess these qualities. Nicole steps back as Scott comes around to look Anthony in the eye—and to tie into his head via the tacnet for a private little chat.

With a subtle click in Anthony's brain, he hears Scott's voice as if he were actually speaking by mouth, <"Hey, dumb-shit, with that attitude of yours, you're on a one way ticket to making Chief. That is, if I don't manage to kill your ass first. Think you can handle it, boy?">

<"Sir, I can take on anything you dish out. Sir.">

<"Do you believe in God, son? If so, start prayin'.">

Scott turns towards the formation and his voice softens just slightly, "I've heard it said that good judgment comes from experience, and that experience comes from exercising poor judgment. This recruit's judgment is in question! Recruit Gudici, here, has just volunteered to be point-man on your first hot-drop! The odds are stacked against him, but he has insisted on volunteering for this hazardous duty. So, when you follow this recruit's ass into the valley of death you just may see him die! It will be a learning experience for all! Don't waste it."

"Mr. Rutledge," Scott turns around to see Jacob Graves pushing a cart full of black jumpsuits in from the maintenance bay. "I'm ready to address the recruits however, maggot yellow makes me wanna hurl."

Scott turns back and shouts, "All right, shit heads. Molt!"

Confused, the recruits just stand there; so Scott grabs the collar of a recruit's jumpsuit, rips it open past her waist and shouts, "Get the fuck out of these jumpsuits, *now!*"

In a flurry, 120 recruits scramble to strip off their jumpsuits

as Bill snakes through their formation shouting, "Drop the maggot yellow skins where you are, and secure a black jumper from the cart! After that, fall back into formation! Let's move! Move! Move!"

Like pigeons on the wing, the naked recruits sweep past Scott, and then Jacob to get to the cart.

Via the tacnet Jacob opens a techlepathic channel into Scott's mind to comment, <"Rutledge, you are such an asshole.">

<"Thank you. Sir.">

<"And don't call me Sir.">

<"Yes, Sir.">

Jacob sees Nicole in the corner of his eye. That is, he notices the dark visor that obscures her face. Instead of being obvious, he concentrates on the recruits who are now zipping up their black jump suits while they fall back into formation. It has been eleven years, eight months, twenty-nine days, and a handful of hours since he last saw her. That's not to say he's been keeping track, it's just that it also happens to have been the last day of the war. At one time he and Nicole were lovers, and Jacob is sort of curious as to what she has to say to him after all this time. He hasn't been avoiding her, but he suddenly feels a twinge of guilt.

Then again, the net does work both ways.

"Listen up!" Scott barks, and with their undivided attention, he continues, "This is absolutely your last chance to reconsider the Steel Annex as a career choice. Just fall back to the drop ship and we'll take you anywhere you want to go. With the fat severance package we offered you earlier today you can start a new life for yourself! No questions asked."

The recruits stand unmoved, so Scott makes one last plea, "Be advised, the worst is yet to come. In less than a minute your person will become an asset of the S.A., and this decision of yours is forever! There will be no way out of it. You will be committing yourself to a life of endless boredom and sudden death! I suggest you back out now while you can."

No one budges.

Scott breaks into a smile, "In that case, I want you to meet your senior commander. The most feared man alive, Field Marshall, Jacob Eugene Graves."

Scott pivots and moves back to stand beside Jacob. Jacob looks over at Scott and gives a low whistle, "With an intro like that, I don't know weather to puff up, or burst his bubble. He obviously

doesn't know my wife."

Everyone gives the customary under-the-breath chuckle that is expected by superior commanders who take a poor stab at humor.

"At ease." Jacob sighs, and the recruits quickly snap to parade rest. "We're gonna stop riding you people around, and start treating you like human beings again. You've made the cut. That's the good news. Now the bad news. Your gonna hav'ta start from scratch. A lot of your training up to this point has been running patrols from useless outposts with obsolete equipment. I hate to tell you this, but the S.A. has absolutely no operational bases that are planet side. All assets, both combat and logistical support detachments, are mobile and highly armed. So, why the six-month circle jerk in the Ninth Circle of Hell you ask? Well, first is so you wouldn't have any practical experience with our advanced systems. That is, so we wouldn't have to kill you if you didn't make the cut."

No one reacts to that last statement, but something inside tells them that the threat was not an idle one. After a few seconds of silence, Jacob continues, "I let that one sink in 'cause, like Mr. Rutledge said, there is no way out from here. This ain't Star Trek, kids. We play for keeps."

"What the training here on Cue Ball did give you is truly priceless. You now have an intimate knowledge of your opponent not attainable through any lecture or text. You have experienced how Homer lives, the air he breaths, the chow he eats, and the head he shits in. You have learned his drills, ran his maneuvers, and stood his watch in his bunker, with his raggedy-ass issue. And when you scope ol' Homer, and waste his ass, you will know only respect. He and his kind are fuckin' heroes! They deserve no less."

"Someone once said that the greatest virtue of a soldier is survival. Why is that?" Jacob shrugs, "Consider the alternative. Heroes die! That's what they do! Heroes become casualties, and what are casualties?" No one responds so Jacob throws his hands out and shouts, "Anybody!"

Angela calls out from the back of the formation, "Sir, they are expended assets. Sir!"

"Exactly!" Switching to DI mode, Jacob lunges forward and barks right in Anthony's face, "They're fucking dead!"

Jacob steps around Anthony and starts to stroll through the formation.

Cut from the old-school, his eyes lock on theirs as he goes their lines, "Do any of you people have a clue what my problem is right now? No? Then I'll tell y'all what it is. I'm surrounded by a bunch of

God-damned greenhorns who think they're heroes! Didn't Cue Ball give you any insights? Any clues? We've been teaching you how to die! Don'cha git it? All the swinging balls, and all the firepower, in all the universe won't prevent you cluster-fucks from getting dead if you gung-ho your assets into Homer's killing-zone! To survive on operations you must reacquaint yourself with fear. You must rely on it. You must embrace it! Show me someone who is not afraid and I will show you a corpse!"

Jacob starts back for the front of the formation, "Whatever madness possessed you to abandon your worlds and inheritance for this shit does not matter. You're mine until death do *you* part! If you people are not willing to do a one-eighty, and become survivors, then kill yourselves now!"

Turning to face the ranks, Jacob's predatory gaze has an unnerving effect on the recruits, "Each and every one of you will be faced with countless opportunities to die. Don't make me pick an' choose for you."

And just as quickly, Jacob switches out of DI mode, "I would like to take a minute off-track to make a few announcements. D.I. Nguyen will not be taking charge of your company, as is the usual practice with the senior drill instructor. Mr. Nguyen has been promoted to Deputy Marshal First Class. He will be filling the battalion commanders slot vacated by Mr. Rutledge. Mr. Rutledge has been elevated to Deputy Field Marshal, and will assume command of the 36th Mobile Field Division. First Sergeant, Angela Simmons, has been promoted to the rank of Deputy Marshal, and she will take charge of this company. Your company will be attached to Mr. Nguyen's 4th Battalion. 1st of the 36th. These changes in T.O. are in effect now. Questions?"

Asking for questions is not just a formality. The SA takes the practice seriously, but these recruits are not aware of that fact yet. Jacob would prefer a question or two, but that would be against a boot-recruits natural instinct to avoid drawing too much attention to themselves. All stand silent, many still in Pavlovian maggot-mode, waiting for the next shoe to fall.

Jacob clears his throat, "One last thing. Normally we give you a pep talk on how bitchin' your assignment is. We really don't have anything to say about SA36 except that we've spent the last six months working out the bugs, and that when you board her eighteen hours from now she will be combat ready. SA36 is the first of the Trung series of battle platforms to become operational. We call her the Iron Maiden, and one look at her an' you'll understand why. She's big and scary. Our analysts have billed the Maiden as *the ultimate in force projection*. That remains to be seen, but with your help we

intend to prove them right. Welcome to the Annex. Marshal Simmons." He motions for Angela, the recruit known as Vapor Lock, to come forward and take the floor.

Angela breaks ranks, and stomps around from the back of the formation, all the while shouting, "You people have a lot to absorb over the next year, and everyone here is depending on *you* to get your shit screwed down tight! I honestly believe that the only stupid question is the unasked question! The reasoning is, *my life* depends on *your* ability to recognize your own ignorance! I think it's a shitty deal for me, but that's the way it is! So, if you don't understand something, you need to ask! If you still don't get it, you are hereby ordered to ask again and again until you do! In our world, ignorance is not a crime, but failing to rectify it is."

Angela is amused by the recruit's reactions. You can almost see the confusion, disbelief, and fear in their faces. If you happened to have tied into the company tacnet frequency, you can hear the actual screams echoing in their heads such as, <"This was the idiot that almost killed us all!">

Present a mental patient with someone who is nuttier than themselves, and the patient tends to pull it together. They may not be able to hold it together for long, but there is a moment of self-awareness like, *At least I'm not that crazy*. Take a training company and plant a Gomer Pile amongst their ranks. Faced with such a liability, even the worst of the recruits tend to pull it together.

Non-hackers quickly discover they can hack.

Starting off on the wrong foot, the Gomer Pile, or Vapor Lock if female, is quickly identified as a colossal screw-up by the DIs. In a few short weeks the company, as a whole, becomes responsible for each and every one of Gomer's transgressions, and is punished accordingly. Tired of the endless harassment, the *team* is compelled to drill, coach, and if need be, beat Gomer Pile into shape. Through their efforts, the Gomer Pile is *reborn* after a fashion.

Forcing the recruits to make a peer out of a pariah is decidedly an ass-backwards way of teambuilding, but this program has proven itself effective by cutting the washout rate to practically zero. Also, having been a squad leader, and a DI at one time, the Gomer Pile helps keep watch over the company. As a result, the fatality rate during the first cycle of training is now at an all time low of 0.5%. One death in two hundred may be high by some standards, but the harsh environment of Cue Ball is unforgiving.

Angela squares off with the formation, and while waiting for the commotion on the companies tacnet channel to die down, she summons three troopers, standing by in JACCs, to enter the lock from

the maintenance bay. The vision of the fighting suits streaking in, and flaring out to land behind her quiets the recruits.

With their undivided attention, Angela almost manages a smirk, "I take it y'all didn't appreciate my little air lock stunt, hu? Or can you say, lock an' load? I could tell you didn't like that one either. Be advised, there is no second chance in the field. If you fuck up, chances are you're going to die! Unfortunately, you will probably not die alone. That's a statistical fact I want you to always keep in mind."

Angela reaches back, and one of the troopers hands her a rail gun. It's a bull-pup design with the magazine in the rear stock, heavy optics, and a grenade launcher atop a long slender barrel. She raises it over her head.

"I would like you to meet a dear friend of mine for over fifteen years. Battle rail gun, BR1-C3. This weapon fires the 4.75 kinetic energy bolts, and a variety of explosive, smart, and the ever popular RAM-assisted munitions."

Angela strips the magazine out of the BR1 and tosses the weapon to Anthony, "The basic design has been a fixture on ground operations for over sixty years, and the C3 model has filled so many roles that we've retired almost all other intermediate squad weapons. Unfortunately, the time of the BR1 is at an end. You will be trained on this marvelous weapon, but none of you will have the opportunity to field it; but before you get all teary eyed like I'm am, check this out. This is the Jerryworks Armored Combat Cybernetics fighting suit model ten-forty. This new build is one mutherfucker of a machine, and we're talking all sixty-four kinds of `em..."

As Angela continues with her colorful lecture on the virtues of the latest JACC, Jacob notices that the drop ship is already on its way out of the lock—through an access tunnel to the left of the formation. With a cursory glance to his right and left, he also notices that Burke has already gone. He could kick himself for playing games, and not getting her attention when he first came into the lock. All he really wanted to do was to find out how she was doing over a cup of coffee or two. Now he'll have to wait, and find the right moment to run into her real casual-like. Maybe she and his wife are still on speaking terms? It's a reach, but there is always hope.

"Which way did she go?" Jacob whispers to Scott.

Scott does a quick look around and shrugs.

Jacob nods towards the tunnel, and without disrupting Angela's lecture on the JACC, Scott and Jacob slip away from the formation. As they approach the tunnel, Jacob suddenly feels sorry for the recruits. Tomorrow morning, while donning their newly issued

JACCs, they'll be nursing the mother of all hangovers. Hangovers that he'll be springing for.

Jacob follows Scott into the tunnel, and out of sight of the formation, Jacob speaks up, "Burke's got a case-of-the-ass. I can feel it in my bones."

Scott stops and turns back to Jacob, "You two have a history, and I want no part of it."

Scott raises a fist towards Jacob's face, "But, do you want to know what *my* case-of-the-ass is? Your silver-backs didn't want the job so you saddled me with it! It reeks. I was lookin' forward to a retreat before sixty and you knew that!"

Scott doesn't want to be a division commander, but Jacob's regimental commanders didn't want the job either. Since the Senior Deputy Marshals (SDM) voiced no objection, Jacob was allowed to move Scott over them, and into the division commander's slot. As a Deputy Field Marshall (DFM) Scott becomes their commander, but the SDMs are happy that they get to retain their field commands for another five or so years. Unless Scott dies, then they get to bicker on who gets stuck with it.

At one time Scott was Jacob's exec, so he was a natural choice for Jacob to make for division commander. Unlike the commander/exec relationship in most organizations, the relationship in the Annex is more like a marriage.

With that in mind, Jacob sees no point in trying to beat around the bush, "Can you blame them? No one wants the job, therefore you git the job. You can thank me later."

Jacob looks up the tunnel to see if he can spot any sign of Burke. "You'll need to find an exec."

"I already found one *hell* of an exec."

Realizing that Scott has just suggested Nicole (Red Hell) as his exec over the whole division, Jacob cringes, "You can't be serious!"

To lure Nicole to SA36, Scott made a promise to her that, as his exec, she would get the first available field company that split out after training. Angela's company will be busted up after the next year, and Nicole would be slated to get her own company out of the shuffle. As a Deputy Marshal she would take a big step back in rank, but Nicole is tired of running the show as a chief. Scott gets an outstanding exec for a year and Nicole will soon get back into the action—if any action were to be had.

If it were handled in the right way, Scott knows that Nicole would not refuse the opportunity to continue on as a Command Chief.

Yes, it's primarily administrative, being an exec for a DFM, but it still places her third in command on SA36—over the rest of the silverbacks. She has locked horns with each of them in the past, and they are not going to like it when they find out that she will be the intermediary between them and Scott.

Scott will have a great time watching them squirm but, for Jacob, it's a bad omen.

"Am I set in stone?" Scott asks about his new job. "If so, then my selection has been made. Burke has got the talent I want, so you just keep it to yourself until I bring her around. Don't tie my hands on this one, or you can fuck the promotion."

That says to Jacob that Scott has already extended the offer to Nicole, so why fight it?

"It's your call. I'll support you on it." Jacob pats Scott on the shoulder, "Look, let Bill know that I've reserved the alpha lounge on the wet deck for the new guys. They can take liberty at nineteen hundred hours and it's on my tab. Invite the D.I.'s and your staff. Ya'll deserve to cut loose."

"Then cut loose we shall."

Jacob steps past Scott, and starts to head down the tunnel after the Razorback, "Be advised. If by twenty-one hundred hours I find one sober person from this cycle—it's your ass! You read me?"

"My ass has always been there for you, good buddy."

Another come-on.

It's been the running gag between Jacob and Scott for over twenty years. Heterosexuals are now an anomaly—the minority in what they still call *western* societies. With the neuronet, the lifestyle of the predominate omnisexual is not a mystery to Jacob. He isn't exactly phobic about guys putting the moves on him, he accepts it as complimentary, but it does give him the creeps somewhat.

What actually bothers Jacob about those of his own gender is their aroma—the way they smell. Jacob has always politely declined counseling, but the shrinks of the Annex that have evaluated Jacob's tacnet recordings for after-action reports have all described him as—*outwardly clinical during actions, but keen to his senses*—which is their way of identifying the few and far between troopers who maintain self-control, but are driven by some underlining primal rage. If one were to observe Jacob directly, this probably explains why his nostrils constantly flare out during combat.

It's not the idea of being with a guy that Jacob has an aversion to, it's the pheromone flags that are broadcasted by those of

his own gender that he, and most avowed heterosexuals recoil at; and, if transmitted deep inside his bubble, Jacob will experience fight-or-flight anxiety.

Jacob simply ignores the comment but it steels his resolve to get back at Scott one of these days.

All kidding aside, Scott worries about Jacob, and before returning to the air-lock, and the nuggets being lectured too, he mutters under his breath, "Watch your six."

A hundred meters into the tunnel and Jacob finally catches up to the drop ship. He sees an elevator up ahead and, suddenly feeling uncomfortable, he bolts for it. Jacob stops short of the open elevator door, and sniffs the air. He doesn't even notice this behavior of his, sniffing the air like that, but he's suspicious as to why that the door continues to remain open. With a chill running down his spine, Jacob turns and quickly heads back towards the air lock. Just past the open ramp of the drop ship—he bounces back as if he were a mime that just walked into an imaginary wall.

Jacob doesn't have time to react. The flicker from an invisible arm reaches out and presses against his chest. In one smooth stroke Jacob is vaulted off his feet and up into the open hold of the drop ship.

As he goes airborne Jacob shouts, "oh—shit!"

At the top of the ramp, Jacob struggles to lift himself off the deck. Looking up he sees the distorted ripple highlighting a cloaked JACC. This visual giveaway, by the holographic cloak, only comes when a fighting suit is in quick motion, and from the way it looks this invisible figure is bearing down on him with a purpose.

After the span of over eleven years, a breath short of one fifth of his life, Jacob again hears Nicole's soft yet haunting voice, "Half steppin' again, huh Eugene?"

Like Bambi in the headlights, Jacob is frozen. Not from fear, but in fascination of the thousands of intersecting grids that make up the holographic cloak.

He opens his mouth and only gets one word out, "Burke?"

The ghostly figure slams into Jacob, and in this low gravity he flies over twenty meters back into the hold. Tumbling onto the deck, he jumps to his feet and belches, "Fuck you Burke!"

"That's the idea."

The ramp snaps shut and the lights flood the hold in combat red. Red light not only allows the eyes to adjust quickly to dark conditions, but it also defeats this type of holographic projection. To

avoid the fuzzy checkerboard look, Nicole shuts off the hologram, and her JACC materializes just three feet from Jacob. Without warning, the artificial gravity inside the Razorback is neutralized. The soles in Nicole's fighting suit makes her stick to the deck but Jacob, sans the gecko like footgear, starts to float.

As Nicole pops her helmet off, Jacob pleads, "Burke, honey, let's talk about it."

Nicole tosses the helmet away, visor and all. Then reaching out, she rips Jacob's jumpsuit apart exactly the way Scott did to the recruit earlier.

Defenseless and exposed, Jacob switches to clinical mode, "At this point in our relationship, I feel that a display of indignation would be considered a, oh...pointless exercise?"

Nicole grabs Jacob and snarls, "Cut the crap!"

She sounds hostile, but the look on her face expresses a warm passion—not the scowl you would expect with such a comment. In this light you can not see the crystal blue of her eyes, which are an oddity for a redhead, but after all these years Jacob remembers, and is caught off guard by the sadness in those eyes.

Nicole is a *Barbie Doll* clone, and her physical beauty and perfection is matched only by her insatiable appetites. She's got that Seven-of-Nine thing going on, but with hips and a heart. Designed and bred for the flesh trade, she is a slave to touch, and the melancholy she projects provides Jacob with the insight that all of her relationships since they last knew each other have failed to quench her undying thirst for intimacy. A dysfunctional pattern of codependency which has compelled all other NCL model clones to off themselves by the time they reach thirty years of age. Nicole is forty-one, and is having a difficult time coping with herself.

What Jacob did not remember is what he had felt for Nicole—what drove him to face almost certain death by jumping from orbit over eleven years ago. Call it suppressed, or call it denial, when he catches a whiff of her scent, a unique cross between mango and Darjeeling tea, it's like someone kicked him in the chest. Now, being kicked in the chest is no mystery for Jacob, but what is a mystery are the emotions that have burst forth from the core of his being like an aneurysm. There is nothing warm and fuzzy about the realization that you have spent more than a decade away from your one true soul-mate. Jacob has been abruptly, and rudely, awakened to the fact that he is still in love with Nicole, and that knowledge hurts like a bitch.

Nicole pulls his face close to hers. Though her verbiage is harsh, her voice is surprisingly seductive, "I'm at three-fifteen Kelvin,

with six hours left in the window. So, either you do me, or I'll do you." She thrusts her fist towards his face, "Fucking or fisting? It's your call, Little Boy."

"Well, I guess I'm fucked."

"Good choice!"

Nicole takes his head in her hands, and pulls his lips to hers. The immediacy of it was predictable; but what was totally unexpected was that it the most fulfilling kiss Jacob has ever experienced in his entire life. So tender and deliberate that his resistance completely melts away.

Nicole lets go of his head, reaches down, and rips the jumpsuit wide open. She breaks the kiss and whispers, "Short arm inspection." With a smile, she lightly flicks the tip of his nose with the tip of her tongue, and then in counterpoint she barks in his face like a DI, "Attennnnn-hut!"

Grabbing Jacob by the hips, Nicole raises his body overhead.

Pulling her head back, she calls out, "about face!"

"Wait a minute!" Jacob protests as she flips him around.

"Forward hooooo!" shouts Nicole as she drives her face into the tattered remains of his jumpsuit.

As Nicole seizes him, Jacob screeches, "Bur-urke!"

Nicole has proven herself to be demanding, but never has she manhandled him before. Helpless and bewildered, Jacob cries out, "What will Tiger say!"

Nicole pulls away for just a second, "Fuck her, I have."

That's true, they have, and Maria would convey that invitation if she were asked.

Few people have any hang-ups about who their sexual partners are nowadays, but if Maria knew what her husband actually felt for Nicole the betrayal would be unforgivable. Jacob would instinctively deny it if he were to be put-to-the-question, but that would never happen in today's world. People have learned to not ask for what they don't want to know; and if anything were to be brought up Jacob's one honest defense would be that Nicole was clearly the antagonist, and he was given no quarter.

No avenue of escape.

With a firm grip on him, Nicole drops her arms, and in one smooth action the JACC blossoms out—peeling away to expose her upper body. She slips her arms out of the sleeves of the fighting suit,

then reaches up and again grabs his hips with a force.

Jacob's eyes bug out, "Whoa! Come on, get off!"

Once again, Nicole comes up for air, "Don't mind if I do."

She pushes off with her toes, and the lower half of her body slips free from the JACC. From off the plexiglas door to the cockpit, Jacob notices the reflection of them floating in the air.

The JACC secretes an olive oil like compound that coats the body to prevent abrasions while maintaining a skin tight contact. With this thin film of lubricant on Nicole's alabaster skin, she glows like a burning ember in this light. As if from some Hieronymus Bosch nightmare, she appears as an inviting devil-whore who has lured her prey unaware, and is now ripping through his belly and feeding off his vitals.

Now, there's an image for ya, Jacob thinks.

Sometimes the truth bites. Nicole has an agenda, and a schedule to keep, and Jacob understands this as though he can read her mind. She desires a child, and he has been selected to be the mechanism for sire. A tool. In many ancient cultures, Nicole's theft of Jacob's essence would prove as sinister in intent as would be consuming his flesh for real. In today's cultures, her assertiveness would be universally condoned—even applauded.

Jacob deserves to feel cheap, but he doesn't, and that's what really bothers him.

As they slowly rotate in the zero-gravity, Jacob pulls Nicole close to reciprocate. Now is not the time for regrets, and with surprisingly little effort he manages to file them away for later.

5

velemas solo que mal acompaño

TIME: 21:10zulu (local 35:30mst)

Jacob's head hits the deck with a slam. He looks up from the grating and sees Maria smiling at him. Brushing her hands off, she walks away. Maria could have broken his neck by using his body weight to compress his spine, but she thought better of it. Sure, he'd be good as new inside six weeks, but this latest transgression did not warrant the expense to fix him up.

Maybe next time.

The crowd milling around the elevator lobby know better than to take exception to Maria's exchange with Jacob. This is the third time in as many months that she has exercised her prowess with judo on him. This sport favors the smaller opponent, and a big lug like Jacob makes an easy target for a little sprite such as Maria.

Her face is replaced by Scott's grinning mug.

He offers Jacob a hand up, "I heard you've been doin' cartwheels all afternoon with Burke."

"That's not what this is about, Wakow."

Jacob takes Scott's hand and gets to his feet. He rubs the back of his head and grimaces. Not just from the pain, but from the loud music and flashing lights blaring out from the main dance hall on the wet deck.

Calling it the wet deck is an understatement. At night it's more like party central, and every station and battle platform has one. Each wet deck is a unique and elaborate maze of lounges, game rooms, and dance halls that lead back to a bathhouse known as the free-for-all. The free-for-all is not open for business between Sunday and Wednesday, so most everyone tend to migrate to the main dance hall or to the lounges that sport actual windows. On the five battle stations, unless you frequent the bridge or airlocks, this is the only

place you can satisfy your need for an outside view in real time.

Jacob shakes his head as Scott brushes him off and queries, "Then why would Ramirez be flippin' you like a pancake all of a sudden?"

"Remember when I jumped on Sapphire? Well, last week I gave the Historical group access to my files for that cycle. Some dumb shit posted copies, and they're scattered all over the place by now."

"So?" Scott shrugs as he follows Jacob towards the hall.

"So...it's not the jump, or the fight people are pathing, it's what we were up to afterwards. Remember? Maria an' I were kickin' it all the way back to Cue Ball."

"No shit! I gotta get me a copy. I've got to know what it's like to rock-n-roll with the Tiger!"

"Hey look. They've got Maria's track in tandem with mine, so do me a favor and don't path hers."

"But girls have all the fun!"

Suddenly, Jacob spins around, and taps his index finger in Rutledge's chest, "I know you all too well. You'll be rewinding that shit in your head for months. So, in the spirit of keeping the peace between us, you keep your hands to yourself, cocksucker."

Scott steps past Jacob, "Don't knock it till ya sock-it."

Jacob fumbles along behind Scott, "Knock it! I'll knock your God-damned teeth out if you ever make a grab for it. I'm happy being in the minority, okay! I shouldn't have to walk around with a sign saying *hetero* or a disclaimer *grabs ankle only as a figure of speech*, or some shit like that!"

"All you polars are all the same, Paranoid and phobic all of ya." Scott stops and spins around to poke Jacob in the chest, "And don't be telling me you haven't pathed any of Maria's tracks!"

"Well...sure I have."

"An' you liked it, didn't you!"

Jacob throws his hands up and stomps past Scott, "You omnis are all alike. Shit, I get to critique myself, don't I?"

Scott shakes his head and he follows Jacob into the hall, "Bullshit! What other wet-dreams have you pathed? Tom an' Jerry? Maggie Air-Tight?"

"Who hasn't pathed Maggie!"

Which is a half-truth for Jacob.

The 23rd century version of *Behind The Green Door*, as the first N2 recording with tandem tracks, *Air-Tight* became an instant classic in the carnal genre. Because it was cast by troopers of the SA, the top echelons frowned upon it, but since the distribution copies didn't lead to the identities of the participants there was nothing they could really do about it except acquire a copy for their own libraries.

Jacob doesn't have the nerve to tell Scott that he was actually one of the cast members. Young, dumb, and in love, Jacob was willing to do anything for Maggie. He has no regrets about his involvement, but luckily, for him, the years have managed to obscure his identity. Now that he is a somebody—nobody recognizes him. Only his fellow platoon members at the time knew about his role, and only two of them are alive to tell of it. His company commander also knew, but Bob has kept it to himself as well. Not that the exposure would have hurt Jacob's career, it's just that everybody has remained silent on it because the novelty would wear thin in short order.

Scott grins, "You liked it!"

"Maggie, she liked it."

"It's still participation."

"By proxy."

"Who the hell are you kidding!"

Jacob stops, spins around and flips Scott the bird. Pointing the finger straight at Scott's face, Jacob mouths the words, *fuck you!*

Scott couldn't pass up the opportunity before him. He immediately latches onto Jacob's finger with his mouth and starts to suck on it.

"Oh, yuck!" Yanking his finger away, Jacob leaps back while frantically wiping the saliva off, "You freak!"

Scott belly laughs, "Anytime sweetheart!"

"Back off, fuck face."

Scott purses his lips slightly, "Any polar who wants to swing it in my direction can fuck my face anytime." He turns away, slams his bear paw of a hand on the bar, and bellows, "Barkeep!"

Incensed, Jacob steps up behind Scott. He leans in close and snarls in his ear, "You understand, I ain't your good-buddy!"

Scott looks at Jacob, and bats his eyes, "You know that when you whisper in my ear like that, and your hot-hot breath drips down my neck, it just makes me all horny and shit. Look!" Scott caresses his own chest. "My nipples are gettin' hard."

Scott then gives Jacob a little peck on the nose.

Jacob jumps back and furiously wipes his nose off on his sleeve, all the while shouting, "Fuck me runnin'!"

Swallowed up by the half-naked revelers, Jacob is suddenly taken aback as hands start to grope him and tug at his clothes.

Fortunately, the hands are all female.

Nobody's rank or position ever matters on the wet deck, but at least Jacob's heterosexuality is respected for the most part. The few straight males are easy to pick out in a crowd. The wet deck protocol dictates that they sport a simple stud or loop in just the left ear, or risk being accosted by others of their own gender; and even though Jacob doesn't have a pierced ear, everyone in the Annex knows who and what he is: Buzzard, One-Two-Three, Jumping-Jack, Carrion, and last but not least, Azrael (aka Mortis Angelus).

But, from this day forward, in the minds of the troops, he will no longer be the man who walks with God and swaps spit with Death. What these people see with their knowing glances is the man who has subdued the Tiger Bitch herself. The man they witnessed—no, they experienced via the neuronet—rendering Tiger Bitch into a whimpering and bleating mass of protoplasm.

For some unknown reason this is perceived as an amazing power by the rank and file, and for the first time in twenty years, Jacob is having the make put on him. From the dozen or so hands feeling him up, one young blond gets bold, and presses herself against his body. He recognizes her—she was one of the recruits he reviewed this morning. She was the little maggot who's eyes bugged out when he yelled in her ear, *Until death do you part!*

She had to have been at least twenty-one to sign on with the SA, but she doesn't look a day over sixteen. Already, she and all the other recruits have gotten into the spirit of the wet deck, and they have no problem mingling with the veterans and old heads. In the Annex, no one is an FNG. A *fucking new guy* that is. Either you are in or your not, and that makes a difference. The command structure is respected in its totality, but it has very little meaning here. Everyone here fraternizes on the same level. Unfortunately, the higher in rank and position you are, the greater the responsibilities, and the less time you have to be an average Joe. Jacob almost never comes to the wet deck to play because it's hard for the troops to perceive him as just another guy lookin' to have a good time.

What amazes Jacob is that after over twenty years he has suddenly become an object of desire again. Not that he wasn't desirable after all this time, it's just that the troops can actually look

upon him as human, and not *the-destroyer-of-worlds* as they led themselves to believe.

But as memory serves—he did destroy a world.

Over twenty years ago, the Pandemonium had orders to neutralize a Co-op base at Nu-Ara to prevent an invasion force from launching against the Pleiades. Jacob was the only one in the third wave of fighters that got through the layered defenses, and the last weapon he had available in his Thunderbolt was a spider.

With so few options, he cut the thing loose.

The missile accelerated to 1.6 times the speed of light before it reached the target—where between a *pico* and a *jiffy* the half-tonne weapon should have reverted itself back to its basic atomic parts when it pancaked on the mesosphere—thus lighting the air on fire out to a thousand clicks in all directions and thus destroying the base. It was a calculated but necessary risk that backfired because Jacob, on a whim, set the thing to do a forced jump at 200 kilometers just to squeeze a few more clicks out of it before it became unstable. Tragically, the spider managed to slice completely through the atmosphere, and punch a hole through the planet's crust. The force of the impact was equal to that of a mountain the size of Kilimanjaro falling from space. It would have been better if the planet were vaporized outright, but as fate would have it that's not the case.

Over 1,370,000 died from that single shot, but not all at once. Horrors upon horrors unfolded over the next week as UN relief efforts stalled, and only a handful of the resident quarter-million colonists, five children, were ultimately saved. And with as much determination that went into suppressing the identity of the shooter, everyone in the Annex knew who pulled the trigger. None of the news services ever really covered this event, and no one in the Annex talks much about it, but each and every trooper that has been asked stands firm with the conviction that they'd have done the same thing regardless of the outcome. And then, without exception, they have all said in one way or another, 'I'm glad it wasn't me.'

Innocent lives snubbed out just to meet an objective, but that's the nature of war.

All this flashes through Jacob's head as this little blond rubs against him in rhythm to the techno-metal. Her tunic drops to her ankles revealing her creamy skin, wasp like waist, and full hips. She immediately starts thumping her ample rear against Jacob's thighs in time with the down-beat. Too short to bump where it counts, the flagging is effective just the same.

"Are you game!" she grunts.

Jacob thinks to himself, *Gamy is more like it*. He hasn't had time to freshen up since Nicole cut him loose an hour ago. He could take this young lady back to the bathhouse and jump into one of the hot tubs with her. Though the free-for-all is not open for business, and he's not the Big-6 of this station, he's a big enough 6 to get his way.

Then it hit him like a knife in the heart. He doesn't remember her name but he remembers that night, oh so many years ago when he was twenty-something, and on his first extended leave. Back in the days when the Annex and the Cooperative were amicable. He remembers a three day layover on New Era (Nu-Ara 4), and a bar where an indigenous blond bombshell put the moves on him. Even though he knew it was a weekend deal, he has regretted it ever since. Not because he was in love with anyone in particular at that time, but because he did not go back to get her out of there. He didn't know why, but he just felt that he should have.

After blowing the planet up the thought of having killed this girl was unbearable, so he had a therapist hypnotize him to quash the memory of her.

The guy didn't bury it deep enough.

Jacob doesn't know why, but he does not intend to let this opportunity slip away. Always in control, Jacob throttles down both his guilt, and his lust and with some urgency he takes this young lady by the arm and shouts over the music, "Hold that thought!"

First things first. Focused and determined to settle a pressing issue, Jacob lets go of the girl and negotiates a path through the dancers towards the far corner of the hall looking for Tiger Bitch. He could have pinged the net to get an exact location, he can do that at his level, but he knows where she is and he knows she is pissed.

As predicted, Maria was in the corner table by the window. With her are Cricket, Angela, and Bill. Jacob approaches the table and points to one of the empty chairs across from Maria. She shrugs, so he takes the seat.

Maria looks long and hard at Jacob and thinks, *How can someone so top notch in his professional life be such a cluster-fuck in his personal life?* She realizes that what he did was not intentional—it was just plain stupid. The latest in an endless string of stupid.

Resigned to save face, she quietly grimaces, "So, *Pandejo*, you want to get yer shit out of mi-casa, or do I?"

Cricket sighs, "Let up on the guy. He ain't done nothin'."

"Ain't done nothin'?" By now I'm spread eagle and doin' the drill press in the minds of half the personnel on this battle station, and

you call that nothin'!" And in her East Los Angeles accent, "I tell you what I call it!"

"Hey!" Jacob cuts her off, "Really, how bad can it be?"

A hint of rage sparks off in Maria's eyes as she declares with a venom, "*Velemas solo que mal acompaño.*"

Jacob translates this as—*it's better to be alone than with bad company*. She has said it to him before, but this time he thinks she means it. For the last ten years, his relationship with Maria has been more like holding onto a tiger by the tail. Drop your guard and you'll get mauled.

Just then, Scott plops into an unoccupied chair beside Jacob and spares him from the claws. He sets two pints of dark ale and two shots of black rum on the table.

Sliding a pint and a shot towards Jacob, he grins big and laughs out loud, "I've got my E-Ticket for tonight, baby!"

The salvation was short lived.

"What's an E-Ticket?" Cricket asks.

"Show us Scott." Bill prods as he polishes off his beer.

Scott pulls out a business size data-card and holds it up for everyone to see.

The size, look and feel of a typical business card, the cards used today function like the mag-cards of old, but instead of only 500 characters of simple typed-text, these cards hold over 1.32 teraphits of data. The compressed neuronet recording of Maria and Jacob is a quarter that and easily fits on the embedded media.

Scott smiles at Maria, "I git—to ride—the Tiger!"

Angela makes a grab for the card but Scott snaps it back.

"Let's see it, Scott!" Angela wags.

"Little white girls hav'ta wait their turn."

"Why don't you two just go path it together?" says Nicole as she steps up to the table.

Bill and Cricket perk up, and Bill goes, "Can we come too?"

Cricket turns to Bill, "Can we come too?" She slaps him up side the head and snarls, "Asshole."

Scott beams, "Share the experience I always say." And, in the spirit of giving, he nudges Jacob and extends the offer, "Care to—come along?"

Jacob mumbles, "go away."

Scott starts snickering as Angela glees, "Lets go!"

The four of them hop up and dash out of the lounge. As Nicole slips into the chair vacated by Angela, they hear Scott call out before being swallowed up by the crowd, "Thanks, Red-Hell!"

Maria glares at Nicole, "You gave those shit-heads the file!"

Nicole smile, "Ah, not so Maria." She pats Jacob on the hand and announces, "Jacob Eugene, you are now the co-star of two, count them, two wet-dreams. What are you gonna do now?"

It's bad enough that a file with him and Maria is floating around, but now a second file is out the door with his and Nicole's encounter from that afternoon.

Jacob's response is icy, "I am not amused."

Maria gives Nicole a genuine grin, "You slut!"

"I prefer harlot, but slut is applicable."

"I'd say it's dead-nuts on." Jacob digs with his nostrils flaring.

Maria scolds him, "Now, Jacob, you be nice to her."

Looking at Jacob, Nicole smiles, "By the way Maria, your track has a longer running time. Ten years has made a difference."

"He's getting old, Nicole. Nowadays ya gotta pump 'em full off torpedo just to keep him goin' for the long haul."

Flustered, Jacob stands to leave, "I'm gonna go check up on my kids."

"Kids? Plural!" Maria slaps Nicole in the arm, "Nicole, you promised I'd get to see his face when you told him about Jessica!"

Jacob is suddenly pissed off. He could understand Nicole withholding information about their daughter—conceived just days before Nicole got shot down—but not Maria. Jacob wonders how long Maria has known, but the lazy smile on her face answers that question.

"You knew all along!" Jacob hisses.

Maria shrugs, "It's not my place to tell you these things."

Nicole interjects, "You should have kept in touch."

Jacob turns and stares at Nicole. Nicole stares back and amazingly, there is no real hostility between them. Just a mutual disappointment.

Maria leans back in the chair and again gives her stock evil grin, "I wish I could say it's even between us, Jacob, but it's not. I

hope it hurts.”

Jacob redirects his stare at Maria, so Nicole chimes in, “For your edification, Maria, the boy figured it out on his own. He says it was my tits that gave it away. You wanna see?”

Maria glances at Nicole, “I thought he was a leg man?” Looking back at Jacob, she feigns hostility, “You’ve been lying to me all this time!”

Uncle—Jacob throws his hands up and turns to leave.

As Jacob stomps away, Maria laughs out loud, “If I think of any more personal traumas you’re entitled to, I’ll let you know!”

Jacob takes the long way around the dance floor to avoid the revelers doing the *Time-Warp* of all things. While they were in the middle of the pelvic-thrust Jacob fails to notice the little blond as she trots out to meet him. Oblivious to her presence, he doesn't feel the touch of her hand to his as he sweeps past her. As he walks away the young lady considers chasing after him, but decides against it.

Live each day as if it were your last is engraved on the granite panel beside the entrance to the wet-deck. Before Marshall Nguyen cut the recruits loose inside, he pointed this saying out and said, “For one day you will surly be right.”

What Bill said earlier that night struck a chord in her more than with the other recruits. So, thinking that she'll run into Jacob at some future date, she shrugs and slips back amongst the dancers looking to score some action; but, first, it's the end of the song and *time* to tumble to the ground...

Scoping out the little blond while she picks herself up from off the dance floor, Nicole thinks maybe she should get the jump on this girl before Jacob comes to his senses and returns for her. Obviously, there is something there, some potential, and Nicole wants to muscle in on it. After considering several opening lines she settles on the direct approach. Her normal MO always seems to work for her.

Just then, Nicole is snapped awake by Maria rattling off in Spanish, “*Boca cerrada y las moscas no se meten.*”

Nicole looks at Maria and goes, “Huh?”

“Get your tongue back in your mouth! Your too fuckin’ obvious.” Maria then puts out her hand, “You know what, don’t change your style now. If you want the little pork-chop, just whack ‘er over the head and drag her off like you do the rest of ‘em. Stick with what you know.”

“You’re right, I should.” But instead of *gettin-after-it* as they

say, Nicole reaches over the table to take Scott's shot and ale. She then slides Jacob's pair over to Maria, "Ever try one of these? It's a Murder Board."

Maria shakes her head *no*, as Nicole drops the shot glass, rum and all into the ale and hoists the pint into the air in mock salute, "Cheers!"

Nicole takes a couple of gulps, and licking the foam from her lips, she grins, "Yummmmm, spunky!"

Maria follows suit and almost gags on the concoction. Forcing down one mouth full, she coughs, "I guess it's an acquired taste."

"I thought you were a swallower?"

"Darlin' is my middle name, but this shit is nasty!"

Nicole sits back and admires the smoky quality of the glass.

Streaked with dark veins and splashes of blue, it's like most of the bar glass now used on all of the battle platforms. Chiseled out by lasers from the chunks of excess diamond harvested from around Betelgeuse, this pint and shot glass by themselves would fetch a king's ransom on the open market. All twenty-one battle platforms and the five battle stations have a stash in their holds almost equal to that of the Carrie Nation's—which in itself amounts to 215,000 tons of the stuff. The Orion Trust auctioned off a whopping quarter-ton of the raw carbon crystal and made off like a bandit.

And, they were pawning the scrap.

Six hundred meters below where Nicole is now sitting is a single block of the stuff the size of a small barn. Nicole wonders what would be offered for that rock as she gently sets the virtually indestructible drinking utensil on the table.

Curious, Nicole asks, "So, how you two getting' along?"

"Which one? Fat Man or Little Boy? They're both dicks in my book." Maria tries another swallow from the glass and her brow frowns at the heaviness of it, "How can you stand this bitter shit?"

"It's an acquired taste."

Maria pushes the drink back and belches, "You know, if I didn't have this intolerable need to get laid, I'd waste him."

"He does make good lookin' kids."

"I've done about all the breeding I'm gonna do."

"Then, I guess it's love."

"Hey!" Maria takes exception, and pokes at the air between

them, "If you ever see me give one of those big, doe-eyed, can't-live-without-you looks for his ass. Do me a favor, I beg you."

"What's that?"

"Shoot me."

01110011-01110101-01111000-01111000-01101111-01110010

The door of the lift slides open. Jacob steps out and hangs a left into a dark corridor leading towards the family complex. The corridor is illuminated from above by a ghostly hue that simulates moonlight. Like all ships in the SA, Carrie Nation is on zulu time (Greenwich Mean Time) and right now it's midnight. It's a nice touch to have night and day inside the ship the way they do, but the real purpose of this is to help maintain the natural clocks for the flora that sprouts out from the walls of the corridor.

Narrow troughs, like high-tech rain gutters, fill most of the open wall space throughout the passageways of the habitat sections. These gutters are chock full of flowering plants and ivies that not only ease the starkness of the interior of the ship, but intermingled with them are production plants that generate an excess of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The plants were genetically altered to reduce their spatial and resource demands. With more than seventy years to perfect their techniques, the quality of this produce matches or exceeds that of the imports from planet side farming operations. The one complaint from the troops is that they are required to detour from this superior quality fare and eat at least three of the CWR-RAT (sewer rat) field rations each week.

The troops take it in stride, rotating the stock of emergency rations the way they do, and it's not that they can really tell the difference between plant synthesized fecal material, and the dreaded CWR (Cyclic Waste Recovery) synthesized fecal material, but it gives them cause to complain. It's in the nature of the rank and file to have to have something to complain about, and it's a good sign that this one issue is the best they can come up with.

Forty meters in and Jacob stops close to the door to his and Maria's quarters. He looks up and takes a huge whiff of the air. The holographic glow of the Earth's moon splashes on his face as the sound of artificial crickets complete an illusion that is duplicated in all the tunnels and walkways in the lodging facilities.

The only visual give away are the robotic arms that silently attend to the foliage during the night cycle. Reaching down from

tracks hidden by the holographic sky, he notices that these robots are starting to harvest the grapefruit that are growing out from among the decorative ivies. He has been watching one grapefruit swell and ripen over the last several weeks, so he decides to pick it before the robots get to it.

With grapefruit in hand, Jacob steps up to the door and the sentry lock instantly recognizes him via the tacnet. The door slides open, Jacob steps through and it hisses shut behind him.

His quarters are more like a split-level condo than the bunk-an'-a-trunk arrangement you would expect on a combat ship. He steps down the stairs to the family room and he sees his three year old son, Diego, stretched out on a sofa and asleep with his head on the lap of an eleven year old girl. And for as much as Jacob would like to believe otherwise—a total stranger.

He hears screaming, and looking to his left he watches the toothed tongue of a three-meter tall *Alien* punching through the head of yet another two-bit actor who the director pegged-in just so he could line up this shot. Jacob remembers this as the 13th of the series. Produced about a hundred and seventy years ago, it's the one sequel that most resembles the original film.

Jacob couldn't resist commenting, "Bet'cha they'll feel that in the morning."

Jessica huffs—suppressing a laugh.

Jacob tosses the grapefruit on the sofa and scoops up Diego in his arms and smiles, "Thanks for watching him. I appreciate it."

Jessica doesn't look up, "Not when you get the bill."

That's abrupt, Jacob thinks to himself as he cradles his son. Poked in the chest by a toy, Jacob pulls it out from between him and Diego and he sees that it is an *Alien* action figure. The toy starts shrieking as the mouth opens and the toothed-tongue shoots out. Jacob lets up off the button on its back and the plastic figure stops screeching. The tongue retracts.

Diego mutters, "Alien."

Jacob shakes his head in wonderment, "Whatever happened to Loony Toons, or Disney? You know, Mickey Mouse!"

"Fuck, Mickey Mouse."

"You ought to check out Wile E. Coyote. Now, he was definitely beyond cool. Always gettin' blown away or squished by an anvil, or something like that."

"What's that buzzing noise?"

Jacob glances to his right and left, "What buzzing noise?"

"The meaningless drone of small talk."

Jacob believes that she has a right to be bitter, but he refuses to be dismissed like that, "So, you're Jessica."

She looks up at him, "Jessie, but it's Burke to you."

Holy crap! Jacob thinks, *This girl is worse than her mom!* Trying to avoid excuses, he blunders into making an excuse right out of the chute, "Okay, Burke, then listen up. I didn't know about you before today."

"You sure don't know a lot for a dinosaur."

"And you got way steady nerves for such a small mammal." Jacob shakes his head in amazement, "Impressive for eleven."

"Like Aunt Maria say, bitch begat bitch." and she flippantly gestures to herself.

"I think maybe you should secure that shit."

"What are you, my father?"

Jacob has to think about it for a second, "What do you want me to be?"

"I'll get back with you on that one."

More screaming so both turn and witness the Alien add to its body count.

It wasn't exactly the father-daughter encounter Jacob had in mind, but at least it's a start. So instead of prodding Jessica further, he carries Diego up the stairs and into his room.

Wading through the typical three-year olds mess, Jacob lays the boy in his unmade bed and covers him up. Sitting down beside Diego, Jacob leans over and kisses the child on top of the head only to have him sigh, "Alien."

Jacob's eyes roll back and his shoulders sag in defeat. Suddenly tired, Jacob yawns. He scoots the little guy over and curls up beside him. After Jacob settles in, Diego pulls Jacob's arm around him and puts his small hand on top of his father's.

Jacob never really thought much of children before Diego. Becoming a father has had a dramatic effect on him. This child's love for Jacob is unconditional. It doesn't matter what Jacob is, Diego accepts him without reservation. When Jacob used to live on Earth, he didn't give a damn when he heard stories about children being abused or hurt. Now that he's a father, in some bizarre way, every child has become his own.

With this thought, Jacob's consciousness slips away. As his mind wanders, the screaming from the movie reverberates through the floor to encroach on his dreams.

6

the lesson for today

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-5-THURSDAY
TIME: 09:40zulu (local 33:01mst)

The screaming is for real.

Force-regress is the term used by the SA. Retrograde-action is rarely used anymore, and then only when you intentionally pull troops back to divert them elsewhere, or to lure an opposing force into a trap.

This just so happens to be a flat-out retreat.

Dozens of troopers in fighting suits scramble for the cover offered by a tree line. Caught out in the open they have no choice but to try or die, and as expected, they are getting cut down for their efforts.

To draw fire away from the last two still running back across the killing zone, Anthony Gudici vaults out from behind the foliage and blasts away at the opposing tree line. This selfless act was not only futile, but also foolish. The two runners had their legs shot out from under them before Anthony hit the ground. So, as the only clear target, all strings of fire immediately turn in to converge on him.

Anthony didn't stand a chance, and throwing himself to the ground only delayed the inevitable. Before he could get out two bursts with his scorpion gun, a mass of hypervelocity mini-balls splash against his visor. Unlike the Minié balls from the Civil War era, these vicious little things are more like miniature Sputniks—3.31mm balls of depleted uranium, with four wires trailing for stability. Sabot driven from the weapon in masse this death spray sounds more like a rain-stick as it strikes the canopy covering Anthony's head.

Within a fraction of a second, this sustained fusillade weakens the canopy and caves it in. Now free to invade the interior of the

JACC, the mini-balls streak in and bounce around—first attacking Anthony's face and then his body like a Cuisinart set on purée.

Out of nowhere, Jacob steps over Anthony's still twitching corpse. Jacob's Hawaiian shirt and baggy shorts are totally out of place with the slaughter that rages around him.

He taps Anthony on the shoulder with his sandal and says, "Get up."

With no reaction Jacob calls out, "Bill, release him."

The back half of the destroyed JACC is instantly erased and the gore that makes up Anthony's head snaps up. And just as quickly—his horrible wounds are morphed away leaving a startled expression on Anthony's face.

As wave upon wave of micro-nuke grenades are exchanged by both sides, Jacob smiles at Anthony, "Walk with me, son."

Naked and feeling exposed, Anthony manages to get to his feet. He has never been *ghosted* in a simulation before, and is amazed by the sight of Jacob strolling away through the killing zone. While watching debris from the explosions fly through Jacob's translucent form, Anthony hears a rip in the air.

A grenade has just passed through his head only to detonate against the tree trunk behind him. Anthony thinks how surreal it is the way the blinding, white-hot plasma from the miniature nuclear blast envelops him, but doesn't consume him. He is a ghost, and ghosts are immune to such physical and thermal influences.

As the violent inrush of air forces the fireball up and over his head, Anthony realizes that Jacob is almost in the center of the killing zone. And as he hurries to catch up to Jacob, Anthony can't help but flinch as he watches the bodies of the two runners, the two he tried to lure fire away from, best friends in fact, get blown to smithereens by heavy weapons fire.

Anthony quickly reaches Jacob, and without looking over, Jacob nods towards the enemy held tree line, "What in God's name were you thinking when you decided to rush that tree line, son?"

"I decided?" Anthony is taken aback by Jacob's perspective, "You ordered us to take it!"

"It doesn't matter what I told you to do. I asked what was going through your mind. What was your gray matter saying to you thirty seconds before it got splattered all over this field?"

"Recon. That we need to recon the tree line."

Stepping over a body, Jacob shakes his head and looks at

Anthony, "No! It's not a question about tactics. This is about perspective. Let me ask it another way. Tell me...what you were feeling? Let's try that approach."

Anthony is confused, "Feel? I don't understand, Marshal."

"I ordered you into an obvious fire-sack! You sure as hell had to have felt something! I need an answer!"

"Oh, yeah." Anthony nods with understanding. He stops walking and almost laughs out his response, "That you were a stupid motherfucker, Sir."

Jacob thinks, *excellent, two insults in one!*

Jacob stops walking and turns to face Gudici. Jacob has a grim smile on his face. "Then why didn't you tell me that in the first place? As point-man you become the de-facto commander, you see the situation for what it is, or for what it can become. You are in control." Finally, Jacob yells at Anthony, "Not me! Why didn't you tell me to get fucked!"

"Marshal, I tried too."

"You didn't try for shit! Or, are you telling me that you don't have an aversion to casualties? How do you expect to lead these people if they think you're gonna get 'em killed!"

"But—"

"Bu, bu-bu, bu-but don't cut it. Look around you. These people are dead or dying! You allowed them to walk into a meat grinder!"

To Jacob's delight, Anthony is finally pissed off and forces his words through pursed lips, "fuck you."

"What was that?"

Anthony grunts, "Fuck you."

"Who in God's name do you think you are?" Jacob downshifts into D.I. mode and gets in Anthony's face, "You do not have an opinion! You are nothing but a lump of shit!" Jacob jabs his finger towards the opposing tree line and shouts, "You will advance as ordered! Shit on recon, you will take that tree line!"

"Fuck you, Sir!"

"I can't hear you!"

"FUCK YOU!"

"That's better..."

01000010-01001111-01001111-01010100-00100001

In the blink of an eye, Anthony snaps to in what looks like the hold of a drop ship. In fact, the simulators used by the SA are not just copies of the latest Razorback assault ships, but actual bulkheads of such ships *retired through action*. Stripped down, and hard mounted to function as simulators, the atmosphere is authentic—right down to the patched holes in the deck, and the occasional smear of oil, dried blood, and graffiti.

With their noses separated by the canopy of Anthony's fighting suit, Jacob cracks a big smile, "I'll make a chicken-shit out of you yet."

Jacob, now in proper black and gray tiger-stripped BDU-tactical pants, and a black T-shirt, stands and stomps out of the simulator—all the while calling out to Bill, "Cancel the simulation, Bill. I want these people in my lecture hall inside ten minutes."

The rest of the company snaps awake. As they are released from the simulated action, or for the umpteenth time—simulated death, Bill shouts, "All right kids, playtime is over! Let's hit the deck, dismount and get yer butts in the lecture hall. You got ten minutes, people. Y'all move it!"

As the troops squirm out of their fighting suits, Bill looks over at Anthony who is dragging behind. Scott has taken great care to make sure that when Anthony takes field command, or point, he gets the worst of the available scenarios. Either they are totally uneventful, or everyone dies.

With this in mind, Bill feels a pang of guilt putting Anthony through the ringer yet again, "Y'all buck up there, Gudici. No one wins that sim."

Bill's sympathy doesn't help, but it's appreciated by Gudici just the same.

In simple red robes and slippers, the troops walk out of the simulator and head towards the lecture hall. As they file out, they see Anthony and feel sorry for him. They don't know what sin he has committed to be singled out for such special treatment, but it does worry them. When Anthony is not on the company net, like now, the gossip flies.

Why are they trying to break him? is the common question amongst them on the net, but no one in the company has the balls to ask for real. Mainly because they're afraid of what the answer might be. Afraid that by knowing they would be subjected to the same.

Why risk it?

What the troops know is that there *is* a reason, and they also know that Anthony himself is aware of that reason. Anthony has yet to bitch to them about his plight, and in their minds, what the powers that be don't know is that Anthony will not break. They'll have to kill him first—and it looks like that eventuality would not set well with the company.

Monitoring the reactions of Anthony's fellow recruits has been an important aspect of this process; however, one recruit has stood out by not standing out on the subject at all. A one, Zach Nelson, has actually brought attention to himself by keeping quiet. Tapping into Zach's thoughts, via the tacnet, a practice not taken lightly, Scott and Bill have discovered that Zach has entertained the thought of fragging both of them.

These thoughts have never been discussed with his fellow troops, but the actual plan he came up with looked pretty fool proof. Friendly fire incidents, though not as common as they used to be, are usually written off as unfortunate accidents. The Annex has an exceedingly Japanese way of looking at things and, as a matter of policy, they tend to find and fix the problem—not the blame—when something blows up or someone gets dead.

Learn from your mistakes and share the wealth is the SA's unwritten rule. If someone fucks up the one mortal sin is trying to cover it up. There are no black marks for admitting a lapse in judgment, or a simple brain fart for that matter, because you can guarantee that person will never allow that to happen again under their watch. Accordingly, all that Zach needs to successfully frag Scott and Bill is the opportunity (and opportunities are many) and the will to believe that it was an accident to begin with. That's the hard part, but Zach has actually managed to put it out of his mind.

Zach thought it up as a contingency, and only if anything happened to his teammate, Anthony. Zach doesn't even like Anthony all that much. In fact, he doesn't like Anthony at all, but Anthony is part of the team and that's all that matters to him. Zach has demonstrated a level of ownership, initiative, discipline, and a sense of confidentiality that is rare in any one package. As a career goal, Zach has always expressed one desire—to always remain as a grunt in the field, and nothing more.

Obviously, that will not be allowed.

Anthony is the last of the company to file into the lecture hall. More like an auditorium than a classroom, forty rows descend a steep grade to a large stage. Front and center on the stage is a long desk that looks more like a sacrificial altar than a work surface, and behind the desk is a monitor screen that encompasses the entire back of the

auditorium.

The company's squad and platoon leaders have already taken seats in the middle rows, and except for their red T-shirts, their mode of dress is identical to Jacob's. The recruits, in their red robes, have just settled into the front rows, as is the custom for troopers throughout their second stage of training.

Anthony has taken the first open seat he came to. Isolated dead center in the very back row, his robe, conspicuous against the charcoal black décor, makes him stand out like a sore thumb.

Just as he plops into his seat, Jacob blows in from stage left, and immediately calls out, "Remain seated!"

Half of the recruits, including Anthony, have already hopped up to attention. Realizing they jumped the gun, they set themselves back down. The old heads, sitting behind them, know enough to give their Biggest-6 a second or two to call off the formalities that tend to annoy him so much.

Jacob stops in front of the desk. He pivots left face and practically leans out over the recruits. Through gritted teeth, his voice is surprisingly non-threatening, "Do I intimidate you?"

It was obviously a rhetorical question, but with all eyes locked squarely on Jacob, Zach throws his voice from his seat the second row, "Well, d'uh."

Jacob snorts with a laugh, "Good, I'm supposed to." He leans back against the desk and his whole demeanor changes. More like a psychology professor than the *Angel of Death*, Jacob queries, "However, the lesson for today was?" After a couple of seconds, Jacob shrugs, "Anybody?"

With no reply from the resurrected-in-red, Jacob continues, "The point we we're trying to get across today is that it takes a whole lot of balls to walk into a firefight, but it takes some really big balls, I mean *mondo cunicas*, to tell your boss to get screwed. Where were you guys when Mr. Gudici needed *you* the most? You, the collective you, knew better than to cross that field, and you people know that your objective doesn't mean shit if you fail to reach it." Jacob gestures to himself, "My mission and my timetable are moot if all of you die. I was not forward on the line. I'm not in the position to make that call! It is *your* responsibility to weigh the risks in reaching your objective."

Jacob shakes his head with a grim smile, "So, you all failed; and for that incredibly remarkable failure I will personally issue your duties for tomorrow. Your task, or if I may, your punishment will be precedent setting in its scope. Even beyond detailing the recyclers, for tomorrow you will do it for real. We're goin' in hot after some Cobalt

Bluer retrofits in the Hyades—without the mandated forty-eight hour notice to the U.N.”

The screen behind Jacob comes alive with a view of the Iron Maiden slipping into orbit around a planet with battle platforms SA30, SA21, SA16, and SA23 in tow. The recruits stare at the simulation in disbelief as missiles, drop ships, gun ships, drones and fighters pour forth, in masse, from the 5 platforms. Within seconds, far below the assault teams, the nuclear warheads on the missiles pop in the stratosphere. With that, the recruits immediately understand that the targets have been drenched in a massive electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that renders communications to line of sight only.

Realizing that this operation is not a *party-raid*, the auditorium explodes with applause, whistles and shouts of approval.

“Mission prefix, Papa-Fox.” Jacob puts his hand out to quiet the recruits. He expected a reaction, but not this level of excitement.

After a few seconds, they settle down and he continues, “Mission prefix, Papa-Foxtrot. Code name is, Party-of-Five. Last Monday, we received word about some cobalts being retrofitted at the Co-op bases on the desert moon orbiting the fifth planet of Theta-2-Taurus. We confirmed their existence, and this morning we got approval for the raid—or *inspection*, which is the actual protocol for this mission. Battle platforms Godzilla, Dashi, Sawney Beane, and the Zapata will rendezvous with the Maiden approximately thirty-five AU out from the target. We'll keep the bulk of the gas giant between us and the objective until the last possible moment, and launch the strike teams the second we drop out of the dash. As you can see, the drop will be preceded by a series of extremely dirty fission bombs that will detonate high in the stratosphere. Taking out their satellites early on, and the residual radiation from the bombs, should make of mess of their communications.”

The view is switched over to a tactical overview of the planet. Five targets are highlighted and labeled 1 through 5. A red line traces the path of each of the five strike teams as they close in on their respective target and objective, or more commonly referred to as an area of operation.

Jacob points to the screen and continues, “The strike teams will reach the surface, scatter and hit their respective T.O. within sixteen minutes after exiting the dash. Our target is number five. You people will be in the lead ship however, you will not be going in with assault group. Your company will be dropped off by pallet extraction about three clicks out from the target, and there you will be held in reserve. If all goes well, we find the bombs and pick you up within a few hours. If not, one of your squads will secure an LZ to support any

medevac operations and the balance of you will move forward to contact.”

Via the tacnet, Jacob puts the simulation behind him on pause. As the drop ships freeze in the air—about five kilometers out from the target—Jacob stands and continues, “Before I start answering questions about the mission, I would like to take a moment and make a few quick announcements. This morning, platoon leaders Kristi Venkatesh and Mike Amelung have been transferred to Cue Ball for orientation. First Sergeant Venkatesh will be taking command of the next training company due to arrive next month. First Sergeant Amelung will be planted into the ranks as the Gomer-Pile for that cycle. If you get a chance this evening, please drop both of 'em a note. They've taken on a hell of a big load, and they'll be happy to hear from you. And, just to let you know, I'll be offering them my condolences if you know what I mean.”

Another failed stab at humor that resulted in yet another polite laugh.

“Accordingly, we've had some movement in the ranks. As a result of this shuffle, troopers Zach Nelson and Anthony Gudici will be promoted to the rank of Corporal. The balance of you people will be promoted to the rank of private. These changes are in effect now.”

Totally understated.

There is no ceremony, no parade, no pomp, nor circumstance for such things. Just a quick announcement followed by a simple, “Questions?”

In the Annex, promotions are considered burdensome, and in many ways they are looked on as undesirable. There is obviously some stroke in attaining rank, but that pales in comparison to the responsibilities and aggravation that comes with the job. Statistically, half of all recruits will not make rank beyond PFC3, and if for some reason someone is unlucky enough to be tagged as upwardly mobile, most will plateau as a squad leader—if at all possible. Rank is not earned, nor is it an award for excelling in your duties, it's a job and the job is only given to those that can hack it. No one envies any poor slob that goes above squad leader, and all present understand that—as corporals right out of the chute—the die has been cast for both Anthony and Zach.

Anthony sort of expected this, but Zach is not at all amused. As is the whole of his fellow recruits, Zach's perspective on the treatment of Anthony for the last six months suddenly changes, but why Zach was singled out is a mystery to all.

Zach wonders what kind of nightmarish training regimen and

challenges are in store for him.

The tactical simulation resumes, and as Jacob sits back on the edge of the desk the recruits watch as the drop ships pick up where they left off. A company marker falls behind the lead ship indicating the pallet drop of the reserve team. Seconds later, the ships over fly the target and five more company markers are deposited in the middle of the target perimeter.

Without hesitation, dozens of hands shoot up into the air. Jacob points to Zach. Zach manages to hide his anger about the promotion, "Ah, Marshall, which target is the primary objective?"

"Our target, number five." Jacob points to a hand in the back of the rows, "Yes?"

"Marshal..." a young blonde stands—the hot little number from the wet deck.

There she is and, yet again, Jacob mentally kicks himself for letting that one slip through his fingers. Nicole has been semi-exclusive with this girl over the last year while she carried their second child to term. Taking the high road Jacob has left it alone, but maybe it's time for him to muscle in on her action?

The blonde continues, "The Razorbacks are over-flying the target, and are dropping *in* the perimeter. That is, without softening it up first. Now, I know that our doctrines contraindicate the adherence to any one method—"

Jacob interjects, "Or madness?"

That scored a real chuckle.

"Well...this seems a little risky, even by our standards."

"Do you have a question?"

"Well, ya. Does this look risky to you?"

"Well, ya, it sure-as-shit does! All combat operations have an inherent risk, and this op is no different. If successful, the payoff will be well worth it."

To come across as more casual, Jacob slides up and sits squarely on the desk with his feet dangling. More hands shoot up, but Jacob holds his hand out and continues, "Look guys, the Security Council is a neutral third party, right?"

That got him an honest laugh.

"The two times we gave notice these weapons mysteriously disappeared before we got there. Forty-eight hours is an eternity, so it's imperative that we catch these people with their pants down. We

simply can't afford target-softener beforehand because, as an *inspection team*, we will not fire upon them until they fire on us first. That sucks, but this facility needs to be taken as intact as possible, and we cannot violate the ROEs in the process. We do not want our actions to start a war here."

Jacob gestures to the simulation behind him as it reruns the seconds leading up to the pallet drops. "We're bettin' the farm that Homer will cooperate, and start shootin' the moment we pop over this rise. That'll be about twelve seconds out. If so, we'll respond accordingly—thereby clearing a path to the drop zone. If Homer holds fire until we're overhead, then the drop ships will get shot up before we had the opportunity to deploy the teams. Either way, we are totally committed. The assault force will drop—or it will crash—right smack dab in Homer's lap. From there, all combat effective troops that make it through the insertion will proceed to their objectives."

Hands go up, but Jacob puts his hand out, "Oh ya, something you should know. Three of you will be assigned to the assault teams for this mission. I don't know who the lucky trio are, but they will be notified before you people turn in for the night."

Hands go up again, so Jacob points to one of the privates in the front row and asks, "Yes."

7

to keep my soul

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-OCTOBER-31-SATURDAY
TIME: 01:48zulu (local 27:05mst)

At the end of a cul-de-sac three men sit and watch as the Trick or Treaters venture out onto the street. It may be a bit early back on Earth, but here on Scab, with Electra fading out in the west, it happens to be dusk. And save for those handing out candy, like these three, or jumping out of the shadows to scare the little creatures, the adults are nowhere in sight.

This is the kid's night out.

Children unescorted by adults on Halloween would have been unheard of even a hundred years ago, but nobody is concerned about their kids running around on the street tonight. In fact, nobody is concerned about their kids running around the street at anytime. It's not that there's an all-seeing Big Brother watching out for them, it's just that Big Brother would be a weenie when compared to those who are watching—their parents.

Just nanoseconds away via the neuronet, the parents know right where their kids are and what they are doing. To a point that is. They can't exactly read the child's mind with this technology, that interface is illegal, but they can pinpoint them on a GEV display and talk to them at any time. It's not that there isn't any crime on the streets of Sapphire, it's just that crime doesn't often happen in neighborhoods such as this. Police are expensive, few, and far between, so like most adults on Sapphire everyone here has taken an oath *to protect and to serve* as the need arises.

Violent crime was rampant before five score ago, but now with an armed citizenry—a practice employed by most independent planets—assault, rape, armed robbery, burglary and murder are at an all-time low. Go ahead, make a grab for a kid, and see what happens

to you! Extreme distress, physical trauma, or unconsciousness automatically results in an alert to be broadcast across the local net; and if you knew what was coming your way you'd wish to God you were caught by the cops because the average Jane or Joe Q. Citizen has no sense of humor about such things. *Two in the chest and one in the head* is the rule of thumb, and these people take it to heart.

Four little girls run up to Pete Suiters and shout at the top of their lungs, "Trick or Treat!"

The children know Pete as Mr. Happy, but his neighbors know him as Bob. Robert Happy is not exactly the name he would pick if he had a choice, but Interpol was getting close and it was the only identity Pete could scratch up on short notice. As for the original Robert Happy, he was not so happy when Pete unceremoniously chucked him out of an airlock eleven years ago, but them's the breaks.

One consolation is that a Robert Happy is enjoying his little retirement bungalow. Better yet, Robert Happy's estranged son couldn't tell the difference after over forty years of separation. Except for the fact that Pete is shacking up with yet another twenty-something bimbo, Bob's MO and a sore point between the two, Robert Happy III actually likes his dad now. A personable eighty-six year old that, as most octogenarians are, is healthy, buff, and randy as a mink. Something that Robert Three-Sticks can relate to as he himself approaches sixty.

Three-Sticks doesn't know what to make of his dad's friend. Two hours ago this guy called Charlie just shows up at the door unannounced; and as the four little girls scamper away with their loot Three-Sticks excuses himself and heads back into the house all the while wondering where these two came to know each other. By his demeanor it's obvious that Charlie is in law enforcement, like an investigator or maybe even a Police Chief, and such a man would not normally be the acquaintance, least not a friend, of a retired futures trader twice his age.

After two hours, Three-Sticks was getting uncomfortable. Every time he came back with sandwiches or beer, the conversation would instantly revert to mindless small talk. No one said anything, but he can take a subtle hint and considered asking Two-Sticks what this Charlie was all about after he left; but then it dawned on him—his dad happens to be the Police Liaison for the neighborhood watch, so why bother?

And without knowing it, he has saved himself from a fate liken to that which befell his actual father eleven years before.

General Charles Hershey finally has time alone with the infamous Pete Suiters. He takes the bowl of candy from Pete and sorts

through it. Finding the right piece, he pops it in his mouth and asks, "Will you do it?"

Zoot Suiters, as he is known, the true to form incarnation of the fictional *Kaiser Souse*, sits perplexed by the request made of him by his friend—his only friend. Pete looks around, making sure that his faux-son, Three Sticks, has already gone inside, and after verifying that the next pair of Trick or Treaters are two houses away, Pete leans in towards the General and whispers, "You can't be serious."

"Oh, I am." Charles hands Pete his business card.

Pete takes the card, and noticing the word 'HELL' written in red ink across the face of it.

Pete cringes, "I know who this is."

"Figured you would."

"She owns the house five doors down from me!"

Charles scoots in closer, "Look, you know what's going on in that hole. I know you do. Don't bullshit me."

"Honestly, I didn't until now. And, to be frank, I'd rather not get dragged into this one." Pete adjusts in his seat and shirt to give himself a clear path to the pistol holstered at the small of his back. He then elects to make one attempt to talk sense into Charlie, "If you know what's good for you, you'd forget about what you saw. Take it from me, my friend, those people are very serious and they've got a long reach if you know what I mean."

"I'm aware of that, but for once in my career I choose not to look the other way." As Pete starts to reach for his pistol, he hears Charlie follow with, "I want to keep my soul."

Pete moves his hand down to feign scratching himself, and wonders why he isn't punching a 10mm hole or two through Charlie's forehead about now. Then it dawned on him—Charlie has a point; and as much as it goes against his nature, Pete realizes that there are some things in this universe that are too evil for even him to ignore.

Pete sighs, "You know what happens if I get caught?"

"Look, I guarantee you won't be anywhere near the place when the Annex shows up. Their Beta-Six, Jackson, he has a hard-on for protocol. I wish everyone were as predictable. There is no doubt in my mind that we'll have every bit of forty-eight hours to pull you and the weapons out." Charlie then shrugs, "But, if you don't show up next week to finish the retrofits, you'll be out business for sure. The people I work for are not totally stupid."

"You really think your crazy-ass plan will work?"

"What plan? Why make it any more complicated than it has to be? Spooky will tear the place apart lookin' for those bombs; and in the process, he'll find the hole. It's that simple!"

"What's to find? The SS will sterilize it."

Charlie chimes in, "They have to get there, first."

Pete's eyes light up at what Charlie just said. It's clear to Pete that Charlie intends to throw his Base Defense Forces at the Co-op's Security Services. The S2, also known as the SS in industry circles, are highly trained and dedicated warriors that answer only to the central committee of the SCC. They have unlimited funding, their own agenda, and a reputation for not playing well with others.

Now, Base Defense troops may be some tough Hombre's, professional soldiers specializing in delaying actions such as defending air bases and the like, but the S2 is chock full of mercenaries, criminals and your garden variety sociopath. The idea of jumping-their-shit seems irresistible to Pete. Some people simply deserve to die, and the S2, as a whole, is at the front of the line—ahead of everyone else including ol' Zoot Suit.

Charlie smiles, "Any one of my people would give up a choice piece of their anatomy just for the chance to cap-off one of those bastards. And, what are my handlers gonna do about it, hu? Court marshal me? Fuck 'em."

"They could kill you."

"Do I look like I give a shit?"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a little boy thrusts his hand in the bowl and shouts up at Charlie, "Trick or treat!" As the child digs through the candy, he cries out, "Jessie, they have taffy!"

Jessica steps out from the shadows. Both men are surprised by her stealth, and are quietly embarrassed that a pre-teen could startle them so.

Then with a haunting voice, way too mature for her years, she reels in her little brother, "Grab an' go, Diego. Don't be rude."

"Okie dokie!" The boy snatches a piece and flies back into his sisters waiting arms. She scoops him up and he shows her his prize, "Taffy!"

"What do you say to the nice men?" Jessica reminds him.

"Thank you!"

Diego's feet are already pumping when Jessica puts him down, and as he races off to the next house, she calls out, "Wait up, Diego!"

"Hey!" Charlie offers the bowl to Jessica, "Want some candy, little girl?"

How insulting can you get! Calling a twelve-year-old girl a *little girl* is up there with calling her a skank. Jessica glances at Pete who is shaking his head with his eyes closed. He knows her, and he knows what's coming.

Jessica then looks at Charlie and sighs, "That's weak. Look, try this line: *Hey kid, ya wanna to pet my rat?* Now, with a come-on like that, some prepubescent little slut like me just might take you up on it." She then thumbs towards Pete and smiles, "Then again, you might get shot. Old Bob there, he has an aversion to cradle robbing. Don'cha Bob?"

With open mouth astonishment, Charlie looks over at Pete who is unable to contain himself. Pete's apparent seizure explodes into howling laughter. With that, Charlie's uptight facade drops and he also laughs out loud.

Jessica has already made good her escape, and as she ambles off into the night, Charlie wags his finger after her, "I like that kid."

"That's Red's kid."

"No shit! Didn't fall far from the tree from what I hear."

"You don't know the half of it. I watched her grow up. Only kid I ever liked."

Their laughter is quickly checked by three more tykes running up and shouting, "Trick or Treat!"

As these children race away with their candy, Pete says, "Spooky will have the card by tomorrow."

Curious as to Pete's change of heart, Charlie asks, "Why?"

"If you must know...I'd like to git my soul back."

8

big six

LCTN: THETA-2-TAURUS-5A (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93957.0101 (49pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-6-FRIDAY
TIME: 04:33zulu (local 10:27mst)

The Buzzard Was Their Friend may have been playing for the troops, but it's *Mr. Toad's Wild Ride* that comes to Jacob's mind whenever he is riding in the hold of a drop ship. Jacob would rather be flying escort than being trapped in this thing, no matter how protected they may be. At least he's not clamped in the racking and facing rearward like the others.

Flying nap of the earth makes it difficult for most to negotiate the pallet racking inside a Razor. Even with the amplified strength of the JACC, and so many handholds to choose from, staying on your feet is a chore because every ten or fifteen seconds the ship is either climbing to clear an obstacle or diving to avoid unnecessary exposure.

Challenging as it may be, the old heads, like Jacob, make it seem easy. It has been an eternity since he's conducted a walk-about preceding a hot pallet extraction. Normally the final VI is done by the ship's loadmaster, but this brand-spankin' new Razorback has no loadmaster. In fact, it has no crew at all because it's not expected to survive the next five minutes.

The drop ship that spearheads an assault is believed to be on a one-way trip. Being first in means, you draw the undivided attention of all fire positions, and those that react, by painting or shooting at the intruder, that is, are themselves locked in by the Warthog gunships that follow close behind. Then when you consider that the target for today is guarded by highly trained Base Defense Forces (BDF), chances are HWG99-02078-36 is destined to become a grease-spot in the sky.

A hell of a mission for a maiden flight.

One might think a hanger-queen would be more appropriate for such an assignment, but fat chance getting seasoned troops to go

in harms way on a flying lemon. Then one may suggest that an older ship, one that has realized most of its service life, might be a better choice, but there is no real service life for a drop ship. Except for portions of the airframe, the oldest working HWG in service is as up-to-date as the ship Jacob perceives himself to be trapped in. Also, aircrews and assault teams are not thrilled with the idea of putting their most successful ships up as sacrificial lambs. They actually form an attachment to the older ships, and the act of throwing one away like this has proven to be detrimental to moral. In the minds of the troops, it's better to have an old bird shot down in an honest fight.

Or, as they say, retired through action.

In terms of budget dollars, the loss of a new HWG99 will end up costing the Annex the equivalent of \$856,010,990,803.15 in United States currency. Of course, when offset by maintenance and support projected over a twenty-year period, the final write off will end up running \$-1,492.95^{US}. Which is, in reality, a plus on the ledger books for equipment that costs the SA somewhere in the neighborhood of Au0.00 in Sapphire-GES (Gold Exchange Standard) currency to manufacture and deploy.

From the outside, the heroic effort to track costs that don't actually exist may seem a bit ridiculous; however, unlike most incomprehensible accounting processes, the bean counters of the Annex have devised an ingenious system that provides an unrestricted avenue in which the SA may dump tons of currency into circulation. That is, into the waiting hands of concerns who are both sympathetic to, and majority owned by the Annex.

It all started innocently enough in transportation, moving manufactured goods and colonists to the Pleiades, with iron, copper, aluminum and other raw materials coming back through the pipeline. Inside seventy years, the original holding company had split up into an economic juggernaut of forty-eight independent conglomerates that openly compete against each other. The real coup for the Annex has been their behind the scenes dominance in a variety of key industries, including material distribution, ship building, weapons development and manufacturing.

The payoff is that the mission planners know the outlay of the defensive perimeter of the target, they know how many BDF troops are stationed there, they know how they are supplied, and how they should be deployed. And as Jacob struggles to get to the back row of the racking, he wonders if they missed anything. The green troops, in the hold of the Razor, are too young and new to know the difference, but the troops going in would.

The SA is high in numbers, short on recruits, and long in

tooth. With an average age of 36 the old-heads are not keen on the idea of losing too many of their own in a risky assault such as this. That is, without an edge and a payoff.

The song, *The Buzzard Was Their Friend*, fades off just as Jacob reaches the back row. Jacob hasn't heard the tune since he last led troops in a hot drop over twelve years ago. Everyone in his command likes to hear it, obviously by the hootin' and hollerin' goin' on, but Jacob can't stand the damned thing. In his mind, it puts a lot of pressure on him.

Traditionally, it's the sort of honor that is reserved only for an unusually popular commander who has been put-out-to-pasture or has died a glorious death. Jacob believes that he doesn't deserve this sort of tribute, but he is very popular so he feels compelled to deal with it.

It does fire up the troops and that's a good thing.

Just then, CIC cracks through the radio, ["Buzzard, we have twenty-one defense fighters over the A.O., but two flights are being lured away from your line of attack. Just thought you'd like to know."]

Jacob smiles, "We were expecting at least ten more than that. Things are looking up!"

CIC cuts in, ["They're still going to be bothersome, Buzzard."]

"Ya, but with twelve gun ships and forty-some Thunderbolts right on my ass I'm not worried about it."

["Ready or not, inside two minutes you'll find out."]

"Thanks for the skinny. Buzzard out."

CIC signs off, and as Jacob turns for the cockpit Anthony catches his eye; but before Jacob can blow past him, Anthony asks, "Marshal, how long will it take for us to know if we'll be called up or not?"

Jacob stops and turns towards Anthony. He then looks at the rest of the green troops who are all now quiet and staring intently at him—ready to hang on his every word. Jacob's right eye twitches because it was not the question he wanted to answer, or think about for that matter. Planning always has to make good for the worst case scenario, and the Murder Board cleared the mission as is, but the risk was not beyond these people's comprehension. Jacob feels that it's bad Karma to raise these type of questions at this point in the game, but the query was made so he must honor it.

Jacob calls out loud enough for all to hear, "Did everyone hear the question? How long before you know you'll be called up. If you're called up that means that the assault has stalled. Which also means

that most of your teammates in the assault are already dead. From breaching the perimeter, we are talking about four, or maybe five minutes at the most. Your maneuver would be preceded by a full bombardment of the target area. At the very least we will win this engagement, but that last scenario is one I can live without." He notices the time and announces, "Thirty seconds people!"

The troops are now dead quiet as Jacob steps over to the hatch of the cockpit. Silence is normal for the last thirty or so seconds towards the end of a drop, but realizing that they, the new guys, are not at any real risk, they now fear for their comrades in the ships behind them. A thousand emotions now race through their minds, but a sense of relief dominates their thoughts. And as the Razorback bottoms out from a shallow dive and hugs the deck of a long valley, every greenhorn strapped down in the hold, without exception, now feels guilt for feeling relief.

Jacob high-fives Angela as the transparent hatch opens for him. The hatch closes and Jacob puts up both hands and flashes ten seconds to Angela.

Angela shouts, "Less than ten people. Hang on!"

The back of the drop ship opens. The drogue chute snaps out and starts to deploy the main chute.

With the material of the canopy spooling out, Angela smiles at Jacob, "Hey Jake, what is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?"

It's estimated that less than 10% of the movies and television programs from the 20th Century have survived the neglect of the last 300 years. Though heroic efforts were made to preserve the bodies of work from masters such as Kurosawa, Coppola, Spielberg and Kubrick, a few of the more obscure gems managed to make it.

And in his best Python-twit voice, Jacob asks, "What do you mean? An African or European swallow?"

With the chute snapping open behind the drop ship, Angela gulps air in mock terror, "Hu? I...I don't know that!"

Suddenly, the entire floor of the hold, including the racking, is ripped out the back of the Razor with a violence. Not ready for the immediacy of an actual extraction, more than a few of the new people yelp. As the pallet clears the back of the ship, the hatch to the cockpit opens. While Jacob leans out to watch the pallet fall behind, the hatch to the galley, across from him, snaps open.

Cricket stretches out from the open hatch, "Jacob, how come you know so much about swallows?"

"You swallow, you tell me!"

Cricket playfully sticks her tongue out at him as the drop ship vaults over a rise and banks hard giving Cricket her cue to jump. She lets go and flips Jacob the bird while falling into the slipstream. As two other troopers follow her out of the hatch, Jacob jumps before the drop ship levels out.

The Defense Forces didn't disappoint. Just seconds after the four clear the Razor it is saturated by fire. Explosive rounds start pummeling the hull, but before the ship is converted to aerial compost, a half dozen Warthogs pop over the rise and open up.

The gunships didn't bother with painting or targeting. Twelve hundred meters of the perimeter was obliterated inside five seconds, followed by a three hundred meter wide swath cut all the way to the landing zone four kilometers in. The assault forces were right on their tail, and because of their speed, the drogue chutes deployed on the perimeter's edge with the pallets fully extracted a half a klick from the LZ. Before the pallets hit the ground, the teams deploy. Hundreds of troopers in JACCs, scores of PacMan robot drones, a dozen Wolverine tanks, and half as many more Badger APCs eject from the pallet racking. The target was not ready for this tactic, so the assault teams drop towards a cold LZ in the middle of a hot AO. Within seconds, they group up, and those teams scatter in all directions.

From their OP, three kilometers from the target, Jacob, Cricket and her team, watch the battle as it unfolds. It ain't much of a fight. The landing inside the perimeter of the base has caught the BDF by surprise. With the Wolverines tearing-ass through the base, and the Warthogs raining hell from above, the whole area was being chewed up from the inside out. With this onslaught, it is just a matter of time before the base commander gives the order for his troops to stand down.

In his excitement, and completely out of character, Jacob jumps up from behind cover and cheers, "W00T, Mutherfuckers! W0000..."

Exposed, a laser, once an effective weapon now used for harassment, reaches out from a bunker and slashes Jacob across his chest. Jacob immediately drops back behind the rocks. He pats out the flames and scrapes a few glowing embers from the top layer of the armor of his JACC.

As the laser thrashes at their cover, Cricket gives Jacob a long look and calmly asks, "w00t? Where in the fuck did you get that?"

Sheepishly, Jacob grunts, "It's just a scratch."

Cricket shouts, "A scratch? My ass!" She whacks him upside

the head. The canopy prevented her from actual contact, but the gesture was only to get his attention as she proceeds to read him the riot act, "God damn it, Jake! I'll snort your exhaust on CAP, I'll walk your point and chase ol' Homer straight into hell! Anytime! But this is the last time I sit ringside and F.O. with you! If you weren't wearin' cover I'd be bitch-slappin' your shit about now for drawing fire down on my O.P.! And I don't mean bitch-slap in that nice, weekend sort of way, buckwheat. Do you read me!"

Jacob rolls his eyes, "I read you loud and clear, sergeant."

The laser has stopped so Cricket and Jacob look up over the rocks to view the action.

As they watch a Warthog duke it out with the bunker, Cricket continues to rag at him, "Christ, Jake, in a few years you can retread to squad leader! Until then make an executive decision. You're the Optimus Prime! The Big-Six in our little clique! Make Rutledge strut his stuff and you get your ass back in the shit!"

The bunker explodes. The one-kiloton bomb that did the deed put out a fireball over a hundred feet in diameter. With that, Cricket and Jacob drop back down behind the rock.

Cricket jabs her finger at him, "Just because we're fuckin' after hours doesn't mean I want you to be hangin' it out in my O.P.! I have an aversion to hostile fire! Maybe you don't mind, but I don't want to get dead!"

The shock wave hits.

At three kilometers it isn't much more than a gentle shove, but it could still knock you off balance if you weren't in a fighting suit. Also, the noise from the blast was more like a muffled backfire than what one would expect from a nuke. Even a small one at that.

If they were closer it would have been rather impressive, but at this distance it was just kind of there.

With the dust stirred up, swirling around them and then drawing back towards the blast zone, Jacob tries to smooth her feathers, "How about RECON on the next rotation, hu? No more of this Forward Observer shit. How's that grab you?"

Cricket grins, "It's a deal! I'll go over the fence an' hunt snipe any day over fuckin' off on missions like this."

Suddenly the Warthog that blew the bunker rips overhead. The gunship pilot, Michelle Kiel, turns the ship on a dime and heads back in—banking back and forth to avoid fire.

On the Forward Observer frequency, Michelle calls out,

["Fuckin' Off, this is Gun Crazy. You there?"]

Cricket responds, "Go ahead, Guns."

The radio cracks with Michelle's voice, ["F.O., it looks like Homer is making a break for it. We count thirty plus shadows on an escape and evasion track in the wash at zero-one-four, and heading your way at twelve-hundred meters out. Want us to pin 'em down, or put 'em down?"]

With Jacob frantically waving his hands in her face, and shaking his head, Cricket replies, "Stand by, Guns."

["Roger that, Fox."]

Cricket knows what Jacob has in mind.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Jacob asks as they watch two more bombs go off on the far side of the base.

Grudgingly, Cricket gives in, "Okay, shit-head, if you insist. Get into position and keepin' your head down. I'll call two squads up from reserve."

She whacks Jacob on the back as he vaults over the ridge and drops into the ravine below.

Cricket calls out to Michelle over the radio, "Guns, do a fly by every minute or two to slow 'em down. We need time to get reserves into position. You copy?"

["We copy."]

Cricket switches over to Angie's personal frequency, "Hey Ten Klicks, you got your ears on?"

Angela comes back at her over the radio, ["Ya, Cricket, I heard. I'll send third platoon."]

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At the landing zone with the reserves, Angela flashes three fingers towards Sandoval, then spins her index finger in a circle. Sandoval starts barking orders for her squads to form up on her.

Over Angela's radio, Cricket continues, ["I'll give Sandoval the details on the way in. She's got fifteen minutes to get into position, or we'll have to call in Gun Crazy to do her thing."]

"Roger that, Cricket." Angela, turns to Sandoval, "Can do?"

"Can do!" Sandoval turns to third platoon, "Ready or not, it's time to pop your cherry! We got a mission at the O.P. We'll go in under my call sign, Harpy-Six." She points to Anthony, "Gudici, you're

on point. Let's haul ass!"

Anthony was both surprised and apprehensive to the order. He was now point on his first hot op. He knows it's clear to the OP, but point is still point and the AO is hot.

Anthony leaps up into the air and flies off towards the OP by nap of the earth, and like juvenile vultures hearing the dinner bell, the rest of the recruits in the platoon scramble into the air after him.

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Sergeant-Major Alex Rzegocki, of the BDF, doesn't like this situation one bit. He can lead these thirty-four people into the ravine and move quicker from this point on, because of the cover it offers; but this gorge through the mountain is a perfect setup for an ambush. That's where he would be if he were waiting for them. The gunship that keeps ripping overhead, slowing their progress, is one of the infamous Warthogs he has heard so much about. The ship has had them dead to rights several times; and in his mind, either the pilot is simply inexperienced, focusing on the battle at hand or the pilot is actually tracking their progress for Spooky lurking up ahead.

No matter, he has brought fourteen civilians and two squads over three kilometers of open terrain, a risky affair, but it is not his style to take stupid chances. Not at this juncture. Then again—this whole thing is one big stupid chance. This is not the sort of thing Defense Forces troops are trained to do, but the Sergeant-Major spent half of his carrier in the Security Services. If anyone were to get them through, it would be him.

Why the base commander, Hershey, wanted to pull two squads away from the fight and escort these people out before it started is beyond him. As he stands forward with his point squad, looking for any sign of Spooky, he wonders why they are violating procedures by taking such a huge risk with these people's lives. He has duked it out with the Annex before, and what bugs him is that the SA is totally unpredictable. The passive sensors in their own fighting suits function well, but the battle that's starting to wane behind them makes this a rather difficult task. Then again, the troopers of the Annex have earned the handle of Spooky by not cooperating—being difficult to spot—even under the best of conditions.

At least they may not have to fight it out if they get caught. If they were at war then they would simply die if they half-stepped into the wrong place at the wrong time; but this is an *inspection* visit, so the SA will give them one fair warning before they open up. As it is, he ordered his people not to fire unless fired upon; however, he did

not have the time to disarm the fighting suits issued to the civilians. One old-bastard clearly has some experience with these systems. It goes without saying, if this fossil knows the equipment then he'll know how activate and use the weapons.

Rzegocki can control his people, they follow orders, but this one guy is truly an unknown element, and that scares him. Not enough to make him overly cautious, but it makes him worry about the safety of his people.

He couldn't give a rats-ass about the civilians though.

0110011-0101011-0101001-0101100-0101100-0111010

Jacob is clearly impressed by the leader of this little band. Hunkered down between two rocks, he watched as the shadows of eleven troops slip past him and stop just a few meters away. Clearly, these people know what they are about, because they have not moved an inch and the others are hanging back nice and quiet like.

Jacob radios to Sandoval, "Harpy-Six, do you have them locked in?"

["That's affirmative, Buzzard. We count eleven in front of you, and twenty-four just forty meters behind you. Check that, we have one moving up, so keep still."]

"Thanks, Harpy, paint on my signal."

["We copy."]

It was just then that a shadow creeps past Jacob to close in on his buddies. Jacob does not have a good feeling about this, so he slowly turns his scorpion gun in towards where he believes his center of mass is.

Jacob does not want to kill any of these people, but if the shooting starts—this clown is going to get cashed in. Not that he's up to no-good, he could have been asked to advance, but then he could be a discipline problem and decided to sneak up all on his own. Not likely though, but this guy has *all* of his attention and that's enough.

He dies first.

0101000-0101011-0100110-01000100

Pete Suiters had no choice but to move forward on Rzegocki's team. Scouting the ravine is taking way too much time, and he doesn't feel good about this direction anyway. Obviously Rzegocki is not thrilled either, so Pete wonders why are they waiting here.

Without the use of radio, Pete asks Rzegocki, "What's the hold up Sergeant?"

Rzegocki is alarmed, but whispers, "Mr. Suiters! What the fuck are you doing up here!"

Pete suggests, "I take it that a different route is in order?"

"You're reading my mind, Mr. Suiters."

Pete interjects, "I'd be along that ridge if I were gonna ambush us. How about we head north a half a klick and try there."

"I concur, Mr. Suiters."

Pete smiles, "Well then, let's get on the hump Sergeant-Major. We're wasting time here!"

Jacob overheard the conversation and can't believe his ears. After all this time he recognizes that voice. Realizing that he has to act or lose them he flashes a targeting laser on Pete's back for just a fraction of a second just to get their attention.

Rzegocki spins around and cries out to Pete, "Don't move Mr. Suiters, you've been painted for God's sake!"

"From where?"

Jacob calmly answers, "Right behind you."

Suddenly, the ridge opens up with targeting lasers that touch each and every one of the squad members and the troops behind them. Everyone freezes, except for Pete, who drops and rolls for cover—clearly blowing the invisibility afforded by the holographic cloak. Pete can't be blamed for his almost Pavlovian reaction. In his world, movement means life, but this is one of the rare situations where the wrong move may exacerbate the situation and result in death.

Rzegocki shouts, "Nobody fire! Hold your fire or you'll get us all killed! Do you hear me, Mr. Suiters!"

With his weapons raised, and looking for a target to shoot at, Pete grunts, "I didn't come all this way to get caught!"

Jacob, now squatting beside Pete, comments, "Listen to the sergeant, Zooter, or you will die."

To nobody in particular, Pete responds, "I'm dead anyway."

Jacob, with his scorpion gun just inches from Pete's chest, materializes into view and asks, "Now or later Zooter, it won't make a difference will it?"

Pete turns off his cloak off and retracts his rail gun, "I guess not, Spooky."

Sergeant Rzegocki radios to the rest of the troops, "Okay, everybody, stand down and disarm. That's an order."

As the BDF troops uncloak and start to detach their weapons from the hard mounts of their fighting suites, Jacob retracts his weapon and offers a hand to Pete.

Grudgingly, Pete accepts the help.

As Pete gets to his feet, Rzegocki turns to Jacob, "Hey, Spooky, thanks for not killing my people."

"I'd rather avoid any unnecessary bloodshed. I take it that your troops do know the drill? If they cooperate, we'll treat them good and out-process them within a week."

"They will cooperate."

"Thanks, Sergeant-Major."

Pete cringes, "Who the fuck are you?"

Jacob smiles, "How ya been, Zooter?"

"Am I supposed to know you?"

Jacob gives a low whistle, "We go way back...Pop."

It was like a wave of joy sweeps through Pete—Jacob is alive! Of all the wet work Pete had to do in his past, here was the one job that got away. What's more, Pete was glad that he did.

Pete grins big, "Where the fuck have you been hiding?"

9

end of the line

LCTN: SOL-3, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.014au from SOL)
DATE: 2273ce-APRIL-1-TUESDAY
TIME: 20:05zulu (12:05pm pst)

At twenty-two years of age Jacob has been around the block more than a few times; however, at this very moment, he is in a flat out race for his life.

Sexually active teens and young adults are a natural condition of the species, and though many western cultures have historically frowned upon them acting on these powerful urges—nowadays they are encouraged to do so. It's not that people are less virtuous than before, it's just that things have changed and the once forbidden fruit is now a dietary staple.

Then again, what's the point of moralizing to those who are in the know?

First off, medical science has finally made good on a centuries old promise and viral diseases are a thing of the past. The common cold as well as the ravages of STDs are all but forgotten in the minds of man. Secondly, crimes such as rape and pedophilia are notably rare, and so much so as to be practically unheard of on the dockets. Predators today are smart enough to take their act into virtual reality and leave real-reality alone for once.

Such is the measure of progress.

Lastly, the neuronet has invaded all levels of culture and society and there are no mysteries left for the young to discover. Innocence is lost before the advent of puberty with the simple push of a button. It could be said that condoning such behaviors puts the kids back in synch with their hormonal clocks, but the truth be known that good judgment does come from experience.

If you can't put the Genie back in the bottle, after the fact,

then might as well use it to learn the young'uns something. Because of the net, an unplanned pregnancy is an honest accident, and a rather uncommon one for that matter. Young ladies all know what it's like to push something akin to a cantaloupe out from between their legs without having to carry a child to term, and that, in itself, has gotten all of their attention. Also, young men can experience first-hand the humiliation young ladies go through by unwanted advances, or the terror imposed by the threat of attack. From this, males have become somewhat sensitive and caring, and in turn, more attractive to the young ladies by getting in touch with their feminine side. Imagine how far a guy can get with the fairer sex by not beating their chest and baying at the moon.

On the other hand, at an impressionable age, Jacob learned that many older women don't like to play soft games, and they tend to appreciate the endurance and stamina demonstrated by many a younger man. Especially those few that know how to beat their chest and bay at the moon. Not obviously so, but bold enough to get their attention just the same.

Being a quick study, Jacob took these lessons to heart.

Early on, *exempli gratia*, Jacob managed to make-time, many times, with three of his mother's dearest and most attractive friends. By and by his mother has wondered why these ladies have accepted her in their clique, but none of them have elected to volunteer a reason. Things are best hidden in plain sight, and it is truly an anomaly where all the members of a coffee klatch, save for one, hold tight to their own version of the same dirty little secret.

Jacob also studied anatomy under the tutelage of his high school science teacher during his senior year. These private coaching sessions went on with her for quite awhile, but by his insistence, Jacob received a fair grade based on the merits of his studies. It goes without saying that he studied long and hard for his scores.

The final example being that he has spent the last year and a half sharing the bed of his most recent employer. Normally this would not prove to be a problem, but Jacob fell prey and succumbed to the advances of her eighteen-year old daughter. Off and on for several months, that is.

More on than off to be exact.

Admittedly, this would not endear him to his employer, and one would expect that his services would be terminated forthwith when these encounters were ultimately exposed. In retrospect, this was bound to happen sooner or later. One would also believe that the phrase "You are so dead!" could be uttered in the heat of the moment, with some passion, yet not acted upon in earnest.

One couldn't be more wrong.

Monique Ribot, his employer, is the head of a concern that puts out a great effort in making substantial amounts of money off the greedy in mind, the weak in spirit, and by their own heroic efforts not to declare any of it. The labels *organized crime* and *the mob* are so out of date as to be laughable, but by definition are surprisingly accurate in this very instance.

Such clandestine activities require significant amounts of muscle, and those that look to encroach on her markets, or simply *piss in her Cheerios* as the saying goes, may find themselves rudely and abruptly life-challenged.

Thus, we return to Jacob and his current predicament.

Monique usually starts her day with beignets accompanied by dark coffee with chicory that would be sliceable if it were to sit for too long. Other times she will opt for a seven-minute egg, toast, and a whiff of orange pekoe. Either way, it is the exceptional morning when Jordan, her daughter, is not there to break that night's fast with her mother. Since Jordan's latest beau was not around the night before, she felt it was safe enough to enter her daughter's room unannounced. Now, Monique has always tried to respect Jordan's space and choice in sexual partners, however poor those choices have been, and to discover her adult child this morning with her feet-in-the-air was not totally unexpected, but it was the *who* that had mounted her was.

The Madame, also known as The Frog in industry circles, was not just taken aback by these proceedings before her, awkward as they were; she was driven into a blind-rage. Expressive and complete with her eyes rolling back to white, and the cursory gnashing of teeth. Acting out with the intensity of a feeding frenzy is just one of those extra little perks unique to her position as the biggest fish in the organizational food chain.

Jacob knew all along it was a bad plan to hook-up with his boss' daughter the way he has, and a dear friend did suggest that he reel-it-in before such curiosity got the better of him, but in Jacob's mind lil' Jordan is of-the-majority and she does have legs to die for. The irony being that *to die for* is not just an expression this time around, and Jacob is now compelled to run like the wind so as not to die for that knowledge.

After over three hours of escape, grand-theft auto, driving, reckless endangerment, crashing, running, hitching a ride, and now running again, Jacob has only progressed 41 kilometers. Finding himself in down town Los Angeles with wallet in hand, and dressed in only gym shorts and sandals, Jacob doesn't exactly blend in with the stylish Bunker Hill lunchtime crowd.

Jacob is getting desperate—all because he can feel them closing in. He doesn't know why he knows this, he just does. He has always known these things, and this awareness has saved him from harm on more than one occasion. This time, however, there is nowhere to hide, and to say that his predicament is scaring the shit out of him is, unfortunately, just a figure of speech.

Before setting out on that days activities, each of The Madame's solders and lieutenants will swallow a tiny disposable transponder. This is so that in the event anybody turns up missing, the organization will be able to track them down and find them, more often than not, buried in a shallow hole out in the desert. Early yesterday was when Jacob swallowed his last capsule, and at this very second, while he weaves through the people on the sidewalk, he would offer up his right testicle just to defecate nice and proper.

Without performing this act, and soon, he is a dead man.

Jacob knows that there are five of Monique's best out there, all his friends, but now he's been deemed "obsolete" and that's really-really bad. Better a pariah be. And though compadres to the bitter end, these people have a rotten job to do and Jacob does not fault them one bit. Unlike Jacob, they have been selected for their loyalty and ability to enforce with a quiet touch; and as much as Monique does not like to bring attention to herself, and her way of life, she is not at all interested in adhering to protocol today. She wants blood. Lots of it. Not so much to punish Jacob, but mostly as an object lesson for the benefit of her troops.

The message being, *I am not to be fucked with.*

Such opportunities are rare, and one in her lofty position must take advantage of them as they come, and though Monique can get another boy-toy with ease, she would rather forgive his transgressions. In all honesty, Jacob wasn't all-that, but as a lover he did wield a power over her and that was a first for any man. Gear and attitude can go a long way, but this *nobody* always knew what she needed as if he could read her mind. He knew what buttons to push, and when, and it pains her to order this talent to waste.

Business is business, and to maintain discipline examples must be made of the rank and file; but, now that she thinks about it, Jacob was not the lug nut he made himself out to be. He got too close—he gained her trust—and for that it's just as well that he become a memory. This steels her resolve that, at times, the herd must be culled of the weak, the stupid, and in this case, the ambitious.

Especially those randy little fucks who dip their wick in the wrong wax.

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They are right on top of him.

Jacob knows they don't see him yet, but they are there.

His only option is to keep moving. Movement is life. The transmitter in him is simple, below the radar, and gives them nothing but a vector, so they have to triangulate on the signal and this takes time. As long as Jacob changes his surroundings every half-minute or so, significantly so, they will not be able to get a clear fix on him.

If he could drop his drawers and pinch-a-load, in the midst of these lunch goers, he would. Yes, it would not be the most attractive of sights, and those around him would lose their appetites, but only then could he make a clean getaway.

If Monique's goons get a visual on him then it would not matter, and as fate would have it his luck simply runs out.

Nancy, an attractive and voluptuous dark skinned East-Indian, dressed in a gray pants suit, white blouse, and sporting a bad attitude, slaps Pete Suitors on the arm and shouts, "There he is! Three o'clock!"

Jacob was already beating-feet before he heard her.

He doesn't even look back as Nancy and Pete tear-ass after him. Jacob is quick and he puts some distance between them as he races ahead, and down an escalator towards the foot of Bunker Hill.

Right behind Nancy, Pete radios ahead, "He's heading towards Sixth Street! Cut him off at the Klick!" Releasing the transmitter, he then huffs, "I can't believe that we are chasing after this stupid shit. Would he listen? No! The young pups never listen!"

Nancy hits the top of the escalator and grunts, "The little prick deserves a medal if you ask me! You sure we can't let 'em go?"

"I used to have his job, Nance. Sorry, we gotta cap him."

"You and the Frog? No way!" Nancy laughs as she pushes people aside. "You and the Frog!"

"When I was first on the payroll."

"How long ago was that?"

"Bitch! You saying I'm old!"

"No, you're just too old for the Frog." She smiles back, "You're not too old for me."

Jacob bursts from the crowd and stumbles into the intersection, and with the screeching of gravity-breaks he jumps and

rolls over the top of a car that almost took him on as a hood ornament. Landing on his feet, he leaps over the next one and heads towards a huge building in front of him called One-Klick.

Pete is amazed as by Jacob's luck and ability to jump. The ground car was occupied by the other three of Pete's crew, and if they didn't hit their breaks, the chase would have been over with. Pete rips past them, hot after Jacob, but now he is astonished that the kid has slipped into One-Klick. Unless Jacob knows the layout, this was a very stupid move. Then again, this building is a one-kilometer tall monolith of engineering with 222 floors and 35 compound elevators. When you throw in a maze of stairs, ladders, ducts, and passageways, Pete thinks, *Maybe this move isn't that stupid?*

Nancy punches the hood of the car and points to the other side of the building, "Hey, wake up! That was him! Cut him off at the other side!"

In the main lobby of One-Klick, Jacob doesn't have a clue where to go. He notices Pete and Nancy as they enter the North entryway; and he was about to make a break for doors to the South, but the ground car pulls up and the other three goons pile out of it.

Cut off, Jacob leaps back into an elevator landing. He looks at the people waiting for a lift and they look at him as if he just crawled out from under a moss-rock. If he were to go up it will make it harder for Monique's crew to find him, and this would buy him time, but he doesn't have time to wait.

Pete and his crew are moving in.

Just past the elevator landing is a double glass door with a sign next to them that reads *Steel Annex*. With so few options to choose from, Jacob bolts for it before they get sight of him.

Jacob bursts through the doors into the lobby of the Steel Annex and is struck by the décor. It's all black. The rock on the walls, the furniture, the floor, the ceiling, and even the receptionist desk is black. Depth and textures abound, but there is no egress from this room. No escape to be had. Jacob turns to look back at the shadows of Pete and Nancy as they converge on the smoked-glass doors. He bumps into the receptionist desk and spins around.

Maggie, the receptionist, looks up from her paperback book, an outdated technology that still hangs on to this day, and gives a genuine smile to the practically naked young man before her, "May I help you?"

Jacob is taken by this youthful blond, beach-babe. The California white bread variety that exists only in the wet-dreams of men and women alike.

"I don't know. Can you?"

"End of the line, Jake." Says Pete as he enters the lobby. "I wish things turned out different, but 'cha screwed up big time this time, son."

Nancy and the crew slip in and slowly spread out.

Realizing he can't get away, Jacob turns back to Maggie and shrugs, "Well, it's been nice knowing you."

Maggie looks around towards Pete, "May I help you, Sir?"

"Ya, go take a break." grunts Pete as they approach.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I won't be relieved for another twenty-minutes; however, I can have some refreshments brought out to you if you'd like?"

Pete tries to reason with Jacob, "Come on, son, let's get this over with."

As Pete reaches out to take Jacob by the arm—a scorpion gun snaps around from behind Maggie's chair, and within a second its laser lock sight paints a red dot on Pete's chest. Realizing that this *girl* isn't just a hired underling, he pulls his hand back.

She's military, an SA trooper, and to tangle with any one of them is not exactly healthy. Especially one with a minigun and a service industry smile on her face.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I believe that the young gentleman would like to stay awhile." Maggie pushes a button on a hidden console in front of her and calls out. "Mr. Jamison, would you be so kind as to bring out some coffee for all our guests."

Pete has a good understanding what their situation is, and he hoped that the other four would likewise keep their cool, but that was not to be.

"Fuck 'er! Let's do 'em both!" was the last thing Nancy was to say in this life as she pulls a 10mm pistol out from under her jacket.

With two quick rips in the air, both Nancy and the goon opposite from her, also with weapon in hand, are cut down. The scorpion gun settles back to lock on Pete. No doubt, Pete was impressed, but the other two, who opted not to pull their pistols, were scared to statues. Not so much by the death of their buddies, but because of the two scorpion guns that dropped from the ceiling to lock on them.

Retaining her receptionist charm, Maggie asks Pete, "Sir, with this unpleasantness now behind us, would you like cream or sugar?"

"What?"

"For your coffee, Sir."

"Ah...no, thanks."

"We'll tidy this up then. Have a nice day, Sir."

Taking this queue, Pete motions for the other two survivors to leave. Without looking back, they move quickly out the door, but before he himself steps out, Pete turns to stare at Jacob.

Pete has liked Jacob from day one, and he always thought of him more as an equal than the lowest man on the totem pole as Monique's shag de jour. Not having to kill the young pup actually made his day.

Pete may be looking for a new job this very afternoon, but them's the breaks. It's time for a career change anyway.

With some relief, Pete grins, "Take care, son."

As the door closes behind Pete, Jacob just stands there dumbfounded. He is alive, and that is not exactly the outcome he was expecting.

"Hungry?"

Jacob turns back to Maggie, "Huh?"

"You hungry? I'll take you to lunch."

"Ah...sure? Ya, I could go for something to eat."

"Put this on or we won't get in anywhere." Maggie tosses Jacob a black tee shirt and smiles big, "Have a seat and we'll take off in a few."

With shirt in hand, Jacob decides to drop into one of the cushy lobby chairs and wait for Maggie. Why not? Where else was he going to go now that he is *persona non grata* here on Earth?

Jacob takes a moment to look at Nancy who is laying askew before him. While Maggie calls her Mr. Jamison to send for a mop-up, Jacob ponders over Nancy's torn and lifeless body.

There by the grace of God go I, thought Jacob.

He does not know why this phrase comes to mind, he is not a believer, but it does hark back to when he was a child, and his aunt who was a minister in a revival of early Christianity. A return to one of the many ancient sects that believed in the inherent goodness of the corporeal world, love, acceptance, charitable and good deeds without recognition, and inclusion for all. They believed that, ultimately, the whole of mankind and the spirit world would be saved. Including the

devil himself.

Then it dawned on him. One day, when he was six, he and his aunt were stuck in traffic. Crawling past the wreckage of an accident they both saw a corpse laying on the ground, just like Nancy, so his aunt uttered this simple prayer. He has always wondered what it meant, but now he knows.

Another thought then comes to mind, If there is a God, I wonder how long he'll smile on my dumb-ass. *If* he smiles on my dumb-ass! Then again is God a she? If so, then maybe he has a chance if that were the case?

It was also said of his aunt that she was psychic, and as crazy as it sounds she usually knew when Jacob was up to some mischief. She always said that God had big plans for him, and for the first time he wished that she were around to clue him in because his life just took another turn for the surreal.

Thoughts abound, and memory serves him up yet another oddity for the moment at hand. Jacob's mother compared him to a pet cat he had as a child. A fuzzy Manx named Mooch. This ornery beast was loveable enough, but always slithering in and out of trouble. Mooch should have been killed off a number of times, but the hairball refused to lie down and cooperate.

And with that thought, Jacob realized that he just used up life number one.

He has eight left to go.

10

a definite strain on the scrotum

LCTN: THETA-2-TAURUS-5A (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93957.0101 (49pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-6-FRIDAY
TIME: 05:45zulu (local 11:50mst)

Cricket was waiting for them.

As the last of the prisoners are escorted back into the base by the ambush team, Cricket intercepts Jacob and Pete who are hanging back at the end of the column.

"No way! This is the guy!" laughs Cricket as she shakes Pete's hand. "For thirty years I hear these wild ass stories about a guy named Zoot Suit and I can't believe that I actually git to have a face with the name. I mean, I'm ticked pink to meet you."

Pete smiles, "Pink! Is it really pink? I'd like to tickle that. Shit, I don' know if my heart could take it."

"You were right, Jake. This guy's a scream."

Jacob pats Pete on the back and asks Cricket, "Could you keep Zoot company while I go find Red?"

"No problem, Six."

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At the landing zone, a Razorback lifts off. As it climbs, the prisoners start moving up the ramp and into the hold of the next ship. At the base of the ramp, Sergeant Cyzk and Nicole are standing with General Hershey, a Colonel Mason, and a major.

As the noise dies down from the launch, Cyzk continues, "Time in transit will be just under six hours. For this we have dropped off two skids loaded with CWR-RATs for your troops to feed on. You may find our field rations surprisingly palatable. The ship also has a

double head, a shower, and eight two-meter screens with a video library that has over a million titles. We apologize we can only offer 2D for the trip, but it's better than being bored for the duration. Anything else you need?"

Colonel Mason snits, "This is a fuckin' joke, right?"

Nicole shoots the Colonel a look, "Captivity is bad enough, Colonel. Is there a compelling reason to make the experience miserable?" After an awkward pause, she continues, "Just give me one. We are accommodating."

General Hershey chimes in, "Spooky, I witnessed the prompt medevac of my wounded and the courteous treatment towards my people. Both orchestrated by you, personally. I can think of no one else who I would rather accept terms by. Command-Chief, is it?"

Nicole gets annoyed when people outside their organization get the rankings of the SA wrong. Most of the time it's intentional. Even though she is technically a sergeant, as the senior-exec to Scott, laterally she does outrank the Colonel. It pleases her that the General did get it right, and that he recognizes the *maverick*, from the bottom-up, non-com command structure of the Annex. Few in his position do. He also had the balls to call her *Spooky* to her face. This was taken as a token of respect, as opposed to his own troops being referred to as *Homer*—which is a put down—and these gestures were not entirely lost on the Colonel or the Major.

"Chief will suffice, General." Nicole tosses a canvas pouch to the Major and declares, "There will be no terms. You and your troops will simply be debriefed and released over the next couple of weeks. Your wounded will be repatriated after they make a full recovery, and that will be determined by the severity of their injuries. We will keep you posted on their progress."

Satisfied, the General nods, "Thank you, Chief."

The major holds out a handful of I.D. tags for all to see. They were obviously removed from the fighting suits of their dead. The general nods, and the major dumps them back in the bag with the rest of them.

Nicole adds, "General, I have orders to evacuate this base immediately. As a result, we will be forced to destroy the dead where they fell. We do not have the time to recover the bodies, and I sincerely apologize for this breach of protocol."

Hershey is not satisfied, "Chief, I'm sure that your handlers are aware that I will lodge a formal protest. However, I will omit your use of EMPs if my troops are afforded the time to collect their fallen comrades."

"My orders are clear, Sir." Nicole shakes her head, "As much as it pains me, I must deny the request. Again, my apologies, Sir."

Cyzk interrupts, "Chief, we have a problem."

Nicole looks over at Cyzk and notices the Razorback that had just taken off is now diving towards the mountain range some thirty kilometers away.

"What is it Sergeant? What is that Razor up to?"

Cyzk barks out, "Chief, the drop ship transmitted that it was heading down range away from the A.O. to terminate its mission..."

A small nuclear blast lights up the sky over the mountains. The blinding light fades and everyone looks up at the fire-ball churning where a drop ship was. For a few seconds everyone stands transfixed at the sight of the fire-ball silently mushrooming up into the sky.

Cyzk continues, "The prisoners kicked in the access hatch to the cockpit and ignored two warnings to abandon it. I am downloading the telemetry and video now."

The General quietly asks, "How many did I lose?"

Cyzk replies, "The manifest reads one hundred and seventy."

Cyzk pulls a data card and hands it to Nicole. She turns to Hershey as the shock wave rolls through. At this distance it's more like a light breeze—accompanied by an almost inaudible rumble.

Grimly, Nicole says, "General, I request that you not review the file until you reach the debriefing facility. I also request that you keep this from your troops until after that time. Their level of anxiety is way high, and I don't want to lose any more of our drop ships by wasting prisoners. Are we in agreement, Sir?"

"Chief, we are in agreement."

Nicole hands the card over, and though they do not have an officer corps, the SA does respect the formalities of other services. She snaps a salute and the General promptly returns it. The Colonel and the Major fail to return said salute—and this is a lapse in etiquette that will be addressed by the General.

As the three officers start up the ramp, Nicole calls out to them, "We call it, Second Hand, General."

They stop and look back while Nicole continues, "Where you are going is a real nice place. More like a resort than a holding facility. In fact there is nothing to prevent you or any of your people from simply walking out of there; but, be advised, Sirs. This facility was not designed to keep you in, but to keep the indigenous fauna out. The local predators are exceedingly effective in policing all escapees, so I

strongly recommend that you and your troops stay put until they've been out-processed. We call it Second Hand simply because survival outside this facility is measured in terms of seconds; and, Colonel, that is not a joke. Enjoy your stay, gentlemen."

Nicole turns to walk away. After she takes a few steps the general calls out to her, "Oh, Chief!"

Nicole stops and looks back, "Yes, Sir?"

"Apology accepted."

Nicole nods then marches off towards Scott Rutledge at the other side of the landing zone.

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Scott doesn't show it, but he's annoyed beyond reason.

Interrogating prisoners is the SOP of the day, and professional soldiers know that they don't have to say anything except name, rank and serial number. That's the rule everyone adheres to, but there is a lot to be gained from the exercise just the same. Questioning civilian detainees can be quite another thing altogether because rarely do they know that they don't have to talk. More often than not they'll spill their guts, but sometimes they don't, and when they think they're a somebody, like, say, a member of the diplomatic corps, that can make things somewhat difficult.

Dodson, an ambassador from the Confederation, puts out his hand to his people, "No one answer that!" He turns to Scott and snarls, "Do you know who I am! I'm Ambassador Dodson! Haven't you fucks heard of diplomatic immunity? You have no right to hold us or ask us shit!"

Scott sighs, "Sir, all I care about is who you are and why you're here. Your name happens to be James Dodson, and that checks out alright. Now, I'm glad you have a job, and you think it's an important job, and I'm sure it is. The thing is, Sir...I don't care. Now with that established, you can answer my questions or you can fart in the wind for all it matters; but you will stand down and allow me to do my job. Technically, you are all under arrest until we say otherwise, so...I will ask these questions. You can answer them, or you can stand there and look stupid for all I care."

"Fuck this noise!" Dodson shouts, then hisses, "You can't hold me for shit."

Dodson turns away from Scott, towards the perimeter, and stomps away with a purpose—daring them to respond.

Nicole pulls up beside Scott as he calls out to the ambassador, "Mr. Dodson, I recommend that you turn back. We will not force answers out of detainees, but we will fire on them if they attempt to escape."

"They found the bombs. Where's Graves?" asks Nicole.

While he motions for Sandavol to take care of the ambassador, he looks at Nicole with a deadpan expression, "Your kidding. Try the net."

"Ooh, ya!" and just as quickly as she pings the net she follows with a quick, "He's at the L.Z."

"Then maybe he's at the L.Z.?" Scott rags.

"Okay, I deserved that."

"Naw, you deserve worse, but I let ya off the hook."

"Appreciate it. That was my stupid for the day."

Sandavol locks her flail-gun on the ambassador and pleads, "Mr. Dodson, Sir, if you do not turn back I will fire. You will not be warned again."

Ambassador Dodson flips them the bird over his head and continues on.

Scott draws the attention of the prisoners, "Don't look at the light. It will hurt your eyes."

Without further warning, as promised, Sandoval fires her boom mounted plasma-pulse weapon. A spherical pellet, smaller than a BB, is hit from more than 20 directions by lasers. The layers of fusible materials inter-react, as advertised, energizing the plasma pulse which is lethal enough. With the liberal introduction of a metallic gas into the reactor-chamber this creates a *spiked* plasma jet that rips out of the nose of the weapon. With the manipulation of magnetic fields, the plasma jet can be directed into various configurations and intensities. For such a soft target, such as a human body, and to minimize the effective range, the gun is set for a 10° dispersion.

With the crack of an electrical report, a blinding, multi-million degree plume of light and gas reaches out and slams into Dodson. Within the blink of an eye he is rendered into his basic molecular components. Only his charred feet and shoes remain as the rest of his body, now part of a very hot and expanding cloud of vapor and ash, mushrooms vertically into the sky.

Dodson was an arrogant son-of-a-bitch as a human being, and as an ambassador he was even worse. Though many in the Confederation will quietly give thanks, under their breath, they will be

quite vocal when they protest his death just the same. Not to say that their bitching will fall on deaf ears, but it's a formality that will serve more as an annoyance than a real bone of contention.

With that knowledge, Nicole shrugs and walks away as Scott picks up where he left off with the prisoners, "Okay, where were we?"

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Something about blunt trauma that, at times, defies reason. Even in the JACC, this girl's beautiful face seems so angelic—with eyes closed and lips parted slightly as if she were sound asleep—but she is just as dead. There were many casualties on this drop, but she was the only one from the Annex to die. Not from action though. She was killed when she didn't clear the pallet she was on that strayed and hit a building—before it hit the building.

Premonitions do not come to Jacob in the form of voices, or burning bushes, but if they did, he knows that he would have something to be concerned about. As it is, gut feelings and hunches are not at all treatable.

Jacob felt compelled to come here. He didn't know why, but now the curiosity was killing him so, while standing over the body, he pulls up her file and found out a lot more than what he wanted to know. What he suspected a year ago was correct, she was originally from New Era. One of the *live five* that made it out. She was the blonde little nugget who made a play for him last year on the *Carrie Nation*, and he'll never forget it because that was the last time he has been to a wet deck on any platform.

He has seen her around, eyes glued to her ass, and just the day before in the auditorium he set himself to wrestle her away from Nicole—just for the sport of it.

Why she joined the Annex is beyond him, and he would like to have known the reason. Maybe she wanted to find and kill the guy that blew up her home planet?

Then again, maybe it's best that he not know.

Then panic set in. Since this girl was the headliner in Nicole's good-buddy network then Nicole is going to take it pretty hard when she finds out, and before he can think of a way of keeping her away for the now—Nicole's voice pipes up beside him.

"So, was that number six?"

Jacob cringes. Nicole knows the story of Mooch, his cat, and together they've been keeping count of the lives he used up.

"I dunno; I just got swept."

"Swept?" Nicole scolds him as she kneels down by the body, "Thirty years ago we'd be toasting marshmallows over your charred ass, you dumb fuck."

"I've been swept before."

"Not by hopping out from behind cover to shout 'w00t mutherfucker.' They had you owned—dead to rights."

"If they would have been aiming maybe you could say that."

Nicole pauses as she tenderly touches the girl's face, "Okay, fuck head, maybe it doesn't count; but, admittedly, it was incredibly y-chromosome stupid of you. Admit it."

"Ya, admittedly it was stupid."

Nicole pulls back and looks up into the sky in deep thought.

"Twenty-eight years old. What a waste." Jacob then touches Nicole on the shoulder, "You gonna be okay? You two were involved."

"Ya...for now; but, later, I'll have my breakdown."

"Need a shoulder?"

"No, I got a whole stable of shoulders to choose from. I'll call on you when I need dick to pass the time, okay."

"Fair enough." Jacob then looks down at the blonde, "Twenty-eight...Gawd, how young people look young anymore."

Mentally scratching her head, Nicole looks up at Jacob, "As opposed to when?"

"You know what I mean."

Nicole stands, "You know who she was?"

"Yep, just pulled up her file. I just got one question—"

Nicole cuts him off, "Why the fuck did she join?"

"No, not exactly. Did she know about me and the spider?"

"I told her last night."

Jacob shrugs as best he can in a fighting suit, "At least I had a chance to play it, I guess it doesn't matter anymore, right?"

"Good thing you didn't."

Jacob huffs, "Come on, when did you become territorial?"

"I'm not, it's just that—"

Jacob cuts her off, "You surprise me, Burke. I mean, when

did you not want fair competition?"

"That's not it."

"Then what? What are you trying to say?"

"Last Monday she showed me her mom's picture."

Jacob bodily turns towards Nicole, "And?"

"And...she was a dead-ringer for that hottie you banged at Nu Ara when you were a nube."

"You always liked pathing that one."

"Endlessly! Makes me wish I had a cock for real." Nicole manages a sardonic grin, "I'd put it to good use."

"Fuck off, Burke..." Then it finally sinks in, and Jacob does a double-take, "Wait a minute, what are you saying? Did you pull our blueprints!"

Members of the Annex have their genetic code on file. Both the DNA and mitochondrial genome make up a *blueprint* of the individual, and a simple RFLP comparison test of just the DNA can determine paternity with incredible accuracy. It's not a practice to compare genetics without good reason, and Nicole, in her position, can call one up on a whim.

Nicole sighs, "On the first pass the results showed that she was your issue."

Jacob snorts, "And, you were going to tell me when?"

Nicole cringes, "We were waiting for the detailed comparison to run. That takes a few days. We wanted to be proof positive before bringing it up."

Jacob begins to wonder about the irony of it all. It's like Sophocles has stepped in to become the ghost-author of his life. He had a daughter that he did not know about, and he was aimed towards knowing of her in the biblical sense. Now that he knows her for who she truly is—he is in the unenviable position of having to bury her.

Jacob cringes, "I hope she didn't hate me too much."

"Nope, in fact she wanted to thank you."

That was unexpected, and Jacob can only manage a, "Hu?"

"Her mother was into her own thing, couldn't take care of kids, and was found incompetent. She, and her brother and sister, were sent out to the middle of nowhere to live with their uncle, and it appears that they were on his dessert menu. According to Sophie, here, you saved them from a fate worse than death."

Jacob kneels beside the body, "Fucking pigs."

"See, baby, every dark cloud—"

He cuts Nicole off, "Don't give me that silver lining crap. A lot of people died, and I'd take it back if I could. Even now."

"Hey, chuckle-fuck, reality-check here! A lot of good came out of that shot. Collateral damage be damned, so don't start."

There is no point in arguing with Nicole, but the *what ifs* now race through his head. Over the last year he has seen this girl on the by-and-by, and even though she gave him a big inviting smile each and every time, there was something in his gut that told him to put it off for later.

Full well knowing that his better judgment has already failed him, Jacob fibs, "Just think if I was my old self."

Nicole snips, "You *are* your old self. You just didn't get around to it. That's all."

Nicole pegged him, so there's no point in arguing.

Anywhere would be better than here, but in a moment of resigned introspection Jacob smiles and whispers to himself, "Sophie, I'm glad I met you."

Nicole puts her hand on his shoulder, "You gonna be okay?"

"For now...but, later, I'll have my breakdown."

"Need a shoulder?"

"I got Cricket."

"Just as well, you two have been pretty exclusive."

"More regular than exclusive."

As the medical team approaches to collect the body of his daughter, Jacob has a change of heart, "How much time till their react forces can get here?"

"The window is closing in three hours and ten minutes."

"And the way we're going we'll be out of here in less than an hour." Jacob stands to leave, "Send a handful of squads out to collect their bodies. We got the bombs. We got what we came for."

"Cool!" Nicole chirps, surprised, "I'll get on it."

As Nicole starts to call out the orders, Jacob's altruism is cut short by a text message he was dreading. With a grimace he hops into the air and flies off towards the perimeter to take care of some unpleasant business.

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Sitting in the shade of a smoldering turret gun, Cricket laughs, "Now, I've been to an interstellar war, a super nova—I've even been to Disneyland, but that's the craziest story I've ever heard."

Peter smiles, "I'm not kidding. It's true!"

"I believe ya. I do!"

"Have a nice day, she tells me. That was one shit-hot little number, so I can understand why he took it as hard as he did."

"We all took it hard when Maggie bought it, but those two were in love."

"That's a rare thing."

"Tell me, Zoot," Cricket asks, "Why did this Frog bitch want him dead anyway? I mean, he was a kid for Christ's sake!"

"He was bangin' her daughter."

"Ya, so, I don't get it? What's the big deal?"

Peter smiles, "He was doin' the Frog too! And, believe you me, Madam Riboh is one vicious-jealous bitch to be sure. I know because I used to have that job some twenty years before Jake was hired on to service her."

"So, my boy was a ho!"

"Don't believe his lies, Cricket." Says Jacob as he touches down behind them. "Though I'm still a whore."

"Zoot, here, he's been talkin' shit, but it's all been good shit!"

"I can't believe that, but okay." Jacob turns to Peter, "Like you said, Zooter, the bombs were sitting on the ramp—right in plain sight. No wonder we couldn't find them. D'uh."

"Glad to be of service."

"One other thing," Jacob's tone changes, "We got a little problem here. There's a death warrant out on you. How did you get involved in something like Cobalt Bluer? What were you thinking!"

"How's that go? Good business is where you find it."

"Look, being tried *in absentia* is not without precedent, but they had to have some pretty solid evidence to issue a death warrant on your ass."

"Crimes against humanity, what can I say?"

"You dumb-shit."

Cricket chimes in, "Jake, can you issue a stay? I mean, come-on, nobody has used one of those things against humanity. Only in combat, and only in deep space."

Peter adds, "Yet. It's just a matter of time, Cricket."

Jacob looks at the two of them and huffs, "Ya, I can issue a temporary stay pending a writ of certiorari. That can stretch it out for years. Plus, I got major stroke, so I don't see a problem in reducing it to life."

Peter shakes his head, "Fuck that. Execute your warrant. I can't go back to Second Hand. A few of the permanent residents will want to make raptor bait out of me if I show up. I'd rather *you* do it."

Jacob pleads, "If I could let you go, Pete, I would—but I can't. I'm sure we can work something out."

"Naw, I'm eighty now, and way too old for this nonsense. So, please, do this old fuck a favor and zap me now. Hey, what are friends for? Hell, I'm Vegas bound anyway!"

Jacob sighs, "You're not giving me very many options."

Peter wags his finger at Jacob, "By the way, one thing, Ribot, she said she wanted to see you. You should look her up."

"Do I look stupid? She don't forgive or forget."

"She's changed. Can't tell ya why, she just has. You have to trust me on this. All she does now is skinny-dip her sexy ass and kick back in her chalet above La Cañada. Go see her. You won't regret it."

"Wish we could talk about it, Pete, but we'll be poppin' a nuke here, shortly. I'll come visit you at Second Hand and we'll work something out. Until then, you tell me what you want. I owe you."

"Then, leave me here!"

Cricket nods to Jacob, "Like you said, you owe him."

What a choice Jacob is faced with. Force Peter to come with them, shoot him, or nuke him. None of these options are actually good ones, but what can he do? He pats Cricket on the shoulder and they stand to leave.

"Now, how does that go again?" Jacob ponders, "Oh ya! The Wrath of God, the Midas touch, or to kick until you're blue. Best take care in what you pray for, least it may come true." He then nods to Cricket, "Let's jet."

As Jacob and Cricket start to walk away, Peter calls out to them, "That's what I like about you son, you slay me!"

Without warning—Jacob's scorpion gun snaps up and fires a short burst into Peter's chest. At this range, the rounds effortlessly tear through the fighting suit and obliterate his heart and lungs. The suit is so heavy that it continues to prop the body up as the onboard trauma maintenance system fights a losing battle to preserve the dying man inside.

Peter was surprised by the suddenness of it all. From such massive damage, most people fall unconscious and die quietly. Peter is a touch nut and a fighter to the end. In shock, all he feels is a numbing sensation from head to toe. All he sees is his vision narrowing into a tunnel. All the while he knows is that this is it, and the one coherent thought he has, as his life races before his eyes, is being appreciative that it wasn't a head shot.

Only Cricket stops to look back. The pupils in Peter's eyes are blown to hell as blood, oil and gore ooze out from the gaping hole in his chest.

She liked the guy, and it pains her to see Jacob cut him down like that. Granted, he had to do something, but it doesn't make it any easier to accept the fact that this was the easy out for Peter. She admires Jacob's ability to always do the right thing no matter how troublesome it will be for him on a personal level. They will talk about it later, and she'll be all ears as he ties one on, but they still have to get through the day, and debrief, before they have a good cry.

So, after a few seconds, she grunts and turns to follow Jacob who is airborne and racing off towards the Landing Zone...and more trouble.

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It is said that the quietest place in the universe is in the middle of a battlefield—after a battle. This was a universal truth up towards the end of the 20th Century, and a post-battlefield can still be a pretty quiet place, but now the landing zones in and around a battlefield before, during, and after a battle are busy places indeed. The landing zone on the largest moon of the fifth planet of Theta-2-Tarus is no different, and Jacob and Cricket have to dodge a drop ship as it launches.

They set down beside Scott as Nicole and Bill walk in their direction from the other side of the LZ.

Rutledge shouts to Jacob over the roar of the drop-ships engines, "That's the civilian techs on their way out. Still don't know why they were here, but I don't think anybody really gives a shit. The body snatchers are almost finished. We still have one squad out

scraping up the last of their dead. Otherwise, we are way ahead of schedule."

"Good work, Scott." Jacob shouts back.

They could easily put the canopies back on their JACC fighting suits, but the air is breathable and, like most of the higher ranks, would rather interface face-to-face than being bottled up in technology all the time.

Scott leans in so he doesn't need to shout as loud, "But, when Ramirez found out that we were collecting the bodies she pinged me up and was shouting *pandeho* this and *muthur-fucker* that with a look in her eyes. Jesus! Man, is she's possessed or what!"

"*El ojo.*"

"*El what?*"

"*Ojo.* The evil eye. She's fuckin' with ya. Tryin' to pinch your balls off. See if you would flinch."

"You were married to her so let her fuck with you! I don't understand how you still put up with her crap. Being the Ex to Tiger Bitch has still got to put a definite strain on the scrotum."

"It keeps my feet on the ground, Scott."

"She wanted me to say something to you but it ain't worth repeating."

"What did she say?"

"You don't need to hear her shit."

"Come on, how bad can it be?"

Scott grunts, "With that nasty fuckin' mouth of hers! I'd rather not repeat what she pukes, man. I mean, you've heard enough of her shit for one lifetime, right?"

"Let's hear it, Scott."

"Okay! She said, *Como te amo.* Satisfied? That's what she wanted me to say to you. Tell me it wasn't a shitty thing to say."

Jacob has already started laughing as another drop ship launches and clears the L.Z.

Scott laughs, "That bad huh?"

Two PacMan drones rip past as Nicole shouts at them, "Jake, Scott, we got a situation on the perimeter!"

She then shouts into the microphone in her suit, "Command freq." There was a perceptible click as the circuit opens so Jacob and

Scott could hear, and she calls out, "Go ahead, Nelson."

Over the radio, Zach describes his situation, ["Copy that Red-Hell. This ain't no spider hole. It's way bigger than a soccer field. Maybe an acre or two. It was totally cloaked from above, and I just fell into the motherfucker. It looks as if a couple of squads tried to torch it then, like...they blasted each other! You gotta see it!"]

"Blow an' go, Nelson! We're poppin' the big one in twenty minutes, so let's move it along!"

["Roger that, Hell, but I got movement just up ahead. The signature is weak, but... Fuck! Where'd it go!"]

Nicole slaps her canopy over her head and leaps into the air with Jacob, Scott and Bill on her tail, "The rest of the squad, you stay put! Nelson, you forgit about that I.F.F. crap. If you reacquire then you lock in an' toast them! You copy?"

["I copy, Red. I'm a taggin' and a baggin'."]

"That's what I like to hear! We're coming in hot, and forty seconds out."

Right behind Nicole, Bill calls up to the Iron Maiden, "Maiden Control, there's gonna be a bit of a delay. We'll keep you apprised."

Over the radio Maiden Control confirms, ["Roger that, Cowboy. So, what kind of shit you guys step into this time?"]

Suddenly Zach shouts over the circuit, ["Negative hot, Red! Say again, negative hot! Hold your fire when you come in! Target looks to be about point zero four cubes. Estimated twenty kilos. Target is active but unresponsive to I.F.F. Negative E.M.R. Zero emissions."]

Nicole is pissed, "You know the Romeo's, Nelson! Don't play with your kill. Git it over with!"

["Like it or not, Red-Hell, it's my call."]

"Then we're coming in cold. And you'd better be right! 'Cause if your not, I swear I'll end your ass! Got that?"

["Five by five, Red. Got'cher assets covered."]

In the hole, Zach is crouching behind a stack of smoldering debris. He has his boom mounted scorpion gun peeking over it and is aiming towards a scorched vehicle by the tunnel opening. He has a solid lock on a thermal image hiding behind it.

The whole area is a disaster. The ground and walls are streaked with plasma burns—with most of the grass in the field being wilted beyond recovery. A wheeled vehicle looks like it had ploughed

into an array of playground equipment, and all of it has been scorched to the point of melting. Worse yet are the charred remains of bodies scattered about. Most frozen eerily in a futile defensive posture.

Trying to identify the thermal image of a living person would be next to impossible in this mess; but, once acquired, the signature of an ambulatory person would stand out like a sore thumb. This image is of a very small person; and the swing set, though bent and twisted by heat, is a red flag for Zach to hold his fire.

Without warning, two PacMan drones rip through the holographic ceiling, and hover with their guns ready. Seconds later the ghost-like cloaked JACCs of Nicole, Bill, Jacob and Scott drop onto the floor. All four advance in unison with Scott and Bill in flanking positions. As Nicole and Jacob slip up to Zach's position, Nicole thumps Zach in his shoulder with her fist.

Nicole snarls, "Okay, where is it!"

Boldly, Zach turns to Nicole, "Back off, Chief."

Nicole bares her teeth, "It's now *my* kill."

Bill calls out, "Two-two-eight, Red."

"Thank you, Bill."

Nicole leaps up from behind the debris and immediately locks on the thermal image with the chain gun on her left arm, but instead of firing, she holds back because she notices the faint outline of an object in the target's hand. The outline of a stuffed toy animal draws her attention, so she takes the time to survey the area.

Out of the corner of her eye she notices the swing set, and in the other direction she notices the smoking remains of dead soldiers. None of this makes sense, so she holds her fire as she exposes herself by stepping around the debris mound to absorb the surroundings better.

Taken aback, Nicole shrieks, "I don't fuckin' believe this!"

Fighting back rage, Nicole turns to Bill, "Cowboy, call back that last HWG with the techs and civvies in it, and park it topside. We...we're gonna have a little chat."

Scott looks at Jacob, "We got ourselves a delay."

While Nicole looks around, absorbing the surroundings, Jacob observes, "Red, this is really weird of you."

Nicole wags a finger at him, "Remember the place I told you about, when I was little? The grass field surrounded by rock and glass and the sky was a big blue square. This is it!"

She turns to Zach and scolds him, "Next time your ass is solo in the A.O. you shoot first—autopsy later! Question that again nube an' you will die."

With weapons ready, Nicole stomps off towards the playground with the other three in tow. Bill and Zach fan out as she stops by a burnt vehicle at the tunnel opening. She has a lock on the thermal image as it coyly hides behind the vehicle.

With her boom mounted flail-gun at the ready, she drops her other weapons and calls out, "You can come out now."

A small hand rises up from behind the vehicle and casually flips the bird like Dodson had. Jacob snorts, but Nicole is not amused.

"Front and center, girl!"

Nicole hears a young girl's voice say, <"As you wish."> in her head, but noticing Jacob and Bill's failure to react to that voice she realizes that, of the group, she was the only one that heard it. It couldn't have come from a telecom pathway, one of the myriad of techlepathic channels the SA uses to communicate by thought via the tacnet because, whoever it was, even if they were chipped they could not have linked into the network without the proper codes. But, then, Nicole's concern fell to the wayside by what happened next.

From behind the smoldering vehicle steps a child. She looks every bit like an eight-year-old carbon-copy version of Nicole at that age. Complete—even down to the mole on her cheek. Nicole has never met one of her type before, and the mind-screw by running into another Barbie Doll clone that's just like her can't compare to what the little girl has to say to her via natural telepathy.

<"So, you are a three-one! I am Nicole, version four-zero. Though, I actually go by Nikki. They say I am an improvement. Let us see...I am supposed to have smaller areola, less body fat, and a more intense orgasm! Something to look forward to, I guess.">

Clones mature fast, but to be compliant they are designed to hang back on the intellectual curve somewhat; however, the sarcasm in this child's demeanor and speech is all-adult. It's obvious as the sun in the sky that Nikki is intellectually light-years ahead of anybody else her age, or any age for that matter.

Aware of the challenge this girl represents, Nicole takes a stab at projecting her thoughts without the tacnet, <"You...you did this?">

<"Panic can be such a terrible thing.">

<"Did they know you're a telepath?">

<"Would I be standing here if they did?">

<"But, you did this!"> Nicole points to the bodies.

Nikki rolls her eyes, <"Psy-cho-kineee-sis. Look it up.">

<"And, they didn't have a clue.">

<"Are you going to ask stupid questions all day?">

<"And you're not chipped?">

Nikki gestures to herself, and says with a smile, "Au natural!"

Nicole shakes her head, "Well, fuck me."

Nikki ponders, "Okay, well, that offer definitely puts a whole new spin on self-gratification."

Scott turns to Jacob and whispers, "Talk about falling down a rabbit hole."

Jacob nods, "Curiouser and curiouser."

11

tell god i said hi

TIME: 08:33zulu (local 17:12mst)

"For people who are about to experience nuclear fusion up close and personal, I think you're taking it rather well." Jacob gloats.

Ms Welch is anything but taking it well, but she won't give them the satisfaction in seeing her stress over the inevitable. She and her staff, all 45 of them, are going to go bye-bye, and that's all there is too it. She looks up and, with the holographic cloak turned off, she watches as a PacMan drone start to lift a conically shaped warhead into the air as a handful of others orbit the area giving them no avenue of escape. At the edge of the hole she sees Nikki peering down at them while holding Zach's hand, and it was just then she realizes that they have been duped all along.

"Why fuss? We deserve it." Welch looks at Nicole and shakes her head, "You're the earlier model, a three one, right? It all makes sense now. The little bitch up there—she did this. I know it."

Nicole sneers, "They can talk to each other...in real time! I mean all fifty-two of them, and you had no idea? This is so beyond your everyday SNAFU. You dumb-shits actually outdid yourselves for once! You finally fucked yourselves over."

Welch shrugs, "How could we have known? The beta-set were absolutely compliant, with perfect dispositions. Perfectly happy."

"Perfectly happy? Okay, Sandra, I still remember how happy I was chowin' down on your stale pussy when you were just a tech. I was six! So, fuck you very much."

Welch's eyes go wide, "That was you?"

Nicole snarls at her, "Ya, cunt, that was me. Talk about a homecoming! Surprise! The kicker is you've finally created the perfect horror. Too good to be true in any gene pool, you'd think!"

She meant horror as it relates to Nikki, not whore as in the

industry objective, and that was understood by all as Nicole ices up, "Now, if it were up to me I'd have slaughtered the whole bunch of you outright, slow and messy, but I didn't get a vote. The way I see it, you're gettin' off easy."

"Look, this was business. It made us all very wealthy, and me very-very powerful. I can't say that I apologize, but..." Welch hesitates, then, "But, in all honesty, I hope you shut us down."

Nicole was about to say *she*, but checks that thought with, "We intend too."

Nicole has had enough. She jumps into the air and flies off towards Nikki and Zach, as Jacob picks up without dropping a beat.

"Normally, we would cart you off and get what we wanted out of you. Grill ya, make shallow promises, or beat ya bloody and kill you anyway! As it is we don't need too. We got the child, and from what I gather she—is—a—walking encyclopedia of your operations and your staff, and customers! Personally, if I had my way, I'd love to cut Chief Burke loose on you people with one of these."

Jacob pulls khukri to show Welch. The heavy blade is 15 inches long and hooked forward. Beautiful to look at, but horrific in its application.

Scott adds, "And she's a God-damned artist with that."

Jacob nods in agreement, "And, if we had the time we would; but, unfortunately, we gotta jet. So, you have any last requests, or do you wanna run your suck? Not that I can really do anything for you, or that we'd be listening in earnest, but even on such short notice it's still polite to ask."

Sandra Welch, facing imminent death, can't think of anything but, "Give me twenty minutes. That you can do."

"Twenty you got." Says Jacob as he sheaths the knife.

Welch grabs the arm of one of the trainers that was standing near her, and starts to lead him away.

Mockingly, Jacob calls out, "Oh, Welch, can you do something for me when you cross-over?"

She stops and looks back, "Sure. What?"

"Tell God, I said, hi."

Welch nods, "With my feet in the air."

From the edge of the hole, Nikki and Zach watch Jacob and Scott float up towards them. Fuming, Nicole has already stepped up the ramp and into the drop ship. Jacob slips by and chases after

Nicole as Scott sets down at the edge.

Scott pats Nikki on the shoulder as he heads towards the ship, "We gotta go, guys."

As Nikki and Zach follow Scott, she turns to him, "I want to thank you for rescuing me."

Surprised, Zach counters with, "Rescue you? Hey kid, I almost blew you away."

"But you did not." She smiles, "That is what matters."

Zach saw something missing, "Where's your teddy bear?"

"Excuse?" For a second Nikki wasn't quite sure what Zach meant, "Oh, that! That was for your benefit. I thought it would help you see me as a non-combatant."

"Smart kid. You know, I picked up on the bear thing pretty quick. Wasn't quite sure what it was, but it wasn't a weapon. That was apparent."

"Smart guy. I knew I was going to like you."

At the top of the ramp in the drop ship they step past Scott, Nicole and Jacob and into the hold where, milling around, are more than two-hundred clones of various ages. As the ramp starts to close they wander towards the middle of the deck where they have two large pallets of field rations staged.

Jacob breaks from the group, "It was not that big of a deal."

Scott laughs as he starts to follow Jacob, "I can't believe you said that to them!"

Bill, who just came out of the cockpit to check the seal of the ramp, taps Nicole on the arm, "What'd he say this time?"

Nicole shakes her head in disbelief, "Being a cold fuckin' bitch is something I excel at. Consider it my vocation; but, Cowboy, that was the coldest thing I've ever heard anyone say in all my years."

Bill pleads, "What!"

"He said to Welch, 'Tell God, I said, hi.' I wish I could've seen her face when he dished that out. God-damned poetic, I'd say"

Bill snorts, "Arctic ass-bite cold."

Overhearing, Zach adds, "Fucked up if you ask me."

Bill replies, "But, well deserved."

"Not even close." Nicole snarls, then points to Zach, "Help Ten-Klicks and Vader out with feeding these little dingos."

"Righty'o!"

Nicole says to Bill as she walks towards the galley, "Let's get this on the hump. We've got twenty minutes to disappear."

"First-class all the way, Chief." Bill snaps, and then switches to the intercom for everyone to hear, "Okay, kids, this is gonna git a little bumpy here and there, so I want you to sit tight whenever possible. We'll get the cartoons goin' and start poppin' some RATs for you shortly."

Normally, on the way out of a combat operation, an assault transport, like the Razorback, will be bucking and jumping about with the sole intent in making itself a difficult target to lock onto. With a *soft* cargo, the children, they have got to keep things pretty easy going on the way up; however, with a gravity counter-flow a smooth ride is not necessarily a slow one, and at a constant 3g in acceleration, even in a shallow climb, they will still reach space inside fifteen minutes.

As the Razorback takes off Jacob winds his way through the children and into the galley across from the ships cockpit, "Sorry I haven't been around, but it's been pretty crazy. How's Seth coming along?"

Nicole follows him in, "He's cutting teeth, but I'm not the Mother Earth type so I've decided to stop breast feeding; and, before you say shit about this, you try being a slave to lactation."

Jacob shrugs as he closes the door behind them, "I know you're not enamored with it. It's just as well. I figure he's a leg man like his dad."

Sitting on the deck for the most part, the children, ranging from ages 1 to 12, are not bothered by the slight movement of the drop ship. Bred for empathy, calm and compliance—they are not at all unnerved by the troopers in their scary looking machines.

Angie and Zach had already torn open the stretch wrap around a pallet of CWR-RAT meal packets and are passing them out. Scott demonstrates to the older children how to activate the instant cooking mechanism. Holding it over his head, he pulls a string and the packet pops out like an automobile air bag.

"Now don't peel it open until it stops hissing. The steam inside is heating the food and will burn your hands if you open the bag too soon. That's why I want you bigger kids poppin' the RATs, okay!" He looks down at a little girl poking at his leg, "Wha?"

The girl is grabbing herself, "I gotta go, bad!"

Zach steps in and, taking the child by the hand, he calls out as he escorts her to the head, "Anyone that has to go, follow me. If

you can hold it then do so until we get into space, but if ya'll can't then let's get in line."

The girl chirps, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"Oh no! They're tryin' to get out!" The kids laugh as Scott shakes the meal packet making it look like something is trying to escape from it, "You want me to let them out? I mean the RATS are just floppin' around in hear lookin' for a way ta get out. Wait a minute... Shhhh, listen!"

The children go quiet as Scott puts his hand out, "It stopped. I guess it doesn't matter now 'cause they gotta be dead! Lets see what's inside."

Scott peels the packet open and puts in a spork and pulls out some spaghetti, "Yuuuck! Rat guts."

Taking a mouthful he smiles big, "Ummm, good guts! You want 'em?"

He hands the packet to the little boy who takes it with a big grin on his face, "Ya!"

"Okay! Who needs help with their RATS?" Scott calls out as he turns to Angie, "Kids dig on skeddy, but we're gonna have a mess 'round here."

"You really like kids, don't ya?" Angie asks.

"Well, sure! Don't you?"

"You know, we've been doin' the horizontal-mambo, pretty much one-on-one for almost a year, and I wasn't aware of that!"

Scott jokes, "It's amazing what you'd find out if you would talk afterwards, instead of passing out like you do."

"Well, we're talking now, and I'm asking—do you want one?"

"I've never spent enough time with a woman to think about it. Actually having a critter the old-fashioned way."

Angie prods him, "Shit, dude! I haven't spent more than a wink or two with any one man, and that's not enough time to think about it either! We've been at it for some time, so...how about it?"

Nikki has been listening in on the exchange between these two while helping pass out the meal packets. It's obvious to her that there is a communication hang up between Scott and Angie, so clearing the air between them is something she can't resist.

Scott looks deep into Angie's eyes and, with a sudden uncontrollable urge, he blurts out, "*Como te amo!*"

Scott is shocked by what he said, thinking it was an insult, but Angie's face lights up and she leans in to give him a quick kiss, "I love you too, Wakow!"

As they kiss again the door to the galley flies open, and Nicole shouts at Nikki, "Hey you! Piss-ant! Get in here!"

Caught red handed, Nikki drops the packets she carried and saunters over and slips into the tiny galley.

Nicole slams the door shut, and growls, "Now, sit."

Nikki parks herself quietly on the bunk beside Jacob, "Sure thing, big-sis."

"I'm not your sis!" Nicole snaps, and then scolds, "I suddenly find myself hard-wired right into your skull, and I was wondering, when exactly *did* Marshals Rutledge and Simmons ask you to get involved in their personal relationship? I think I missed that one."

Nikki rolls her eyes so Nicole prods her with sizzling intensity, "That was a question!"

<"They did not—">

"A verbal response, if you don't mind!" Nicole thumbs over at Jacob, "We're talking here."

"They did not exactly ask, but—"

"Imagine that!"

Nikki stands her ground, "They are romantically involved, correct? What you do not know is their feelings are strong for one another. Unfortunately, Mr. Rutledge finds it difficult to verbalize his emotions. I simply goosed him along. Do you not think they will make good looking children? I do."

Nicole shoves her fist at Nikki and opens her mouth to shout, but Jacob puts out his hand to stop the rant that was about to start. Nicole backs off and he looks up at her as he points to Nikki.

"This *is* an eight year old?"

Nikki interjects, "Physiologically, yes; but sometimes girls like us have to appear wide-eyed and clueless to get what we want. I want to survive. How about you, Nicole. What did you want?"

Nicole hisses, "Can it, you little bitch."

"I may be a little bitch, but you are old and I can be nice."

Jacob laughs as Nicole blurts out with open mouth astonishment, "It took me almost my entire life to become the cunt she is at eight!"

Nikki smiles, "Touché!"

Jacob hits the breaks, "You two will back down!"

After a few seconds, Nikki and Nicole break their eye-lock and both look over at Jacob.

Jacob huffs, "That's better. Okay, Nikki, your situation would frustrate me to no end, but your contempt for Chief Burke borders on outright hostility."

"Surprised? I could have had you people here a year ago if it was not for my carbon base getting knocked up by you a second time around! You are not to blame, Mr. Graves. At least she was direct about it for a change."

"It's Jacob. And you resent that?"

Nicole adds, "She only resents having to wait the extra year. After all, she is still eight years old."

Nikki elaborates on that, "Correct, and at this age a year is an eternity. Especially, having to perform for those perverts. But, we have waited long enough, Jacob. We want to be whole. It is an all consuming objective."

Shaking his head, Jacob ponders, "It's that *we* thing that's got me perplexed to no end. I mean this has all the makings of an urban legend, and not a good one at that!"

"You, a priori, will not be able to understand us; but, please, trust me when I say that we are as real as real can be."

"I can appreciate that. I really can, but I want you to tell them all something." He glances at Nicole, "Are they tuned in? Can they hear me?"

Nicole smiles, "I think you have their undivided attention."

Nikki chimes in, "As you say, five-by-five."

"Great! That's what I like, a captive audience." Jacob takes a deep breath and squares off with Nikki, "I can't shake this nasty feeling you're gonna end up being a lot more trouble than your worth. I saw your handy work, killing those soldiers just by toying with their minds. Exactly why I should shoot the one sitting here now, and let the rest of you rot where you are."

Those words had just the right effect on Nikki. The sudden worry on her face means he caught her off guard.

Jacob continues, "Or, maybe we can work together. Instead of attacking the installations that house just your little band, how about we rescue all the clones. Every last one. With your capabilities,

you can help us make this happen. Interested?"

"Or, maybe we do not need you after all." Nikki counters.

Jacob smiles, "Too late! Nicole has already informed me that you don't have coercive powers. You don't have that Puppet Master shit goin' down; but, if you dare to try me—"

"You...you would sell us out. Am I correct?"

"In a heart beat!" Jacob takes a couple of seconds to let that sink in, "After the mission all fifty-two of you will go to a planet called Sapphire. There you will live out your lives under our supervision. There will be no debate on any of this. You either accept these terms or not. I need an answer."

That meant an answer now, and this is clear to Nikki and the rest of her kind in captivity.

Like a single voice echoing in her head they all shout, *Yes!*

After a couple of seconds Nikki looks up at Nicole and smiles warmly, "I am not that bad, Nicole. You may even get to like me. Imagine that."

Nicole throws it back in her face, "I can't."

"Outstanding!" Jacob stands and starts to leave, "I'll just leave you two alone to get better acquainted. Oh, and Nikki!" Jacob stops and turns to Nikki before he steps out the door, "I have only one rule for you. You must clear everything through Nicole or I'll...I'll kill you. Try to circumvent me, or Nicole, or push the envelope by probing the wrong mind in any way and you will not get a second chance."

Jacob then gives her a Cheshire grin and a big nod for good measure.

As he slips through the door, Nikki calls out for clarification, "Figuratively speaking?"

From the hold they hear him say, "Like I said, try me."

12

ha satan es mericone

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-28-SATURDAY
TIME: 10:15zulu (local 32:00mst)

When one looks upon the battle stations Carrie Nation and Mata Hari for the first time it's with child-eyed wonderment. The sheer size and firepower these platforms wield is well beyond the comprehension of most people. When looking at their sister ships, the Lizzie Bordon, Annie Oakley and Mae West, it is with open-mouth astonishment. These three unstoppable behemoths are twice the size of their two little siblings, and carry such an obscene array of weaponry that they are held onto as the final trump cards for the Annex if they were ever needed in a pinch. The SA has been in some pitched battles in the past, but never have they been desperate enough to warrant drawing any one of these five stations into a fray; but if it ever became necessary the more agile Carrie Nation and Mata Hari would be the first to go into action. Then, if the existence of just these two stations were made known, it would surely change the meaning of *arms race* for quite some time to come.

Other than their specific mission call signs, the nickname *hippo* has been the only operational moniker that has stuck throughout the years. Endearing as it may sound, one would think that these monstrosities deserve something more sinister or ominous sounding; but, as one of the most dangerous animal on the planet Earth, with the largest body count to its name on the African continent, the goofy looking and plodding hippopotamus is apropos in context. Once it was argued that by the historical record the mosquito has caused many more deaths by far, but mosquito's don't lurk about in muddy water waiting to tip over boats, or delight in crushing people in their jaws.

End of argument.

Yet, as the primary manufacturing and support centers for the

SA, these stations were never meant to realize their full potential. So much so that during the last conflict two prototype battle platforms under construction, the Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, SA34 and SA35 respectively, were offered up as bait to draw resources away from Nu Ara, and to lure the Co-op into a trap. The ruse worked—after a fashion. Both ships, over 70% complete, were lost in the fight; but the MAD took a severe beating for their efforts.

Three days ago the Lizzie Bordon slipped into a leisurely twelve-hour polar orbit around Cue Ball. The extreme distance from the planet not only gives it the option of a quick get-away, but mostly to prevent its own mass from perturbing Carrie Nation's ongoing ninety-minute equatorial orbit while studying the solar winds of Betelgeuse.

Though things are pretty easy going for most people on a station, the last hour has been pretty crazy for the traffic controllers. Over sixty-five ships, a mix of HWGs and fighters, have landed on its deck, with only one left in the queue and coming in fast.

["Hippo Control, Lima-Bravo, this is Cowboy, Sierra-Alpha three-six, on final. Do we have clearance for approach?"]

["They're waiting for you, Cowboy. Turn left, zero-five, and set her down dish-side."]

["Copy that Hippo Control. Zero-five, dish-side."]

The Razorback slips over the edge, skips onto the deck, and continues to roll along at high speed the last few clicks towards the elevator by the central hub. Normally they would take a more direct taxiway, but they have to make a small detour. Along both the North and South radius from the hub a latticework of braces, clamps and elevators swaddle two new battle platforms under construction. Built from the outside in, they are not even half-way complete. Virtually identical to, but more than a third smaller than the Iron Maiden, they will be completed in half the time and right-sized to match swapping the current stable of battle platforms one for one with room to spare.

Under the stern of the future SA77, the Razorback skids to a halt on an elevator platform and drops into the hold of the ship. The shaft is soon sealed and is immediately pressurized by simply opening the hatches into the bay. Not a normal practice, the emergency vent did snatch a tech unawares and tosses him into the shaft under the HWG. Totally unexpected this was because most of those working in the bays are wearing a JACC in case of an accident. By taking a shortcut, like this guy did, the vent caught him off guard.

As the tech picks himself off the ground, Jacob, Nicole, Scott and Maria, all in black BDU, walk briskly down the ramp of the Razor

and head towards an elevator that is being held open by a Chief Sergeant named Chang, who goes, "They've already started showing the interview."

Maria smiles as she gets in the lift, "Excellent! I hate sitting through all the previews."

On the way down they hear Bob's voice through the tacnet, <"You're late.">

Jacob smiles, <"Fashionably so.">

Maria interjects, <"Waiting for the confirms.">

Jackson asks, <"And?">

Maria grins, <"It all checks out. We're a go.">

<"Good!"> Jackson cuts the link.

The elevator drops all the way to the bottom of the ship, and opens up to a grandly appointed lobby. Stepping out, they quickly cross to the other side and march through a pair of double doors into an auditorium the size of a small stadium. Chang hangs back as the four of them climb the steps up towards what they jokingly call *The Executive Box*.

Up above the box is a huge screen, and on it is a video of General Charles Hershey being interviewed by Nicole just days before, and below that is Robert Jackson who is pointing towards the four empty seats to his left.

On the screen the General listens to Nicole who is off camera, "I'm impressed. Seven-hundred and thirty-three seconds! And I though the Colonel was a weenie."

"And he's the guy you want to be talking to. Not me." Hershey shrugs. "Look, Chief, I really don't know what went on in that pit. I don't know why I had orders to send Security Services in. I don't know what their S.O.I. was, and I sure as hell don't know why they all flat-lined inside five minutes. To tell you the truth, I honestly don't want to know. I have a hard enough time trying to sleep as it is. Colonel Mason was their one and only contact and as you know—he became raptor crap a week ago. The way I figure it the guilt was eating him alive."

Nicole's hand comes into view and points to a cluster of egg shaped lumps of calcium, "So were the raptors."

The General grunts a laugh as he picks one up to look at. Like a hyena, the raptors on Second Hand eat everything and pass on what they can't digest.

Hershey shakes his head, "I hear rumors, deputy. They say

you people have more than a working arrangement with those animals."

"You could say that. Fact is, they're pretty sociable after slammin' back a few beers."

"I've heard some crazy stuff, Chief, but you socialize—with those monsters?"

"Party on! We don't exactly break bread in the classic sense. We humans can't stomach the idea of our food screaming back at us while we're noshing away, but the morbid little fuckers sure do love their suds and that's where we connect. So much so, would you believe, we built a brewery on site. Talk about cheap labor."

"I find this hard to swallow, Chief."

"Like they say, truth is stranger than fiction, General. Like the circumstances surrounding your untimely death, and a perfectly believable fiction I might add. Here's one that's going around that I think you might get a kick out of. I hear that someone at the top of your organization compromised your base. Word is they gave it to us under the table. Now, I find that one hard to believe; but truth *is* stranger than fiction, right? We simply want to hear your version of the truth, General. Can't be any more outrageous than me getting shit faced with man-eating alien monsters. Now, who would believe that! Shit, man, I couldn't sell that one to Hollywood on a good day."

Hershey thinks for a moment, "I *am* dead, right?"

"As a doornail."

"And, you're willing to maintain this fiction indefinitely?"

"As long as you live, General."

"Convince me."

"We'll harvest some bone and organ tissue. We'll quicken the samples and feed the whole mess with a couple of your teeth to one of those animals and presto! Indisputable evidence that General Hershey went out a hero. In six days you'll have new teeth and a new life!"

"Sounds convincing."

"You didn't sell out, General. You corrected a great injustice. I know a whole lot of young people who are grateful."

The General ponders what she says and gives it up, "Some times you see things and pray that you'll get reassigned before it hits the fan. I was due for rotation in two months and was hoping not to be there when you came. Lucky me. For your edification, a year ago the Colonel thought it would be a kick to show me the pit up close. We weren't there a minute and this...this kid, a little red-head runs up to

us and wraps herself around my leg. I couldn't fuckin' believe it!"

"Did you know what they were up to, Sir?"

"No one knew for sure, but it doesn't take a whole lot of stupid to ignore the obvious. Especially when ordered to. In my world it's usually smart to follow orders that say *be stupid*, if you know what I mean? Anyway, these three people come out of the holo and one of them takes the kid away. This lady, a Ms. Welch, steps up and asks us if we saw anything, and we said no. She points a finger at the third guy and his head blows apart. She had a fuckin' laser in it! She then asks if we saw that! Now, this was a sight. Brains and skull all over us, and the tip of her finger is charred and smoldering, and this bitch is asking us stupid questions."

"Well, did you?"

"See what? We didn't see shit! From that day on I've prayed that the base got hit and that bitch got nailed. I tried, but I couldn't let this go. So, a couple of weeks ago I connected with a weapons dealer who has a talent for fucking us over named Suiters. Guess ol' Pete had a soul 'cause he sent you the dirt I gave him on the cobalt bombs we bought from him and stockpiled there. Imagine my surprise when you fucks actually hit the base. Two out of three ain't bad."

"Two for three, General? She got hers."

"There is justice after all."

"By the way...base hit, bitch nailed, what was the other one?"

The General tosses the lump of bone that used to be the Colonel back at the pile and smiles, "I feel like shit already."

Nicole is already standing at the podium as the video terminates. She shuffles some papers and looks up, "At this moment the General is on Cue Ball evaluating our training exercises. Reports now indicate he'll volunteer for our retreat program inside a month. Questions?"

Nicole normally doesn't mind asking for questions, but this crowd consists of the entire leadership of the SA. Nervous as she is, she gets a small reprieve from the applause at the news of the General entering their retreat program. That relief is short lived as some hands go up. Nicole points to a young Deputy Marshall in front.

The Deputy stands and asks flat out asks, "Chief, who or what is Fifty-Two?"

Nicole cringes inside, "At my request, the identity of Fifty-Two is being withheld until the post mission briefings. We plan to tell you then. I can assure you all that the targeting information you receive

here today is valid. I apologize by the way we commandeered your recon teams, but after Field Marshall Graves goes over the mission profile, your teams will be returned to your control. You will be able to confirm targeting through them."

Nicole points to a female Master Sergeant who looks tough, but speaks softly, "Rumor control is failing, Chief. I speak for myself, but I'm sure that many here have the same reservations as I do about withholding sources. Before I send any of my people into a mosh pit, I want someone to level with me because orders that say *be stupid* don't work for me or the people who rely on my judgment. You understand, don't you?"

Nicole looks at Jacob and Maria. They look at each other and then at Jackson. Obviously, Bob is not thrilled at exposing Nicole after he promised her their secret would remain secret for the now, but it's not a choice he can make.

Jackson looks up at Nicole, "It's your call."

Nicole swallows and turns to the crowd, "As you are aware, during the attack at Theta-2 we discovered a Geisha Hut. The very one that was my home until I was seven years old. Just so you know I'm a Barbie Doll. A model N.C.L. three point one to be exact. I was originally conceived and engineered for the sex trade."

The crowd stirs.

"Everything you have ever heard about a Barbie Doll clone is incredibly true. I have no gag reflex. My body and my sexual drives are...well, they are abnormal."

As the auditorium falls dead silent Nicole's eyes tear up, "My hormones bounce me off the walls. I now have a period. I think I'm the only woman alive who preserved her sanity by *getting* a uterus. What's this got to do with anything you ask? General Hershey had some help. You see, I thought I was the only one of my gene type alive until a few weeks ago. The little girl that the General was talking about, the one that grabbed his leg, she is also an N.C.L. A Four point Oh to be exact. They wanted to improve on my genetic base, but they screwed up. They don't know it yet, but that girl is a telepath. A full-blown telepath. She can read minds like an open book and she's equally adept at manipulating them. There are another fifty-one of these children spread across the core system and they can talk to each other in real-time. As unbelievable as it sounds, distance does not inhibit their ability to communicate with each other."

The concept of *whoa* does not even come close to the reaction from these, the most powerful collective in the human race.

"I'm close enough of a genetic match that I can tie into their

neural network. At this very moment, they hear my words, and see your faces through my eyes, and I can tell you—they are afraid. My voice carries fifty...”

Nicole chokes, but finds her voice, “Fifty-three cries for help.”

It takes all of five seconds before the silence is broken. It is a word uttered from deep in the crowd, but it reflects the unified thought of all in attendance.

That word is, “Mission.”

It is repeated by two, then three, and like the Fibonacci sequence more and more join into the chant. With every repetition, it gets louder.

With tears in her eyes the Chief Sergeant, the one who was pinning Nicole down on Fifty-Two, smiles at Nicole with newfound respect and gratitude, “Thank you, Deputy.”

She then puts three fingers up in the air and thrusts them up in time with the chant. Soon the voices are mixed with about half of the group chanting *mission* and the other half-chanting *war!*

Jackson steps up to the podium and pats Nicole on the shoulder with pride. As Nicole sits down he puts his hand out to silence the crowd.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, people.” He gestures to the chief, “But, your right, Chief. It just may come to that. So, mission first, and then we’ll hunker down and wait for the fallout. Before we begin, does anybody have any reservations going after these cookie cutters? Because if you do then speak up now.”

After a few seconds of silence, Jackson grins big, “Good! Mr. Graves and Mr. Rutledge, the floor is yours.”

Jackson sits back down, and Jacob and Scott step up to the podium to a small round of applause.

Jacob shuffles some papers and speaks up, “Mission prefix, Juliet-Bravo. Code name, Jacc in the Box. Catchy hu? Lets go ahead and open your mission profiles.”

As the crowd tear open the envelopes given to them, Jacob continues, “Because of the nature and complexity of this operation, both C3 and react forces will be handled by the Sawney Bean. All other resources will be committed to assault and extraction ops, and we have beau coup targets to go around. One hundred and six priority targets, each one a cloning facility, and just over eleven hundred soft targets, all tags. And, if you haven’t guessed it by now, we intend to put these people out of business and everyone gets a piece of the

action. To go over the details I'll hand you over to the lead coordinator for this op, Deputy Field Marshal, Scott Rutledge."

Jacob steps back, and Scott takes the podium, "Over the last four weeks we've reconfigured two hundred and twenty type thirty containers for the mission. Each will hold a company of troops, with their equipment; and, yes, it will be a tight fit. Commercial shipping has been arranged to deliver the teams to their jump-off points close to their targets. Obviously, if this plan works, the element of surprise will be on our side..."

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Two hours later Maria races into the lobby from the auditorium and makes a beeline to the head. Beating the crowd, she quickly enters a stall. As soon as she shuts the door, Jacob and Robert Jackson enter the restroom.

"Jake, you're goin' to Earth. Consider it a vacation. I'll make sure the press gets wind of it. You need to do this for us."

They stop at a row of urinals, and as Jacob opens his mouth to speak Bob cuts him off, "And don't give me that *I'm needed* line of shit. It don't work for me. For this ruse to work we need our most senior people out fuckin' and killin' and...on second thought, consider it an order, motherfucker! You copy?"

"I copy." Jacob grumbles.

Bob smiles, "Out-fuckin' standing!"

A few seconds of standing at the urinals, Jacob turns to Bob, "Say, Bob, you smell something brown?"

From the stall they hear, "Fuck you! Kiss my brown butt."

Jacob elbows Bob, "Kiss my wha'?"

They hear a muffled, "*Bete a la chingada madre!*"

Jacob zips up and turns to the sink to wash his hands, "Now, that's the taco I know and love."

The door to the stall slams open, and out of the corner of his eye Jacob sees Maria stomp towards him as he laughs, "You know, Bob, it's kind of disturbing to realize your ex-wife swings bigger balls than Satan could on his best day."

Maria pushes her body into Jacobs. She reaches around and flips open a hooked lock-blade. Holding it in front of Jacob's crotch she snarls, "*El Diablo es mericone!* I cut his off, an' don' you forgit it!"

"Guess you've been told." Says Jackson as he steps up to the

sink next to them.

Maria puts the knife away to wash, "Hey Jackson, I hear you might retread. That right?"

"You heard right, Ramirez."

"You serious!"

Jacob is already done drying his hands, and as Maria and Bob reach for the paper towels Bob elaborates, "I'm getting stagnant up on high, Ramirez. Right after this operation, I'm off to Cue Ball for the six-week refresher. Who knows? I might even hook up with that General Hershey."

Maria laughs, "Uh, uh, Cracker Jack. He likes girls."

"He tell you that?"

"You can tell."

Bob pitches his towel into the trash as he heads for the door, "There's always hope. An' like I always say..."

On queue, Jacob and Maria chime in with Bob, "I've got a hard on for hope."

Bob gives the three fingers *war* sign and slips out.

Maria turns to Jacob and tosses her paper towel. It bounces off his head and drops into the basket, "I'm actually going to complement you and Scott on the planning you've done, as well as that briefing. I think you guys may have started a war. Wouldn't that be a hoot and a half?"

Jacob smiles as he steps past her and out into the lobby, "There's always hope."

Following him, Maria chimes, "I've been thinking, devil's advocate, are we doing the right thing? Is this what we really want?"

"It's inevitable and you know it."

"True."

Jacob turns to her, "We are at our peak in numbers, but we will lose twenty-five percent in the next twenty years through attrition, and lower than low recruitment projections. It's apparent that nobody wants to risk their ass anymore, even if it's for a noble cause. Fuck your Alpha-Omega program shit. Now is good for me."

"Just asking."

Jacob was about to walk away from her, but turns back, "That's not what's bugging you."

Maria scowls, "Maybe we should spring a leak? That will mean fifty-one less of them to worry about."

"We made a promise. We don't go back on our word."

"Maybe we should start?"

"This *is* a noble cause."

"Like you said, they may be more trouble than they're worth."

"You got a bad feeling about them, don't ya?"

"Ya, I do."

"Well, so do I, but we got it covered."

"How?"

"Dead-man's switch." Jacob points to his own head as if he were shooting a gun. "Nicole's idea."

"And, Fifty-Two knows?"

"Yup."

Maria gives a low whistle, "Okay, I feel better."

"So, now is good for you?"

"Good for me!" Maria almost laughs as she turns to leave with a spring in her step.

While watching Maria walk away Jacob get's an idea, "Hey, Tiger, what are you doing over the last two weeks leading up to the mission."

Maria stops, turns and shrugs her shoulders, "After the hearings are all done I'll be fuckin' and killin' like everyone else. Don't know where, or with who. You got a better offer?"

"Ya, I think so."

13

naykid in a tin box

LCTN: CALAR-3 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: M45-B002 (133pc from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-JANUARY-1-FRIDAY
TIME: 07:05zulu (local 16:45mst)

Brown dwarfs, like Calar-3, actually glow with a deep red hue. In the infrared spectrum, they can be somewhat dazzling, spectacular even, but with the naked eye they pretty much vanish at an AU or two.

The Iron Maiden has been waiting for an hour before the tell-tail soap-bubble of a MDDSH field slips in and bursts at just twelve kilometers away. From this emerges a huge tractor ship with just under a hundred freight boxes in tow. Looped in a figure-8 to fit in the drive envelope, it immediately starts to unravel into a string of cars just over 10 clicks in length.

Maiden Control wastes no time, ["Blackjack, One-One-Zero-Eight, this is Sierra Alpha, Three-Six. Do you read?"] After a ten second pause, ["Repeat, Blackjack, One-One-Zero-Eight, this is Sierra Alpha, Thirty-Six. Do you read?"]

["Loud an' clear, Three-Six. I understand you've got me a load of containers?"]

["Roger that. Eleven freight boxes will be ready in about thirty minutes. You need any help getting situated?"]

["Negative, Three-Six. It's gonna take me at least two hours to get unraveled here, and another half a day to splice your load in. Just dump 'em overboard an' I'll get after it. Ya'll don' have to hang out for this."]

["That's okay, Blackjack. We'll hang with ya."]

Suddenly, on the port side of the Iron Maiden, light floods the area between the top and bottom flight decks, and show a buzz of activity as the shipping containers start to rise up on elevators from below. Twenty meters wide, thirty high, and a hundred meters long,

two can fit on each lift.

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In the main hold, under the primary flight deck of the Maiden, the last of the eleven containers is about to be sealed. Scott and Angie are standing in front of one with an open access hatch. He's in casual BDU, and she is in her JACC fighting suit.

He gives her a kiss and with concern, "You cool?"

"I'm cool." Angie gives him a quick peck and smiles, "Trust me, I'll be okay!"

As Angie turns for the hatch, Scott pats her butt, "Watch your ass. I want it back in once piece!"

In spite of all the armor the JACC is flexible, but few women can make a sexy gesture seem...sexy. Angie managed to wiggle her butt back at him. She throws him a kiss and slips into the hatch.

Scott turns to Jacob and Bill who just entered the elevator shaft, "Billy, I know she's a big girl, but—"

Bill puts his suited hand out to stop him right there, "I'll keep an eye out on `er for ya. Just promise me that ya'll come bail our butts out if our situation gets out of hand. Okie dokie?"

Scott smiles as he pats Jacob on the back, "The shit-hottest of them all is scheduled to fly your CAP. How's that Cowboy?"

"That's what I'm afraid of. We're all gonna hang it out on this one, but when Ol' Carion is flyin' CAP, you know it can get ugly."

Bill steps into the hatch, but before he closes it he huffs, "Ya know, a hundred and fifty young-uns slitherin' around naykid in a tin box like a bunch of sardines sounds like my idea for a good weekend. I don't know how I'll hold up after three months."

Which is true.

Between the supplies, recyclers, munitions, JACCs, drones and two wolverine tanks, the only luxuries they can afford in the container are 8 heads, 4 shower stalls, 4 exercise stations, and 2 towels each. It's so tight that after showering all are required to oil up so as to minimize scraping injuries as they move about—all the while bumping and pushing up against each other. It leaves little to the imagination on what's going to be going on during their off time when not running simulations, or when suited up while the container is being hosted in transit.

The hatch closes with a hiss, and while Jacob and Scott step

out of the shaft, heading towards a waiting drop ship, Scott asks, "Eugene, tell me, how do you do it?"

Confused, Jacob looks at Scott, "Do what?"

"You always end up in the thick of it. After all these years, no one can figure out how you manage to do that. You get a premonition or what? Trust me; it ain't in your planning. You position yourself in the oddest places, but that is exactly where they show up every time. How?"

Jacob never really thought about it, "So, would you believe that I consult the stars? You can get a lot of good shit out of your astrological forecast, did you know that?"

Scott rolls his eyes so Jacob continues, "Tea leaves! You know, I drink that shit all the time. Why do you think I always use loose leaf?"

Scott shakes his head so Jacob takes another stab at it, "Okay, I'll level with ya, it's the light bulb. I saw it go off one time. I shit thee not! One night I happened to be looking in a mirror an' *bam!* There's this heavenly aura, and angels singing, and..."

Scott is giving him a deadpan look, so Jacob shrugs, "I don't know, it's just a hunch. I get a feeling."

"More than a feeling." Scott points a finger at him.

Jacob shrugs, "What the fuck do I know? I take a stab at it and it works. So, that works for me!"

As Jacob turns and steps up on the ramp of the Razorback, Scott shakes his head in reflection, "You know, you're crazy for doing this, mon."

Jacob turns back, "Doing what?"

"Let's see, two weeks with a woman who wants nothing more than to snatch your nuts and wear them as earrings. Now *that's* hanging it out!"

"We're getting along, Scott."

"Ya, right. Like fire and ice on a good day."

The ramp starts to close, so Jacob steps backwards into the hold all the while saying, "You got it all wrong, Scott. Too many men desire women who are timid little monkeys with willing genitals. Not me. No, sirree! All the women in my life have been exoskeleton hard, psychopaths. The kind of babe that devours the male of their species like a mantis after copulation. But I continue to persevere and you want to know why? Because they have yet to figure out that..."

The ramp snaps shut, and without a break in rhythm Jacob comes through the tacnet to finish, <"They're supposed to bite our heads off first!">

Amused, Scott shakes his head as he turns away from the Razorback, all the while muttering to himself, "And won't we be a couple of dumb fucks when they do."

The Razor rolls slowly back over Scott towards an open lift. If he were to reach up he could touch the underside of it which would feel like textured glass. As it clears he notices the lift holding the container with Angie onboard is already on its way up.

With that, a thought crosses Scott's mind, *I'm in love...with a woman! How the hell did that happen?*

He has been intimate with women before, and it was great and all, but with omni-men there are no strings attached. Now that he's hooked on Angie, he does not miss his old life one bit.

And that bugs him.

At least, while she is on this mission, he could play the field just for giggles. And with a few hours to blow he thinks, *why not?*

He paths a channel to an old friend who answers the call abruptly, ["Wakow! I hear you've been pussy-footin' around with Simmons. What's up with that?"]

Scott laughs, "Gilroy, how's my Batty-Bwoy?"

["Cock goes here! What's keepin' ya?"]

14

bigger balls than standard issue

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.009au from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-MARCH-31-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 20:15zulu (local 12:15pst)

The Glendale Freeway, running north of Los Angeles, is not nearly as busy as it used to be back in the day when it first opened. Traffic today is moderate to light, but steady, even though the freeway itself has pretty much vanished from sight. Like most roadways throughout the world, after two hundred years of neglect, the lanes have crumbled away to dust and gravel. Only small patches of concrete and rebar remain—peaking through the grass that now marks the pathway between Los Angeles and La Cañada.

For all intents and purposes, the Earth has become a garden planet. Less than two billion inhabit the globe, and property values have dropped so steeply that the few homes that dot the hillsides along California-2 have at least an acre, or three, surrounding them.

In a ground car, floating along the Northbound right-of-way, Jessica watches the terrain pass by as Jacob, Maria and Diego watch a transmission of Maria at a press conference earlier that morning. On a video screen, in the dashboard, Maria is fielding questions from reporters from behind a podium in a very small auditorium adjacent to the One-Click lobby.

On the screen, Maria has just pointed to a reporter named Brenda Ashley.

Ashley stands, "That's a serious accusation you're making, Marshall. You're telling us that the Deputation routinely covers up violations?"

Maria ponders her response, "All I'm saying is that on the two occasions we did advise the Security Council of our intentions, forty-eight hours later we uncovered a big zero. But this time, surprise allowed us to collect over sixty of the Cobalt Bluer retrofits with yields

ranging from one to twenty gigatons. Draw your own conclusions.”

The reporters raise their hands, but Ashley talks over them. “So, if I may, if it's not a cover up then what do you call it? My viewers and I would call it a cover up. You call it what?”

“Cleaning house?” Maria shrugs humorously. “Ms Ashley, look, if the police came up to you and said that in two days they were going to raid your home for, I don't know, for a torpedo lab, okay. What are you going to do? Wait for them to kick down your door and throw your ass in jail, or would you rather pass the white glove test? I cannot wrong the Deputation for taking advantage of a situation that can save them from some embarrassment. I'd do the same thing in their shoes; but we're not going to give it to 'em anymore. It's now a level playing field. Mr. Ortega.”

Maria points to male reporter named Ortega who stands, “Our sources at the United Nations are again pointing a finger at the Co-op; but, like the members of the Security Council, the Co-op continues to remain silent on this issue. Can you tell us if they've made any attempt to contact the S.A. about settling your differences?”

Maria smiles, “Settle our differences? Well, I was under the impression we did that a decade ago! Staging cobalts can save them weeks, even months if we got into another pissing contest, but it proves nothing. Even though they have regularly violated the truce, we have no stipulated provision to remedy these situations except through intervention. I tell you what, next time we have an operation like this, we'll have you people tag along. Sound like a plan?”

We hear rumblings of approval from the reporters. Maria points to another but Ortega butts in like Ashley did.

“Do you expect a response?”

“No, I don't. And, what are they going to say? We caught 'em with their pants down. The best thing for them to do is to clam up and let this thing blow over. It *always* does.”

The hands go up all over and Maria points to a reporter in the back, “Ya, you.”

The reporter stands and asks, “Two weeks ago Marshal Jackson, in a press release, said that he wasn't concerned about this situation. He goes on to say that cobalt weapons have more tactical than strategic value.”

Maria expands on that, “That is correct. The Co-op has yet to find our bases or manufacturing facilities, and I doubt they ever will, so what's the point? But hey, the Co-op is not lead by military minds, but politicians. They want to swing the biggest and baddest balls they

can. So do terrorist organizations—which is why the United Nations Security Council declared all independent retrofit programs a crime against humanity. What frosts my hide is that there is no way to track these things in governmental control except through surprise inspections which have failed to be a surprise. That is, until now. We can only confiscate them if we find them in prohibited areas, but with the way things are we cannot stop their proliferation.”

The reporter chimes in, “But you have them, don’t you?”

“Well d’uh.” Maria drolls. “The Pleiades is a floating rock quarry. What do you think? We pop one, on average, every five months or so to vaporize an asteroid or two. We use them for what they were designed for, which is saving planets and lives. We don’t consider them weapons.”

Another reporter chimes in out of order, “But, you *can* use them as weapons.”

“Well, double d’uh! What do you think? But then, we know how to take a simple missile, a half-tonne in weight, crank it up to hyperphoto velocities, and get the same results on the cheap! Who needs a trillion dollar cobalt bomb when you have that capability? That is all for today.”

The reporters start shouting as Maria waves and steps away from the podium. Over the noise, one reporter shouts, “What are you going to do with the bombs you captured?”

Maria returns to the podium and puts out a hand to quiet the room, “I have to answer that question. Did you hear it? ‘What are you going to do with the bombs you captured?’ I’ll tell ya, at this very moment, they are being dismantled and we are making tens of thousands of small, useful bombs out of the reactive material. I just want to thank the Cooperative for their gracious contribution to our peace-time arsenal.”

Another reporter shouts from the back, “Shouldn’t you get rid of it instead?”

“That would be such a waste, but I would consider giving it back! And, under the right circumstances, you can count on it.”

The image of Maria stepping away from the podium is split with an anchorman who adds, “Marshall Ramirez has been vacationing on the west coast and is accompanied by her husband, Field Marshall Jacob Graves. Shown here last fall on—”

The image is cut off as Jacob pulls his hand away from the dash, all the while his son, Diego, like any four year old seeing their mother on television, starts clapping his hands and laughs, “Yeaaa

Mommy!"

Jessica just shakes her head and looks out the window.

Noticing, Jacob asks, "You okay?"

Jessica sighs, "Do we have to meet these people?"

Maria huffs, "What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem."

"A little less enthusiasm if you don't mind." Jacob snips.

"I'm almost a teenager. I'm supposed to be moody and uncommunicative. It's in my job description."

Jacob shakes his head, "Something else is bugging you, sweetheart. I can feel it."

"Father, for the short year you have known me you've probably wondered why I'm such a cynical bitch."

"It's crossed my mind."

"I always know when you're up to something."

Maria asks, "What makes you think that?"

"For beginners, you two aren't fighting."

Jacob and Maria look at each other and suddenly start flailing their hands at each other, like two little kids in a mock slap fight.

"Right..." Jessica rolls her eyes. "Let me clarify, it's the constant tacnet and goofy looks between you two. Don't forget—I've been chipped. Just because I can't tie in doesn't mean I don't see that something big is up." Jessica turns to Maria and smiles, "And, Aunt Maria, that press conference you gave was exceptional. Whatever mischief you guys are up to I'm sure that they'll be caught with their pants down. Without a cigarette, or a reach-around."

Jacob looks at Maria and she laughs at him via the tacnet, <"It's your kid. You deal with this.">

<"You can handle her better than I can.">

Noticing their behavior, Jessica pipes up, "I'm curious to know who's on the shadow team? I count three."

Maria is truly dumbfounded by her statement, <"How the hell did she figure that out?">

"I think it's obvious." Jessica adds.

Jacob turns to her, "How's that?"

"Their shadows. Each one has their own moves. One of them

looks pretty confident. I figure he's a new guy. Anyone I know?"

Maria and Jacob respond in unison, "Nelson."

"Zach? He's a cutie pie! My mom had better hurry up and pin him down 'cause in a couple of years I'll be ready to compete on her terms."

Jacob looks at her with a frown, "How about we play a game. You tell me what we're up to and I'll confirm or deny."

"You mean deny or evade. Okay, I'll play, Father. Only to watch you squirm."

Maria shrugs, "She's your kid!"

Jacob takes a long and hard look at Jessica. He sits back and, suddenly, it's like a light bulb lights up over his head, "Does your mother know?"

"Know what?"

Jacob gives a sardonic grin, "I think it's obvious."

Jessica is taken aback but for just a second. She has spent her entire life hiding her capabilities, and for the first time she let it slip. Her father is smarter than she has given him credit for, but now is not the time for admiration. Now is the time for self-preservation.

Composing herself, she smiles, "Veeery good."

"You got careless. So, does she know?"

"Are you kidding? I'd appreciate it if you kept it to yourself. I don't fit into their little clique."

Maria suddenly realizes what's going on, and with wide-eyed amazement she tacnets to Jacob, <"She's one of them!">

Jessica butts in without the benefit of the tacnet, <"No, not one of them. I'm different.">

Maria and Jacob sound off together, "Different?"

Maria leans in with, "How so?"

"I have a personality." Jessica quips.

Jacob and Maria laugh as their car passes through Foothill Blvd and starts to race up Hill Drive.

Maria sits back and asks, "How much do you know?"

Before Jessica can formulate an answer Jacob interjects, "Considering the invasive capability of Fifty-Two, I suspect she knows quite a lot."

Jessica grimaces, "Every excruciating detail."

Jacob thinks for a moment, "Now that I think about it you're responsible for all this. Tell me I'm wrong."

Jessica opens her mouth to comment but holds back, and after a few seconds she turns to ice like her father, "My options were limited. I was going to let the little bitches rot, but the baby failed to pacify mother. Isn't it nauseating how she clings?"

Jacob was not phased by that news, but Maria is pissed, "The baby! Seth was your doing! Why you little—"

"I'm trying to keep my mother's codependent ass alive!" Jessica almost shouts. She reels it in and clarifies, "For the first time in her life Nicole is stable. No thanks to the two of you! Take issue on my methods all you want, but my motives are honest. Something else you should know. They can't combine their powers—yet. So, for the now, they don't pose much of a threat, but that won't stop them from becoming a pain in the ass."

Jacob is not amused, "What makes you think I wouldn't perceive you as a pain in the ass?"

"Me? A threat! I know my place."

Maria laughs but Jessica and Jacob just stare at each other.

As Maria's laughter dies down, Jessica smiles at her father, "You're a lot smarter than you look. Don't trust me." Then via telepathy, <"You'll know when I'm fucking with ya."> She then adds, "The little bitches have a hidden agenda and they will fuck with you. Watch your six, father."

"They're an anomaly, but they'll be controlled."

Jessica hisses, "They're an abomination! I can't tell if they're simply naive or showing the early warning signs of megalomania. Either way, controlling them may require killing them."

The two look into each other's eyes, and Jessica smiles, "Yes, father, just like you think you may have to kill me someday. Promising I won't give you a reason to is not enough. You'll just have to trust me."

Jessica then sits back and shrugs, "Which is something you cannot afford to do now that you know what I am."

Jacob ponders his daughter and the natural telepathic and manipulative power she wields. She, at twelve, held in check a collective force likened to herself with the threat of exposure. Then, when she could not give her mother purpose with a new child, she set out to cut a deal with these clones—all to give her mother a sense of

belonging. Towards that goal she hacked, manipulated, baited and switched the SA into action. The whole thing at Theta-2-Taurus was a set up, and he admires her for her clandestine ingenuity. Though it is a noble cause it was wrong of her to do it, but Jacob finds it hard to fault her for the end result. It is what everybody in the Annex wanted, so there was no point of making an issue out of it. What dawns on Jacob is that she may be pre-teen on the outside, but inside she is something else entirely.

Jacob smiles at her, "I'm beginning to like you."

"I won't let that go to my head."

"You are so much like your mother."

Jessica corrects him, "I may look like my mom, I may sound like my mom, but inside I'm all you, Pop. My only other flaw is that delightful little freckle on my butt you gave me. Two, in fact!"

"Well, ya can never say I didn't give you anything."

Jessica rolls her eyes, and as the car tops Hill Drive Jessica looks out the window and asks, "Father, do we really have to meet these people?"

"I haven't seen this lady in over thirty years." Jacob says.

"That's the point. It could wait a day or two."

Maria points out, "We're jumping off tomorrow."

"I know and I don't want to piss away our time here. I know she means a lot to you, but she means nothing to me. It's not like family, ya know."

Jacob feigns surprise, "You care! I'm touched."

Jessica deadpans, "Don't let that go to your head."

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The chalet is as striking as it is huge. It's made of grey stone with a deep-blue trim, and leaded windows. The micro-turret cameras are still there, everywhere, but Jacob wonders where the laser sentries are now posted. Maybe these cameras are the "see and slash" units with the lasers built inside. They already hit the doorbell, and after almost a minute, all of them are still standing there in four distinct human pieces—whole and unharmed.

If Monique Ribot still carried a grudge, and meant to kill him, it would be easy enough too surgically slice him up with a little flicker of light and invite the rest in for tea; but, as it is, Jacob breathes a sigh of relief when the front door opens—but not too much relief.

"Jordon?" Jacob asks.

Ever since Jacob talked to Monique the day before he's been desperately trying to remember her daughter's name, but she didn't offer so he didn't ask. She did say that her daughter had died in childbirth, and that he could meet the twins that next day, but that didn't help him until he saw Monique's granddaughter standing there.

"Junior. Everyone says I look like my mother." Says Jordon.

"Wow, you do."

Jordon gestures them to come inside, "Come on in. Everyone is out back and waiting for you."

Jordon is eight months pregnant, and has a slight waddle as she leads them through the opulence of the chalet towards the back yard. She addresses her grandmother by her first name. Not all that uncommon for adult children and parents nowadays, but not so for generations that skip.

"Monique has told us all about you. It's a privilege to finally get to meet you, Mr. Graves."

"It's Jacob, and I don't know if that's good or bad."

"It's all good the way I hear it."

"Monique going legit. Now, that is something I thought I'd never see. I guess you and your brother had a lot to do with that."

"Not directly but, yes, a lot. You might say she's still the Grand Dame, even though she's been retired for as long as I can remember. At least we only have a handful of muscle on the payroll, but they're more for her entertainment than protection anymore."

"She likes the attention."

Jordon opens the sliding door to the pool and smiles to Jacob as he steps past her, "You know grandmother well."

As Jacob steps out on the cool deck he's witness to Monique lifting herself off her recliner, and in the few seconds it took her to politely don her robe, dressed guests require a dressed host, Jacob was awestruck by how much she has not changed over the last thirty-some years. A tall and sinewy French-African with a figure that rivals that of Nicole's—she looks nothing like her eighty-nine years of age. Even by today's standards, like Nicole, she is beyond knockout.

Stepping up to Jacob, with a runway model's catwalk, she takes Jacob by the hand and gives him a quick kiss, "It's been too long, Jacob."

"Yes, it has."

"First thing, I want to apologize for my ugly behavior. Looking back, you have to admit, it was such a trivial matter."

"No, I should apologize."

"Absolutely not! I wronged both you and my daughter. I did not have the opportunity to make it up to her, but I can with you."

"Just to see you after all this time is enough."

"I think we'll be able to do better. You've met my granddaughter, Jordan. This is Peter, her twin brother."

Jacob was already sizing up Peter as he steps up with two children in tow. Peter stands eye to eye with Jacob and they shake hands. Peter's grip was firm, but personable, and this is a good sign that he is someone Jacob automatically likes.

Monique then gestures to the fourteen year old next to Peter, and his four-year-old sister who cuts between them for Diego, "And this is Josav, Jordan's first, and Connie."

Jacob pats Diego on the back, "Go play, but stay where we can see you."

"Kay!" Diego shouts over his shoulder as he and Connie run off towards the pool.

Jessica and Josav acknowledge each other with a simple nod. The type of signal that indicates tentative approval.

Monique puts her hand out to Jessica, "And, my dear, your name, Jessie?"

Jessica takes her hand, "Madam Ribot."

"Monique, please. We must talk later, you an' I. Until then, Josav, please show Jessie around. We'll watch the little ones."

Josav thumbs Jessie to follow him, and as they walk away, Monique turns to Maria, "You must be Maria. I've been dying to meet you after talking to Jacob yesterday. Nobody gets married anymore except Jordon. At least she and her husband are still on speaking terms."

Jordon cuts in, "Actually, we get along just fine."

Peter interjects, "Monique doesn't understand monogamy."

Monique laughs, "I shouldn't be so critical. Fact is, I'm jealous. Carlos worships the ground she walks on. Your little boy, Diego? He's a gem."

Maria smiles, "Yes."

"I saw him on the com-link with Jacob. He's an adorable

child. Looks a lot like you, but Jessica?"

"She's a carbon copy of her mother."

"Jessie is going to be a heart breaker."

Maria grunts, "More of a ball-breaker if you ask me."

"Appearances are deceiving. I see a lot of her father in her. I think you will be pleasantly surprised by her outcome."

"I don't think that pleasant is the adjective I'm thinking of."

Monique offers her and Jacob a double recliner, "Trust me. She may be a little rough around the edges to you, but to me she's a diamond in the rough."

"Right now she's more like a chigger in the bush, but I hope you're right about her. I got my doubts."

As Maria and Monique sit, Monique sighs, "I know people."

"And I respect you for that. Your reputation precedes you."

Standing side by side, Jacob turns to Peter, "She hasn't changed a bit."

"I wouldn't know any different." Snorts Peter. Then, "Where are my manners! What can I get you to drink?"

"Beer? Any kind will do."

Maria adds, "We're not particular."

Peter turns to his grandmother, "Monique?"

"Oh, surprise me!"

He looks over at Jordon, but she waves him off. As he starts off for the kitchen of the chalet, Jacob turns to follow.

"Let me help."

Little has changed in kitchens over the last few centuries and, much to Jacob's surprise, nothing has changed in Monique's kitchen since he was last in it. Making a bee-line to the refrigerator, he notices a plastic plug covering a hole made by a bullet that just missed his head thirty-six years before.

Suddenly he hears a loud pop, and he nervously looks over his shoulder—only to find Peter pouring champagne into a pitcher of orange juice. Feeling silly, he opens the frig and again to his surprise, he finds his and Maria's favorite beer. He pulls two steel cans of the brew out, and turns towards Peter who is already tossing a church-key his way.

"Rapture Red. Those are some killer suds."

Never before seeing champagne and orange juice mixed together, Jacob asks, "What are you doing?"

"Mimosa. Try it, you'll like it."

"Naw, I'll pass."

Peter smiles, "Maria will want some. I'm sure of it."

"Probably right, but I'll take her a can just in case."

Peter shrugs and looks away, and while stirring the concoction he pipes up, "So, Jacob, what do you do? Monique hasn't had time to clue us in, but I figure you're military."

"Does it show?"

"Afraid it does."

"What do you do, Pete?"

Peter pulls the spoon out and tosses it into the sink, "I drive a Bulldog for the Forty-Sixth Marine Air Group."

"Marines! Way kewl."

"The Few, the proud, the dead on the beach."

Peter, having poured three glasses of Mimosa, has stepped up to the frig and puts the pitcher in it. As he does, Jacob notices a spider web of faint scars on Peter's forehead, around his left eye.

Gesturing to it, Jacob asks, "So, you get punched through a canopy or somethin'?"

Peter snorts, "Naw, ground action if you can believe that. Got caught off-guard swingin' bigger balls than standard issue."

Peter stops and the realization hits him just as it hits Jacob.

Peter laughs, "I don't believe it...it's you!"

"Wow, small world!" Jacob's astonishment then downshifts into a twinge of guilt, "Sorry 'bout your people."

"It wasn't our fight. We should have sat it out."

"At least you did nail me. That round you got off—which, by the way, was well placed, but wrong angle—went in under my arm, and spun me around."

"You almost got me for good."

"I made a point to just clip ya."

"Thanks! I'm glad you meant to do that."

"My aim is true."

Starting out towards the pool, Peter nods, "Ya know, I laughed for days after watching you get chewed out the way you did. No one believed me when I told the story. No one could possibly believe that you, of all people, would take a dressing down like that! But, hey, everybody has to answer to somebody, right? It's pretty wild that I get to meet you for real, Mr. Graves. It sucks that I can't tell anybody about meeting you today."

"It's, Jacob. Please, I'm nobody special. And, yes, thank you for wanting to keep our little visit on the Q.T., but we are being watched and they will approach you. Just tell them the truth when they do."

"It's not like I'm gonna pick up on anything special, right?"

"You got that right."

Stepping up to the group, they pick up on Maria lecturing Jordon on the secrets of a good marriage, "No-no-no! Jordan, the sign of a successful marriage is when you can lead his ass around like a bull by the nose. Better yet, if he's real stupid! I mean, if he really loves you, he'll get himself knocked off and make you a rich bitch! Till death do *he* part, right?"

Jacob moos, "Buuuuull-sheeeeeit!"

As he hands Maria the can of beer, Monique laughs, "Jacob, where ever did you find her? She's incorrigible!"

Maria throws her hand out to Jacob, "Don't answer that! What they don't know won't hurt you."

Trying to suppress her laughter, Jordon blurts, "Stop it! Be nice! I like him!"

Maria smirks, "I am being nice! I let him live another day didn't I?" Then, taking the can of beer, she asks, "What took you boys so long?"

Jacob plops down beside her, "If you must know, the Major and I were getting reacquainted."

"Major?" But before Maria could finish her question, Peter hands her a glass and she blurts out, "Mimosa!"

Peter gloats at Jacob, "See, I told you she'd go for it."

Jordon frowns, "You two have met before?"

Peter tries to cut it short, "Long time ago. No biggie."

Maria pushes, "Hey, Peter, where would you know this guy?"

Jacob gestures to his forehead, "Sapphire, remember?"

Maria mouths the words, *That's him!*

Peter adds, "I was 'Lieutenant Mimosa' then."

Jordon scowls, "I want to hear this, Peter."

"No, you don't." Peter shakes his head.

"Jordan's a big girl." Monique reassures Peter, then turns to Jordan, "Eleven years ago your brother led a counter-attack against some lunatic who was shooting up a base he was refueling at."

Monique then turns to Jacob with that *your turn* look in her eyes, so Jacob adds, "I was that lunatic."

Monique then turns to Jordan, "Satisfied? Go ahead, ask."

Jordan looks at Jacob, then turns to Peter, "So, that's how your face got all fucked up! I thought you've always been a pilot?"

"Marine pilots are ground qualified first." Jacob interjects.

"Ya, but no one in the platoon was going to follow my ass without Top. Unfortunately, Top got hit half way up."

Jordon scolds, "What were you thinking, dumbshit!"

Peter protested, "We were taking fire, and there was only one of them! On his way down this guy shot a bunch of holes through our ships! What were we supposed to do?"

Maria coughs, "Ya, how tough could one guy be?"

"I'll say. After an hour of his shit, I was the only one that wasn't hit. A whole squad down by one man. Cripes, did we get our asses kicked or what!"

Slightly embarrassed, Jacob apologizes, "Sorry."

"No need. We should have ran the other way." Peter then turns to Maria, "Marshall Ramirez, I have to thank you. The way you chewed Jacob a new ass-hole made my recuperation bearable."

He raises his glass to her in a salute, "I am honored to make your acquaintance too, Marshal Ramirez."

"You're welcome, I guess?"

Frowning at Peter, Jordan snarls, "You asshole!"

"I gather there are no hard feelings between the two of you?"

Maria points to Peter and Jacob.

The two respond in unison, "We're cool."

They look at each other and laugh out loud, and to Maria that was just too coincidental.

Monique swirls her drink and nods her head, "Then I think it shouldn't complicate what I'm about to tell you."

Jacob, Peter and Jordan look at Monique with curiosity. Maria, however, rolls her eyes. She has already figured it out.

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The tour of the chalet was impressive to say the least. Remarkable by its artistic appointments, but surprisingly devoid of ostentatious-ness, it is exactly how Jessica remembers it. That is, exactly how Jacob remembers it.

Memories that she has quietly taken from her father.

Living in space rarely avails you to architectural eye-candy that is this chalet, and Jessica has never seen such décor in the minimalist, and almost Spartan world of the Annex. To experience the opulence of hotels and resorts is one thing, but to tread in such a place that people *actually live in* is something quite another. On the way to his wing of the chalet Josav understates the importance of the artworks that litter the place, yet interspaced between the works of masters he points out the insanely powerful illustrations by Ralph Steadman, and the delightful watercolors by the obscure Matthew Monks. Liken to Josav, these artists also cry out to her.

Art has been a hobby for Josav, and with trillions at her disposal, Monique has entertained his desire to procure these works. The payoff is that she has successfully groomed him into being *the* expert on her collection. He is already managing it very well on his own. So much so, that curators and dealers are starting to contact him directly. Anymore, to say that Monique only holds the power of veto, and the checkbook, is not an exaggeration.

Josav didn't tell Jessica any of this—she just took it from him. As well as the knowledge that Monique is positioning him to inherit all her art, wealth, and industries; and that Peter and Jordan are okay with this because they themselves want nothing to do with it. Josav's polarity, wealth, and flat-out sexiness may mean he's a hot-ticket to many an ambitious female; but it is his humility, industriousness, and self-effacement that impresses Jessica the most. More so that she knows that he is checking her out at every turn, and he sees potential in her as both a partner and a confidant.

Jessica may be twelve, but she is starting to blossom. In the last year this skinny twig has started to fill out. She may be twelve, but she is way behind the curve in losing her virginity. Granted, most *children* lose it early-on, and usually to someone of the same gender. More than 95% of them lose it to one of the opposite sex before they

reach thirteen; but, because of her powers, Jessica has experienced more ten-fold, by proxy, than anyone else could possibly imagine before they-themselves reach the majority. Jessica found it odd that people put so much stock in sex and intimacy, but now that she has run into Josav—she finds herself at odds with her newfound desires.

Now in his suite of rooms, covered wall-to-wall in movie marqueees, Jessica realizes that she has interests other than listening to histories about movie blockbusters and disasters. As he shuts the door he turns and faces Jessica who has closed the distance between them. Just inches away, she has a coy, but knowing look in her eyes as she lifts her face up to his.

Instead of shying away, Josav boldly comments, "You have pretty eyes."

When their lips touch it is soft and tentative at first. Jessica is impressed by Josav not trying to eat her face, and by his skill in looking for the invite. So, to push on, she parts her lips slightly and the tips of their tongues meet.

Few things are remembered as much as the first kiss. Usually both the participants are awkward and inexperienced, and the moment is cherished as a remarkable event simply because it was the first. This kiss is remarkable because of the depth of skill and maturity demonstrated by Josav.

Jessica will never forget this moment for two reasons. First is the mind-blowing connection she makes with Josav. The second, it is the almost Earth-shattering revelation that floods her mind and so rudely encroaches on the moment.

Suddenly, Jessica breaks the kiss and jumps back as if someone slapped her, "What the fuck!"

"Did I do something wrong?" Josav pleads, "I'm sorry."

Jessica throws her hands out, "NO! You did nothing wrong! I—ah, something came up! And—ah—nothing wrong at all!"

"You okay?"

"No—yes!" Jessica grabs her head, "Okay, this makes no sense, but we're okay! I'm not!"

"Hu?"

Jessica growls, "I'm gonna hurt someone!"

With Josav in tow, and at a safe distance, Jessica weaves her way through the chalet and blasts out the doors to the cool deck by the pool, all the while broadcasting, <"I finally meet a boy I want to get to know, if you know what I mean, and...and I don't fucking

believe this one!">

Via the tacnet Maria shoots back, <"Stand down, Jessie!">

<"When is it ever a good time with you people!"> Jessica screams in her head as she stops besides Maria and Jacob.

Maria shakes her head, <"Now is not a good time!">

<"I lose a sister and it's not a good time! When were you gonna tell me about her? Hu? I've cried myself to sleep about that one, but I couldn't say anything because, well...because it's obvious!">

Maria pleads, <"Now *is not* a good time!">

Oblivious to their conversation, Josav breaks the apparent silence by asking, "So, what gives?"

Jordan clears her throat, and asks Monique, "Is that him?"

Monique confirms, "That's him."

Confused, Josav goes, "Hu? Somebody gonna clue me in?"

Peter gestures towards Jacob, "Josav, I want you to meet your grandfather. Jordan's and my father...Buzzard."

"Buzzard? My grandfather is a...bird?"

"That's his call sign with the Steel Annex. In the Co-op they call him Azrael."

"Azrael?"

"Mortis Angeles." Monique adds.

Because of his involvement in art Josav is a student of Latin, so to clarify he asks, "So, my grandfather is the Angel of Death?"

Jacob awkwardly waves by wiggling his fingers towards Josav, and says, "Hi!"

"No shit?" Josav asks.

"No shit!" Maria confirms.

It's not everyday that, as an adult, you meet your father for the first time. Jordan and Peter never expected this to happen, but here they are. And it's not everyday that you meet your grandfather for the first time, but this is not a trauma for Josav because he knows his father, and he knew of one set of grandparents and that more than made up for the loss of the second pair.

The others being either dead or *non grata*.

And it's not everyday that you find out that someone related to you has an important job per se, but on someone's payroll as the

Angel of Death is a little over the top in anyone's book. Then again, if memory serves him well, wasn't his great grandmother something of a bad-ass herself back in the day?

All this goes through Josav's mind, but the only thing he could come up with is a simple, yet quietly understated, "Kew!!"

15

for the greater good

TIME: 02:35zulu (local 18:35pst)

The grill set up by the cool deck rivals that of the kitchen, and purists still use wood for barbeque over charcoal or gas any day. Hickory, apple, cherry, and maple may be way big in most barbeque circles, and mesquite may rule the taste of the southwest, but pecan wood has become the prestige in many a grill master's bag o' tricks.

Peter is an artist, and a published one at that.

For this little group he has slow cooked chicken with a homemade apricot glaze, flash grilled K.C. Strip steaks marinated in balsamic vinegar, pepper, and yellow mustard, and he is now turning out kosher-dogs toasted with the juice of grated yellow onions, clarified butter, spices and a dash of brown sugar. The latter being his culinary masterpiece.

The trick is, he says is to, "Keep them turning, and slathered as you do!"

Humbled by watching his son work the grill, Jacob walks a huge platter of vegetables into the kitchen. He may be a carnivore at heart, but this compilation of grilled tomatoes, zucchini, and yellow squash has him drooling. Of all the food prepared, it's the asparagus that scares him most. Pan-fried with olive oil, sea salt, and seasoned pepper, he is amazed by how much of it has already been picked at by child and adult alike—and it's only a garnish for the steaks!

That shit should be covered in cheese! goes through Jacob's mind as he watches Maria sneak yet another spear into her mouth.

"Wha?" Maria mumbles noticing Jacob catching her in the act.

"Nothin' honey!" he smiles as he puts the platter down.

"Chow is up!" shouts Peter as drops a pyramid of dogs on the table. "Get it while it's hot!"

"Sure thing, Marine." says Jordan as she is already at the

table building a plate for her daughter, Connie.

Jacob does the same for Diego, and noticing the mass of vegetables and salad she is putting on the plate for Connie, Jacob comments to her, "Diego won't touch it if it's green."

"Connie will eat anything." Jordan smiles as they both bun a hotdog for their little ones.

"That so." Says Jacob as he offers ketchup to Connie.

Holding out the dog, Jordon continues, "One time a friend of ours served squingilli and Connie shouts, 'Hey!, there's it's eye' and pops it right in!"

"Suingilli?"

"Squid."

"Squid!" Jacob shivers and squirts ketchup on Jordon's hand, "Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's okay, Pop!" says Jordon as she wipes her hand off.

"Ya know, I go from having only a small son, to having a half-grown daughter, then another son, then another daughter, and yet another adult daughter and her twin brother—all within a year!"

"You mean I have another brother and sister?"

"He's a newborn and she's dead. Died in action working for us. That is, before I knew she was my daughter. It's a long story."

"Sounds confusing."

"You're confused?"

Taking the plate out for Connie, Jordan motions for Jacob to follow her, "I gotta hear this."

Following Jordan, Jacob bumps the table and knocks an olive to the ground. At the same time Maria is walking in from outside.

Maria snatches up the olive and holds it towards the sky, "*Todo para Dios!*" She then shakes it at the ground, "*Y nada para el Diablo!*" She shoves it in Jacob's mouth and motors on her way.

Jacob wonders what she said about God and the devil, but ops to put it behind him as he follows after Jordan.

Alone with Monique, both making themselves a plate, Maria smiles, "I want to thank you for having us here. This turned out a lot different than I thought it would."

"Same here." Monique agrees, then sighs, "Maria, tell me something about you two."

"I can tell ya, but then I'd have ta kill ya."

Monique crows a laugh, but adds, "How long have you two been separated?"

"Give that lady a cigar!"

"You know, you make a fabulous couple. You complement each other! When you're not cutting him down of course."

Maria gives her sinister grin, "You know, you're a nosy bitch, but you don't play games! I respect that."

"I've earned the right to be direct, madam."

"I'm sure you have." Maria drops a steak on both their plates, "Look, seeing him probably makes you feel like you're fifty again. But try thirty or so years worrying over his ass. Shit, I feel like I'm eighty about now."

"My sources tell me he takes unusual risks."

"You don't know the half of it."

Monique puts asparagus on Maria's plate, "I've been keeping track of him."

"As his superior I'm proud of his work, but as his spouse... Well, I don't need any more holes in my stomach."

"Then I hate to bring this up, but an old friend of ours, Pete Suiters, he died awhile back. Your representatives at One Klick say he was trying to evade capture. My sources tell a different story."

Perplexed, Maria shakes her head, "Who are your sources?"

Monique smiles, "Ya gotta know who ta blow."

Between a rock and a hard place, Maria clearly grits her teeth, "Pete asked Jacob to do it. He was given options, but...Pete insisted."

"At least now I know where he is. I haven't told anybody, but he was Peter and Jordan's grandfather."

"Think I figured that out."

"They've meet him, but they don't know."

"One step ahead of ya!"

"Zoot, he never really went by Pete. Our relationship was impossible. My expectations didn't change when Jordan was born and he never forgave me when she died. It was an accident, but it was all so avoidable. If—"

"Gotta love that word, if."

"I really shouldn't blame myself, but who else is there to blame?" Monique notices Maria clutching at her stomach, "Maria, are you okay?"

Maria gives Monique a grim smile, "I wish I were kidding about the ulcers."

"Ulcers? Really?"

"In my job, at my level...ya, really."

Monique helps Maria to a chair, "Can I get you anything? A pill maybe? I can send my staff out to get some."

Maria's hand is shaking, "Bread and milk, please."

"Whole milk okay?"

Maria nods *yes* with a look on her face like she's going to hurl. As Monique heads for the refrigerator Maria gets a tacnet channel alert for her and Jacob. She opens the channel and hears Angie's voice.

["I need to get out of this bitch can! I'm as much a free spirit as the next guy, but three months of grab ass with Bill's people is giving me the cramps!"]

Bill is also on the channel, and he adds with his drawl, ["The troops are bored to tears boss-lady. Have we got a mission?"]

Angie kicks in, ["Scott ain't talking."]

Jacob has just stepped in to load up a plate for himself and nets back, <"The guy is busy! He's operating on amphetamines and wet-dreams. Let him be! You got the alert, right?">

Bill sighs, ["Ya, but we've got a tough nut to crack. We want a verbal confirmation that it's a go. That's all."]

Maria announces, <"Juliet Bravo is a go, Cowboy. You'll jump off as scheduled. That's eighteen-twenty zulu. You copy?">

["We copy, Ramirez. Fourth of the first, SA three-six, will jump off at eighteen-twenty zulu!"] Bill is obviously jazzed.

["See you guys at the party!"] Angie adds as they cut out.

<"Wouldn't miss it!"> Jacob looks at Maria from across the room, "How's your stomach?" And then, <"I'm worried about Peter.">

"Sucks." <"I'm doubled over and you're whining about the incredibly stupid obvious! We'll think of something!"> Then quietly to Monique as she sets the bowl of bread and milk in front of her, "Thanks, Monique."

When people use the net to transmit speech—without speaking—most of the time they are skilled enough not to broadcast

facial queues. Maria happens to be shouting on the net, and Monique, adept at the art of deception and use of this technology, picks up on what's going on when Maria's temples and cheeks flex repeatedly while clinching her teeth.

Dismissing herself, Monique pats Maria on the shoulder, "Need anything else before I step out?"

"No, thanks, this'll do the trick." Maria smiles warmly.

Before Monique can slip away, Jessica blows through the door from the outside, <"Consider it unfucked!"> Then to Monique, "Pete has called in a personal day and is going to drive us all to San Diego while these two do their thing. Sound like fun?"

"Why, yes it does!" Monique is rarely surprised.

"We all wanted to know if you were good to go with. Like they say, the more the merrier!"

"Why, yes, I would be delighted!" Monique nods as she steps out to the patio.

As Monique leaves, Jacob sits down across from Maria and Jessica plops down beside her—amused by their dumbfounded faces she laughs, "Wha?" <"This is what you wanted, right?">

Maria grimaces, "Why you meddling—"

Jessica shrugs, <"I'll change it back if you want.">

Maria and Jacob both shout quietly, "No!"

"Good." <"He's my brother. I sure as shit don't want to hear about him getting shot down by you guys. That would piss me off.">

Jacob clears his throat, "If I may, what do you plan to do in San Diego?"

Jessica thinks about it, "I don't know. The bay? The Zoo?"

Maria chimes in, "Yes, the zoo!" <"The shadow team will have no problem keeping track of you there!">

Jacob smiles, <"And we won't have to redirect troops to One-Klick if it's compromised!">

Jessica adds, <"It also means we won't have to sit around One-Klick; but, fact is, we may not make it there.">

Jacob frowns, "Why not?"

"I didn't give a rats-ass about these people before today. They're family now, and I don't want them fucked with—which just may happen the minute you guys start your shit. So, if the balloon goes up for them you're gonna pick us up before they do. Capiche?"

Shaking her head, Maria looks at Jacob, "I think we've been outclassed."

"Not hardly!" Jessica smiles big, "I simply emulate the people who influenced my childhood. I may have mad-skills but, Maria Ann Ramirez; you'll always be top dog. Queen Bitch in my book."

Jessica stands, and as she walks over to make a plate for herself Jacob calls out to her, <"Have you given any thought about losing contact with the shadow team? Things may get out of hand.">

The mechanical arm of a PacMan drone taps Jacob on the shoulder. Jacob knew to expect it and doesn't flinch or look back.

<"Covered all your bases, I see."> Jacob smiles, "Can't say I'm proud of you, but...I don't know what else to say?"

Maria is pissed, "I do. Put it back!"

The drone vanishes and they watch its holographic ghost-trail slip out through the back door. Jessica has taken control over a PacMan drone without the help of the tacnet, and this unnerves Jacob and Maria just a tad.

Between the corn chips and potato salad Jessica breaks the introspective silence, "For what it's worth, father. Six months ago, I presented these same circumstances to you while you were asleep."

Maria shakes her head, "This I gotta hear!"

Jacob shrugs, "Why not!"

Jessica continues, "In your dreams you came up with this exact same mission plan. Except for a few tweaks, what you guys are doing tomorrow is the product of your mind, father. I just set up the situation, but you ran with it. I think you have a right to know. You get all the credit."

"I have no memory of this."

"I had to suppress it. I had to come up with something that would occupy your waking thoughts. Someday you'll have to tell me why you have a thing for Marie Antoinette." Jessica grins, "Food is gettin' cold!"

With plate in hand, Jessica slips out of the backdoor. Maria and Jacob just look at each other dumbfounded by Jessica's ingenuity.

Maria asks, "Marie Antoinette?"

Jacob deadpans, "Remember the dream I had about Maggie?"

"Ya, it gave me a whole new perspective on giving head. So, do we give her a pat on the back, or do we cap one off in her back? It's a tough call."

"You got that right."

"*Cariño.*" Maria hands Jacob a metal tube with a cap on it, "I hate to ask, but I need this for the Alpha baseline."

"No, I'm not interested. Choose someone else."

"No, you don't understand, Jacob. It has all been decided. You're the Alpha."

"Then you got what you need. Why bother me with this shit?"

"Understanding meiosis is not an exact science. We need another comparison."

Jacob looks at the tube. Grudgingly he pops the cap, pulls out a cotton swab, and gives the inside of his cheek a good couple of swipes. Thrusting it back in the tube, he sets the cap on and pops it in. Suddenly, the outside of the tube gets frosty.

He tosses it back at Maria with a snarl, "Just keep me out of it. I mean it."

"That's the deal."

"Pick an Omega yet?"

"I thought you wanted nothing to do with this?"

"Just curious."

"The jury is still out."

"Someone I know?"

"Yes."

"Someone I like?"

"It ain't me if that's what you're asking."

Jacob shrugs, so Maria asks, "You look disappointed."

"I don't like this thing."

"Which is why you are perfect—on so many levels. Look, our numbers are high, but recruitment is dropping off. With a projected life expectancy approaching one-fifty, like you said, nobody wants to risk their ass anymore. Even for a good cause! We are forced to do something."

"Why me, God damn it?"

"You are above the curve on all counts. You like the job—as a job. That's rare. Honestly, without you, the program would have been scrapped, or seriously modified."

"Honestly, I think you're wrong. You should find someone

who wants the honor."

"Can't. Gotta have someone who doesn't want the job, and that's why you get the nod. Buck up fuck-tard."

"Try to keep me out of the loop."

"I'll do the best I can." Maria pats his hand, "Hon, I'll be right out. I need a moment to collect myself."

Jacob picks up his now cold plate and stomps out. Jessica slips in after him and plops into the seat in front of Maria.

Without missing a beat she chirps, "Jacob *is* perfect for this gig, no? A natural born killer with the Wisdom of Solomon and a benevolent nature that rivals even Jesus himself. And when you look at it, in spite of popular opinion, those qualities are not as diametrically opposed, as you would think. He's also got a big-personality, but it's kind of on the dry side..."

Maria scowls, "Arid dry."

"Ya, but, he is a funny guy, and still a hottie at fifty-eight!" Jessica then subtly taps her fingers on the table between them as one would to a dealer on Blackjack, and this gesture was recognized by Maria because they play against each other, and Maria loses to her, regularly, "The double-down here is that people on the outside are scared shitless of him, and that's for good reason. Couldn't pick a better Alpha I'd say."

Maria sighs, "Okay, I'll bite."

Jessica leans back, "But, your choice for the Omega is no longer a viable one."

"How so?" Maria then gets pissed at the intrusion, "What the fuck do you know!"

"Come on. Like you said, the jury is still out."

Maria spits, "Stop listening in to our conversations!"

"Look, Antie, Fifty-Two is like sand in your gears. My mother has already changed and the risk of her switching allegiances is too great. She may have been the best candidate, but not now."

Maria again has to bring herself to the fact that this is no ditzzy teenager, but a smart-tough hombre in a twelve year old body, "Okay, shit head, how much do you know? I'm dying to know!"

"Ah...everything?" Jessica's façade drops, and the maturity in her voice chills Maria, "I know everything about my mother. Her thoughts, her past, and I possess her skills. All her skills." Jessica wiggles her fingers in the air for just a second, "Mad skills! And, I

know about the Annex, and all that all of you people know about it, ad nauseam. Culture, missions, plans, pass-codes, you name it—I got it! I know all about you and I've known about what makes you tick ever since I was an itty-bitty baby. And, you should know, I love the way you breath before you orgasm, and the way you scream when you do. Lord knows how many times I was in the other room when you were with my mom."

"You heard us?"

"I lived it?"

"You've got to be kidding!"

"My first kick was at six-months. Doesn't that kind of creep your shit out?"

"You could say that."

Jessica shows her hand with Maria's "thang", her neuronet sex fantasy. Most everybody has one, or dozens even, but Maria's is unique. Not something she has ever shared with anybody, but a fantasy world she has built, and dives into, whenever she feels lonely, frustrated, and remorseful.

Jessica hits home, "How about this...I don't know what it is about being stretched out over a stone pillar, and having your heart ripped out, that would turn your crank; but, I guess it's the shabby way all those well-hung, muscle-bound Mayan priests violate your corpse afterwards that expresses your need for loss of control and submission. This is not your normal gang rape fantasy mind you. In the real world you could kick all their asses if you wanted too! If you ask me it smacks of both penance and pleasure all in the same breath. Now, Aunt Maria, don't feel bad 'cause it ain't as fucked up as most peoples. Fact is, it's pretty tame...if ya ask me."

"If you know so fucking much, what's Jacob's thang?"

"That's a trick question, right?" Jessica grins, "He don't have one! He lives his dreams. Very simple tastes. After what I've seen in my short life, I can appreciate that. No, really, I can!"

Maria throws her hands out, "Okay, I'm convinced! It's obvious you got something on your mind, so spit it out before I beat it out of you."

Jessica sits back with a huff, "Nicole is not going to work out as the Omega."

"We realize that, now."

"Your other top choices were Cricket and Angie. Cricket scored way high, and her part-time role as *Sergeant Washington*, the

voice and face for the Annex gives her incredible visibility, and as tough and capable as she is in a fight, with a man in her life...she's a door-mat. Plain and simple."

"Jacob respects her."

"Right..." The sarcasm in Jessica's voice did not sneak past Maria, "The second you wiggle your ass at him, like you will be in a couple of hours, he'll leave her in the dust and she'll be okay with it! Sorry, but taking a back seat does not make for a good leader."

"Maybe leadership skills are not necessary for the Omega? How about Angie?"

"Come on, get real, she's just this side of crazy! Jacob would not relish the idea of yanking on her chain for millennia. You have to get someone he'd be compatible with."

"Okay, I take it you have a solution?"

Jessica gestures to herself.

Maria just stares at Jessica and doesn't know weather to laugh or scream, but then her curiosity gets the better of her and she says flatly, "I'm listening."

"I am sooo much like my mom, but I think like my dad. He and I, we're both altruistic to a fault, and we both believe in the Annex; but, what you don't know, is that he thinks the Alpha/Omega program just may work. He was hoping that it wasn't going to be him that got picked for it."

Maria ponders, "So, he knew he was Alpha all along?"

"Ya, and that's why he protested so loudly."

"Nobody told him until I did just now, and he still knew?"

"He has my...abilities, but they're untapped. Why do you think he's always ahead of the game? Call it what you want. Situational awareness, prescience, or call it spidey-sense for what its worth. It's freaky shit."

"What do you call it?"

Jessica never really thought about it, and it shows, "I dunno. Can't say for sure. It's like a hunch, or a gut-feeling. It's like a guardian angel whispering in your ear but you just don't know it. Whatever it is he's got it, and he's got it in spades."

"I've wondered that myself."

"Still think he should be Alpha?"

"More now than ever."

"Look, in this situation you get your Omega, but one that will match your Alpha—ass and elbows. Then there's the question of us being father and daughter. Well, we are, but *they* won't be; and by the time our issue becomes aware of this trivial of details they'll be in their teens and will have already established a relationship of sorts. And, since I have no uterus to speak of, the question of bastard children and inbreeding is moot. Then again, it won't really matter because nobody will know but you, me and the selection committee. And, there is something else to think about..."

Jessica then leans in, "As for Fifty-Two, if you continue with my mom I find it necessary to warn you that I will never let those fucking abominations reach their next birthday. Think of Caesar, Stalin, and Tamerlane all rolled into one and maybe—just maybe you will come close to what those little shits are capable of. The word megalomaniacal doesn't even scratch the surface!"

"Why should I listen to you?"

"If you don't, and *this* gets out of hand, I may have to kill my own mother as well. I don't want that. Do you?"

Maria thinks about it—Jessica is dead nuts on about how her mother is changing, and quite possibly for the worse. She's also right about no one else being a viable Omega as it relates to Jacob—and without him the program is gonna be scrapped for sure. If not Nicole, then who?

Maria asks, "Do you really wanna do this?"

"Honestly...fuck no, but what choice do we have?"

Maria hands her a tube, "We? You're not messing around in my head, are you? Because if you are—"

Jessica takes the tube and pops it open, "I may be a lot of things, but stupid is not one of them."

"If I find out otherwise—"

Jessica has already swabbed the inside of her cheek and puts it back into the tube, "Don't worry. I've poked around here and there but I have not manipulated anybody in the Annex against their will, and I promise I won't. That is, unless it's absolutely necessary."

"For the greater good, right?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that."

"Confer with me first."

Jessica hands her the tube, "By all means."

"First, being the operative word."

"It's a deal."

Maria shakes her head, "I don't know why I trust you, but I guess the alternative is far more unattractive. You know I have to trust you explicitly."

"I guarantee I'll earn that trust."

Maria points to the door, "Go. I'll be right out in a minute. I need a moment to internalize the fit I'm about to throw."

Jessica stands, and leans forward to kiss Maria on top of the head, "Love you, Aunt Maria." And before Jessica steps out the door she turns back, "I like the word, *subterfuge*. Don't you?"

Maria perks up, "In what context?"

"What you don't know, and fear, but I know for a fact, is that Fifty-Two is betting on the come. She's banking on Nicole becoming the Omega clone."

"And, you were going to clue me in when?"

"You had to make your choice about me on the merits. To tell you that before now would have come across as manipulative."

After a thought or two, Maria agrees, "Ya, you're right."

Jessica nods her head, "I think maybe we should continue to let her think that for the time being. Don't you?"

Maria ponders this for a second, "I'll follow your lead."

"Then put it out of your mind, and believe that Nicole is the chosen one. What we did here and now never happened."

With Jessica gone, Maria has much to reflect on. She truly believes Jessica's intentions are noble, and believing her is so not Maria's style; but, even though Jessica and her mother are not blood relations, she and Nicole are the only family she's got outside her son and her ex-husband, Jacob. All these years Jessica has sported herself as the loner, or as the moody teen, and all the sarcasm she puked out with such skill, just this side of insolent, was clearly a deception.

A *subterfuge* to conceal her true nature.

Looking back, Maria always knew that Jessica was more than she was letting anyone in on, and it pains Maria that she never challenged her on it before. Maria realizes that Jessica beyond her control, and an intellect to be reckoned with, but also comforted by the fact that she is family, with a bond stronger than blood, and an ally.

"Feeling any better, love?" Monique asks as she quietly slides into the seat across from her.

Maria didn't even see Monique come into the kitchen, and can kick herself for half-stepping it like that, "Great. Seriously!"

"I was worried about you."

"Bread and milk—magical stuff."

Monique slips a small bag into Maria's hand. Glancing down at it she notices a capsule with a P40 shark's tooth grin on one end, and on the other a clover shape looking like a small propeller.

Confused, Maria asks, "What's this for?"

"It's to get your life back in order."

"Seriously, mine is pretty damned tame compared to the wake of collateral damage in Jacob's. At least I don't have children popping up all over the place."

"Straight males *are* the preferred breeding stock. Why do you think Jordan threw herself at him?"

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"No offence taken. It's the reality of our culture."

"It's funny..." Maria smiles, "Up till a year ago he thought he had only one child. Now he has six, and grandkids even."

"I wouldn't trade them for the world."

"Neither would I."

Monique shrugs, "Don't be surprised if more pop up."

Thinking of Sophie, his daughter that died at Theta-2-Taurus, Maria nods, "I won't be."

16

a momentary lapse in personality

TIME: 06:05zulu (local 22:05pst)

With Monique and Jordan walking away, Peter crouches down and taps knuckles with Jacob, "I'm gonna turn in too, Pop."

Jacob, sitting in the Jacuzzi, reaches for a smoke, "Pete, I really appreciate it. You and your sister taking the kids tomorrow."

"I want to get to know them."

"For your careers sake let's keep our relationship quiet for now, but if it ever becomes public knowledge I'll iron it out with your Corps Commander, Orozco. Can't say we're good-buddies, but we're on friendly enough terms."

"I appreciate that. All I ever wanted to do was to zoom, but in a year or two I may be piloting a desk. I don't know if I can hack that. I just may take you up on the earlier offer."

Lighting a cigarette, Jacob scrunches his face, "Earlier offer?"

"Rutledge, was it? He offered me a job with you guys."

"Oh ya!" Jacob yanks the cigarette out of his mouth and points to Peter, "The offer is still good, but stay put for now."

"Sure thing." Peter stands to leave, "I know you guys are up to something. I can feel it. You and Maria are lucky. It's so boring here. Nothing ever happens on Home Base."

Jacob would love to say something to him like *Don't hold your breath*, or a snappy *Ya—right* to clue Peter in, but doing that may put him on alert; so, to cut the conversation short, Jacob chuckles, "Look, we'll see each other sooner than you think. We'll spend some quality time together. Sound good?"

"Sounds like a plan. Goodnight, Dad." Peter walks off.

"I haven't earned that, yet." Jacob calls out.

Peter glances back, "You already have."

As Peter fades into the shadows, Jacob grows introspective thinking about Peter calling him "Pop" and "Dad" right out of the chute. Only today, did he hear it from Jessica for the first time. After over a year of butting heads she has let her guard down enough to show just a smidgen of affection. Miniscule as it is, at least it's something.

Jacob's peace is broken by Jessica slithering up to him and, beside his cheek, she mimics Peter, "Goodnight...Dad!"

Jacob feigns surprise, "Twice in one day! I think we may be chipping through that shitty façade of yours."

"Naw, fat chance. That's the most I can do for now, and maybe for quite awhile. And, whatever you do, don't make me say the "L" word 'cause that'll only serve to make me wanna hurl. The cloying sweetness will make me blow chunks for weeks! This'll just hav'ta do."

Jessica leans in to kiss him on the cheek and—resorts to a raspberry instead.

She pulls away and squeals, "That's so twelve of me!"

Jacob grunts, "I was under the impression you bypassed childhood altogether?"

Jessica hops up and laughs out loud, "I'm having a momentary lapse in personality! It's only an episode. Don't worry, it'll be short lived."

"That's good to hear. I was getting worried."

"I thought you wanted me to act my age?"

Jacob thinks for a second, "I want you to be who you are."

"I thought you didn't like me for who I was."

"That was before I knew who you were." Jacob takes a pull off the cigarette and coughs from it, "Look at it from my perspective. I'm not dealing with some punk-ass kid here, but an equal. I have to adjust to that shit. You're my daughter, and I love you for who you are, but that doesn't translate into me liking you just yet. But, I'm getting there. Surprised?"

"A tad bit."

"Just give me some time, and give me a break for once. Okay? I'm new to this."

"Okay." Jessica says as she quietly slips into the shadows.

Entering the chalet, Jessica makes her way to her room, but before she enters, she stops to think. As much as today was both a

disaster and a blessing it's difficult for Jessica to accept the fact that everything is going *Jessica's way*. Tomorrow was supposed to be her crowning achievement; but now that everything has changed, and she's dangerously exposed, she has in her possession a new vehicle to make good on a promise to herself. That is, to make a difference. Jessica so hates drawing attention to herself—but her feign did succeed in bringing her father and Maria around because now she's in a notably better position to make that difference. Jessica is amazed by how much she is just like her father, and it pains her to think that she is forced to do an end-run to protect him and the Annex from Fifty-Two, and from what her mother may have become as the Omega.

So, for the now she doesn't have to kill anybody.

Choices. That's what Jessica is faced with yet again. She looks down the wing towards Josav's room and debates whether if it's a good idea to pay him a visit or not. She feels him thinking of her and, to her dismay, she can't seem to put their kiss behind her. He is unaware that his thoughts are calling out to Jessica, drawing her towards him, and compelling her to act.

It's not that having sex is such a big deal, but it's the *who* that has always mattered to her. So much so that Jessica has ruled out any complications in her life for the time being, and was perfectly content in whoring herself vicariously through others. She is so not casual about this sort of thing, and it's obvious to her that if Josav were as cavalier as most people are then she would not consider him for her first encounter. Nephew or not.

What Jessica realizes, walking down the wing towards a new direction in her life, is that this is not a change in plans, nor is it a detour per se, but more like opting to take the scenic route.

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Grunting, impaled, her back arches as she cries out, "Joe!"

Incisors flash as she gnashes her teeth at a sliver of light radiating through the blinds. They slam into one another, yet again, and she howls like a wounded animal—as if she were dying, and mercifully so. Dropping onto his chest, they roll over and pant heavily in the darkness.

She punches him playfully in the chest, "*Ay, pandejo, muevete a la chingada.*"

He slips out of bed and walks into the bathroom. The light goes on and from the bedroom, she hears a mumble, a sharp snick, and a hollow thud.

She calls out, "Shapiro, take a piss for me while you're at it!"

No response, so she swings her legs out, stands, and whips open the blinds.

The New York skyline greets Rosie Alvarez. She hates her work, selling children to perverts like Joseph Shapiro; but it's a living, and it affords her many luxuries like this condo on the top floor of a Manhattan high rise. Of the nine Barbie Doll clones she has sold him, they have always managed to close the deal in the sack. For his advanced years Shapiro is one good looking guy, an Adonis you might say, and women drip off of him wherever he goes. As difficult as it is for Rosie to admit she'd be right there with them. That is, if it wasn't for his taste in minors and hermaphrodites that creeps her out.

Rosie is the only adult female, without a dick, that he is interested in being intimate with; and if she knew what draws them together like this she would probably be more open to disliking the guy—as she dislikes all her other customers. At least none of the product she has sold him has ever been snuffed, and the fact that he has been their benefactor as they became adults, striking out on their own, save for one, is at least a conciliation. The one that got away, the first one, has never been found, but that was over thirty years ago. Still, to this day, Rosie wonders whatever happened to the little redhead that Shapiro loved so dearly.

Curious as to why Joe is taking so long, Rosie turns and heads towards the bathroom, but as she steps through the door it's not the headless body that catches her attention, nor the blood, nor Joe's head sitting neatly before her feet, but the breathtaking image of Nicole standing there before her naked—with knife in hand.

Nicole feigns a warm smile, "Hello, Rosie."

For some crazy reason Rosie knew exactly who this was, and before she could react, she felt as though she was spinning in the air. It took all of a second for her head to hit the ground but to Rosie it felt like an eternity. The sudden stop brings her around, and the image of Joe's face that fills her view fades to white as her pupils blow—and she loses her grip on this world.

A trooper, in a cloaked fighting suit, steps out of the shower, "Face to face, Deputy. That's unfucken' believable."

Nicole replies without satisfaction, "I've been practicing."

Cricket, also in a cloaked suit, steps into the doorway, "At least they gave us a hell of a show. That's a plus."

Stepping past Cricket, heading for the living room to mount her fighting suit, Nicole snarls, "If it wasn't that we had to be fucking

quiet about this, I would have given you a better one.”

Cricket chuckles as she calls out on the radio to C3, “Charlie Three, this is Tag Team, Xray-Whiskey-Bravo, One-Niner.”

Command, Control, and Communications has been waiting for the call, [“Go ahead Xray.”]

“Secondary targets one-two-eight and seven-six-niner have both been neutralized. You copy?”

[“We copy. Terminate wet work. Orders are to escort Red to evac, then proceed to Urchin Gnome.”]

“Roger that. X-ray Whiskey Bravo is on the move.”

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It’s a clear night and Jacob drinks in the twinkling stars of Orion, the Hyades, and the Pleiades stitched across the sky. Suddenly, the thought comes to mind, *when this all plays out then what next?*

Jacob closes his eyes to ponder the inevitable.

Undoubtedly there will be a war, but the rules of engagement in this next conflict will, more likely than not, mimic the gentleman’s agreement from the last one. The *Marquess of Queensberry* rules may work for awhile, and the Annex may get a rabbit-punch or two in, but if one side or the other hits below the belt—the gloves may come off. Then they’ll be fighting under the *Marquis de Sade* rules, and what follows from that would not be for the faint of heart.

Plan-B, as cooked up by Marshal Maria Ramirez, would make Sherman’s march through Georgia look like a Sunday drive through the country. What would have been a war of attrition, that could have spanned ten or twenty years, will be over with in just a handful of weeks—and a billion or more could die because of it.

That is, if it got out of hand.

Trying to think of a way to contain the fallout from that contingency was cut short by faint footsteps approaching him.

With a plate of snacks in one hand, and a bottle of Chianti and glasses in the other, Maria approaches the Jacuzzi and announces with a deep sigh, “Well, it’s started.”

Jacob opens one eye, “That’s what I’ve heard.”

She sets the treats at the edge by Jacob and walks around to the other side, “I was worrying if snatching up all those reporters is going to be considered kidnapping or not.”

Jacob opens the other eye, "But, if they go into the shit they will have signed on voluntarily, right? We should be getting off the hook for this one."

"You got that right." Maria's robe drops off her shoulders and she sits her tantalizingly athletic body on the edge across from Jacob, "Nicole served Alvarez and Shapiro."

"That's what I've heard."

"Cricket said that it was anti-climatic for her."

Jacob sighs big, "Too bad."

Maria wets the torpedo capsule in her mouth, "I tried to tell her, but would she listen?"

Jacob watches her as she lifts one leg up on the edge of the Jacuzzi, and as she reaches down to insert the capsule he asks the obvious question, "Torp?"

Maria smiles, "Uh hu!"

"Most people swallow it."

"It's more intense this way."

"Damn the torpedo. I don't think we need it."

"See, that's the problem. You keep trying to think. I want to kick big, and if I come to my senses I won't make it."

Maria drops quietly into the water and slithers across towards Jacob. She reaches up to the plate, selects a jalapeño and crunches into it with impunity.

While she munches away, Jacob asks, "What's that?"

"A chili. Want one?"

"Sure."

Jacob didn't think much about it, for the first second or two, but the intensity of the chili makes him almost choke, "What the hell are those things!"

Maria laughs, "Want another one?"

Jacob shakes his head as he pours some wine to douse the fire in his mouth, "Cripes! I knew it! You're trying to fuckin' kill me!"

As Jacob downs his glass she chomps into another one and grins, "Graves, you're like a jalapeño. Innocent looking on the outside, but full of fire."

Jacob coughs, "Oh, really!"

Maria drapes her arms around Jacob's neck and gives him a quick kiss, "Ya, definitely, but then you give me heart burn."

"Oh, really."

Maria starts biting his neck with purpose, "And then you become a pain in my ass."

Instantly affected by her ministrations, something he has wanted for quite some time, Jacob whispers, "Oh...really."

"Uh hu, but..." Maria then pulls back and laughs in his face, "Like an idiot, I keep coming back for more!"

17

juliet bravo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacob is indignant, "Wha'? What's your problem, woman! I didn't say nothin'!"

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

"Who or what are you praying for?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just for passing the bar."

"It'll be a cakewalk!"

"Your people get a thousand for what again?"

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

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

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

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

Maria smiles big, "Tell ya what, I wanted it to be a surprise, but I was able to score you a job as a pinsetter for Satan. No, it ain't

exactly belly flops in the clouds, but when you consider the alternative."

Jacob scrunches his face, "Pinsetter?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then it started.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not yet, that is.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Strapped in and ready to go."

"Then, let's get this on the hump."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nikki and Nicole look at each other, <"If she thinks for one second that you've taken even a smidgen of thought from her, she will shoot you where you sit, and order the rest of you put-down on sight. Stay out of her head. Follow the rules and you will be okay.">

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

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

01101001-01100010-01110100-01110100

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

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

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

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

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

And they have.

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

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

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

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

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

[“You done bitching?”]

“No, I’m just getting started.”

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

Scott interrupts, “I know.”

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

"I'll hold you to that. Git some for me."

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

Stark, with a portable clipboard monitor in hand, calls out, "One minute, people." Then after a few seconds, without looking up, he asks Scott, "What is it, Marshal?"

Surprised, Scott asks back, "Chief Stark?"

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

"Whatever you say, Chief. You're the Captain."

"I'll ignore the insult...Sir."

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

His thoughts are broken when their pilot announces, "We're on final. Attack profile sequence to initiate in ten, nine, eight, seven, hands free, people!"

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

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

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

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

0110011-0110000-0110001-0110111-0110110-0010001

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

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

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

Angie then sneaks her company around to South Brother Island. From these four positions they split their ranks and half slip underwater to slowly move on Riker's Island from three directions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

behind the last of the fleeing children.

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

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

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

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

They hear blood curdling shrieks from around the corner.

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

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

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

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

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

"Everything working?" Sandoval asks meaning her suit.

She nods, "Think so."

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

"On your six!"

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

Team two slips into the side tunnel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Beth is fine."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With a grim smile Sandoval sighs, "Ma'am, the simple truth is

you are not going to be allowed to walk out of here. Do we have to hurt the child too? Let him go and I swear I'll make it easy on you."

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

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

Nikki pats Sandoval on the arm, "Do not worry, we will be fine. Trust me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gudici, with Nikki in tow, pass through the cafeteria and out into the tunnel, all the while Gudici speaks up, "That was an amazing piece of negotiation, kid. Real smooth."

Nikki shrugs, "It is kind of sad when you think about it. All she really wants..."

The rip of Koenig's penta gun rings out, short of a minute, so Nikki continues, "Wanted was to spend her last moments in curious

introspection. Not being chased like a rat down a hole. It is sad."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nikki gives an embarrassed smile, "Could be?"

"Sandoval should not have let you do that."

"The child would have been hurt."

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

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

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

00101010-00111100-01011011-01011101-00111010-01111011-00111110

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

The Maiden, slowing to a crawl at 90 miles altitude over the East Coast of North America, drops out of hyper-drive. Suddenly, twelve-hundred troopers in JACC's pour out of the six-drop bays underneath the ship and force-fall straight down towards New York City. The second the last of them drop clear from the reach of the

displacement fields the Maiden kicks in the MDDSH engines and pulls away. The ship pitches up and loops back around for a second pass from the southwest.

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

Just outside of Newark, slowing down over Long Island, this launch sequence is repeated one last time.

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

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

When the Germans and British dabbled with it during WWII the scheme worked better than expected at night, but it was never taken seriously. Decades later, when stealth aircraft were being developed in the United States, it became clear that the stigma was so great that one of the generals overseeing the project swore that, "None of my boys are gonna fly in harms way in a pick aircraft!"

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

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

Watching this monster of a battle-platform slip away, but

never really vanish because it's just too damned big, Jacob wonders what it would look like from a far distance, or if a dusty rose or mauve would work better. All these things race through Jacob's mind, but the only thing that he could think of saying was, *Majin Buu*.

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

Jacob laughs, "Buu."

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

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

He has since forgot about all this until he saw the Iron Maiden fading away and all he could say was to snort a laugh, "Look it up!"

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

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

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

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

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

["Sixteen petaflops of fuckin' and killin', muddafucker."] comes back over the radio. ["Waddya want?"]

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

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

"Because, we are going in? Hello!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

perfect people all around, where all you have to do is to fuck-off and kill-time day after day, and year after year, life (that is, post-life) can get pretty damned boring after a while.

A very short while.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was then that the flash alert came up:

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

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

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

01001001-01000010-01010100-01001100-00111010-00101001

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

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

Where all of the air forces throughout all the worlds have taken the fragile human out of the cockpit, only the U.S. Marine Corps continued to keep the pilot in the mix. When the SA was formed, and with a little convincing by old heads from the Marines, they too put the human element back in the equation. Shortly thereafter, ships solely piloted by A.I. alone, or remotely piloted, that squared off with the SA, started to fall from the sky in masse. The combination of human pilots and A.I. working together proved to be the winning formula for air

dominance.

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

That's where any similarity ends.

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

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

Yard Dog, the call sign for Marine base air-controller, radios them up, ["Bloodhound Flight."]

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

Captain Moore, Bloodhound 1, responds, "Go ahead, Dog."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

01010101-0110101-0110011-0101000-0010001

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

Especially since they've been expecting a walk out.

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

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

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

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

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

Bob smiles softly, ["This is Senior Marshal, Robert Jackson, Commander in Chief of the armed forces for the Steel Annex. At this very moment, we are involved in a rescue operation. We have uncovered one-hundred and six illegal cloning facilities that have been supplying genetically reengineered humans beings. Over the last few decades over a million children have been developed, sold and exploited for medical research, prostitution, and for a variety of military applications. No more. This activity is a crime against humanity and it ends here and now." Bob tapped his finger on the conference room table in front of him to emphasize the concept that the SA has taken ownership of this problem. "Just so you can see for yourself what has been going on, we have invited members of the press corps to accompany us on the extraction phase of our operation. They will broadcast live footage without the benefit of the editorial process. We thank you for your patience and we apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you and your loved ones. We'll now cut over to the commander of your particular Area of Operation."]

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

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

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

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

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

01001101-01011001-01001111-01000010

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m responsible for them, trooper.”

Zach gestures towards the open drop ship, “Then please, drive your vehicle into the ship and we’ll be on our way. Sir.”

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

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

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

Zach looks up as Bulldogs streak high overhead, and start to

orbit their position at twelve-hundred meters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

00110001-00110000-00101101-00110101-00110101-01100100

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

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

"How many you guys attacked, exactly?" McElroy asks.

"One-hundred and six. There are about a handful more. We know of one in Brazil, and two more in the Hyades, but we haven't

pinned 'em down just yet. Hopefully we can get to them before they waste the product, but I'm not holding my breath."

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the detectives run towards the closest ship with children in it, Maria adds, "We'll have them back in a week or so, with recordings of the interviews. Will that be satisfactory, Inspector?"

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

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

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

"Guilty as charged."

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

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

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

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

"McElroy."

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

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

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

McElroy looks up and gives a grim smile, "You did good here, and doin' good is good enough for me."

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

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

18

over the top

LCTN: SOL-3, QUEENS, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.009au from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-APRIL-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 18:40zulu (local 13:40est)

Riker's Island, like the rest of New York City, has become a plush, grass sewn, 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 break up of that arm of the United Nations, the Co-op has been running the place.

Only six buildings are on the island, but they are huge buildings at that. Three are apartment complexes, two office buildings, and one, short and solid, has a purpose unknown to everybody except that it used 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's also speculated that they 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 uncloaked.

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 their facility fall inland at about a football field or two from the shore allowing for civilian encroachment,

such as picnicking and corporate events, but the appearance of up to two-hundred troopers materializing at the waters 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 their surprise the BDF poured 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. Originally, this was supposed to be a containment op but the BDF 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 opposite sides, who are facing off, to flash each other with their targeting lasers. It says that *I see you* and someone is gonna 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 get involved in what was going on in Queens, or the United Nations, or didn't do anything else stupid.

Later it will be discovered that a butter-bar lieutenant, green and gung-ho, freaked at the sight of Spooky at their 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 only target he could see. Of the burst of fire that comes her way one round 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 has been 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, whose 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, (aka 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 have been perched, as the rest 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, "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 gentle boy. If you don't mind me asking—what took you so long?"

With three of the large HWG98s hovering overhead, Maria's Warthog 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 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 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."

"Ya, but inside I'm shaking like a leaf. Just stay with me for a few, okay?"

Bob taps his head and says, "Where it counts." He then pats her on the shoulder, "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 Nekida Krushev 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 SA troopers 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 is met by a static shock that hits his hand and throws him back with a yelp.

As one of her crew catches Martinek and forces him off the podium landing, Cricket turns to the crowd 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 know, cloning human beings for nefarious purposes is still 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."

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.

In the canon a tiny 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 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 in 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 thatch-weave and figure-eight 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 change in 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 Med., 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, so stay in the groove and everything will be okay. It's not a good idea to come back down. If you know what I mean."

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

Captain Moore 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 head north to St. George where he sees another blip showing a flight of Navy Bulldogs out from the Mediterranean.

Jacob chuckles to think that these people still have aircraft carriers, but then it dawned 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'kay, Bud, what do you think about this sitch?"

Bud perks up, "You—asking me?"

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

There is a short silence as Bud thinks about this, "They're gonna come in four and four, but there's something we don't see."

"Waddya mean?"

"Well, the Navy is not gonna send only 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 over another to hide their numbers from the high-eyes. We've done that, and I'll bet the farm they're flying in synch, low man in control like we've done in the past."

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

"Fuck ya! Why not?"

Jacob snorts, "Give that man a cigar."

"Don't patronize me, you smug prick."

Jacob understands his frustration. Bud is an exceptional pilot, and an intuitive tactician. Just the kind of guy he would love to have 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 with me."

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, "Maybe so, but, maybe we can improve on our relationship."

01010010-01010101-01010011-01001000-00100001

Over the radio, 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 small arms 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, until Gun Crazy showed up.

The maelstrom she let loose from above was withering and exacting—and 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 remained after her fifth and last pass gave Sargent the opening to press the attack home.

When they jumped-off over the wall Private Ozo got hit. His leg was shattered and the femoral artery was severed on the first round. The next two rounds virtually liquefied his intestines, so his JACC cut his body off at the diaphragm. He will live, but it's gonna be a year or so before he'll be whole again.

When they got to the courtyard, between the two office buildings, the defenders opened up on them. A mini-ball caught Private Chase on the top of his helmet, passed through his skull and traveled 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 guns to return fire; and the last thing Angie needs is Scott whining at her 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. Copy?"

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

"First and second floors of the office buildings. Kinda 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 in. You people copy 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 ripping through the buildings, Angie cries out, "Okay, let's mosh!"

The fire is directed up, and 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, quickly realize that they've ran headlong into another set of difficulties.

01000111-0101000-01000110-01001111-00100001

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!"

Such is 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 looses 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, in a very stylish business suit, approaches Bob and Maria on the sidelines.

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

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, minimalist and intimidating, 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 conference nooks, and the cushy sociable pit, is the power of consensus.

The Secretary General herself, Michal Pitney, is 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 she normally wears, 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 clicks 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 witness to grenades 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, 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 that she's 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 as accountable as the rest.

Then again, in retrospect, she may have chose wrong.

With a sad smile, and a sullen reserve, she throws back her second shot of Croatian slivovica. The 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 guards 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 are doing?"

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

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

Bob shrugs, "It's a job."

Mofid speaks up, "Marshal, I'm sure you'll present us with all kinds of evidentiary justification for the killings, and the expulsion warrants, but may I remind you that most of the people employed by the Co-op 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 smirks, "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 Kiplinger, from Gamma-Taurus, petulantly 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, you're shit outta luck and your damage control options are limited."

Blunt was, in the last war, an SS commander, and he grunts with disdain, "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 general assembly. 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 troopers.

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."

Harcourt whispers back with a smile, "Don't be too sure about that, Marshal."

With him gone this leaves the domestic toadies du Condé from France, Lebedev from Russia, Tarō from Japan, and Zemljakovova from the Czech Republic wondering what to do with themselves without the Co-op in charge. 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 breathes 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 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 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 ain't his bag.

You could say there was a betrayal of sorts, but Michael was always vocal about this 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.

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."

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

"Ya, 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."

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 imagination 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, "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."

Mofid asks Bob, "Smart kid, but one child did this?"

Nikki adds, "Ah, 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 we 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 pursuing 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 her—"

Michal, face in her hands, sobs, "I so not deserve special treatment. 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. 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. 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, "And, consider yourself served."

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

Michal has a gut feeling what this 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 to him.

01000110-01010101-01000010-01000001-01010010

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 out at Ashbury Park—leaving the other two to slither into New York overland without further interference.

Those flights, four Navy fighters stacked just thirty-five meters above the four Marine fighters, tore up through Eastern Pennsylvania past Trenton, 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.

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 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. When they pass over the Williamsburg Bridge the Navy pilots take control of their ships and climb up to one thousand 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 craft. There they will stay put until ordered into action, or someone calls for help, or if someone starts some 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 it low and slow and act like the consummate professionals they've trained themselves to be, but 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 proceeded 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 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 a single short range missile 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 actually used for defense against said full-sized missiles, so this encounter is gonna to be a gun fight, and 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 chimes 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, but Bud has something else up his sleeve.

It is Marine-3 who is daring enough to close in on Bud, 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, 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 was the first really innovative maneuver since the Harrier-Tuck 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 ass backwards, one would think that Bud would spin crazily out of control, but he's been practicing this for quite awhile and is now doing it for real.

It just takes a little bit of a roll and a flat turn to line up the shot, and when Bud lets loose with the cannon, rounds erupting from below at the root of the cockpit, it's the Bloodhound's elevator, wing and 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 dive 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 back in 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 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 a five to 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?

00110011-00110001-00110011-00110011-00110111

The atrium of the South tower is quiet for only a quarter minute before the Base Defense troops make themselves known. From the windows of the second and third floors, looking down into the lobby, they open up on the 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 the Sarge 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 pop corn. At least their suits contain this mess, but for the rest of them, most now with singed eyebrows and temporary spotted vision, they pull back from the million-plus degree pulse of heat.

When sprinkler heads go off, 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 stuff 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 one.

Flames now envelop most everything in the atrium, thrashing at both décor and people alike, but within seconds they are quashed by the sprinklers. And, 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—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. The troops above, in response, started 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.

Shaking her head in amazement, Angie thinks, *and the sarge thinks I'm crazy!* She thumbs back towards elevator landing behind her and belts out, "Fuck ya, 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 others mind. Sargent stops at the fifteenth floor and pushes a wire camera through to survey the area. With the area clear he rips those doors wide open and they pour out into the lobby. Civilians scatter as they negotiate their way towards the emergency exit, and down the stairwell to the fourteenth 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

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 blowing in rapped succession. The force of the explosions is so extreme, that four Defense Force troopers are blown into the atrium—only to be riddled with fire before they hit the ground. Before this holocaust subsides Angie’s people dive into the shafts and quickly descend to what is left of the third floor lobby.

And into yet another brief moment of calm, and another desperate fight for survival.

01110111-00110000-00110000-01110100-00100001

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, 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, “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 coffee break between 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 will suck us all in!”

Maria interjects, “Not necessarily.”

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

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. 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, they won't buy that. The Co-op will push for a unified military intervention, but you arrange to have the Security Counsel 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, "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!"

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's that coming from! Those are not the words from the Michal I know!"

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

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

du Condé adds, "There's no stopping it!"

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

Everybody looks at the *non-child*, and still in 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 your neutrality becomes. And, Madam Secretary, I have every confidence that if there is a peace to be won, then only you can win it. 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, "Mike, remember what I said about hope?"

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

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

Michal reaches up 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 chose differently—oh so many years ago.

With 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. It *will* be."

After Bob kisses Michal gently on her cheek, he turns towards Karr and asks, "Mr. Karr, 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 alone, with knife in hand, and Karr's headless body crumpled at her feet. The 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 precision, and steps purposefully out.

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

01001111-01010111-01001110-01000101-01000100

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 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 blow 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 at them.

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 fourth 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 little 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 Defense Troopers charge in through the door while firing back at the people shooting at them. They trip over the tables, chairs and fall on top of Angie and Zazueta.

If the situation wasn't so 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's straddling her waist while holding her right arm and gun mount where her left arm was. She can't 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 points it at 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—effectively taking her out of the 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 breathe 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 cig." 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."

Angie sighs, "Yep."

"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."

01100111-01100111-00100001

A lot can happen in ninety seconds, and 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 an air-mine destroys the centipede, only two of the 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 half the fuselage surrounding it.

The pilot ejects as the ship spins 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 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 the other craft, 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 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 his cannon in line with Marine-1's direction of travel, and when Jacob fires Marine-1 is no more. The Bulldog is overwhelmed by those cannon rounds and from the now tumbling fighter a cloud of debris rains down on Central Park.

Then, to Jacob's 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, 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. Too close for missiles, 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: pitch, yaw, roll and with some aircraft you can toss in forced-drift for good measure. Marine-4 has that yaw and roll thing down and 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. He even intentionally shoots back through the pipper in the reticle forcing Jacob into yet another coordinated turn. Sometimes 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 this he extends the distance between them making it difficult for Jacob to line up a decent shot.

These are not learned maneuvers, but pure innovation on the fly. Every pilot has learned to do 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 was cut short, slows and steadies his Bloodhound in level flight. He is still panting hard, but by taking deep breaths he manages to calm himself down.

Seconds later the Thunderbolt that was trying to kill him pulls up along side 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."

20

saltare cüm diablo

LCTN: ELECTRA-7 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.02 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-APRIL-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 22:35zulu (local 13:12mst)

Other than Cue Ball and Second Hand, the Steel Annex has only one base to speak of, and that's on Sapphire itself. Originally conceived as a home port for recreation and reboot than a base of operations, the designers still felt it necessary to add on a dozen particle cannon nodes, a handful of missile farms, and a hanger deck below the air field with thirty-two fighters and eight Razorback gunships for, as they so eloquently put it—shits and giggles. Though bristling with armament galore, stowed out of sight and out of mind, this facility is mostly protected by diplomatic immunity, as well as the political neutrality of Sapphire itself.

It also helps that ninety-five percent of the people on site, at any given moment, are civilian employees and tourists on holiday.

The centerpieces of the base are as iconic as those were for the 1939 Worlds Fair. First, to go up was the kilometer wide glass biosphere constructed over seventy years ago at a time when Sapphire did not have breathable air to speak of. Anchored on three sides to solid rock, and suspended over a small fjord at the end of a ragged peninsula called the Church Key, the sphere stands as an engineering marvel to this day. Except for its wide open spaciousness, posh appointments, and the hundred and fifty meter wide pool at the very bottom, transparent and overlooking the waves crashing on the rocks below, this is actually considered an utterly practical and self-contained environment.

The two-kilometer plus tower next to it, referred to as *The Spike*, or the *G.O.P.*, for God's Own Punji, was constructed forty years afterwards with the old Trylon in mind, and at a time when there was finally breathable air and blue skies to boot.

The Administration for the Annex was moved over to the tower upon its completion, but they only took the top six floors high in the sky. The rest of the tower, as planned, ended up as apartments, and as offices serving private firms, companies, and consulates as well. Another nifty addition to the lower three floors was the financial P.X. (the Pleiades Exchange) making this facility the de facto World Trade Center to the Frontier states.

The sphere, on its third and last renovation, was converted to a full-blown resort hotel that not only served the troopers and their families of the Annex, but was opened to the public as well. Because this massive structure is surprisingly luxurious, and the rooms huge, and because the service and food is of extraordinary quality, and yet the cost of everything is bargain basement cheap, the Kilosphere, as it is known, has been christened the nouveau Motel-6 of Five-Star resorts.

The sphere became such an exceedingly popular destination that they had to expand the operation by constructing two noticeably smaller, but equally impressive, spheres to handle the overload. And, when that wasn't enough, they recently finalized construction of a hotel and convention complex which was inspired by the Giza Necropolis in Egypt. Eight pyramids by count, three of them massive as hell, all twice the dimensions of the original, are still dwarfed by the spheres, but they are impressive in their own right.

Now, having a small military airfield adjacent to a large civilian airport has had its problems over the years, but today has been an exceptionally bad day for the air traffic controllers.

Because the HWG drop ships are carrying children unsecured in the holds, they have had to take great care in transporting them. Forced to use the narrow civilian corridors coming into Scab the competition for approach slots has proven frustrating for everybody; but, at least, the controllers are letting the drop ships come in groups of twelve or more.

Over twenty-some thousand people, vacationers and civilian employees alike, have made their way to the edge of the airfield by the Giza complex to watch the drop ships roll up, off-load the children, and launch vertically up and out of the controlled airspace. The crowd is abuzz with news about that day's events, and they cheer and applaud the troopers as they escort the children into the three-hundred meter tall Khafre pyramid.

Slated to open last New Years Eve, people were wondering why the grand opening of this place kept getting pushed back, but now they know. The three pyramids are spacious enough to house the children while they are out processed to waiting families.

Many of the clones looked exactly alike, carbon copies to be exact, but one child stood out from the rest. Not because of anything more than she was singled out at the entrance to the Khafre pyramid and whisked away under guard to God knows where.

The door man noticed this, as so did the bell hops, but when the doorman went to ask the Sergeant escorting two teenagers girls, who appeared to be cut from the same cloth as, to their count forty-nine of the littler ones, he was summarily told not to ask before he could get the question out.

The urban legend about "Fifty-Two" will be unsubstantiated for quite some time; but these guys will believe it, as will all their friends and family, even though they counted only fifty-one.

A Warthog and a Thunderbolt fighter both slip in under the radar and set down on the airfield at a spot closest to The Spike, and beside another gun ship that itself landed only a half-hour before.

Sitting on the grass, Monique and the family stand to greet Maria, Bob, Nicole, and Nikki as they exit the ship in gray and black utility BDUs. Pete, on the other hand, walks past them with a nod and makes a bee line to Jacob as he conducts a walk-around visual inspection of his fighter.

Noticing the scoring marks on the gun cowling, and already knowing what happened with his crew, Peter asks, "Fur ball, anyone?"

"Not quite. More of a run and gun, but your Lieutenant Peña surprised me. That kid had a couple slick moves. Clearly improvised."

"The...nubie?"

"Look, when the dust settled that nugget was the only one left from the Sunliners and Smoke still flying, *and* he got on the scoreboard." Jacob pats Peter on the shoulder, "Let me put it to you this way, my Number Four, who he shot down, she wants to skin his ass alive and tac it to her wall."

"So, did you try to recruit him?"

Jacob grins as they start to follow the others who are making their way towards the spike, "Made my pitch, but we'll see when his commission is up."

"You people are shameless."

"Ya, well..." Jacob thinks for a second, "How about you?"

"If I get that desk job, then I'm shootin' to be a full-bird desk jockey. If not, then you just may hear from me."

Jacob laughs, "Peter, if you're ready to be a political animal, then I got just the thing for you."

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"I can't believe that you're showing me this!" Peter exclaims as he watches Nicole, huddle with the mass of little girls and the two teenagers.

Even with the Cliffs Notes version of the story Peter finds it miraculous that these children made it out alive. He also finds it miraculous that the S.A. is going to let them stay alive.

Nobody else would.

Realizing that this is a knowledge that he should not be privy too, nor responsible for keeping secret, he turns to Jacob, "You know I have to report this."

"We want you too; but, then again, they already know, Pete."

"Okay, then, what's the point?"

"A modest proposal, you might say."

Just then Nikki and Jessica walk in, with Maria speaking up as she enters right after them, "Lebedev has just agreed to be the U.N. liaison."

"Good." Jacob smiles, then to Nikki he gestures to Peter, "Nikki, I would like you to meet Major Ribot. Waddya think?"

Nikki looks at Peter for a few seconds and says, "He will do."

Pete asks, "For what?"

Jacob grins, "A job."

Nikki elaborates, "I have just chosen you to head the D.P.K.O. component that will work with Ambassador Lebedev. In this situation, normal protocol will be suspended, and you will be answering directly to the Security Council. Interested?"

Jacob adds, "You get to stay in the Corps."

Peter shakes his head, "Who gets picked, well, that's a State Department choice."

"That is my choice, and Ambassador Mofid will see to it." Nikki steps up to him, "Major Ribot, it is all about containment. I am a prisoner on this planet and your job will be to see that it remains so. The people who watch over me must be people that cannot be swayed by me. The Annex will be my guards, you the Warden and Lebedev will be my advocate. Your job will be pretty easy because I, that is we, have already been spiked."

She glances at Jacob and Maria, "We have been dusted with

triple redundancy nanoids. Net, GPS *and* dead man-switch, and they appear pretty foolproof I might add. I am stuck for good or bad.”

Peter looks over at Jacob, “You’re serious.”

Jacob replies, “Containment is everything.”

Nikki takes Peter by the hand, “I need someone I can trust, so you get the nod, Colonel.”

Peter corrects her, “That’s Major.”

“Not for long.” Nikki smiles as she turns and walks to join Nicole and her sisters.

Maria cuts this all short, “We gotta get you back, Pete. The family is loading up now.”

Peter looks at his father, “What do I tell them about you?”

“Tell them the truth. That’ll put them on edge to be sure.” Jacob then pats him on the back, “See you in a couple of weeks.”

After a quick round of goodbyes, Maria escorts Peter out leaving Jacob and Jessica standing there watching the clones and Nicole touch, hug and rejoice in each other.

After a minute Jacob smirks, “Can’t you just feel the love.”

Jessica counters, “Can’t you just taste the bile.”

These two just look at each other and smile, and after a few seconds, they both laugh out loud. This is their first real moment as father and daughter, and for the first time they feel genuine affection towards each other. It will take baby steps, but get there they will. Jacob will never be an authority figure, she is so beyond needing that, light-years even, but he will be what Jessica has never had before. Someone she can look up to.

Jessica adds, “You are aware that they see themselves as enlightened—in a very literal sense.”

Jacob frowns, “You *are* working for me, right?”

“I guess I am.”

“Keep ‘em in check. Will ya?”

Jessica holds out her hand, “Give me a pistol and a couple of mags, and problem solved.”

“You would do that wouldn’t you.”

“Just lock the door on your way out.”

Jacob smiles, “Love too...can’t.”

Jessica looks at the clones and sighs, "Little rays of Sunshine, or dark clouds on the near and far. Do you really want to take that chance, *Dad?* I say, if you're ever going to go back on your word then now *is* the time."

"I can't do it."

Jessica turns and looks into his eyes with ice, "I can."

Jacob ices back at her, "One day, I may take you up on that offer...Scarab."

Jessica glows.

Jacob just gave her a handle, a call sign, and one so apropos when considering her job. This was a sign of acceptance that did not go unnoticed, but unexpected just the same.

It is just then that Nicole pulls away and walks from the group, "Girls, I gotta go debrief, If you need anything just ask Jessie. She knows the ropes."

Nicole stops by Jessica and kisses her on top of the head, and as she starts for the door Jacob flags her down, "Just a second, I'll walk with ya."

He turns to Jessica while pointing to the JACC fighting suit he is still wearing, "I got to get out of this shit. I won't be long."

Jessica watches him walk out, and as he reaches the door he turns around and mouths the words "play nice" to her.

Jessica can't believe that she is here, alone, with them...or, is it her? Or, is it...it? Jessica notices that twelve of them are smaller than the others. Cherubs—children stunted at around seven years of age for all the obvious reasons. Then there are another twelve she knows that will stop growing around eleven or so—at the onset of puberty—again, for all the obvious reasons. Then sixteen of them are Third-Gen's that have returned to popularity with a vengeance. Female templated hermaphrodites, with above average endowments, have become all the rage.

What creeps Jessica out is that only twelve of them, the Beta's included, are the only *normal women* amongst them. That is if you can call her mother normal, which nobody ever has.

To put this freakishness out of her mind, Jessica looks out the window in time to watch the last of the drop ships launch up and out. The beauty of the view helps her tune out the cacophony radiating from the clones, but her serenity is quickly shattered by the mental equivalent of a knock at her door.

<"Jessica, if I may impose upon you.">

Unable to escape the intrusion, Jessica snarls at her, "It's Jessie, but it's Burke to you."

<"If we may share a moment?">

"I was content in ignoring you."

<"I will be quick.">

Jessica turns with wide eyes, "I can't hear you!"

Nikki opts to speak, "Words then?"

"If we must."

Nikki draws her breath, "I feel like I am perched precariously on top of a flagpole. Metaphorically speaking."

Jessica cuts her off, "Ya, and I'm playing tetherball on that flagpole, looking to knock your ass off. Realistically speaking."

"Must you be so adversarial?"

"Ah..." Jessica feigns introspection for a second, "Ya? ...Ya! It's my prerogative. Work with me here!"

"We could be working together."

"For what!" Jessica leans towards her, "Look, you're the *Hello Dolfi* of the Future Fascist Explorers Club. All you gotta do is get a little goose in your step to make it picture perfect!" Jessica touches her face in a fashion observation, "Ya know, lederhosen would be a nice touch too."

Nikki is clearly frustrated, "Can we at least be civil?"

"Okay, let's stop this right here. If you want to live then stick to your end of the bargain. Otherwise, I'm gonna get all up inside your sarcastic, self-inflated ass."

"Reluctantly. Or, you could join me."

"Me? The collective me! No, trust *me*, I won't fit in."

"Please reconsider. Together we can make a difference. There would be no limit to our potential."

Jessica has had enough.

Nikki's eyes go wide with disbelief as her hand raises up and, against her will, she slaps herself across the face. The other fifty-one freeze in a shocked silence as they digest what just happened.

Jessica, with eyes cold as ice but her sarcasm still intact, leans to the side and calls out to the crowd, "Oh! I'm sorry, did ya'll miss that!"

On queue, and with horror, the other fifty-one haul off and slap themselves across the face in exactly the same manner as their de facto leader had.

Making people see, hear or feel things, and tricking them to do things is one thing, but what Jessica did was coercive manipulation. The clones realize that she now has the upper hand in absolute terms. Jessica has what's been called macro-psychokinesis and she's a natural one at that. Known in some circles as a *Puppet Master*, of the two previous 'psi-clone' anomalies created by accident at the cloning facilities one they were able to make disappear without much notice.

As for the other...the Co-op had to nuke the facility.

As they quietly blow a mental gasket over this, Jessica bites the air on just this side of rage, "Okay, Helios, Ra, Surya, or whatever the fuck you secretly sport yourselves to be. You will stand down!" Jessica jabs a finger at her, "And, to clarify, that means back the fuck off!" Jessica then quietly adds, "You will learn your place, or I will crush your ugly little skulls."

It was then that Jacob speaks up, "Neat trick, Jessie. What else can you do?"

Jessica looks over her shoulder only to see her father leaning against the wall in dress BDUs. He must have been watching the whole thing, and this is a card she did not want him to see played, so she acts quickly to fix the situation.

With a simple thought she drops her father. Jacob's eyes roll back into his head and he crumples to his knees. Nikki watches with curiosity as Jessica takes his hands, guides him towards her on the bench and gently pulls his head to rest on her lap.

Without looking up, Jessica quietly says, "Get lost."

Humbled and humiliated, Nikki slinks away with her tail between her legs only to hear Jessica call out, "Hey, Nikki!"

She stops and looks back at Jessica, who mocks her with a tidbit of advice, "Try speaking in contractions." Then with a severe country drawl Jessica adds, "It will make you-all seem more human."

With that done, Jessica starts by ransacking her father's short term memory, looking for something to bury what he just witnessed, and...*voilà!* She finds the perfect memory. With this she can create a dream for him that will not only make a mess of his waking thoughts, but one he will find some amusement in recollection.

She kisses her fingertips and touches them to his temple, and with that his eyes close as he slips into a deep sleep.

As Jessica softly strokes his head she smiles, "*Saltare cūm Diablo, patris*. Pleasant dreams."

Jessica's lips part as she opens a pathway into her fathers mind, and if the eyes were the window into the soul then hers would be portholes into a netherworld for the end of times. A mercy free zone—loathsome and complete—full of flame, and pandemonium, and uncompromising torments.

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It's your typical picture of Hell...

As if *Necronomicon* itself came to life, bio-mechanical textures are interspaced with towering jagged rocks, bursts of fire, and the occasional grasping appendage—with the cursory gnashing of teeth, and shrieking, after said grasping. The stench of sulfur, and rot, and the screams of the damned fill the air. It is a heartless place where invincible error is moot, appeals are for naught, and where savagery is rewarded yet gratifying in its own right.

And, as horrific as this all appears at first glance, on closer examination it is evident that the damned have become desensitized to it all. It's like Hell has taken on the characteristics of a Del Taco commercial with the *same-place same-thing* mindset. It's not the mayhem, pain, agony, and daily dismemberment that torment these people, you get over those pretty quick, it's the humiliation this world offers that's unendurable.

Eventually you overcome that too.

The one thing that nobody here ever gets past is the maddening drone of Ravel's Boléro, Toscanini style, which permeates every nook and cranny of this place. Reorchestrated into Hell's own elevator music, it is accompanied by legions of musicians condemned to play the banjo, or the accordion, repeating sixteen bars of mind numbing Muzak for the duration of their stay.

Hell has a galaxy of workstations, serving many a different transgression and tortfeasor alike, but it is the V.I.P. section that has developed a fan-base of sorts.

The daily standards, like Hitler getting gang-raped by huge circumcised golems, or Stalin yet again being staked out and eaten by hordes of army-ant regimented Ukrainians, mandibles and all, still get the occasional curious onlooker, but it is the obscure sinner that draws the crowds anymore.

One demon pulls three young men out of the middle of the VIP queue, tosses them into a barbeque pit, and starts to drown them

in lighter fluid. As if spectators at a PGA tour, the hordes of the damned, currently on break, stop to watch the show. Rarely do they ever know why someone is punished so brutally, but when the demon lights the match and bellows at the *hot-dogs* on the grill, many of those in the crowd nod their heads with understanding and approval.

"Not even DOOM music, mutherfuckers!" And to the cheers of the damned, he tosses the match in after them.

Back at the queue, another demon chastises a group at the front of the line, "Look, this is a union shop and we got a serious back log here! The twentieth century set us back big time! Right now we're getting the short timers and priority jobs out of the way, so we can give you Jihad fucks the service you deserve."

And so it goes...

In the adjoining lake it is as if the damned look like they are in the middle of a beach swim party. As uncomfortable as it looks, they manage to laugh, splash and play in the rolling waves of watery superheated plasma.

This is where newcomers come first. High in the cliffs the demons toss them in one by one. Aiming for the stalagmites jutting out of the plasma below, they get the occasional solid skewer, but most of them cartwheel into the plasma with a *swoosh*. This is followed by the *snap-crackle-pop* of steam emanating from the entry point as the moisture from their body is instantly cooked out, and the plasma starts to leach in to take its place.

This is the point of initiation. This is where the body parts are tossed into—where they mend and repair. This is a holding pin where the damned find some respite until they are pulled out for their scheduled session of buggery and vivisection, standard fare, or selected randomly out of the mix for the special occasion.

And, today is a special day, with a very special visitor.

Across the lake is Jacob, not as a human, but as a ten-meter tall demon. Sitting, anchored to the rocks at the end of a two-lane bowling alley, his face appears somewhat normal, but the rest of him has morphed into a serpent like monster that arches high over the lanes like a cobra.

An unusually large head slams into ten bodies at the end of a lane. The bodies tumble into each other just like pins do, but instead of the resonate and woody crash you normally get, here you get a hollow crunch of bones and the dull thuds from blunt trauma.

All of them went down, and with a hoot and a hollar from Lucifer, Archangel Michael walks back from the line with a wide grin.

"That's the touch, Mikey!" Lucifer pats Michael on the back. "See what happens when you hit the mark? Blammo! All fall down!"

Michael shrugs, "I think I'm gettin' the hang of it."

Lucifer urges, "Remember your follow thru. Very important!"

Michael turns to Lucifer, "You know, Gabe and I have been wondering when you'll come and pay us a visit on high?"

"I still make people nervous up there, and you know that."

"We'll take you to the driving range. That's out of the way, and we can teach you a thing or two."

"Naw, you feather dusters can keep your croquet."

Michael shakes his head, "Golf!"

"Ya, whatever..." Lucifer tosses Michael a can of Raptor Red Ale, and smiles, "At least my balls come back to me!"

Multitasking, Jacob has already cleared the lane with a scythe like dew claw on his foot. While scraping them into the lake, he drops the rack on the other lane, setting ten more bodies in place, and starts to load the next rack with a purpose.

When Jacob reaches into the lake for another handful of involunteers, Lucifer applauds, "Well, if it ain't little Maria Ramirez."

Standing as the head pin, Maria waves and pipes up in her best East L.A. accent, "Lucie, I'm home!"

Lucifer laughs, "Glad you made it. I've been wanting to thank you for our addition to the damnation squad. The boy 'as got talent."

"Oh, thanks Luce!"

Lucifer gestures to Jacob, "Let's have some fun. Jacob, I can use Maria in the next frame. Send her on up for me!"

Jacob lifts Maria out of position, "What are you doin' here?"

Maria shrugs, "Penance. Three-hundred years."

Jacob smiles at her, "Oh ya, I remember now!"

Maria points to Jacob's body, "You...always like this?"

"No. Only when I'm on the clock."

"Well, when you're off, why don't you come take a dip with me in the pool? Catch up on old times, ya know."

"Sounds good!" Jacob leans in and whispers with a little nervous apprehension, "Do you mind? I'm kinda busy right now."

"No-no-no! Back to work, I insist!"

"Thanks, hon."

Maria winks at him, "You know, it's been quite awhile since we've rock-n-rolled."

Jacob smiles back, "Three hundred years—cakewalk!"

Jacob casually snips Maria's head off with his teeth and swallows it whole, and after a few seconds of intestinal gurgling her head reappears with a flatulent explosion. Rocketing down the ball return trough, it tumbles up the ramp and into the ball return rack with a bounce.

Bumping into the head of Rosie Alvarez, one of the people she defended *in absentia*, Maria blinks her eyes with surprise, "That was different!"

Rosie looks over at Maria, "Ey, mieja, new in town?"

21

propeller heads

LCTN: SOL-3a, MOUNT MARILYN, MOON
CORD: SAO-0.0101 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2099ce-NOVEMBER-6-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 09:10zulu

After three weeks of discord this hastily set up lunar base has more the ambiance of a trailer park rather than a scientific endeavor. Because of the infighting it has been remarked that all it needs is a barbecue, horseshoe pits, and the occasional tornado to make some of them feel right at home.

Of the nineteen people at the site, fourteen of them are pissing and moaning that two college boys are emceeding this show.

Their handlers, three über-fellows from academia who are representing Oxford, Texas A&M, and the ICTP out of Trieste, refuse to give into the agents from the DOD, DOE, JPL, NASA and the ESA. All the concerns, arguments, cajoling, and threats did not sway their position one iota. ASU is at the helm, and they picked Jay and Silent Bob for the task.

Born into privilege, the short-brawny graduate geek from the ASU Department of Physics, who goes by the name of Jason Kay, has had a blast arguing theoretical physics over the last twenty-one days. Thumbing his nose at these titans in the field, and not subtly so, he has basically dismissed everything they believe and hold dear. His contention that *a proof does not make for truth*, is argumentatively sound, and the fact that almost every known theory in physics has found its way onto the metaphorical scapheap is clearly supported by the historical record.

Jay's stoner exterior cannot hide his intelligence, disdain for the conventional, or the biting sarcasm he wields like a chainsaw, "Can you fossils say Higgs boson, branes, and multiverses? I knew you could."

Being labeled a *closeted forth-dimensional time-space holdout*

would not endear an accuser to anyone, but when it's *in your face*, and from such a nobody, it makes for very bad feelings indeed.

More so because he's not far off the mark.

Worse yet has been the annoying "Whoa...Steve" these two say, with the obligatory *mano cornuto* sign and a solemn bow of the head, whenever someone mentions anything dealing with the Standard Model, Technicolor, or KISS.

In science theory becomes postulate—becomes indomitable truth; and, at the turn of the millennium, when string theorists were as mad as bloody March hares coming up with all kinds of fanciful ideas that made the revelations of L. Ron Hubbard look reasonable and grounded by comparison, Steve Weinberg stepped back and watched. Steve reached *Cultus Confirmus* status to this latest generation because, like Gödel to Einstein, his level-headed observations brought reasonable back to popular reason.

Unfortunately, it was decades after his passing.

Credit is where credits due, and his life's work lead another to the unification of gravity to the other three forces. This impossibility was accomplished by an Italian gravestone cutter doing his graduate work at night and on weekends. His paper, the *Kasko Irregolare String Struttura*, translated and published in 2071, brought this poverty-stricken family man from obscurity to rock star status overnight.

Very few people embrace change, and when the physics community does manage to shake things up they are notorious for casting off one set of dogmatic blinders for another. It is said that they hobble themselves with empirical proof instead of seeking truth itself—which are not one and the same—and Jason took incredible delight in applying *stupor-gravity* as salt in the open wounds of the old guard trapped with him at the base.

Colonel Washington, an astronaut representing both NASA and the Department Of Defense, is not happy about how this mission is being managed. With just a few minutes to go before it launches he is obviously agitated that his efforts to wrestle control of the experiment out of the hands of the consortium have proved fruitless. So are the four NASA astronauts and two from the ESA on hand. They too are afraid that these undisciplined college boys are going to blow the experiment. The idea that seven highly trained professionals are going to be upstaged by two techno twerps erks all of them to no end—especially by that quiet geek-tron who the Colonel describes as, "A walking ficus tree with that God-damned propeller beanie!"

Robert Graves, the Silent Bob ficus tree, is a mystery wrapped

in an enigma. Believed by those at Mount Marilyn to have only a two word vocabulary (i.e. *no* and *Pepsi*), it is well documented that at JPL, during the first Moon experiment, he actually put two words together by way of *holy* and *shit*. In spite of his quiet demeanor, the report on Robert is that from his humble *double-wide* beginnings he excelled in high school enough to win scholarships in Philosophy and Logic at ASU. On top of that he has a reputation of being a computer wiz, a consummate gamer, an expert in crane style Kung-Fu (which is in sharp contrast to his street fighting juvi-record) and that he has an ongoing stable of centerfold quality girlfriends without money, means of transportation, or GQ savoir-faire.

When put to the question by Colonel Washington all Jason had to say is that, "He's a good listener. Chicks dig that. Also, I hear he plays a mean game of hide the Genoa. That counts for something."

With three minutes to go the Colonel steps up, leans over the console to block the main monitor from Jason and Bob, and demands, "Don't you propeller heads fuck this up!"

As Robert gives him a snappy salute, Jason comes back with attitude, "Look, Colonel Washington, dude, for the umpteenth time, we'll run your half as best we can; and, after your time is up, we're gonna do our thing."

"Mr. Kay, I'm not quite up on this addendum you're working with this morning. It looks more like a crazy quilt table of organization instead of the carefully thought out flight plan we gave you clowns!"

Jason parries, "For gravity repulse, dude! Come to think of it, I have yet to hear of a burn patient or a family sedan being shot out into space simply by turning the shit on! Do any of you people know what's happening here? I wish someone can tell me, because we don't know jack." Jason shakes his head as the Colonel just stares back, "This is not just unexplored territory, Bwana. We're stepping into the grotto of the Vestal Virgins! The holiest of holies in Physics. You guys left it up to us clowns to figure out how to spelunk this honey pot, an' we do not intend to do it on the fly."

The Colonel's eyes pierce Jason with death rays.

He has come to admire the tenacity of these two 'punk-ass shits', as everybody, even their own handlers, have come to know them by. Jason's valley-rocker façade is wearing thin, and it is clearly evident that he knows something nobody else does. Not that he hasn't been trying to share this knowledge with everyone else, he has, ad nauseum, but it is the rest of them who have chosen not to listen. On that note, it is apparent to the Colonel that his own arrogance and prejudice may have prevented him from making the correct judgments about these two, but any admission now would be a weakness he

cannot afford to show at this time.

Colonel Washington makes a hollow threat for good measure, "For my cousin, Leon, make me proud, or I'll toss both of you shits out the airlock."

Of all the people at the site, it is the Colonel that Jason and Robert have actually come to respect and enjoy bickering with. He has not avoided them, no matter how obstinate or insulting they may have been; and, to his credit, he has constantly challenged them at every turn, and on every issue. Most people would crack under his double-barreled microscope, but the boys have loved every minute of it.

Jason chuckles, "Then you better start cycling it up, bird-man. If it comes to that we'll toss ourselves in and all you gotta do is flush our asses out!"

The Colonel wanted to laugh, but was able to hide it with a snort, and with ninety seconds left to go he gets out of the way so Jason can finish the pre-flight check list with the JPL engineers and techs. Jason is totally excited in his role, but the Colonel is amazed how calm Robert is. The lanky kid just sits there with his chin in his hand and the propeller on top of his beanie, an antique premium from the old Alienware computer company, slowly turning from the air blowing down on them from the AC duct above.

Jason, on the final count down, stops at seven and calls out with anticipation, "Boost the juice!"

In orbit around the moon, the experiment is pushed into full power up. Right on queue the *juice* is diverted to the gravity field generators and, just as expected, the readings spike completely off the chart—and the experiment rips away at one-thousand and twenty-three kilometers a second.

The first maneuver is to push the field to the port side, whereby it was believed by most there that the ship would go towards starboard; but, as predicted by Jason, the ship zigged instead of zagged.

Jason says in their face, "We got ourselves a tractor drive! Chalk up one for the dynamic duo!"

They then pull back the direction of the field and the ship stops the sideways maneuver while continuing on its way downrange.

Jason turns to Robert, "That says lock down all over it! You were right." He then crumples up the original NASA flight plan and tosses it back over his head as he then says, "Let's try this."

Jason repeats the maneuver, but with a twist. They pull the field back to stop forward momentum and then press it towards the

left again.

Jason then warns, "Let's confirm. Dropping the field."

The Colonel shouts, "Wait!"

Too late. Jason kills the field and the experiment continues to drift towards the left.

Robert and Jason tap fists as the Colonel steps in, "What the fuck are you two doing?"

"Confirming a hypothesis." Jason then turns the field back on and the tower rips away again at high speed.

Jason then calls out, "Engaging transitional shift."

The Colonel shouts, "God damn it! Trans what?"

When the experiment stops on a dime, yet again Jason turns to Robert and they tap knuckles, "Exquisite bit of coding, my man. You're batting a thousand!"

The Colonel is pissed, "I want to know now! Lock down?"

Jason shrugs, "The field locks the experiment in static space."

"Shouldn't it be going the other way?" The Colonel asks suggesting towards the universal center.

"So you would think, but it appears that space is traveling through us faster than we are traveling through it." Jason then asks the tech behind them, "Is its clock dragging or racing, tech dude?"

The tech calls out, "Measurably faster."

The Colonel then asks, "Where the fuck are you taking this thing is what I want to know."

"We're taking it where it needs to go, bird-man." Jason then calls out to the techs, "What's our status?"

Such a dismissal would normally infuriate the Colonel, but when he hears the tech respond he chills out, "Looks good. A little bump when you dropped off, though. Also, we can't make out the power glut in the surrounding event field. It's in the tera-joules, and that doesn't make sense unless it's stripping virtual particles at the event horizon."

"Crazy kEwL! What's it doing now?"

"Bump."

"It was off, and now?"

"Nothing. You gonna turn it back on?"

"Just did." Jason turns to Robert, "You're right on again."

The Colonel asks, "It's just sitting there. Transitional shift, the thing you mentioned earlier, right?"

"Yeppers, Colonel dude! Now, are you ready for something completely different?"

The Colonel looks back towards the physicists and does a double take when he sees their faces. They are in obvious wide-eyed astonishment, trying to absorb what these two have done with the experiment.

The tech announces, "You got twelve minutes of power left."

The Colonel turns back to Jason, "Ya, surprise me."

Jason elbows Robert next to him in the ribs, "Okay, Drama Flakes, she's yours to fly."

As Robert puts his hands on the gamer flight controls they Jerry-rigged to the console, he quietly calls out his battle cry with his best rocker accent, "Spoooooon!"

And, boy howdy, is the Colonel surprised!

Colonel Washington's secret pleasure has been on-line video games and his favorite to date has been the VFR mod to DCS9. In this mod everyone flies the high-end fighters and nobody takes on the A10 in the air-to-air mode because it's just not done. One guy, who goes by the handle *Drama Flakes*, has made running and gunning in the old A10 a skillset unsurpassed by all. So much so that few have been able to boom on Drama and prevail because his piloting skills are reputed to borderline on clairvoyance, and when his signature battle cry is heard over TeamSpeak everyone knows that someone on the other side is going down hard. From his many encounters with, and deaths by the hand of Drama Flakes, the Colonel urged the Marine Air School to study his tactics and when they did they could not make sense out of them. Drama never did the same thing in exactly the same way and he had this uncanny ability to lure people into stall traps.

The kid was a natural, and totally improvised.

At first what Robert does is simple turns and straight lines of acceleration to get a feel for the controls. With that done, he starts to pull loops, barrel rolls and the occasional corkscrew or two for good measure.

Blinking with amazement at the coordinated turns in the vacuum of space, the Colonel looks to the techs behind them and asks about the telemetry, "You gettin' all this?"

"Every bit of it, Colonel." The tech then calls out to Robert

and Jason, "Guys, we need to wrap this up inside three minutes."

Robert nods and flies the tower back towards the moon. He carefully slips the experiment into an orbital track where he drops the field and it floats in space.

The tech laughs, "Sloppy elliptical, but it'll do."

After a moment of stoned silence the three physicists step up and their leader, an old pterodactyl from the ICTP, announces for all to hear, "Spatial displacement—this validates KISS. Mr. Kay, we stand humbled."

"That's some serious crow eatage, fossil dude, but don't tell it to me. I don't have an original thought in my head. Talk to him..." Pointing to Robert, "He's the brains of our little enterprise."

They all look over at Robert who, after a pregnant pause, feigns a shiver, "Cold mutherfucker in here, isn't it?"

They all just stare at him, waiting for more.

"Wha'?" Robert looks around and shrugs, "What do you want me to say? You people keep trying to prove shit, and what we did here proves nothing. How about discovering something without your heads up your asses, hu?"

The pterodactyl purses his shriveled lips, "Okay, you insolent little fuck, obviously you're ten steps ahead of all of us. How about you give us your thoughts before we shove our heads back up our own asses...hu?"

Robert smiles, "I'm beginning to like you."

"Make it mutual. How about a brain dump?"

"Okay...how about we take this puppy out for a spin?"

With open minds they listen, and to the surprise of all they do exactly what Robert suggests.

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NASA recovered the experiment and turned it around inside eight weeks. In that time they strapped on extra generators, a Lunar Lander, and the command trailer from Mount Marilyn.

With Robert in the left pilot's seat, the Colonel graciously takes the co-pilots seat and says, "You got the stick, Drama Flakes."

This time there is a carefully thought out flight plan that they stick too. Mostly because they're thrilled with its layout and simplicity which consists of straight-line speed runs just to see what they can

squeeze out of this drive system.

When the gravity fields are kicked on they shoot off like a bolt towards the glowing spot of Saturn in the far distance. Robert pushes the field out little by little; all-the-while telemetry is called back to him. They have ninety minutes worth of power available, but it only takes five minutes to exceed the speed of light (c) and a couple of more before they hit 3c.

It took thirty-five minutes to reach Saturn, and as Robert slows it down to go around the planet he lets go of the controls and says to the Colonel, "She's yours to fly, Sir."

The trip back is as uneventful as the trip out, except inside this ten minute run the Colonel pushes the ship to 12c.

The Colonel drops the ship in a perfectly circular orbit, and they all silently crawl into the Lunar Lander.

On the way down the Colonel breaks the silence, "Drama, Robert, you are officially the man who broke the light barrier."

Jason speaks up for him, "Colonel, dude, you were there too. We all were."

"He was the pilot, and that's what counts."

Jason quips, "Ya, but you beat him by a factor of three on the way back, dude. That makes you the fastest fly-boy around town."

Robert interjects, "Guys, let's chill on that because it was Leon that figured this shit out. Not us. Now, in my book, Colonel Washington's cousin gets the credit."

The Colonel nods with understanding.

He now sees Jason and Robert in a new light. They did this thing for the kicks—not for the bragging rights. He knows that people will look to them as heroes, as they will be, but these two will shun the spotlight and flippantly brush off the kudos to come. Something he would never have been able to understand until now, and that is something he respects in them.

Colonel Washington looks down at the Navy Astronauts Badge pinned to his chest. He remembers all that he did to earn this little piece of brass, and he has been so proud of his accomplishments because of it; but then he wonders if the time he spent on the Moon, and going to Mars, were worth losing his family over. What they did today was a great thing, and no matter how giant a leap this was for the species as a whole it comes with the realization that he has no one back home to share this with. Being a Zoomie in the Marines was bad enough, but the astronaut corps has taken a whole decade of his life

away from his family.

Here and now, at the conclusion of man's greatest scientific achievement in space since landing on Mars, Colonel Washington realizes that all that he has ever done—was all about him.

Epiphanies come when you least expect them too.

His divorce is not yet final, and with a resolve greater than that which drove him to get this little piece of brass, he is suddenly determined to get his life back.

With the hint of a tear in his eye, he pulls the badge from his jump suit and pins it on Robert, "Here, son, you deserve this."

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Glossary and Design Plates...

The glossary, drawings and designs that were developed for the screenplay are available at: <http://jaccinthebox.com>

About the Author...



Nicholas Ralph Baum is an Information Management Analyst with a utility in Phoenix, Arizona. He has one son who he bonds with by blowing up the world on Team Fortress 2 (hdgehog6), and punching holes in paper targets for real.

He was married in February of '08 to Nedka Petrovova.

The pool is closed



PART
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Jacob Graves, a smart underachiever, quite by accident finds his niche with the Steel Annex—a military organization in the Pleiades Cluster—and no matter how much he looks at this job as just a job, through the years he has earned a reputation that has instilled unimaginable fear in the heart of their adversaries. Now, being a straight male (an oddity these days) has its share of drawbacks, but Jacob's life is more complicated than most. Torn between his ex-wife, Maria, and his on and off again lover, Nicole (front cover), as well as all his children, Jacob soon finds out that even he can be redeemed from the indiscretions and collateral damage of his past.

In worlds without hunger, disease and poverty—where wealth is abundant and want is for naught—it is in the exclusive A-List of politics, industry and society where ambition, avarice and debauchery are redefined. In this instance children cloned for the sex and military trade have been discovered, and it is up to Field Marshal Graves and his people to rescue them...only to learn that it is a young girl, playing a very dangerous game of manipulation, who is pulling the strings and guiding mankind to the abyss of interstellar war.

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