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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 strains 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 has pulled his khukri to show Welch. The heavy blade is 15 inches long and hooked forward. Beautiful to look at but truly 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 then says, "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." He looks down at her, "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. Children 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, "Artic 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 heads towards the galley across from the cockpit to wait for Jacob, "Let's get this on the hump. We've only 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 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 slipping into the galley he says to Nicole, "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 2 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 have 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 in her hands and saunters over and slips into the tiny galley.

Nicole slams the door shut, and growls, "Now, sit."

Nikki gingerly 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 talk around 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, right?"

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 with each other 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. Right now 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 one and 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 all 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, and 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 collective, 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, "Work with us and 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. You either accept these simple 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 says, "We agree to the terms." She then 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 smile and a big nod for good measure, then slips out through the door.

Nikki calls out to Jacob, "Kill as in figuratively speaking?"

From the hold they hear him say, "Like I said, try me."

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