

27

handholding everyone by their dicks

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orian)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-MAY-11-SUNDAY
TIME: 19:07zulu (local 13:12mst)

It took less time for the Iron Maiden to make the four zigzag jumps back to the rendezvous point called U-Ey (out near HIP-27427) than it did for the surviving SS cruiser to see the first one get hit. After they recover the twelve fighters they had to follow combat procedure and wait the twenty-three remaining hours before they could double back to Betelgeuse.

As the Maiden backs up to secure hard-dock with the hub of the Carrie Nation, in a polar orbit around Cocytus, Chief Stark realizes that most of the CIC crew have already started to leave their posts. After handing off to Hippo-1 Control the CIC on the SA36 becomes superfluous so, as is the standard practice, only a skeleton crew is left behind.

When Zach himself starts for the exit Jerry gets his attention, "Corporal, if you've got a minute."

"My time is your time, Chief."

"You off duty, son?"

"Not if you need me."

"How about a single-malt? My buy."

"Okay?" Zach thinks for a second then shrugs, "Sure!"

With Scott in tow they hop on the last elevator out of CIC and are silent on their way to the wet deck of the Carrie Nation, and as they step off the elevator Jerry opens the conversation by getting to the point, "Corporal, I have to ask, what are your career goals?"

Zach shrugs, "To do the best I can no matter what job you throw my way. I've been tagged as upwardly mobile and I don't know

if that's a good thing."

"Killer answer, but I need you to be honest with me."

"Honestly, Chief, I'm here to do the job—not to climb a ladder. But, another tidbit of honesty for you..." Zach pauses as he gestures towards Jerry and Scott, "Who wouldn't want to be one of you guys up on high? The shit you see, the things you do, man, that's got to be a kick."

As they step up to the bar, which is in the middle of a didgeridoo competition, Jerry tells the barkeep, "Line 'em up, Raul, my regular poison." He then turns to Zach, "Any job, right?"

The didgeri-duet in play has a dubstep quality to it as Zach gives a nervous smile, "Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut."

Jerry gives him a deadpan look, "Too late."

Scott speaks up, "There has been a handful of vets who have retreaded, and from that we've had a lot of movement in the ranks. Sergeant Gudici is now your platoon leader, and you are going to be his exec. Any questions, Staff Sergeant, Nelson?"

Not exactly a double promotion, which is not unheard of in the Annex, but what is unheard of is rising past two chevrons without at least six-months time-in-grade with three chevrons. Zach would like to have taken a crack at being a squad leader before moving on up but the job they give you is a job they think you are ready for. It's not an offer though. Nearer to the top you can quietly tell them to find someone else, but at the bottom you have no choice but to accept.

Zach shrugs, "No, but I'm gonna go take a piss and give you two time to rethink your choice in me."

Zach walks away, and when he's out of earshot Scott turns to Jerry, "So, Cap, waddya think?"

"Everyone in that room last week was on the same page. The only way the Co-op could've known about those receivers was through him."

Scott threw in, "You leaked it."

Jerry added, "Ya, but that was the conformation. My report following his makes it actionable. By himself makes it meaningless."

"You know that."

"For a fact!" Jerry then says, "Look, the manifests are always coded to hide them in plain sight and we've been shipping those fuckers for decades just to extract the turret bearings. Security Services doesn't have intel for crap so they *had* to have been clued in. There is no other explanation for yesterday. No way."

Scott points out, "The Co-op specifically asked you to confirm. Let's not forget."

Jerry thinks about it for a second, "Ya, and it was obvious they were looking to start some shit but, seriously, who would have expected *that* shit."

"No shit." Scott then ponders as he notices Nelson returning to the bar, "I wish we could have come up with a better game-plan to flush Nelson out instead of the *in your face* option."

"Marshal Ramirez wants this done. We don't have time to win him over the normal way." And with Nelson stepping up Jerry speaks up, "So, Staff Sergeant, you ready for this?"

"You think I am."

Scott hands him and Jerry each a shot and says, "That we do, and we wouldn't be standing here with every intention of drinking ourselves stupid with ya if we didn't."

"A toast!" Jerry raises his shot glass, "Here's to the poor dumb bastards from yesterday whose time we cut short."

Scott adds, "Rest in peace, motherfuckers. For one day we'll get ours."

After shooting back, and slamming their shot glasses down, Nelson pipes up, "I like how you two changed the conversation when I was walking up. Good recovery, I might add."

Scott and Jerry look at each other and Scott says, "Naw, what makes you say that?"

"I'm not that stupid. Well, yet."

Jerry smiles, "No, you're not, and that is why you got promoted, son."

Scott then says, "But, we do have a question for ya."

"Okay, but before you ask yours let me ask mine."

"Your question trumps ours. Go ahead."

Zach gestures to Raul for a refill as he asks, "When you guys chuck me out the air-lock would you be so kind as to put a bullet in my head before you hit the purge button? It's not that unreasonable of a request when you think about it."

Jerry blinks his eyes in surprise before turning to Scott, "I think that's a reasonable request. Don't you?"

Scott frowns, "It's doable, but so avoidable."

"You think so?" Zach laughs, "Everybody knows what Marshall

Ramirez did. It's true, Chief, isn't it?"

Many years ago, a couple years before the end of the last war, Maria uncovered two Co-op moles and was interrogating both in this very bar. Neither was cooperating much so Maria took one, the more timid of the two, out to the elevator landing where she surprised most everyone by pushing that mole into the emergency air-lock then flushing her out into space.

Jerry was at that interrogation, playing the good-cop role, and he was not surprised by the *planned* abruptness of it, "The other mole, the asshole of the two, she started to sing like a canary." Jerry takes the shot that Zach was handing him and says, "Word is that every anecdote, rumor or wishful thinking you may hear on the wet deck is either surprisingly factual or ultimately true given enough time. *That* story is one I can personally bear witness to."

Zach hands Scott a shot and Scott says, "It freaked the fuck outta me and I was nowhere near it."

Jerry's laugh is genuine, "Ya, but you did end up having a kid with that crazy-ass canary. Now, didn't ya?"

"Please, don't remind me."

Jerry asks Zach, "Do we need to toss you out the airlock, son? It's not what I wanna do but it is your choice."

Zach half expected that question, "No, I'll pass on that."

Scott then asks, "Ready to spunk on both sides of the fence?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Yes, you do. Switching loyalties is a given but continuing to 'be the mole' for them is your choice."

Jerry throws in, "You get used to it, trust me."

Zach is surprised, "Hu?"

"What do you think we are? Scott and I have been workin' both sides of the street our entire careers. The Annex has been pimping me for decades and Co-op doesn't even know it. Fact is, they think I'm a retread three levels down in the CIC when I'm actually runnin' the show." Jerry thumbs back at Scott, "Wonderboy here, he's been workin' for a different crew all this time and nobody knew—"

Defensively, Scott pokes Jerry, "If you'z guys were smart enough you would have figured that out on your own. At least my loyalties lie with human beings and not the Daleks."

Jerry looks at Scott trying not to laugh, calling the Nefer Key the Daleks of all things, he then turns to Zach, "Look, son, it's better

to control and manipulate the espionage rather than fall prey to it. It goes like this...we feed you the truth, with our spin on the truth that is, and you push it on through. Obviously they have confidence in you or yesterday wouldn't have happened. Right?"

Zach is more than curious about Scotts comment, but he decides to drop it and ask, "What if they find out I turned-coat?"

"What if they do?" Jerry smiles big as he notices Maria slip up behind Zach, "You don't understand how this works do you? If that were to happen then, through you, we'd feed them the truth-truth, and won't that be egg on their faces when you become the only avenue of that truth!" He shakes his head, "The British have been playin' this game like, forever, and we learned from the best."

Scott reassures the young man, "Zach, it's our responsibility to make sure they have confidence in you. All of the moles we've exposed were planned for because we had a purpose to."

Jerry adds, "Hell, all the spies the Co-op pushed to negotiate a release for are now sending us intel from there."

Zach points out, "If I do this, you know, double-agent thing, I wouldn't want to go back. Ever."

"Duly noted."

Scott then announces, "That's actually good to know because we've got other plans for you..." Scott puts his hand out, "Not just yet, but we think you'll be good with it when time comes."

Maria pipes up, "There's always the airlock option."

As Scott mouths the words *You're an asshole!* to Maria, Nelson slowly turns to her and calmly says, "Options are options. Can I get back to you on that?"

Maria is quietly taken aback because the little fucker...that is the six-foot one, chiseled, stud-muffin, twenty-something kept his cool and didn't jump when *Tiger Bitch* jumped in on the conversation. It goes without saying that this left a good impression on her.

Maria pokes him in the chest, "Yes you may and, until then, I'll have your codex if you don't mind. It is in JPEG, right?"

Zach smiles, "Posted like clockwork!"

After over 300 years JPEG still commands the lion's share in digital photo formats. Common 32 bit JPEG formatted images have a 16,777,216 color pallet where the HTML code (e.g. #000000 for black) translates to 262,144 possible hexadecimal #code options for all of the 26 alpha-characters, 10 numbers, and some 28 symbols. The beauty of JPEG is that the image degrades craptastically with each and every

save, and if someone were to leave a body of text floating in the text tool box, and save the image, then an encryption sequencer, hidden in the photo editor, will take that text and imbed it within the pixels of the image where, when rendered, is flat-out impossible to crack.

On the receiving end a standard 1920x1200 wallpaper quality image of the sender and their buddies boozing it up on a Friday night translates to 2,304,000 pixels. For this example the codex tells the decryption sequencer, also imbedded within the editor, how to decode the character sequencing for the date of that save. Messages usually end up with about one or two coded pixels per line, and in a matrix where all of the colorful squares you see have actual meaning—nothing meaningful can conceivably be extracted out of the pixelated mess of a JPEG save without the codex key.

Post to your social page and *préparez-vous à être surpris!* The most clandestine of drop-offs right out in the open—for all to see.

Maria receives a text from Zach, and after quickly deciphering the letters, numbers and symbols she says, "Al-Masih ad-Dajjal?"

Zach smirks, "Ya, they wanted me to climb a ladder."

"How far did they expect you to go?"

"Aaaaah..." Zach thinks, then, "All the way?"

"Outstanding!" Maria starts passing out shots that Raul just set out for them, "It's great to see that everybody's plans are in lockstep for once."

Zach sips on his shot then says, "You know, Marshal—"

Maria flips her hand out and interrupts, "It's Maria. We're on the wet deck."

Zach nods then continues, "Okay, Maria, what made you kill that girl? Throwing her out the airlock like that?"

"We got results and you can't argue with results." Noticing Jacob and Sandoval entering the deck Maria looks up at Zach, "But, can you keep a secret?"

"We're in the business of keeping secrets."

"We got her repressurized inside six seconds."

"No shit!"

"She's one of our day-traders at the P.X."

Jerry throws in, "And we get a shocking amount of intel from her. Just amazing the goin' ons on the trading floor!"

Scott adds, "All that dirt right in our own back yard."

Maria smiles at Zach as she walks away, "You want to know what else? Tell him, guys!"

Watching Maria walk off, Zach turns back to Jerry with Scott laughing, "It was a holo, mon!" His fingers walk through the air, "She went from one airlock to another. It was all for show!"

Zach is taken aback, "All our boot-troops believe Marshal Ramirez blew her out the airlock!"

Jerry hands him and Scott a shot, "Ya, and the Co-op believes we saved her ass, but you know the truth."

Zach nods in understanding, and after a few seconds Jerry asks, "Did you want to ask why the charade?"

Zach nods no, "Why ask the obvious?"

00110001-00110100-00101111-01101011-00101111

Jacob is there to meet Sandoval as she steps off the early evening beer-run out of New York. Stopping at the foot of the Warthog's ramp she faces off with Jacob with a shrug, "Wha'?"

Confronted by Sandoval in a three-piece gray business suit, surprised that the tight skirt and wedge pumps actually look great on her, Jacob feigns a perplexed look while asking, "Eighteen months? What's up with that?"

Sandoval pokes at Jacob's chest, "No choice. We hav'ta have both the Co-op and Security Services totally committed to the 4.54 (i.e. four.fifty-four) ball and 4.58 bolt before we git to upgrade! That also goes for deploying the M2. Ya'll will just haf'ta wait."

Jacob motions for Sandoval to follow him, "I understand that, Beth, I just don't haf'ta like it."

"Sorry, Jake, like it or not, the clock starts when the shit starts." Sandoval shakes her head, "And, let me tell ya, it was a mutherfucker to win that fucken' contract. I can't believe they're settling for the underpowered crap we're offering."

Jacob has a surprised look that says why would that matter, "You're competing against yourself!"

"Another subsidiary of ours, yes, but they were the premium option. We won because we proved to 'em they can upgrade existing systems *and* we negotiated a price lock for five years."

"I take it they still liked the miniballs?"

"Fucken-A, you know it, and Security Services can use 'em too when they want a C.Q.B. munition. The 4.58's are a tad cost

prohibitive for spray-and-pray."

"Ya, but that puts them on par with our 4.75."

"Ya, but for only eighteen months so buck up." As they step on an elevator Sandoval says, "And, before your bitching gets out of hand, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the 4.16 and the 5.77."

Originally the 2.73 millimeter pentagun was designed for an upgrade to the 4.75, and it was also planned that all the existing 4.75 systems be upgraded to a new 6.8 millimeter bolt, but when it came to actually doing the conversions the systems were plagued by jamming. Hence scaled down alternatives to 4.16 and 5.77 were introduced. Using the same capacitors they were getting better results as a result. The 6.8 was so loved that Sandoval's people decided to retool the BR1 and designated it the K-model for hand held weapons.

After a second of thinking, Jacob asks, "What's the M2?"

"Oh ya!" Sandoval looks over at him, "We haven't reported this yet and, quite frankly, I want it to be a surprise to Simmons. So, for the BR1 we wanted to ratchet it up a couple of notches. Remember that thirty-cal we were toying with?"

Jacobs stammers a bit, "Ya, the anti-armor."

"Yes, well, we've been calling this latest build of the BR1 the 'Ma Deuce' of all things. We upped the ante just a tad."

"From what I hear it's gotta kick like a mule!"

"Not so! We swapped out the grenade launcher for a robust counter-recoil assembly." She puts her hands out at shoulder width. "Shootin' this thing feels like a twelve pound sledge hittin' an anvil." Dropping her hands she blinks her eyes, "It's kinda freaky. No kick to speak of and no flip! Just this shock wave and that takes some getting used to. Its got a painfully slow rate of fire but considering what it's throwin' down range—"

Jacob snorts out, "If you know Simmons like I know her, she's gonna piss all over herself if she ever gets her hands on one."

Sandoval chuckles as they step off the elevator to the wet deck, "Funny you should say that because that's exactly what's gonna happen inside the next hour. Told her I was gonna be here."

"Simmons's been expecting the M1 for torture testing."

"Things change. She get's the M2."

Under his breath, Jacob smiles, "Klicks' gonna squirt like a geyser!" As they enter the wet deck he asks, "So, how are you?"

Sandoval is sort of surprised, "Thanks for asking."

"Hu?"

"You've never asked me before."

"This is the first time I didn't know how you're doing so, how are you?" Reaching the bar, Jacob motions for the barkeep, "I know this assignment was...unusual. It was a lot for you to take on."

"Ya think!"

To the barkeep, one Sergeant Zazueta, on rotation from the Maiden, Jacob points between Sandoval and himself, "Hey ya, Zaz! Rye, neat."

It's been years since Zazueta has served Jacob, but a good bartender always remembers his customers. He stabs the air towards Jacob with a cheesy smile, "Overholt! You got it Doc."

"I'm proud of you for doing a fabulous job." Jacob, realizing the understatement, turns to her and elaborates, "You may not think so but what you did for us was very important. Everybody here appreciate your efforts."

Sandoval brushes the compliment off, "Ya, okay."

"Don't dismiss this." Jacob thumbs behind him, "These people won't. To them you're a modern day Ng Mui, but with a clip board and gray tweed. You're a hero in their eyes!"

Sandoval is taken aback, "Mui who?"

Just then, Maria bumps into Jacob and pries herself between him and Sandoval, "Welcome back, Sandy!" Then to Jacob, "Muas!" Then back to Sandoval, "We really appreciate everything you have done. Playing a C.T.O. minge to the hilt and all."

"I appreciate your appreciation, but three years of this Mickey Mouse bullshit is enough. I want my company back."

Maria huffs, "It's not your company anymore, Beth."

"Then bust me back to platoon leader, or squad leader for that matter. I'd prefer that."

"You get what we give you." Maria smiles as she moves to the other side of her, "How about Bill's old regiment? He's comin' to work for me and they're looking for someone."

Sandoval's shoulders sag, "Ah, fu', come on!"

Jacob weighs in, "For a job well done it's where we need you."

Sandoval's head snaps around, "An SDM! I consider that a penance."

"You need to bitch-slap that attitude. A lot of people are

gonna make it through the next duration because of you."

Maria puts her arm around Sandoval's shoulders, "Time to tender your resignation and git your ass back ASAP."

Shaking her head, Sandoval thinks, "We've shipped so how about six weeks? Will that do?"

"That'll do." Maria squeezes her for a second, let's go, steps back and calls out, "Wet-Deck, break decorum!"

Just then, Zazueta steps out from behind Maria to shout, "*More majorum!*" And then with a D.I. bark, "Atten-hut!"

Suddenly, all personnel on the wet deck rise and jump to attention facing Sandoval's direction. Maria snaps a salute with everyone else following suit a full second later.

The Annex has no medals to speak of. Here you get citations and commendations and when you open one's profile you can pull down their service history as well as a list of brownie points for all their good deeds. The only physical award per se is becoming polished. This is where your badge of rank is converted from brass stripes or silver stars to gold or platinum and is the Annex's top recognition for gallantry or altruistic valor. For one to become polished they have to do something exceedingly heroic or save a lot of lives and Jacob has been the only trooper to have been polished more than twice in their career. He's been awarded this honor five times over and all because he was pivotal in turning the tide of battle or he overcame incredible odds. Then again, one could say he was simply being creatively murderous and it really depends on your personal perspective whether polishing was warranted or not, *id est*, the firefight at Saiph-6B being swept under the carpet like it was.

To be saluted when becoming polished requires you to have saved lives. Maria is one of those rare individuals to have received this honor and she earned it for her efforts getting the Phoenix-Marauder through the duration of the last war. She personally saved their asses over, and over, and over and she remembers the constant irritation of being saluted everywhere she turned for the next 24 hours while on the Carrie Nation. Maria will never forget how troopers, like Sandoval, upped the annoyance level by setting themselves up to salute her three or four times over. Maria swore she would get back at someone for that and takes great delight in having stacked Sandoval's following day on the Carrie Nation with meetings, meetings and more meetings.

As Sandoval returns the salute, Maria taps into her head through the tacnet and says, <"Payback's a bitch, ain't it.">

<"That you are."> Replies Sandoval as Maria and the rest of the troopers on the wet deck break off their salute.

Sometimes people forget that the Steel Annex is in fact a police organization. The heavy emphases on military interdiction in support of the frontier makes for an interesting juggling act between functioning as a constable one day and commando the next. It's as if the Texas Rangers were issued a magical bottomless checkbook—each district commanding a whole division of *Jagdkommando* with their own aircraft carrier. Since the Annex is tasked patrolling tens of thousands of cubic light-years that comparison kind of makes sense.

Jacob thrusts a polished badge of a Senior Deputy Marshal, a Regimental Commander, into Sandoval's hand then pins a miniature version of it to her lapel while saying quietly, "Let's knock back a few before Simmons gets here. She's on her way."

Sandoval graciously says, "Thank you, everyone." Followed by another personal transmission to Maria and Jacob, "<But, fist you two just the same.">

"She's definitely one of us now!" Maria laughs while handing her a shot, "Did ya tell 'im about the Ma Deuce?"

Jacob adds, "Ya, 7.62, I can't wait to try it myself."

Maria smiles, "Oh no, Sparky, it gets better!"

Sandoval tells him the rest, "We didn't settle on the thirty cal. We kicked it up to the 8.80 from the bisE upgrade, but my people are calling the round the eighty-eight." Jacob's eyes bug out. "We've beefed up the BR1 to the max and it'll only do a quarter-million before it starts ta shake apart but, we think that's a good trade off."

Jacob taps her shot glass with his and they all slam it back, and he then coughs, "Homer is not gonna like it."

Sandoval then adds, "They will come back at ya with a crew served option. It's already in the works as we speak..."

She takes a few minutes explaining that the bolt they will build for the Co-op will also be an 8.80 but with differences. It will require three people to set up the weapon and operate it. The bolt will be underpowered by comparison but their weapon will last for millions of rounds. The SA will be able to use Co-op rounds and magazines in a pinch, but they can only use SA rounds after transferring them to their own magazines which is a labor intensive proposition. If Homer tries to push the SA rounds to full power it will burn out their receiver after only a thousand rounds or so, and considering the exorbitant cost of this weapon that will be a firefight *faux pas* for sure.

Over the next couple of shots Sandoval rattles on about a mock twenty-four month development cycle which has been mapped out for a weapon system that is already designed, built, tested, and

ready for production and shipment.

Boring stuff for the ballistics non-aficionado, but for those in the SA it's the *best news ever* as Sandoval asks, "So, waddya think?"

Everyone is a little buzzed, so Jacob grabs Sandoval by the face and gives her a quick kiss, "You are like, awesome!"

While Jacob wanders off to take a piss, Sandoval asks, "Wow, he's openly affectionate. What gives?"

"You bring good tidings. You've managed to nerf 'em down!" Maria laughs, and then with a country drawl, "Hell, I'm about to drop to my knees for ya'll!"

"Ya." Sandoval snorts, "So, boss lady, it's been a long time since we've talked. Still pissed off at Jackson dumping this shit on you?"

"Thought I'd never forgive 'im but his new job sucks so much I kinda feel sorry for him. This is easy-street by comparison."

"Not for long."

Maria thinks about it for a second, "We've got good people, and I have to remind myself constantly that the greatest burden of command here in the Annex is letting go."

"You? Let go!"

"I'm getting better at it!" Maria shakes her head, "Still, I feel like I'm handholding everyone by their dicks. Now I know why Jackson was crabby all the time..." As she raises the shot glass to her mouth she quietly says, "He had to deal with my fucken' issues."

Sandoval laughs, "All God's children got issues."

Maria asks, "Where have I heard that before?"

"From you! Ninety-nine percent of the funny shit I say comes from you. I want to thank ya for my repertoire."

"Do I get royalties?"

"Sue me."

"What would you offer in compromise?"

"Really?" Sandoval laughs, "How many pounds to you expect to exact from my dainty ass?"

"Tell ya what." Maria smiles, "You start slackin' and I swear I'll put the screws to ya. No quarter given they say."

"Where does it end with you?"

"You really want to know?" Sandoval motions for her to give

it up so Maria sheepishly adds, "Scott's gonna retread early."

"Why does he get to..." Then it sinks in, "You fucking piece of shit! I cannot believe you're setting me up like this."

Maria notices that Angela, Cricket and Bill have entered the Wet Deck, "I need ya Beth. Rutledge has some important shit to do for us and has to step down from his current duties. You've proven yourself and you also work well with Jacob."

"He's dangerous." Sandoval leans in and snarls, "He's fucking dangerous! Nobody's that lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it, but that's not a discussion point at this point. Get me? I'll brief you when it's time. You just have to trust me because..." Maria points to the troopers on the wet deck, "Fuck me! These people need you."

Sandoval shakes her head, "I need a break."

"How 'bout a vacation when you get back, hu? I'll give ya two months! Anywhere you want to go, girl. We need you one-hundred percent for the up and coming slug-fest."

"It's gonna be that bad..." That wasn't posed as a question but Sandoval had to ask, "Seriously?"

Maria snorts, "If you knew what I'm cookin' up for us you'd think I were crazy, dangerous and nuttier than a fruit cake."

It was just then Sandoval hears a throat being cleared behind her. She turns around and is confronted by Angela, Cricket and Bill snapping a salute. All three are trying to keep a straight face which annoys her to no end.

Sandoval responds with a middle-finger to her forehead and a quick, "Don't you fuckers start in."

Cricket smiles, "What are friends for, hu?"

Sandoval looks up at Angela, "I suppose you can't wait until tomorrow to get some trigger-time in."

"Ah, d'uh!" Angela hands her a capsule of BuzzKill, "We bust some caps tonight and I'll blow your brains out for the privilege."

Sandoval was starting to feel the shots and wasn't quite ready for BuzzKill just yet. Chomping down onto a tab of BuzzKill is an experience very much like biting into a capsule of amyl-nitrate; however, the euphoric torpedo like rush that follows is short lived as the alcohol is cooked out of the system and cognizant reality blows back in with a vengeance. That means if you were being a stupid drunk then a dose of BuzzKill brings your uncouth, slovenly and/or drooling behavior to light like a slap in the face. Yet, considering how

Angela is going to react when she gets her hands on the M2 then the offer she's now making may not exactly be in jest—especially after they crack open the case of Shiraz that Sandoval has in her luggage.

Sandoval pops it in her mouth and says, "Let's go!"

Jacob steps up as Sandoval and Angela race out of the Wet Deck, "They're off in a hurry."

As he hands Maria and Bill jello shots, Maria observes, "So, you're a social butterfly when you're off taking a piss."

"Everyone wants to chat." Jacob shouldn't be bowled over when he sees Cricket in one of her cocktail dresses that's basically just a whisper of fabric that barely covers anything. He sees her in nothing at all more than he can count but there's something about these dresses on her. He hands Cricket a shot and quietly goes, "Damn!"

Cricket beams from Jacobs comment but her shoulders droop when Maria pipes up, "Guys, I hate to call it in early like this, but I got a lot on my plate and I gotta go talk shop with Chuckle-Fuck here."

Cricket stares at the floor as Bill hurries them on, "No, go-go!"

As Jacob and Maria slip out of the Wet Deck Jacob asks, "This couldn't wait?"

"If you wouldn't mind..." Maria's drags him into an elevator, "You got an organ to grind, monkey."

Back at the bar Cricket slides onto a barstool and, getting Zazueta's attention, she points to the cocktail napkin she just placed in front of her. Bill leans on the bar beside her and looks around as if nothing happened. Bill is trying to get her attention as she nibbles on a couple of cherries she swiped from the bar kit.

As Bill is about to speak Cricket cuts him off, "Keep it to yourself, TexMex, before I pop ya one."

Bill just shrugs, at the exact moment Zazueta puts a double martini in front of Cricket and says, "I told you before. You need to fuck around and stop waiting on that. He's not worth it."

Bill throws his hands up in agreement, "Thank you! I've been saying the same thing for years. Will she listen?"

Zazueta urges to her as he walks away. "Go get laid! It doesn't matter who, just do it!"

Over the next three martinis Bill simply nods or grunts in agreement as he overhears Cricket repeatedly to mutter to herself things like, "Go get laid? Why not! Horny as hell and I keep waiting on that jackass. Fuck 'im!"

It can be said that everyone has some mighty virtue or keen ability and Bill is one of those exceedingly rare individuals who can spot an opportunity. To get results he uses his non-threatening good ol' boy charm, sometimes purposely clumsy or self-deprecating, to bait his quarry and cinch the deal. He remembers his uncle, who sold used cars telling him, 'Whatever ya'll do don't sell! Get yur mark ta sell demselves and don't steal thur face...which ya are.'

Words to live by, as they say. Bill's ability to 'size up the kill' extends beyond combat or business and at times rears its ugly head when it comes to casual amusements. Cricket is vulnerable, and malleable, and this is an opportunity he wonders if he should pass on or not. With the best of intentions he has spent the better part of four years becoming her confidant, and too many times she has cried on his shoulder and he turned down her advances in moments of abject weakness. Not because it wasn't the right thing to do, it's just that it wasn't the right time, and today is different because Cricket is finally past feeling sorry and is now angry with herself.

Bill already has his arm around Cricket's shoulders as she urges him on, "And, Bill, by the way, I'm done being coddled. I will follow your lead but I don't want talk. I want action."

"Sure about that?"

"You've got this bad-ass rep of bein' a man of action. So, act, you squint-eyed peckerwood! Mutherfucken' act!"

Cricket has always thought of Bill as 'safe' and she couldn't be more wrong. Bill has already scoped out the area and it's dark. So dark you can't see under the bar-countertop, so Bill thinks *why not* as he ducks below.

Cricket was not expecting this, and before she could voice an objection she hears Bill say, "Follow my lead!"

At first she didn't know what to do but within a few seconds Cricket decides to cooperate and slides back in the seat. With her lips parted and eyes glazing over she is surprised that she's getting into this so quick, but then realizes the martinis are helping a tad.

Just then she hears Zazueta ask her, "Want another?"

With her hands pressing on the edge of the bar, Cricket opens her eyes and nods yes. Zazueta realizes that something is up and he gives a funny look while feigning a glance over the bar.

Cricket puts one hand out and laughs, "I'm taking your advice to heart, Zaz. Okay!"

Zazueta chuckles, "Carry on, soldier."

00100011-00001000-0000111-0000111-0000111

For once Maria has snuggled up to Jacob. With her head on his shoulder she notices his slightly sagging jowls. Jacob is over sixty and it's catching up to him. Maria cannot resist being Maria, and pokes repeatedly at the little sag on his cheek by his ear.

"What's this?"

"Gravity?"

Maria lifts her head and loudly asks, "On what planet?"

Jacob just rolls his eyes because that was expected. These rendezvous are becoming infrequent, years apart even, and Maria's humor and sarcasm are her defensive tools to reestablish her sense of dominance after these encounters.

Jacob looks at her and wonders, "You really know how to put the fuck to the moment."

"Why, thank you! Don't want to disappoint." Maria then clears her throat, "And don't expect me to play bumble-bee like Cricket. Doesn't her giggling like a school girl get old?"

Jacob raises his hand and hovers his finger over Maria's navel, and as he starts to twirl it around Maria points to him with a threat, "Do that and you'll pull back a stump!"

He smiles, gives her a quick kiss and sits up, "I forget how fun you are afterwards."

Jacob starts to pour them both a glass of wine as Maria sits up, "Speaking of Cricket, what are you gonna do about her?"

"Am I supposed to do anything with her?"

"You are such a guy." Maria shakes her head. "She's in love with you ya know."

"What make you think that?" As he hands her a glass.

"I can sense these things. I hated seeing her face when you bugged out with me. You can't sit on the fence anymore with this one. Commit to her or cut it off. You could do worse! The kids love her and you know that she'd make a great step mom."

Jacob recoils slightly, "I don't think I'll go that far."

Maria verbally pokes him, "Then do something!"

"Maybe I will?" Which in Jacob speak means no he won't. Jacob then changes the subject, "Got the preliminary report from the Murder Board. You curious?"

Maria already knows what they think and honestly responds, "No, not exactly."

"They're asking me what I thought and I wanted to run it by you before I said anything."

"Okay, spit it out?"

"Drops." Maria is obviously curious so Jacob elaborates, "Coordinated practice drops. About every third or fourth orbital insertion have everybody drop at exactly the same time. Get 'em used to seeing that so they won't be surprised when they do launch."

Maria ponders that for a few seconds and is genuinely surprised, "I like that!"

"You can cut all the sleight of hand crap from the plan."

Maria urges him, "Please, write it up!"

"I'll get on it." Jacob thinks for a second, "I was gonna tell ya that this plan is very Sun Tzu of you, but—"

Maria quickly throws out, "I wouldn't know. Never read the little fucker."

"Ya, I know, but the more I think about it...what you're proposing has Cannae written all over it 'cept that you'll be more like channeling Fabius for the most part and *then* throw a Hannibal in as a third act."

Maria chuckles, "I always find it tiresome that we military planning dweebs have this tendency to compare our wishful thinking to the outcomes of the past. Honestly, it gets old. Now, upon reflection, I'd like to think I was drawing inspiration from Cowpens, but who the fuck am I to suggest what I was thinking?"

Jacob is an astute military historian and the plan Maria is proposing is probably the most audacious strategic withdrawal he has ever seen. Comparing elements of it to the battle of Cowpens makes sense now that Maria has pointed it out to him, but the fact is it doesn't really compare to anything. He realizes that if they pull this off it's going to be puzzled over and puzzled over forever.

Jacob nods in agreement then then he perks up, "Kiplinger! Jessica told me about a framework of an idea she proposed to you and I think I have the answer on how to get in."

Maria really wants to know, "She said you would. Do tell."

"Well, it involves swimming."

Maria knows exactly what he's suggesting and counterpoints with, "They can't swim."

"They've never been taught." Jacob smiles, "I was running a sim this afternoon and I think I got it all worked out."

"No shit!"

"Think Snoopy will go for it?"

"Oh, ya! That little feathered bastard would in a heartbeat! Question is will Jackson go for it?"

Jacob sighs, "One wonders."

After a few seconds of them wondering if Bob is going to approve or not, Maria perks up, "A toast!"

Jacob smiles and raises his glass to hers.

Maria's face beams with a twinge of self-mockery as she recites, "Here's to you and here's to me, I hope we never disagree, but if we do – fuck you – and here's to me!"

With a quick laugh Jacob and Maria taps glasses. Jacob will always remember that one. This toast was one of the first things she did with him decades ago when he joined her platoon.

After they sip, Maria quietly digs, "And don't you be expecting a sympathy fuck from me when Cricket kicks you to the curb. Got that, *Pandejo*? Get out and expand your horizons for once."

With a wry grin, Jacob snorts, "I feel the love!"

"You should! All I have for you is love..." Then with an over the top accent of a Filipino hooker, "At five dollar, you pay!"

On that, Jacob reaches for his pants on the chair and pulls a five *Au* note from a wad of money. He tosses it to Maria who catches it. She really wasn't expecting that and while scrutinizing the note she bites onto the corner as if it were a gold coin.

With a nod of approval, Maria flips the note onto the night stand. Putting her glass of wine down on top of it she, with a sly grin, slides back into bed for round two.

00000011011