

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 (MAD) it's just under fourteen hundred meters in length and a third of that wide. 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 quantum cores, the latest 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 handful 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 one of the most popular destinations 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 this 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 quantum cores, propulsion and MDDSH engines incorporated into the bay assemblies, the aft superstructures were minimalized and preserved much of the feel of the original cruiser. These bays are twice the size of the old wedged shaped ones and were configured in a teardrop 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 Warthog gunship is ejected from underneath SA15 and is followed by three HWG99 'slick' drop ships that pop out from under SA33.

The latest in the HWG (hog) series of assault transports, now referred to as a Razorback, hands down these are the most advanced in armored drop ships. Looking like an ancient SR71 on steroids the HWG99 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 old school thrust mode, with copious amounts of fuel and oxidizer, flames cannot exist in a vacuum. The ninety-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 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 heat usually associated with reentry the ships control their decent with old style gravity-repulse, popularly known as anti-gravity, and at twenty-eight thousand meters the air intakes to the quantum pulseblade engines snap open and they now shriek to life without fuel. At a brisk Mach-3 they level off at a thousand meters and inside ten minutes the lead ship spots the columns of smoke over the horizon marking the target along the northern coast of Pangaea.

The only substantive landmass Sapphire has to offer, Pangaea covers approximately 0.8% 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 kind of used to it.

Short for Jerryworks Armored Combat Cybernetics, the JACC is a heavily armored and cybernetically amplified space suit. The JACC gives off little in the way of 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. Its exoskeleton consists 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 though 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 base-model slicks peel off to orbit the target as the gunship config 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 Warthog 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 as the gunship blasts out from the other side of the base the slicks immediately tighten their orbits. As these 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 alongside 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 three companies of his brethren in JACCs, pouring out of the back of the three slicks, 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 Warthog screams overhead and lands only fifty meters behind them. As soon as it touches down the ramp snaps open and a platoon streams out.

As they scatter, flying low and fast, Griego thumbs back at that 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 gunship, 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 and nods to the side. "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 an' 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 beautiful 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't 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 micrascopic 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 an eternity apart from his roots, Scott’s mix of African accent with Jamaican parlance suddenly bleeds through for just a few seconds, “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 and away from

his face. "Spit it out sergeant." Then as a passing thought she thinks, *I must be an ogre—I just insulted a chief!*

"Sir, we got beaucoup 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 fucktard 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 Warthog gunship. 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-yield 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 with a snarl, "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, and 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 would all look the same, a facial expression of 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 medevac 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 her 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 gunships WSO (weapons system operator), 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 Razors 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 through the ships communication channel, ["Go ahead, Marshal Ramirez."]

"Plot an Echo-Three 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 launch 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 Razorback throws itself around 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 about you getting to play tag throughout the Steel Chain while I was forced into an endless God-damned game of hide-and-seek on a crippled battle platform!"

With both arms, free Maria repeatedly gestures to herself then to Jacob who is now standing, "Now, I can forget all these things, because while you were racking up the kills, I was winning battles. 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 the slight increase in body fat over the years has had a tremendous effect on her figure. 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 what many have called, Hell's Barrister. Trying 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! Yea, 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. It 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 and, "Try again."

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

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

Maria snaps her hand forward and Jacob flinches big.

She wins.

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? This is 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 teeth push into his flesh 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 has been 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.

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