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When one looks upon the battle stations Carrie Nation and Mata Hari for the first time it's with child-eyed wonderment. The sheer size and firepower these platforms wield is well beyond the comprehension of most people. When looking at their sister ships, the Lizzie Bordon, Annie Oakley and Mae West, it is with open-mouth astonishment. These three unstoppable behemoths are twice the size of their two little siblings, and carry such an obscene array of weaponry that they are held onto as the final trump cards for the Annex if they were ever needed in a pinch. The SA has been in some pitched battles in the past, but never have they been desperate enough to warrant drawing any one of these five stations into a fray; but if it ever became necessary the more agile Carrie Nation and Mata Hari would be the first to go into action. Then, if the existence of just these two stations were made known, it would surely change the meaning of *arms race* for quite some time to come.

Other than their specific mission call signs, the nickname *hippo* has been the only operational moniker that has stuck throughout the years. Endearing as it may sound, one would think that these monstrosities deserve something more sinister or ominous sounding but, as one of the most dangerous animal on the planet Earth, with the largest body count to its name on the African continent, the goofy looking and plodding hippopotamus is apropos in context. Once it was argued that by the historical record the mosquito has caused many more deaths by far, but mosquito's don't lurk about in muddy water waiting to tip over boats, or delight in crushing people in their jaws.

End of argument.

Yet, as the primary manufacturing and support centers for the

SA, these stations were never meant to realize their full potential. So much so that during the last conflict two prototype battle platforms under construction, the Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, SA34 and SA35 respectively, were offered up as bait to draw resources away from Nu Ara, and to lure the Co-op into a trap. The ruse worked after a fashion. Both ships, over 70% complete, were lost in the fight, but the Co-op took a severe beating for their efforts.

Three days ago the Lizzie Bordon slipped into a leisurely twelve-hour polar orbit around Cue Ball. The extreme distance from the planet not only gives it the option of a quick get-away, but mostly to prevent its own mass from perturbing Carrie Nation's ongoing and close in ninety-minute equatorial orbit while studying the solar winds of Betelgeuse.

Though things are pretty easy going for most people on a station, the last hour has been pretty crazy for the traffic controllers. Over sixty-five ships, a mix of HWGs and fighters, have landed on its deck, with only one left in the queue and coming in fast.

["Hippo Control, Lima-Bravo, this is Cowboy, Sierra-Alpha three-six, on final. Do we have clearance for approach?"]

["They're waiting for you, Cowboy. Turn left, zero-five, and set her down dish-side."]

["Copy that Hippo Control. Zero-five, dish-side."]

The Razorback slips over the edge, skips onto the deck, and continues to roll along at high speed the last few clicks towards the elevator by the central hub. Normally they would take a more direct taxiway, but they have to make a small detour. Along both the North and South radius from the hub a latticework of braces, clamps and elevators swaddle two new battle platforms under construction. Built from the outside in, they are not even half-way complete. Virtually identical to, but more than a third smaller than the Iron Maiden, they will be completed in half the time and right-sized to match swapping the current stable of battle platforms one for one with room to spare.

Under the stern of the future SA71, the Razorback skids to a halt on an elevator platform and drops into the hold of the ship. The shaft is soon sealed and is immediately pressurized by simply opening the hatches into the bay. Not a normal practice, the emergency vent did snatch a tech unawares and tosses him into the shaft under the HWG. Totally unexpected this was because most of those working in the bays are wearing a JACC in case of an accident. By taking a shortcut, like this guy did, the vent caught him off guard.

As the tech picks himself off the ground, Jacob, Nicole, Scott and Maria, all in black BDU, walk briskly down the ramp of the Razor

and head towards an elevator that is being held open by a Chief Sergeant named Chang, who goes, "They've already started showing the interview."

Maria smiles as she gets in the lift, "Excellent! I hate sitting through all the previews."

On the way down they hear Bob's voice through the tacnet, <"You're late.">

Jacob smiles, <"And fashionably so.">

Maria interjects, <"We were waiting for the confirms.">

Jackson asks, <"And?">

Maria grins, <"It all checks out. We're a go.">

<"Good! I like being thorough."> Jackson cuts the link.

The elevator drops all the way to the bottom of the ship, and opens up to a grandly appointed lobby. Stepping out, they quickly cross to the other side and march through a pair of double doors into an auditorium the size of a small stadium. Chang hangs back as the four of them climb the steps up towards what they jokingly call *The Executive Box*.

Up above the box is a huge screen, and on it is a video of General Charles Hershey being interviewed by Nicole just days before, and below that is Robert Jackson who is gesturing towards the four empty seats to his left.

On the screen the General listens to Nicole who is off camera, "I'm impressed. Seven-hundred and thirty-three seconds! And I thought the Colonel was a weenie."

"And Mason is the guy you want to be talking to. Not me." Hershey shrugs. "Look, Chief, I really don't know what went on in that pit. I don't know why I had orders to send Security Services in. I don't know what their S.O.I. was, and I sure as hell don't know why they all flat-lined inside five minutes. To tell you the truth I honestly don't want to know. I have a hard enough time trying to sleep as it is. Colonel Mason was their one and only contact and as you know he became raptor crap a week ago. The way I figure it the guilt was eating him alive."

Nicole's hand comes into view and points to a cluster of egg shaped lumps of calcium, "So were the raptors."

The General grunts a laugh as he picks one up to look at. Like a hyena, the raptors on Second Hand eat everything and pass on what they can't digest.

Hershey shakes his head, "I hear rumors, deputy. On the

grapevine they say you people have more than a working arrangement with those animals."

"You could say that. Fact is, they're pretty sociable after slammin' back a few brews."

"I've heard some crazy stuff, Chief, but you socialize—with those monsters?"

"Party on! We don't exactly break bread in the classic sense. We humans can't stomach the idea of our food screaming back at us while we're noshing away, but the morbid little fuckers sure do love their suds and that's where we connect. So much so, would you believe, we built a brewery on site. Talk about cheap labor."

"I find this hard to swallow, Chief."

"Like they say, truth is stranger than fiction, General. Like the circumstances surrounding your untimely death, and a perfectly believable fiction I might add. Here's one that's going around that I think you might get a kick out of. I hear that someone at the top of your organization compromised your base. Word is they gave it to us under the table. Now, I find that one hard to believe but truth *is* stranger than fiction, right? We simply want to hear your version of the truth, General. Can't be any more outrageous than me getting shit faced with man-eating alien monsters. Now, who would believe that! Shit, man, I couldn't sell that one to Hollywood on a good day."

Hershey thinks for a moment, "I *am* dead, right?"

"As a doornail."

"And, you're willing to maintain this fiction indefinitely?"

"As long as you live, General."

"Convince me."

"We'll harvest some bone and organ tissue. We'll quicken the samples and feed the whole mess with a couple of your teeth to one of those animals and presto! Indisputable evidence that General Hershey went out a hero. In a few days you'll have new teeth and a new life!"

"Sounds convincing."

"You didn't sell out, General. You corrected a great injustice. I know a whole lot of young people who are grateful."

The General ponders what she said then, "Some times you see things and pray that you'll get reassigned before it hits the fan. I was due for rotation in February and was hoping not to be there when you came. Lucky me. For your edification, a year ago the Colonel thought it would be a kick to show me the pit up close. We weren't there a minute and this...this kid, a little red-head runs up to us and

wraps herself around my leg. I couldn't fuckin' believe it!"

"Did you know what they were up to, Sir?"

"No one knew for sure, but it doesn't take a whole lot of stupid to ignore the obvious. Especially when ordered to. In my world it's usually smart to follow orders that say *be stupid*, if you know what I mean? Anyway, these three people come out of the holo and one of them takes the kid away. This lady, a Ms. Welch, steps up and asks us if we saw anything, and we said no. She points a finger at the third guy and his head blows apart. She had a fuckin' laser in her finger! She then asks if we saw that! Now, this was a sight. Brains and bits of skull all over us, and the tip of her finger is charred and smoldering, and this bitch is asking us stupid questions."

"Well, did you?"

"See what? We didn't see shit! From that day on I've prayed that the base got hit and that bitch got nailed. I tried but I couldn't let this go so a couple of weeks ago I connected with a weapons dealer who has a talent for fucking us over named Suiters. Guess ol' Pete had a soul 'cause he sent you the dirt I gave him on the cobalt bombs we bought from him and stockpiled there. Imagine my surprise when you fuckers actually hit the base. Two out of three ain't bad."

"Two for three, General? She got hers."

"There is justice after all."

"By the way...base hit, bitch nailed, what was the other one?"

The General tosses the lump of bone that used to be the Colonel back at the pile and smiles, "I feel like shit already."

Nicole is already standing at the podium as the video terminates. She shuffles some papers and looks up, "At this very moment the General is on Cue Ball evaluating our training exercises. Reports now indicate that he'll volunteer for our retread program inside a month. Questions?"

Nicole normally doesn't mind asking for questions, but this crowd consists of the entire leadership of the SA. Nervous as she is, she gets a small reprieve from the applause at the news of the General entering their retread program. That relief is short lived as some hands go up. Nicole points to a young Deputy Marshall in front.

The Deputy stands and asks flat out asks, "Chief, we've heard the rumors so who or what is Fifty-Two?"

Nicole cringes inside, "At my request, the identity of Fifty-Two is being withheld until the post mission briefings. We plan to tell you then. I can assure you all that the targeting information you receive

here today is valid. I apologize by the way we commandeered your recon teams, but after Field Marshall Graves goes over the mission profile, your teams will be returned to your control. You will be able to confirm targeting through them."

Nicole points to a female Chief-Master Sergeant who looks tough, but speaks softly, "Rumor control is failing, Chief. I speak for myself, but I'm sure that many here have the same reservations as I do about withholding sources. Before I send any of my people into a mosh pit, I want someone to level with me because orders that say *be stupid* don't work for me or the people who rely on my judgment. You understand, don't you?"

Nicole looks at Jacob and Maria. They look at each other and then at Jackson. Obviously, Bob is not thrilled at exposing Nicole after he promised her their secret would remain secret for the now, but it's not a choice he can make.

Jackson looks up at Nicole, "It's your call."

Nicole swallows and turns to the crowd, "As you are aware, during the attack at Theta-2 we discovered a Geisha Hut. The...the very one that was my home until I was seven years old. Just so you know I'm a Barbie Doll. A model N.C.L. Three point One to be exact. I was originally conceived and engineered for the sex trade."

The crowd stirs.

Nicole frowns, "Everything you have ever heard about a Barbie Doll clone is incredibly true. I have no gag reflex. My body and my sexual drives are...well, they are abnormal."

As the auditorium falls dead silent Nicole's eyes tear up, "My hormones bounce me off the walls. I now have a period. I think I'm the only woman alive who preserved her sanity by *getting* a uterus. What's this got to do with anything you ask? General Hershey had some help. You see, I thought I was the only one of my gene type alive until a few weeks ago. The little girl that the General was talking about, the one that grabbed his leg, she is also an N.C.L. A Four point Oh to be exact. They wanted to improve on my genetic base, but they screwed up. They don't know it yet, but that girl is a telepath. A full-blown two-way telepath. She can read minds like an open book and she's equally adept at manipulating them. There are another fifty-one of these children spread across the core system and they can talk to each other in real-time. As unbelievable as it sounds, distance does not inhibit their ability to communicate with each other."

The concept of *whoa* does not even come close to the reaction from these, the most powerful collective in the human race.

"I'm close enough of a genetic match that I can tie into their

neural network. At this very moment they hear my words, and see your faces through my eyes and I can tell you—they are afraid. My voice carries fifty...”

Nicole chokes, but finds her voice, “Fifty-three cries for help.”

It takes all of five seconds before the silence is broken. It is a word uttered from deep in the crowd, but it reflects the unified thought of all in attendance.

That word is, “Mission.”

It is repeated by two, then three, and like the Fibonacci sequence more and more join into the chant. With every repetition, it gets louder and louder.

With tears in her eyes the Chief Sergeant, the one who was pinning Nicole down on Fifty-Two, smiles at Nicole with newfound respect and gratitude, “Thank you, Chief.”

She then puts three fingers up in the air and thrusts them up in time with the chant. Soon the voices are mixed with about half of the group chanting *mission* and the other half-chanting *war!*

Jackson steps up to the podium and pats Nicole on the shoulder with pride. As Nicole sits down he puts his hands out to silence the crowd.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, people.” He gestures to the chief, “But, your right, Chief. It just may come to that so, mission first, and then we’ll hunker down and wait for the fallout. Before we begin, does anybody have any reservations going after these cookie cutters? Because if you do then speak up now.”

After a few seconds of silence, Jackson grins big, “Good! Mr. Graves and Mr. Rutledge, the floor is yours.”

Jackson sits back down, and Jacob and Scott step up to the podium to a small round of applause.

Jacob shuffles some papers and speaks up, “Mission prefix, Juliet-Bravo. Code name, Jacc in the Box. Catchy hu? Lets go ahead and break open your mission profiles.”

As the crowd tear open the envelopes given to them, Jacob continues, “Because of the nature and complexity of this operation, both C3 and react forces will be handled by the Sawney Bean. All other resources will be committed to assault and extraction ops, and we have beaucoup targets to go around. One hundred and six priority targets, each one a cloning facility, and just over eleven hundred soft targets, all of ‘em tags and, if you haven’t guessed it by now, we intend to put these people out of business and everyone gets a piece

of the action. To go over the details I'll hand you over to the lead coordinator for this op, Deputy Field Marshal, Scott Rutledge."

Jacob steps back, and Scott takes the podium, "Over the last four weeks we've reconfigured two hundred and twenty type-thirty shipping containers for the mission. Each one of them will hold a company of troops with their equipment and, yes, it will be a tight fit. Commercial shipping has been arranged to deliver the teams to their jump-off points close to their targets. Obviously, if this plan works, the element of surprise will be on our side..."

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Two hours later Maria races into the lobby from the auditorium and makes a beeline to the head. Beating the crowd she quickly enters a stall. As soon as she shuts the door, Jacob and Robert Jackson enter the restroom.

"Jake, you're goin' to Earth. Consider it a vacation. I'll make sure the press gets wind of it. You need to do this for us."

They stop at a row of urinals, and as Jacob opens his mouth to speak Bob cuts him off, "And don't give me that *I'm needed* line of shit. It don't work for me. For this ruse to work we need our most senior people out fuckin' and killin' and...on second thought consider it an order, motherfucker! You copy?"

"I copy." Jacob grumbles.

Bob smiles, "Out-fuckin' standing!"

A few seconds of standing at the urinals, Jacob turns to Bob, "Say, Bob, you smell something brown?"

From the stall they hear, "Fuck you! Kiss my brown butt."

Jacob elbows Bob, "Kiss my wha'?"

They hear a muffled, "*Bete a la chingada madre!*"

Jacob zips up and turns to the sink to wash his hands, "Now, that's the taco I know and love."

The door to the stall slams open, and out of the corner of his eye Jacob sees Maria stomp towards him as he laughs, "You know, Bob, it's kind of disturbing to realize your ex-wife swings bigger balls than Satan could on his best day."

Maria pushes her body into Jacobs. She reaches around and flips open a hooked lock-blade. Holding it in front of Jacob's crotch she snarls, "*Ha Satan es mericone!* I cut his off, an' don't you forgit it!"

"Guess you've been told." Says Jackson as he steps up to the

sink next to them.

Maria puts the knife away to wash her hands, "Hey Jackson, I hear you might retread. That right?"

"You heard right, Ramirez."

"You serious!"

Jacob is already done drying his hands, and as Maria and Bob reach for the paper towels Bob elaborates, "I'm getting stagnant up on high, Ramirez. Right after this operation, I'm off to Cue Ball for the six-week refresher. Who knows? I might even get to hook up with that General Hershey?"

Maria laughs, "Uh, uh, Cracker Jack. He likes girls."

"He tell you that?"

"You can tell."

Bob pitches his towel into the trash as he heads for the door, "An' like I always say, there's always hope and..."

On queue, Jacob and Maria both chime in with Bob, "I've got a hard on for hope."

Bob gives the three fingers *war* sign and slips out.

Maria turns to Jacob and tosses her paper towel. It bounces off Jacob's head and drops into the basket, "I'm actually going to complement you and Scott on the planning you've done, as well as that briefing. I think you guys may have started a war. Wouldn't that be a hoot and a half?"

Jacob smiles as he steps past her and out into the lobby, "There's always hope."

Following, Maria asks, "I've been thinking, devil's advocate, are we doing the right thing? Is this what we really want?"

"It's inevitable and you know it."

"True enough."

Jacob turns to her, "We are at our peak in numbers, but we will lose twenty-five percent in the next twenty years through attrition, and lower than low recruitment projections. It's apparent that nobody wants to risk their ass anymore, even if it's for a noble cause. Fuck your Alpha-Omega program shit. Now is good for me."

"Just asking."

Jacob was about to walk away from her, but turns back, "That's not what's bugging you."

Maria scowls, "Maybe we should spring a leak? That will mean fifty-one less of them to worry about."

"We made a promise. We don't go back on our word."

"Maybe we should start?"

"This *is* a noble cause."

"Like you said, they may be more trouble than they're worth."

"You got a bad feeling about them, don't ya?"

"No, I don't and that's what bugs me."

"Well, we got it covered."

"How?"

"Dead-man's switch." Jacob points to his own head as if he were shooting a gun. "Nicole's idea."

"And, Fifty-Two knows?"

"Yup."

Maria gives a low whistle, "Okay, I feel better."

"So, having it hit the fan now is good for you?"

"Good for me!" Maria almost laughs as she turns to leave with a spring in her step.

While watching Maria walking away Jacob gets an idea and calls out to her, "Hey, Tiger, what are you doing over the last two weeks leading up to the mission."

Maria stops, turns and shrugs her shoulders, "After the hearings are all done I'll be fuckin' and killin' like everyone else. Don't know where, or with who. You got a better offer?"

"Yea, I think I do."

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