

Nickname
By Patrick Villegas

He nicknamed me Mama Bear. She agreed. They said it fit with my age, my attitude. How I refused to let a single one of them out of my sights, always kept my graying hair in a neat bun to prevent distractions, always had my wrinkled hands just shy of the trigger. I thought it to be rather insulting, but they insisted that it was a compliment, a monument to my skills. To them, growing old was an honor, something they both wished to do someday, and having a name to reflect that accomplishment was nothing more than well-earned praise. It only reminded me of all those I'd lost to even get here.

It was given to me on a night like any other. We were stationed at guard post #17-BH, as we were all patrolling the Eastern Gate, guided only by the light of the stars. Williams was the first to bring it up. It came in passing, a thought spoken aloud as he lit a dim cigarette for Vera to help keep the Autumn chill at bay.

“I just want one for myself, you know? A nickname, a name I *earned*, not one just handed to me because I magically popped out of mom all healthy and alive.” He paced around the balcony, his body armor clinking ever so softly as he took his steps in stride. He snapped his fingers, eyes going wide, the little old light bulb in his brain jolting awake with a spark. “Snapshot! Because I’m the fastest shot in this squad and that is a F-A-C-T!” He looked on at us, mouth agape and eyes darting back and forth, waiting for a response to the wittiest thing he’d probably ever imagined. He was met with Vera’s puff of smoke and my silent stare.

The old building we were in creaked, croaking out long distorted moans as it barely supported our weight. “Aw, y’all know it’s true,” he said to us, smiling. “Vera, you go. What’d be your nickname?”

She was sitting down on the only chair in the outpost, and as she cleaned her rifle with a small handkerchief and puffed her cigarette, she tried feigning annoyance, but it was obvious that Williams had gotten her. Each wipe of her rifle got rougher as she missed a spot or two, each inhale lighting the embers of her butt ever brighter, each exhale coming out slower and slower. “Gatecrash,” she said, taking the shack’s sounds to be like some sort of omen. “Because I’m always the first one barging into the fight.” Williams nodded his head in faux-approval. He opened his mouth to say something, probably some sort of witty retort about breaking in his own fair share of “gates,” but we never heard his response. He saw

the glint of the scope before any of us. His grin faltered and he screamed for me to get down and tackled Vera to the ground. He knew the shot was heading towards the only source of light in the room. An echo rang and he was flung to the floor, like a ragdoll. He was motionless, a small pool of crimson starting to grow under him.

Vera was the first to act. She dragged Williams behind a wall of rusted metal, trying to stop the bleeding with as many pieces of gauze that The City could offer our station. She was screaming for Williams to get back up, to say something, anything to make sure he wasn't just shot dead by those diseased Overworlders. I didn't feel like telling her that she was wasting her time, that her tears and the patches of fabric wouldn't help bring him back. Only "proper" care would do that, but we both knew that would be impossible to get now. So I chose to mourn Williams later, to write my eulogy for him some other time and try to forget that his last conversation was about something as stupid as a nickname. I cocked my gun, jumped over the side, and ran for cover.

My bones ached in protest when I landed, but I couldn't have cared less. They had taken one of my own, and they deserved to suffer for it. In the dim night, I could barely make out that there were three of them, hiding behind a patch of rocks and broken vehicles off in the distance. Only one of them had a gun, leaving the other two near defenseless. They were small beings, malnourished, hair falling out in patches, and wearing whatever rags they could muster from their little slums. The fact one of them even found a government-issued rifle, let alone knew how to shoot it accurately, amazed me, but at the time I couldn't exactly compliment their marksmanship.

The first one went down without a problem. She was the scrawniest of the bunch, probably also the most courageous. She thought a flank would work, that hiding beneath some scattered debris would protect her. It only took a single shot, and she fell to the ground with a pathetic thud. Her buddy with the gun screamed and tried mowing me down with whatever ammo he had left. His shots lit up the battlefield, giving Vera just enough time to pop a bullet right into his chest. The last one tried scrambling out of the area, tried begging for forgiveness when I caught up to them. I still remember how they spoke when they were on the brink. They said that they had only wanted three things: "Food, family, and freedom." All I could do was put a bullet in its brain. It was pure instinct.

The shot rang hollow, echoing off the empty battlefield, and their tiny corpse stared back at me, jaw agape. The sky started to change shades, splotches of bright reds and oranges illuminating the scars on all their faces. As I made my way back to Vera, I breathed in a sigh of relief, glad to live another day unscathed. But their faces were in my head now, grasping on to me, refusing to let me leave them. They were Overworlders, yet they were intelligent enough to speak, to want something so normal, so human. And I stared again, thinking of the one who had spoken to me. They had been educated enough to have wants and needs, and in their pleas, I saw her.

Time has a way of messing with your memories. It makes you remember the strangest things about the past, associates one sense to the other until you forget all about who you are and why you even exist. You forget all about the smoking gun in your hand, about your fellow soldier barfing and gagging only meters away as she tries to save one of the last few kind souls in this broken and desolate world. Instead, all you remember is her, and it's all because of that dead face and their final words. The pain comes when you realize that it's not even anything special that you remember. It's not the best parts or the worst parts that time makes you see. It's only the small things that you can even be bothered to envision.

She is standing in a meadowy field, one of the last places in the world where green grass surrounds you, as far as the eye can see. You can't quite remember how you got here, the strings you had to pull to bring a child to the surface, but all that matters is that you are here and that you can see her. So much time has passed that her face is blank, a pale petite oval devoid of the things that make you human. She does not have a pair of brown-colored eyes anymore, that shined under the fluorescent lights whenever she stared up at you, or an uptight little nose that blew snot everywhere whenever she had to sneeze. But you can still see the young, toothy, grin, Pa's little red cap that you let her borrow just this once since it would be the first time she ever saw the sun and you don't want her pale skin to burn. She has on a bright orange dress, specially made by her grandmother, already a bit torn and faded from years of running around and tripping and falling and laughing. Oh, what Ma would have given to see her grow up to be so spry.

The sky is turning into a shade of purple now, and the sun is beginning to set. She is quite excited to have seen it for so long. That glorious beam of light she had only ever heard about in legends before today, the being known simply as the sun. It sinks below the horizon now, as it does every evening. Back then, when you took the day shifts, you would oftentimes spend your patrols in eager silence watching the orb float off and away, alone and ready to go back home after a long day of patrolling. But now you are watching her, excitement and jitteriness fill the air, and suddenly the rifle on your shoulder is only so heavy, and the padded armor you wear no longer feels like such a burden. And then she turns to you, still smiling that stupidly adorable grin, and she says she never imagined it being so big before.

“Commander Jules!”

“Commander Jules, snap out of it. Williams is dying ma’am!”

Vera shook me away from the daze. My first thought is to punch her for taking it away from me. But she is shaking, crying, and looking at me with a sense of desperation I’d only ever seen once before this moment. The sun is coming up now, the morning glow giving a dull pallor to the leftover specks of vomit dribbling off her chin. I ball up a sleeve and gently wipe it away. She goes back to the ground and is kneeling beside Williams, who she’d managed to drag next to the foot of the stairs while she waited for me to return. Despite all the odds, the soldier’s still breathing. Blood is pooling out of his back. He’s losing less of it but is turning whiter and whiter with each passing second.

“Commander, I,” she’s stumbling now. Her hands are coated in his blood and the tears are trying to come but she can’t quite get herself to bawl one more time. “You have to tell me what to do Commander. You have to help me fix this! H-he took the bullet for me. I should be where he is right now. You need to help me make this better, Commander, please!” I look down at her, kneeling next to Williams, broken. I kneel beside her as she continues to try and mend the bleeding. At this rate, he will be gone within the half-hour, and the entrance back to our base is at least a two-mile trek.

“An injury like this, it won’t be cheap to fix, but I think you already knew that.” Vera remains unflinching, but she is silent. “He’ll need to be operated on by the best, most state-of-the-art robotics The City can muster. A job like that, on such short notice, it’ll be a few hundred thousand credits.”

“I don’t care. I need to save him.”

“Even if we do manage to get him in on time, he won’t be of much use. In all likelihood he’s been shot somewhere in the spine. If that’s true, he’d never be able to walk again, meaning he’d never be able to serve under The City’s defensive forces again.”

“But we can save him? There’s a chance?”

“Vera, you’re not listening to me. You’ll be in debt the rest of your life. Even if you do save him, he’ll end up on the streets if he can’t serve. The City has no use for the broken. You have to-”

She’s the one to slap me. It echoes throughout the outpost and I feel the sting burn on my left side, leaving my ears ringing. I turn to meet Vera’s gaze, but I no longer see the desperation and fear in her eyes. Determination and anger fill the void now, a pure kind of hatred directed towards me, and without hesitation, she begins hefting Williams up to his feet.

“Either help me save his life, or get out of my way.”

She starts to walk on, his arm draped across her, knees still shaking, adrenaline still pumping. She’s at the foot of the steps, threatening to collapse at any second. When she starts to stumble, I walk over to get his other arm. She stares on in silence.

“Saving his life will only ruin yours. But I’m too old to argue about bad decision-making anymore.”

We walk on in silence.

The entrance is located at the cross of 3rd and Birmingham, underneath a half-crumbled building that used to be some sort of bank or something like it, I couldn’t tell you. I scout the area ahead of Vera, making sure none of them are watching us. I prop open the faux rubble below the bank door, and motion for her to come. We drag Williams into the pit, and he is looking worse for wear now. His face is drained, and when I get a moment, I check his pulse, which is getting

weaker. Vera is as pale as him now, and her breathing dense. At this point, even I'm starting to feel the weight of my age.

The hallway is as barren as ever, and our footsteps echo across the displaced ruins with each hurried breath we take. Door 82 is always the one to look out for. From the outset, it's a simple black door with a few miscellaneous scratches and bumps on it. Hell, it doesn't even have the number 82 on it. But the giveaway is always the control panel. Its buttons never click properly, never have that satisfying crunch when you push your finger into the number pad. But that's how you know it works. The code is fifteen digits long, so ingrained into my mind that I no longer need to think about what it is. It's all muscle memory now. We both hear the beep, and watch as the doors slide back, leading to a clean, transparent, pristinely lit elevator beckoning us to enter.

Vera, exhausted and at the point of another breakdown, rushes into the space and quickly starts calling for the lowest floor, pressing the button next to it labeled "EMERGENCY" just as fast. I rush in beside her as both sets of doors close behind me. As soon as the second pair closes, we start descending. The seconds pass by in agony, as the lights of the other floors flash by. Our ears both start to pop, which helps excuse the tension in the room. As we stare ahead of us, we are surrounded only by the cold metal walls outside. The cold gray has never looked more unappealing to me. Then, for a moment, it stops. And around us is nothing but a view of The City.

Downtown is as busy as usual, its light illuminating the entirety of the caved in home. The rocks that outline the outer skies lay dormant and bare as people walk below us. Augustine Lake shines as bright as ever. Bridges layered with tracks stack upon themselves, giant transportation shuttles carrying citizens in a web of interconnecting railways connecting one station in The City to the next. Things are normal as usual, as if one of our squad isn't fighting for his life as we descend further down. And in all my life, in all my years spent living underground, has The City never felt more empty than it does now.

"He'll make it, right?"

Vera is staring at me, and it is only now that I see how drained she is. Her once tightly slicked back ponytail hangs disheveled and loose. Her skin is stained with pinks and reds, and her rifle has clattered to the ground, covered in blood and grime.

She looks hopeless, broken. Any bravado she may have had before is gone, and instead I see a scared little girl, wishing for nothing short of a miracle. So I do what I can.

“Williams will be fine. He’s a tough one.”

And for the time since our patrol started, she smiles.

“No offense Commander, but you’re fucking terrible at lying.”

When the doors open, a medical shuttle is set outside just for us, just for him. Vera and I rush outside to the nearby medical team. The machines take him from Vera and place him on a gurney as a monitor moves up and blinks at me with the message “Tell Me Whats Wrong”.

“Patient needs priority level one treatment. Name is Sergeant Mackenzie Williams. He’s in serious condition, and needs as much blood as you can pump into him, Type A stat. The wound is towards the left side of his lower back. My other sergeant has managed to remove the bullet but you need to disinfect it when possible, check his vital organs, and give him a proper stitching. He’ll also need an X-Ray to determine if he can still walk straight after this.”

The bot calculates all of this in half a second, and flashes the price in bright red. 224,789 credits. Vera nearly gags as the bot waits for any sort of payment.

And that's when I see it. See the pain in my fellow soldier as she realizes that she's nowhere near able to save the one she loves. That same feeling of despair when you know that the one thing you love the most in this world is about to be ripped away from you because of a price tag. She doesn't deserve to be like me. She deserves to be happy.

“Payment will be authorized by City Defense Force Commander Laura Jules. All expenses will be placed under her name.”

“Commander you can’t just-”

“I will go with interest plan 14, loan type G for any overpayments, now go save this worthless piece of trash. Confirmation phrase: ‘Lucy.’”

The bot interprets this, confirms the order, and soon places Williams on the shuttle, off to the nearest hospital to be operated on. They go off into the distant sky, and in a moment my heart begins to feel a bit more at ease. They leave me and Vera alone, isolated.

“Commander, that’s... what you just did was ludicrous. That’ll take at least thirteen years to pay off, and that’s being generous! I mean, I love Williams, but 224,000 credits? I mean I - ”

“Vera, just... Just make sure he’s safe for me, alright? I’ll see you both at the hospital. I just want to go home for a bit.”

After a moment of silence, Veras merely salutes me, and begins running to the nearest station to try and follow the droids. And I am left alone, the white noise of the city my only companion.

When I came by, Vera had been keeping him company, just like I told her to. Their hands were wrapped around one another. Williams was in stable condition and conscious. He was even strong enough to smile. He was stationed on the top floor, with a beautiful view of The City to keep him company while he healed. He would be served decent grub three times a day, properly relieved when needed, even given a wheelchair so he could wander the premises to his leisure. It's the least you get when your treatment is on level one priority. My fears had been correct of course, and the man wasn't going to be able to walk for a good two years. He called himself a waste of space and was bored out of his mind but he was alive and that was all that mattered. He thanked me for paying off his medical bills, but didn't promise he'd pay them back. We both knew that wouldn't be possible.

It was only when things quieted down, when general small talk was over, that Williams brought it up again.

“It's hard to imagine that my last conversation was gonna be about something as childish as nicknames... although I gotta admit, Snapshot was pretty badass though.”

“Gatecrash was a lot better than anything you had and you know it.”

“Frankly, I think both names are pretty terrible,” I said with mock cynicism. It gave them a good laugh.

It was only then that it hit the both of them, and Williams, in all his intellectual glory, stated the obvious first.

“We never did give you a nickname huh?”