

Fuckin' Bugs

The sound of scuttling crept into Marcelline Nguyen's perception.

It was a faint, rhythmic stimulus that stirred something in the far recesses of her subconscious, rousing her to scrunch her face and turn over in bed and shake her head and cry out nonverbally.

Despite her unconscious struggles, the noise persisted, continuing to pull the woman into the shallows of wakefulness.

Marcelline bolted upright and kicked with every fiber of strength that her legs offered, sending her comforters flying onto the floor as she reached for the service rifle she thought to be beside her.

But there was no service rifle. There hadn't been a service rifle for years.

The forty-year-old woman's chest rose and fell in the dim sanctuary of her apartment as she caught her bearings, still sweating and jittery from the adrenaline.

The scuttling came 'round again, meandering from her bathroom, pausing at the foot of her bed, then wandering up towards her. Factually, Marcelline could intuit it wasn't anything dangerous—it was one an indigenous animal, one of them mouse-sized cockroach-lookin' things whose legs clicked real loud on the faux wood floorboards.

She waited for it to draw closer, watching the animal's antennae waver as it happily wandered closer and closer, and then pounced, trapping it between her foot and the floor.

It chirped in alarm, legs flailing in desperate futility as she steadily applied pressure to the insect. Against her skin, the animal's xenochitin back bow more and more, straining against the strength of something hundreds of times larger than it, until its body gave in with a crunch and a final, pained cheep.

The jagged shards of its broken shell bit into her foot, though Marcelline ignored the sensation, dulled as it was from the adrenaline.

She didn't have any inklings of regret, save for maybe not using her right leg to crush the damn thing—it had a helluva lot more power to it than her left one did.

Marcelline's right leg sat powered down and leaning up against her bedside table, however. Her mood soured as, once again, she thought of the stump three-quarters of the way down her right thigh.

“Fuckin' bugs,” the veteran spat.

—————o—{+}—o————

Her squadmates called her Marcy.

Marcy Nguyen, Specialist of the Territorial Guards 85th infantry division. You'd have to be bitter and old and formal to call her Marcelline.

Marcy sat in the back of the troop transport packed shoulder-to-shoulder with her squad. She was the lead element of Longhorn squad: with a full two years of experience, Marcy was the most seasoned member of the territorial cleanup force.

Behind her own, two more transports followed, carrying Caracu and Barzona squads, driving down the dirt road in a trundling caravan.

Compared to her squadmates, Marcy wasn't all that big, standing at five-five with short, black hair. She didn't let that get to her, since she looked big under her impact vest and load bearing rig and ballistic brassards and composite helmet and kneepads and BDUs and rucksack that she was all dolled up in, looking like the little green men on the propaganda channels and feeling like she could wrestle a bug and win under all the protective weight.

Even if she knew that wasn't the case.

It was sweaty under all the cloth and packed in the back of the truck, and she didn't like that, but the Regional told her that if she didn't like it, she shouldn't'a signed up.

Whatever.

Marcy wasn't much inclined towards the big picture— unlike her older siblings, Marcy's parents hadn't thought it worthwhile to send her off to the fancy school in the city, unlike her smarterer siblings, so she devised her own means for categorizing the world around her: things she did and didn't like.

As she ruminated on this fact, Marcy twirled an orange and white-tipped rifle cartridge between her fingers. The bullet was one of the few things she had conflicting thoughts about.

The round's official designation was T65M7, though the words on the can she fished it out of said "7.62x51, Anti-bioform, 10000 Cartridges."

The projectile, consisting of a copper jacket surrounding a frangible lead-uranium powder tipped by a tungsten ceramic penetrator, was positively ruinous. It had been carefully engineered to boast the brutal lethality of the hollow point with the penetrative capacity of an AP round, all wrapped up in the famous package that the Neoamerican theocracy used to great success against Russians two hundred years prior.

Marcy, a grunt, didn't know all that. They were just bullets that went into her rifle for her. What Marcy did know was that the tips were painted a pretty color, and its weight felt nice in her hand; both things she liked.

She knew the bugs made real nice songbird-like sounds when she shot 'em with it. They always made pretty noises when they were wounded, and Marcy liked pretty things, so she didn't think about it any further than that.

She knew the rounds made a loud, unpleasant sound that she could feel and hear in equal measure, which she disliked, but the big fireball they made off the end of her MC 67 hybridized pulse-service rifle was something she **really** liked, so it was okay if her ears rang afterwards. It was exciting to shoot her gun, an' after two and a half years of service, she was proud to say her aim was good with the thing.

Marcy also knew, only because one of the other grunts told her, that the metals or somethin' in em' were reaaaal poisonous, so even if a bug crawled away after it got shot, it'd die no matter what.

She really wasn't sure whether she liked that fact or not.

Of course, Marcy didn't love the bugs—nobody did, she surmised, which is why the government was payin' her to kill 'em—but she didn't hate the damn things, neither.

Sure, they hunted the cows an' chopped em up and put 'em in their weird nests, an' sure, they hurt a few ranchers sometimes, but that wasn't their fault, was it? The most offensive thing Marcy had ever personally witnessed was when one sent a four-inch chitin flechette into one of her squadmates' shoulders. Even then, he'd been told, repeatedly, to stop poking the dyin' thing with his bayonet, though, so he had it comin' in her eyes.

Feelings this conflicting were tiring for Marcy.

She sighed, and leaned her head way back over the edge of her seat to watch the countryside pass her by. Hers was a frontier world, so it was all wilderness and ranches and farmland and dirt roads. The rural scenery was pleasant on the eyes, and Marcy derived some small amusement from watching it go by upside-down.

Thirty seconds into gazing, Sargent Sandersfeld, who stood at the end of the truck, nudged her foot with his.

"You can't do that sort of thing anymore, Longhorn One," he stated. "You're the squad lead now."

Marcy liked Damien Sandersfeld. She thought he was a very exotic-looking man—he was from a whole ‘nother planet than her—and his was the darkest complexion she’d ever seen in her life.

Of course, Marcy hadn’t seen *any* complexion other than her own before.

Still, Sandersfeld was a big, sinewy, sundried, tankskinned motherfucker from one of the arid mining worlds where water was piped in from the oceans and cities were small. He was one of them career types—the kind of person who’d be a general or something one day—and was transplanted into the TDF from elite naval infantry. He’d been put here to share his expertise killing a helluva lotta bugs with everyone else.

She thought of the older man as attractive, but didn’t fancy him all *that* much, and not because relationships up the chain of command were strictly forbidden. Marcy had been asleep during that briefing.

Rather, it was because he took everything so seriously. He was all solemn-like about the bugs, an’ he was solemn-like about the chain of command, an’ he was *especially* all solemn-like and reserved-actin’ on missions.

The guttural, asyllabic warcries he made when opened full auto on em’ weren’t all too endearing, neither. They made her hair stand on end.

Marcy huffed, but obliged and sat upright; as severely unprofessional as the guardswoman was, she knew better than to disobey a superior, a-

KRA-KOOM

An explosion rocked the nearby woodland, kicking up a cloud of dust off to the side of the truck. The pressure wave thumped on Marcy's chest and rang her ears, and by the time she could hear again she'd thrown herself on the floor of the car, same as everyone else.

Except for Sandersfeld, who was sitting, crosslegged, same position as before.

"Fuckin' bugs," he muttered.

He spoke with a casual, carefree disdain, using the same tone one might talk in if they dropped their favorite beverage. This drew a chorus of confused questions from her squad—what the hell would the bugs have to do with an explosion and why didn't he care about it?

Sandersfeld smiled knowingly, but didn't respond, instead choosing to make a show of things by pointing up at the sky with three fingers. A handful of soldiers, Marcy included, glanced up only to see nothing but sky.

Sandersfeld dropped a finger, now holding only two.

Then one.

Then none at all.

Another explosion rocked the earth. Marcy caught a good look at it this time. It wasn't firey and bright, not like the ones she'd seen on TV, just a big cloud of kicked up dust and smoke, with loose earth that tumbled back into the crater.

“Biomortar, just one,” Sandersfeld began, speaking into his radio with a clinical tone. “Size category three by the sounds of it. Have the troops encountered them before, over?”

The radio squawked a tonal two-beep before someone’s voice, tinny with radio interference, lept from the small black box on his chest. “Negative, Corporal; hives don’t usually get big enough for things like that to happen. Over.”

Sandersfeld’s thumb came off the switch, and it’s only then that the veteran gave the long-awaited explanation for what the hell was going on.

“Biomortars develop soon after the hive organism finishes putting down its root structures. There’s no point in ducking; their shells don’t throw fragments like ours do.”

Sandersfeld sounded funny to a lot of the soldiers, since he was the only one who took the time to fully pronounce each and every word, but they treated the veteran’s words like gospel. One by one, troopes got up and dusted themselves off, still wincing when the rounds went off--even without fragmentation the possibility of one directly impacting the truck still lingered in their minds--but the Sargent didn’t seem to care, so it probably wasn’t likely to happen.

Or if it did, came the realization for some of them, they suddenly wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore.

Eventually, the explosions stopped, and Sandersfeld rapped his knuckles on the roof of the car. “Stop here for dismount.”

The truck carrying Longhorn squad stopped, then truck behind it carrying Barzona squad stopped, then the truck behind it with Caracu squad.

Sandersfeld was the first out, vaulting over the side of the troop transport and landing with deceptive lightness. He spoke in a loud, clear voice as he began walking down the dismounting convoy.

“The mortar’s stopped, and that means we’re in AO range of the bugs proper. I want you all to know that the biomortar doesn’t change anything about how we’ll be operating. This is a new nest. It will try to overrun us with a single large swarm, which you all should know how to deal with. Let’s not give it any learning opportunities, eighty-fifth.”

A chorus of assenting cries sang from the platoon, and he continued.

“Form up. Barzona and Caracu squads, on flanks. Longhorn, you’re in the middle with me.”

They oriented accordingly, forming into a loose V. Marcy thought all the formation training they had to do was silly. Still it gave everyone a wide field of fire to work with, which made pickin’ off the eight or so bugs she usually dealt with. She wondered if there would be nine, or even ten, or perhaps *eleven* in the pack they were sure to encounter.

As Longhorn’s lead element, Marcy soon found herself walking shoulder to shoulder with Sandersfeld. There were a few suspected nesting sites in the area, and the nearest one was a town, which they now marched to. Sandersfeld moved funny, Marcy thought, with a purposeful sort of fluidity. He also carried his Martin-Cooke Type 65 Carbine at a shallow downward angle

instead of by the sling or carry handle that the others preferred. Marcy mimicked his posture, bracing her full length MC-67 at a low angle.

Her peripheral vision caught movement, and an instant later, Marcy heard someone shout in a loud, fast tone: "CONTACT! CONTACT! CONTACT! TWO OCLOCK!"

The staccato, ripping sound of four hundred rounds per minute of pulse-boosted seven-point-six-two tearing through foliage sounded through the glade they were in.

It was joined by a second, now a third and fourth, soon devolving into a constant, chaotic crackling as the firefight proceeded. Sandersfeld let out that low, guttural he always did as the comparatively shorter barrel of his carbine spat balls of fire, an' she felt goosebumps crawl up her legs as she shouldered her gun, eyes keen for any targets she could spot.

It took her a moment or two before she started to spot the bugs, but once she did, there were a helluva lot more than eleven. Normal-sized ones, an' little ones, an' even the horse sized ones she'd only ever seen once or twice before. Her eyes soon landed on one that wasn't actively getting lit up: a small, dog-sized critter clinging to a tree, mouth wide open and bristling with chitin flechettes. She aligned the reticle on her LVPO with the summbitch and depressed her trigger and the gun barked out a short burst and the bug fell, floundering on the ground, tryin' ta limp off, an' she put another burst into the thing before sweeping her muzzle over to one of the horse-sized ones that was gettin' a bit close.

Her gun barked out another short burst and the bug stumbled as a series of holes danced their way across the critter's xenochitin shell, spiderwebbing the rigid material with cracks. It twitched on the ground, writhing and squirming, but Marcy knew it was already dead enough, so

she moved on to her next target, nailing that one, too, before her bolt locked open on an empty mag.

That was a funny thing about bugs, Marcy idly thought as she reloaded with instinctive precision, cycling the bolt and leveling the barrel as easy as she breathed: in the movies, they'd always just keel over when shot, dead as a doorknob, but when you put real bullets into a real bug, it winced an' cried out an' writhed an' thrashed an' bled before it finally started to slow down an' eventually stopped moving, and in that time it was still a dangerous wild animal.

It wasn't long before the swarm thinned out and stymied. The bugs— they weren't *really* bugs, since they had lungs and internal skeletal structures— were protected by thick plates of xenochitin, but the rifle bullets ripped straight through 'em, leaving jagged cracks on their way in and hemorrhaging exit wounds that Marcy could almost fit her hand into on the way out.

Marcy liked the bugs in this state. If they moved at all, it was all slow-like, not threatening in the slightest, an' the cooing, whistling songbird noises they made were pretty.

Marcy liked pretty things.

Sargent Sandersfeld surveyed the dying field with a detached regard. "Big swarm. This was a lot of biomass. Fuckin' bugs."

A sparse, disunified chorus of "Fuckin' bugs" sounded from the troops behind him. But not Marcy, who was silent as she ran her mind over the maps from the morning's mission briefing.

“But there ain’t any ranches with cows on ‘em nearby for the bugs to eat,” she observed simply. “The only nearby settlement’ a town.”

Sandersfeld gave her a solemn look, but didn’t say nothin’. It wasn’t until fifteen minutes later that the dawn of realization finally rose for poor Specialist Marcy Nguyen: the town was empty.

Except, the town wasn’t *really* empty, was it? Marcy’s might notta’ been educated, but she wasn’t stupid, neither.

She could think.

An’ right now, she was thinkin’ that there’d been signs of a struggle, clear as day. Underfoot was the occasional spent bullet casing, mostly twelve gauge, with some .308 an’ a few pistol calibers, and some of the windows an’ doors on the prefab concrete-printed houses were busted into. Along the ground were drips and trickles of blue-black dried bug blood, and periodic swaths of the pavement bore burn marks, each with charred glass shards that must’ve been liquor bottles at the epicenter,

Except, as Marcy came to realize, boots pattering down the main street as she and her squad split up to sweep the settlement, the town really was empty. There weren’t no bugs, an’ there weren’t no townfolk, either. Neither survivors, nor, as Marcy grimly realized, people who weren’t lucky enough to be survivors. There wasn’t the queen, there wasn’t the nest, and there weren’t the piles that the bugs kept their kills in, either.

Marcy stopped, standing in the middle of the road, as she watched one of the soldiers from Caracu squad take irregular potshots at a nest grow that was poking up through the tarmac. The not-quite-plant, not-quite-animal thing twitched helplessly in pain, suppurating blue-black hemolymph.

“Save yer rounds, Carricoo eight,” she said, attempting to emulate the simple, instructive tone Sandersfeld always used. “A dog or sum’n other critter’ll come by and clean it up an’ you’ll look real foolish for bein’ down a mag.”

Caracu eight was dressed up in the same exact uniform Marcy was, a rigid impact vest and shoulder pads and battle dress uniform, everything olive green and mottled, but his face was visibly younger than hers—seventeen or eighteen, compared to Marcy’s twenty one.

He looked at her, then back at the nest organism, then back at her. “Critters eat them bugs?”

“Yeah, they do.” She broke into a wide, crooked smile. “Sandersfeld told me the bugs’ll interga- int- intergrate into ecosystems on the worlds they’re on, so’n they’ll eat th’ other critters an’ the other critters’ll eat ‘em back.” Marcy was exceptionally proud to have memorized this fact.

So proud, in fact, that she continued to repeated his explanation nearly verbatim. “We shot all them drones dead, an’ so that means ain’t nothin’ keeping the nest safe from other critters.”

Caracu eight seemed especially dubious—it was hard to believe that the fleshy, off-white subterranean growth was anything nearing natural—but, once Sandersfeld's name was invoked, he nodded receptively.

“Oh,” he said softly. “If they’re partta nature, how come they change their surroundings so much?”

Marcy, of course, didn’t know the answer to that question. How the insects were able to spread so virulently, and construct advanced structures, despite their most intelligent members being comparable to crows, remained still a hotly debated subject of research.

What she did know was that only a single species came close to behaving like them.

“Duonno. I think they’re sorta like us in that way,” Marcy mused.

She was sure there were greater implications to the revelation that had just befallen her, but what exactly those were eluded the uneducated woman. The radio on her chest crackled to life, halting the formation of any corollary thoughts. It hissed vitriolically, causing her to wince and adjust the volume before the harsh noise gave way to a man’s voice.

“This is Barzona three. I found them.” Three’s voice was obscured by radio interference, but through it, Marcy could hear an unmistakably sickened, cynical rawness in the man’s voice. “They’re all gathered in the town hall.”

She found the hall quick enough—the ground outside its painted concrete exterior was absolutely littered with bug blood and bullet casings—and found her way inside. Sandersfeld was already there, surveying the structure’s transformed interior with a pale grimace.

The townsfolk were piled up in the middle, and a sticky dirty coating of blood clung to their limp figures. Many of them bore jagged gashes on their bodies, but Marcy couldn't see anything other than pinkish tissue and a brownish speckling that looked like, but couldn't be dirt around the exposed tissue.

What troubled Marcy the most was how sickeningly anodyne the slaughter was. The bugs treated their kills with a spittle that interdicted decomposition, and unless Marcy focused on any one point for too long, they were perfectly indistinguishable from the living, breathing people she'd seen countless times before.

"Nothing we can do for them now. Fuckin' bugs," he spat.

"Fuckin' bugs," Marcy echoed. There wasn't anything else she could think to say. not once in her life had she ever seen anything like this, and she hoped she never would again.

Sandersfeld turned to the soldiers—a sizable crowd had gathered in the town hall by now—and pointed to the pile. "There's a queen nearby that did this. Find it."

That was all he needed to say.

It was after an additional ten minutes of wandering around the same twelve some streets that the settlement had to it that Marcy finally found something of note.

Coming from a nearby alleyway—one Marcy had already noted was a dead end—was a scuttling sound that crept into her perception. It was a faint, rhythmic stimulus that stirred

something deep in the woman's subconscious mind, causing her to scrunch up her face and shake her head.

Even still, she froze when she saw it.

It was big, around the same dimension as the horse sized ones, and it froze as it regarded her back, multisegmented, chitinous legs glued to the concrete floor beneath it. The animal's markings were distinct, zig-zag stripes on its legs and thorax, and it crouched defensively over the clutch of eggs on its abdomen.

The cornered animal was a queen.

It raised its forelegs defensively at Marcelline, slowly stepping back as it opened its complex mouthparts to give a hissing, whistling coo of warning.

“Yeah, yeah, I bet that's how them townfolk felt, didn't they?” she asked quietly.

The animal's reflective compound eyes betrayed no answers as it regarded her back.

Marcelline had never been this close to a bug before. Slowly, carefully, she shouldered her rifle; she'd seen them close similar distances in under a few seconds. It took a few steps back, and Marcy took a few steps forward, wondering if it was non-hostile.

This was the wrong thing to do to a cornered animal.

It charged her, the massive animal moving with stunning speed, and Marcy got eight rounds off, five of them clean hits, before the bolt closed home with an odd sound and the hammer dropped on the chambered round with a deafeningly silent *click*.

Streaming obscenities, Marcelline kneeled down, giving the bolt a gentle tug, then jerking it back with primal violence when it resisted her motion. She struck the side of the gun, sending a single deformed bullet clattering out of the ejection port and onto the pavement below.

The guardswomen raised her service rifle and got three rounds off and into its center mass before the animal barreled into her.

The rigid body of her impact vest kept Marcelline's ribs from breaking then and there, but was woefully impotent against the sheer force imparted into her, sending the woman flying into the street, dazed, with the wind knocked out of her.

It whistled real songbird-like as it came up to its stunned prey. It was the ugliest damn sound Marcelline had ever heard in her life.

She tugged on her holster, the hammer of her service pistol caught in one of the webbing loops on her load bearing vest. Struggling with her holster, Marcy kicked the damn thing. The first blow connected with the insect's head, striking squarely on one of its compound eyes; she felt the chitin bow under her foot with increasing pressure until, suddenly, it gave way. The animal stumbled back, one of its eyes inverted into its head by the blow, and Marcy kicked it again, only for the animal to catch her leg in its jagged, vertical mouth.

Its odd jaws closed around the limb and Marcy could feel her consciousness ebb out from under her as a distressingly intrusive, stabbing sensation encompassed her whole leg. Viciously

struggling, she kicked it again with her free left foot, boot glancing off the animal's thick xenochitin shell before she finally freed her pistol from its holster.

Except, the gunshots Marcy heard weren't the barking reports of a ten millimeter service pistol.

They were the staccato, ripping sound of four hundred rounds per minute of pulse-boosted seven-point-six-two tearing through xenochitin, accompanied by that low, guttural, monosyllabic cry that made Marcy's hair always stand on end.

Half-stepping back, Sargent Sandersfeld kicked it off her and the animal sprawled onto its side on the pavement and there's a new mag in his carbine and it's empty again and Marcy could see fresh chunks of viscera painted on the pavement behind him and he's dropped his gun now, kneeling to a crouch beside Marcy's leg as his hands busy themselves with the zippers on his IFAK, all in the span of a few seconds.

Marcy sat up to survey the damage to her leg. Her pants were all torn up and sopping, and the flesh beneath was rent into jagged, loose strips. Bright red blood, brighterer and rederer than any blood she'd ever seen in her life trickled from the limb at a distressing pace, pooling with the fresh hemolymph on the ground below.

An odd, disconnected part of Marcy's mind thought it was funny; she didn't even know it was possible for blood to be that bright a color.

"Arterial bleeding," Sandersfeld said in a quick, low tone, placing a hand on her chest and firmly pushing Marcy back to the ground. "Stay still while I tourniquet it."

She didn't resist, laying limp against the sun-warmed tarmac to let him work. The sky was awful pretty today, Marcy thought, an' she felt like she just could doze off then and there.

Sandersfeld was all too familiar with that gently fading expression.

"Start talking to me, Specialist," he snapped. "Tell me what's on your mind."

Her vision swam as she struggled towards coherent, easy-to-make statement.

"Fuckin' bugs," Marcelline slurred.

Sandersfeld gave the delirious woman a small, wry smile. "Fuckin' bugs," he echoed.