

# 1

New guy. Brown jacket. Gun in my back.

Don't like him.

Into the elevator. Subbasement seventeen. Boot tread slipping on the floor. I go down.

Portholes, again. The view. Vacuum of space, then the desert. What?

Scrambling to get up.

Pushes me through a hatch and the hatch closes. Metallic sound, and then the hatch opens again.

Tight.

This really is the desert.

Sit down in a rover and now we're speeding across the sand. Ample dust. Sunlight. The trip is taking a while, and my eyes, dry and tired, come to a stop on the driver's side-arm.

Inscription in silver along the stock: **THE STATE WILL EVENTUALLY WITHER AWAY LIKE A SNARK HUNTER, LEAVING US ALL FREE AS BIRDS.** Can't help but look down at my handcuffs. Irony?

"That's a new one," says the driver, smiling. "Used to read, simply, **NUANCE**, but there were objections. Nuance was out of the question."

"What kind of objections," I ask, but his eyes are back on the road and he ignores me for the rest of the trip.

"I know what you're thinking," he finally says, smiling again as we roll up to the guarded entrance.

He's fishing for his papers, there's no time for him to elaborate.

We enter.

## 2

Life at the test site is strange.

I get up in the morning and step into a pressure suit, seal up my face and don't speak to a soul all day.

As I'm working, I hear things.

"...the prize of them that hath overcome Space."

Strange things. But I know better than to ask what goes on in the other buildings.

None of these buildings seem to have basements.

Occasionally, we're asked to press our faces to the ground and then ignore the sounds that are coming from outside the hanger.

Afterwards, we get back to work.

Like I said, I don't ask questions. I pack the pilots' lunches and load them into the cockpits. I do a good job. I'm popular with the pilots.

Most of them know my name.

## 3

We're all standing around outside, smoking, when the paperwork arrives. A forklift unloads it onto the flight line and then departs. We'll move the papers into the hangar as time permits.

"Tight," pronounces my supervisor, and we all head back inside to straighten out our cover stories.

## 4

Weather is still an issue. The sky's always pink.

I am probably mentally ill.

I've been advised not to wear shorts on the shop floor.

Shifts are ten hours, plus breaks. Designated smoking area, but we pretty much light up wherever we want. Explosions are infrequent.

Some of us watch telescreen while we work.

I prefer to concentrate.

## 5

Once a week I get my hair cut.

Into the chair, cape on, tissues tucked into my collar. I always ask for a perfect box. This is seen as humor, because the barber doesn't care what I want. The government pays him anyway. I give him the finger under my cape.

Today I'm in the chair, flipping through an issue of ACTRON, when the alarm sounds.

Staffed by professionals, the barber shop clears in seconds. TIGHT IMPRESSIONS runs a tight ship.

"Tight," I say, to myself.

Outside, a flight of new hires is arriving. I head for my bunk.

Brown jacket is waiting for me.

## NOTES