1 boost the juice

LCTN: SOL-3, BUCKEYE, ARIZONA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.987au from SOL)
DATE: 2097ce-MAY-26-FRIDAY
TIME: 19:30zulu (local 11:30pst)

For some people suburbia can be wrist-slashingly dull. Take Buckeye for example. This place is ideal for raising a family but it's not the town for a social butterfly such as Terry. Leon promised they would have more time together if they both moved out here but the fact is they see a lot less of each other. Two or three times a week if they're lucky. Over the years they have entertained the thought of splicing children but not now. Things may have been different if Leon's research project wasn't on a fast-track.

Then again, Terry has too much time on his hands and they are surely idle out here in dullsville.

Mill Avenue is more to his liking. He can hear the gyms, the shops and the Rio Salado beckoning him to return. Terry could always cope with Leon's absence when they lived in Tempe. There were distractions to fill his day and when Leon did show up it was quality time for them, and usually one on one. Now in Buckeye, Terry has been subjected to hosting a dinner party for Leon's colleagues almost every Friday evening. Conversationally, physics is the most dreadful of subjects and when Leon and his staff get together all they talk about is boson this and Kelvin that, ad nauseum. At least in Tempe, after serving dessert and the second round of coffee, Terry could slip away to work on his thesis, take on a film, or rock-out at a bathhouse.

At 43.3°c the cool deck fails to live up to its name. Terry slithers up on a recliner and rolls over to sun his front side. He's the only redhead that he is aware of that can lay out like this. Even though he can tan without freckles, it's only thirty minutes a side or he'll burn to a crisp. Fifteen for Johnson and the twins. After four weeks Terry has managed a warm amber glow that highlights his

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

3 caught up in the moment

LCTN: SAIPH-6B (kappa-Orion)
CORD: SAO-132542.0402 (221pc from SOL)
DATE: 2275ce-MARCH-12-FRIDAY
TIME: 17:10zulu

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know, Marshal. He won't talk about it."

"Call me Bob on the wet deck. My rank doesn't apply here."

In a dark lounge on the wet deck of the Marauder, Deputy Marshal, Robert Jackson hands trooper Cricket Washington a whisky on the rocks. After she takes the drink he remembers his manners, "You prefer something mixed?"

Cricket shakes her head no. You may want a mixed drink but in the SA you learn to shoot straight when discussing business. Cricket slams the drink back and, according to protocol, Bob refills the glass. This one you sip.

Bob slides into the chair beside Cricket. While looking out the window onto the jungle moon orbiting sixth planet of kappa-Orion, he takes a sample of the same poison he served her and begins, "As a company commander, the well being of the troops under my wing is of primary concern to me. It may not show sometimes but I actually give a shit about you people and I hope this informal chat doesn't come across as meddling."

"I understand, Bob."

"No, you don't. I have two valuable people dead and a kid who's seen more action inside thirty minutes than the both of us will see in our entire careers. The problem is, he shows none of the classic signs of combat induced stress or personal loss. Not that I take exception to that reaction, abnormal as it may be, but the rest of the platoon has managed to distance themselves from him because of it. Tell me; are they afraid that Jacob will act out?"

4 short arm inspection

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2307ce-SEPTEMBER-15-SUNDAY
TIME: 15:30zulu (local 25:05mst)

From Cocytus, better known as Cue Ball, Betelgeuse looks like a stop sign lit up by headlights on a dark rural night. Shotgun holes and all. The galactic equivalent of the end of the road, in spite of the retina searing glare you would expect from a star this size, the great Alpha-Orion glows cold, red and sickly.

Betelgeuse is dying.

In its short life this massive star has gobbled up most of the hydrogen in its core and has bloated into an obese sphere as wide as the orbit of Jupiter. Astronomers are thrilled to be studying a doomed star up close but their excitement is checked by the fact that none of them will be alive when it finally collapses and goes supernova some 1,500 years from now.

One conciliation is that they've been able to collect samples from the hot spot that radiates intensely just below the surface of the star. At one time Cue Ball was the twelfth planet, and the hot spot just so happens to be the remnants of a gas giant that was swallowed up during the stars expansion phase. Layer by layer the planet was stripped away until all that remained was a core of predominately white-hot carbon—compressed into a diamond shell ten times the width of the Earth.

It's amazing how the occasional absurd idea made in jest becomes realized.

So successful were the probes used to study the interior of Betelgeuse that the Annex quietly supplied the scientists with a Cobalt Bluer retrofit. The blast from the retrofit-bomb was about as significant as a ladyfinger going off in a bonfire but the weapon did manage to blow tons of the material out into space. And through a

5 velemas solo que mal acompaño

TIME: 21:10zulu (local 35:30mst)

Jacob's head hits the deck with a slam. He looks up from the grating and sees Maria smiling at him. Brushing her hands off, she walks away. Maria could have broken his neck by using his body weight to compress his spine but she thought better of it. Sure, he'd be good as new inside six weeks but this latest transgression did not warrant the expense to fix him up.

Maybe next time.

The crowd milling around the elevator lobby know better than to take exception to Maria's exchange with Jacob. This is the third time in as many months that she has exercised her prowess with judo on him. This sport favors the smaller opponent and a big lug like Jacob makes an easy target for a little sprite such as Maria.

Her face is replaced by Scott's grinning mug.

He offers Jacob a hand up, "I heard you've been doin' cartwheels all afternoon with Burke."

"That's not what this is about, Wakow."

Jacob takes Scott's hand and gets to his feet. He rubs the back of his head and grimaces. Not just from the pain, but from the loud music and flashing lights blaring out from the main dance hall on the wet deck.

Calling it the wet deck is an understatement. At night it's more like party central and every station and battle platform has one. Each wet deck is a unique and elaborate maze of lounges, game rooms, and dance halls that lead back to a bathhouse known as the free-for-all. The free-for-all is not open for business between Sunday and Wednesday so most everyone tend to migrate to the main dance hall or to the lounges that sport actual windows. On the five battle stations, unless you frequent the bridge or airlocks, this is the only

6 the lesson for today

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-5-THURSDAY
TIME: 09:40zulu (local 33:01mst)

The screaming is for real.

Force-regress is the term used by the SA. Retrograde-action is rarely if ever used anymore, and then only when one is intentionally pulling troops back to divert them elsewhere, or to lure an opposing force into a trap.

This just so happens to be a flat-out retreat.

Dozens of troopers in fighting suits are scrambling for the cover offered by a tree line behind them. Caught out in the open they have no choice but to try for it or die and, as expected, they are getting cut down for their efforts.

To draw fire away from the last two still running back across the killing zone, Anthony Gudici vaults out from behind the foliage and blasts away at the opposing tree line. This selfless act was not only futile but also foolish. The two had their legs shot out from under them before Anthony hits the ground so, as the only clear target, all strings of fire immediately turn in to converge on him.

Anthony didn't stand a chance and diving for the ground only delayed the inevitable, and before he could get off two bursts with his boom-mounted scorpion gun a mass of hypervelocity mini-balls splash against his visor. Unlike the Minié balls from the Civil War era, these vicious little things are more like miniature Sputniks—3.31mm balls of depleted uranium with four wires trailing behind for stability. Sabot driven from their weapons in masse this death spray sounds more like a rain-stick when hosing down the canopy protecting Anthony's face.

Within a fraction of a second this sustained fusillade weakens the canopy and caves it in. Now free to invade the interior of the

7 to keep my soul

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-OCTOBER-31-SATURDAY
TIME: 01:48zulu (local 27:05mst)

At the end of a cul-de-sac, three men sit and watch as the Trick or Treaters venture out onto the street. It may be a bit early back on Earth but here on Scab, with Electra fading out in the west, it happens to be dusk. And save for those handing out candy, like these three, or jumping out of the shadows to scare the little creatures, the adults are nowhere in sight.

This is the kid's night out.

Children unescorted by adults on Halloween would have been unheard of even a hundred years ago, but nobody is concerned about their kids running around on the street tonight. In fact, nobody is concerned about their kids running around the street at any time. It's not that there's an all-seeing Big Brother watching out for them, it's just that Big Brother would be inadequate when compared to those who are watching them—their parents.

Just nanoseconds away via the neuronet, the parents know right where their kids are and what they are doing. To a point that is. They can't exactly read the child's mind with this technology, that interface is illegal, but they can pinpoint them on a GEV display and talk to them at any time. It's not that there isn't any crime on the streets of Sapphire, it's just that crime doesn't often happen in neighborhoods such as this. Police are expensive, few, and far between, so like most adults on Sapphire everyone here has taken an oath *to protect and to serve* as the need arises.

Violent crime was rampant before five score ago, but now with an armed citizenry—a practice employed by most independent planets—assault, rape, armed robbery, burglary and murder are at an all-time low. Go ahead, make a grab for a kid, and see what happens

8 big six

LCTN: THETA-2-TAURUS-5A (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93957.0101 (49pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-6-FRIDAY
TIME: 04:33zulu (local 10:27mst)

The Buzzard Was Their Friend may have been playing for the troops but it's *Mr. Toad's Wild Ride* that comes to Jacob's mind whenever he is riding in the hold of a drop ship. Jacob would rather be flying escort than being trapped in this thing, no matter how protected they may be. At least he's not clamped in the racking and facing rearward like the others.

Flying nap of the earth makes it difficult for most to negotiate the pallet racking inside a Razor. Even with the amplified strength of the JACC, and so many handholds to choose from, staying on your feet is a chore because every ten or fifteen seconds the ship is either climbing to clear an obstacle or diving to avoid unnecessary exposure.

Challenging as it may be the old heads, like Jacob, make it seem easy. It has been an eternity since he's conducted a walk-about preceding a hot pallet extraction. Normally the final VI is done by the ship's loadmaster but this brand-spankin' new Razorback has no loadmaster. In fact, it has no crew at all because it's not expected to survive the next five minutes.

The drop ship that spearheads an assault is believed to be on a one-way trip. Being first in means, you draw the undivided attention of all fire positions and those that react, by painting or shooting at the intruder that is, are themselves locked in by the Warthog gunships that follow close behind. Then when you consider that the target for today is guarded by highly trained Base Defense Forces (BDF), chances are HWG99-02078-36 is destined to become a grease-spot in the sky.

A hell of a mission for a maiden flight.

One might think a hanger-queen would be more appropriate for such an assignment, but fat chance getting seasoned troops to go

9 end of the line

LCTN: SOL-3, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.014au from SOL)
DATE: 2273ce-APRIL-1-TUESDAY
TIME: 20:05zulu (local 12:05pst)

At twenty-two years of age Jacob has been around the block more than a few times however, at this very moment, he is in a flat out race for his life.

Sexually active teens and young adults are a natural condition of the species and though many western cultures have historically frowned upon them acting on these powerful urges—nowadays they are encouraged to do so. It's not that people are less virtuous than before it's just that things have changed and the once forbidden fruit is now a dietary staple. Then again, what's the point of moralizing to those who are already in the know?

First off, medical science has finally made good on a centuries old promise and viral diseases are a thing of the past. The common cold as well as the ravages of STDs are all but forgotten in the minds of man. Secondly, crimes such as rape and pedophilia are notably rare and so much so as to be practically unheard of on court dockets. Predators today are smart enough to take their act into virtual reality and leave real-reality alone for once.

Such is the measure of progress.

Lastly, the neuronet has invaded all levels of culture and society and there are no mysteries left for the young to discover. Innocence is lost before the advent of puberty with the simple push of a button. It could be said that condoning such behaviors puts the kids back in synch with their hormonal clocks but the truth be known is that good judgment does come from experience.

If you can't put the Genie back in the bottle, after the fact, then might as well use it to learn the young'uns something. Because of the net an unplanned pregnancy is an honest accident and a rather

10 a definite strain on the scrotum

LCTN: THETA-2-TAURUS-5A (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93957.0101 (49pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-6-FRIDAY
TIME: 05:45zulu (local 11:50mst)

Cricket was waiting for them.

As the last of the prisoners are escorted back into the base by the ambush team, Cricket intercepts Jacob and Pete who are hanging back at the end of the column.

"No way! This is the guy!" laughs Cricket as she shakes Pete's hand. "For thirty years I hear these wild ass stories about a guy named Zoot Suit and I can't believe that I actually git to have a face with the name. I mean, I'm ticked pink to meet you."

Pete smiles, "Pink! Is it really pink? I'd like to tickle that! Shit, I don' know if my heart could take it."

"You were right, Jake. This guy's a scream!"

Jacob pats Pete on the back and asks Cricket, "Could you keep Zoot company while I go find Red?"

"No problem, Six."

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At the landing zone a Razorback lifts off, and as it climbs the prisoners start moving up a ramp and into the hold of the next drop ship. At the foot of the ramp, Sergeant Cyzk and Nicole are standing with General Hershey, a Colonel Mason, and a BDF major.

As the noise dies down from the launch, Cyzk continues, "Time in transit will be just under twenty-four hours. For this we have dropped off two skids loaded with CWR-RATs for your troops. You may find our field rations surprisingly palatable. We expect your troops to

11 tell god i said hi

TIME: 08:33zulu (local 17:12mst)

"For people who are about to experience nuclear fusion up close and personal, I think you're taking it rather well." Jacob gloats.

Ms Welch is anything but taking it well, but she won't give them the satisfaction in seeing her stress over the inevitable. She and her staff, all 45 of them, are going to go bye-bye and that's all there is too it. She looks up and, with the holographic cloak turned off, she watches as a PacMan drone strains to lift a conically shaped warhead into the air as a handful of others orbit the area giving them no avenue of escape. At the edge of the hole she sees Nikki peering down at them while holding Zach's hand, and it was just then she realizes that they have been duped all along.

"Why fuss? We deserve it." Welch looks at Nicole and shakes her head, "You're the earlier model, a Three-One right? It all makes sense now. The little bitch up there—she did this. I know it."

Nicole sneers, "They can talk to each other...in real time! I mean all fifty-two of them and you had no idea? This is so beyond your everyday SNAFU. You dumb-shits actually outdid yourselves for once! You finally fucked yourselves over."

Welch shrugs, "How could we have known? The beta-set were absolutely compliant with perfect dispositions. Perfectly happy."

"Perfectly happy? Okay, Sandra, I still remember how happy I was chowin' down on your stale pussy when you were just a tech. I was six! So, fuck you very much."

Welch's eyes go wide, "That was you?"

Nicole snarls at her, "Ya, cunt, that was me. Talk about a homecoming! Surprise! The kicker is you've finally created the perfect horror. Too good to be true in any gene pool, you'd think!"

She meant horror as it relates to Nikki, not whore as in the

12 ha satan es mericone

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2308ce-NOVEMBER-28-SATURDAY
TIME: 10:15zulu (local 32:00mst)

When one looks upon the battle stations Carrie Nation and Mata Hari for the first time it's with child-eyed wonderment. The shear 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

13 naykid in a tin box

LCTN: CALAR-3 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: M45-B002 (133pc from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-JANUARY-1-FRIDAY
TIME: 07:05zulu (local 16:45mst)

Brown dwarfs, like Calar-3, actually glow with a deep red hue. In the infrared spectrum they can be somewhat dazzling, spectacular even, but with the naked eye they pretty much vanish at an AU or two.

The Iron Maiden has been waiting for over an hour before the tell-tail soap-bubble of a MDDSH field slips in and bursts at just twelve kilometers away. From this emerges a huge tractor ship with just under a hundred freight boxes in tow. Looped in a figure-8 to fit within the drive envelope, it immediately starts to unravel into a string of cars just over 10 klicks in length.

Maiden Control wastes no time, [“Blackjack, One-One-Zero-Eight, this is Sierra Alpha, Three-Six. Do you read?”] After a ten second pause, [“Repeat, Blackjack, One-One-Zero-Eight, this is Sierra Alpha, Thirty-Six. Do you read?”]

[“Loud an’ clear, Three-Six. I understand you’ve got me a load of containers?”]

[“Roger that. Our eleven freight boxes will be ready in about thirty minutes. You need any help getting situated?”]

[“Negative, Three-Six. It’s gonna take me at least two hours to get unraveled here, and another half a day to splice your load in. Just dump 'em overboard an' I'll get after it. Ya'll don' have to hang out for this.”]

[“That's okay, Blackjack. We'll hang with ya.”]

Suddenly, on the port side of the Iron Maiden, light floods the area between the top and bottom flight decks, and this shows a buzz of activity as their shipping containers start to rise up on elevators from below. Twenty meters wide, thirty high, and a hundred meters

14 bigger balls than standard issue

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.009au from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-MARCH-31-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 20:15zulu (local 12:15pst)

The Glendale Freeway, running north of Los Angeles, is not nearly as busy as it used to be back in the day when it first opened. Traffic today is moderate to light but steady even though the freeway itself has pretty much vanished from sight. Like most paved roadways throughout the world, after two hundred years of neglect, the lanes have crumbled away to dust and gravel. Only small patches of concrete and rebar remain—peeking through the grass that now marks the pathway between Los Angeles and La Cañada.

For all intents and purposes the Earth has become a garden planet. Less than two billion inhabit the globe, and property values have dropped so steeply that the few homes that dot the hillsides along California-2 have at least an acre or three surrounding them.

In a ground car, floating along the Northbound right-of-way, Jessica watches the terrain pass by as Jacob, Maria and Diego watch a transmission of Maria at a press conference earlier that morning. On a video screen, in the dashboard, Maria is fielding questions from reporters from behind a podium in a very small auditorium adjacent to the One-Klick lobby.

On the screen, Maria has just pointed to a reporter named, Brenda Ashley who stands, "That's a serious accusation you're making, Marshall. You're telling us that the Deputation routinely covers up violations?"

Maria ponders her response, "All I'm saying is that on the two occasions we did advise the Security Council, forty-eight hours later we uncovered a big zero but, this time, surprise allowed us to collect over sixty of the Cobalt Bluer retrofits with yields ranging from one to twenty gigatons. Draw your own conclusions."

15 for the greater good

TIME: 02:35zulu (local 18:35pst)

The grill set up by the cool deck rivals that of the kitchen, and purists still use wood for barbeque over charcoal or gas any day. Hickory, apple, cherry, and maple may be way big in most barbeque circles, and mesquite may rule the taste of the southwest, but pecan wood has become the prestige in many a grill master's bag o' tricks.

Peter is an artist and a published one at that.

For this little group he has slow cooked chicken with a homemade apricot glaze, flash grilled K.C. Strip steaks marinated in balsamic vinegar, pepper, and yellow mustard, and he is now turning out kosher-dogs toasted with the juice of grated yellow onions, clarified butter, a dash of brown sugar and light on the salt. The latter being his culinary masterpiece.

Pete has said, "The trick here is to keep them turning, and slathered as you do!"

Humbled by watching his son work the grill, Jacob walks a huge platter of vegetables into the kitchen. He may be a carnivore at heart but this compilation of grilled tomatoes, zucchini, and yellow squash has him drooling. Of all the food prepared it's the asparagus that scares him most. Pan-fried with olive oil, sea salt, and seasoned pepper, he is amazed by how much of it has already been picked at by child and adult alike—and it's only a garnish for the steaks!

That shit should be covered in cheese! goes through Jacob's mind as he watches Maria sneak yet another spear into her mouth.

"Wha?" Maria mumbles noticing Jacob catching her in the act.

"Nothin' honey!" he smiles as he puts the platter down.

"Chow is up!" shouts Peter as drops a pyramid of dogs on the table. "Get it while it's hot!"

"Sure thing, Marine." says Jordan as she steps up to the table

16 a momentary lapse in personality

TIME: 06:05zulu (local 22:05pst)

With Monique and Jordan walking away, Peter crouches down and taps knuckles with Jacob, "I'm gonna turn in too, Pop."

Jacob, sitting in the Jacuzzi, reaches for a smoke, "Pete, I really appreciate it. You and your sister taking the kids tomorrow."

"I want to get to know them."

"For your careers sake let's keep our relationship quiet for now, but if it ever becomes public knowledge I'll iron it out with your Corps Commander, Orozco. Can't say he and I are good-buddies but we're on friendly enough terms."

"I appreciate that. All I ever wanted to do was to zoom, but in a year or two I may be piloting a desk. I don't know if I can hack that. I just may take you up on the earlier offer."

Lighting a cigarette, Jacob scrunches his face, "Earlier offer?"

"Rutledge, was it? He offered me a job with you guys."

"Oh ya!" Jacob yanks the cigarette out of his mouth and points to Peter, "The offer is still good, but stay put for now."

"Sure thing." Peter stands to leave, "I know you guys are up to something. I can feel it. You and Maria are lucky. It's so boring here. Nothing ever happens on Home Base."

Jacob would love to say something to him like *Don't hold your breath,* or a snappy *Ya—right* to clue Peter in, but doing that may put him on alert so, to cut the conversation short, Jacob chuckles, "Look, we'll see each other sooner than you think. We'll spend some quality time together. Sound good?"

"Sounds like a plan. Goodnight, Dad." Peter walks off.

"I haven't earned that, yet." Jacob calls out.

17 juliet bravo

DATE: 2309ce-APRIL-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 15:00zulu (local 07:00pst)

Jacob and Maria's goodbyes with their new friends and family were pleasant but quick. Only Jessica knew what was up, and only she walks out to their vehicle to see them off.

Jessica hugs Maria, "We'll be half way down the coast when you launch this thing. So be ready to pick us up along the Five?"

Maria smiles, "The trash run has been rerouted for you."

"Thanks!" Jessica hugs her father and whispers in his ear, "Catch ya on the flip side."

Maria and Jacob jump into the ground car and, instead of pulling away along the driveway as one would expect, the vehicle lifts up vertically into the air. At the controls, Jacob requests clearance to downtown Los Angeles and they were given a hold. At a hundred feet up in the air they just sit there silently waiting for altitude, vector and speed.

Finally, Jacob has the flight clearance flash up for him on the HUD display so he engages the autopilot for the preset coordinates to One-Klick. He monitors their flying *Countach* as it quickly accelerates to over 560kph, and even though Los Angeles is in a basin far below the chateau, the vehicle has to climb to reach the landing platform on top of the building.

Satisfied that all is well, he looks over at Maria who sits there with her eyes closed. She seems to be in deep thought or maybe feigning sleep but, either way, Jacob is amused by this and casually watches her for the entire four-minute flight. With the ship now decelerating, Jacob opens his mouth to say something.

Before he utters a word, and with eyes closed, Maria reaches out and swats Jacob in his chest with a loud thud, "Quiet!"

18 over the top

LCTN: SOL-3, QUEENS, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.009au from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-APRIL-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 18:40zulu (local 13:40est)

Riker's Island, like the rest of New York City, has become a plush, grass sewn and tree spotted paradise. Originally, the island was an abandoned prison but those facilities were raised a century ago to make the island a base for the Military Alliance Deputation. Since the breakup of that arm of the United Nations, the Co-op has been running the place on its own.

Only six buildings are on the island and they are rather huge buildings at that. Three are apartment complexes, two office buildings, and one short and solid with a purpose unknown to everybody except that it is believed to be a bunker and supply depot for the Deputation. It has been speculated that the Co-op may have several companies on the island, maybe even a battalion, but nobody has been able to verify this. It is also speculated that they may have tanks and APCs in this building but, again, this has been unverifiable.

Of the four SA companies staged far off Riker's Island, half of their numbers have slithered unobserved over to the shores close to the Co-op's facilities. Their movement underwater was so slow that the sensors around the island did not pick up on them until they came out of the water and uncloaked.

The soldiers of the Base Defense Force were not ready for this one. They have already scrambled and staged because of the action in Queens, and the sight of over a thousand SA troopers raining down on Manhattan got their attention as well, but those two things did not result in an order to launch from the bunker.

This provocation is a bit different.

The secure boundaries of this facility fall inland at about a football field or two from the shore allowing for civilian activities, such

19 a hard on for hope

TIME: 19:05zulu (local 14:05est)

The office of the Secretary General is as huge as it is stately. Walnut drips off everything except the North and East walls which are seamless windows that stretch from floor to ceiling. This office is minimalist and intimidating and reeks of power. Not the sort of power you could say was actually purposeful per se, or absolute by any stretch of the imagination, but the ambiance here as expressed by the receiving area, the multiple high-tech conference nooks, and the cushy sociable pit, is the power of consensus.

The current Secretary General who occupies this office is a one, Michal Pitney, a delicious sixty-eight year old G-MILF who looks every bit like a six-foot-two brunette knock-off of Barbara Eden in her prime. At first glance, Michal, in the tight floral dresses and pumps she normally wears to work, appears more like a *trophy secretary to* than the *Secretary Big-Shot of*. That said, she has been at this job now for almost a decade and she is at the top of her game.

Truth be known she's been good at it since day-one.

As an ambassador to the U.N. from Sapphire she negotiated the peace between the Co-op and the Annex. If that wasn't tough enough as its leader, Michal then accomplished the impossible. She has maintained that peace and she has fought for it at great personal cost. Concessions are part and parcel with the job, requiring some mental gymnastics and a little more than your everyday moral flexibility, but the deals she has wielded and weaved over the last eight and a half years has taken a dire toll on her conscience and almost shattered her faith in man as a species to be protected and preserved.

Michal, looking out the window, watches as wistful columns of smoke drift skyward from Riker's Island just eight kliometers away. She touches the window and swipes a diagonal line creating a digital *window* on the window. She then taps the center of that window and taps the glass in the direction of the island. When she zooms in she

20 saltare cüm diablo

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2309ce-APRIL-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 22:35zulu (local 13:12mst)

Other than Cue Ball and Second Hand, the Steel Annex has only one base to speak of and that's on Sapphire itself. Originally conceived as a home port for recreation and reboot than a base of operations, the designers still felt it necessary to add on a dozen turret defense towers, a handful of missile farms, and a hanger deck below the air field with thirty-two fighters and eight Razorback gun-ships for, as they so eloquently put it—shits and giggles. Though bristling with armament galore, stowed underground out of sight and out of mind, this facility is mostly protected by diplomatic immunity as well as the political neutrality of Sapphire itself.

It also helps that ninety-five percent of the people on site, at any given moment, are civilian employees and tourists on holiday.

The centerpieces of the base are as iconic as those were for the 1939 World's Fair. First to go up was the kilometer wide glass bio-sphere constructed over seventy years ago at a time when Sapphire did not have breathable air to speak of. Anchored on three sides to solid rock, and suspended over a small fjord at the end of a ragged peninsula called the Church Key, the sphere stands as an engineering marvel to this day. Except for its wide-open spaciousness, posh appointments and the hundred and fifty meter wide pool at the very bottom, transparent and overlooking the waves crashing on the rocks below, this is actually considered an utterly practical and self-contained environment.

The two-kilometer tower next to it, referred to as *The Spike* or sometimes the GOP, for God's Own Punji, was constructed forty years afterwards with the old Trylon in mind, and at a time when there was finally breathable air and blue skies to boot.

21 propeller heads

LCTN: SOL-3a, MOUNT MARILYN, MOON
CORD: SAO-0.0101 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2099ce-NOVEMBER-6-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 09:10zulu

After three weeks of discord this hastily set up lunar base has more the ambiance of a trailer park rather than a scientific endeavor. Because of the infighting it has been remarked that all it needs now is a barbecue, horseshoe pits, and the occasional tornado to make some of them feel right at home.

Of the nineteen people at the site, fourteen of them are pissing and moaning that two college boys are emceeing this show.

Their handlers, three über-fellows from academia who are representing Oxford, Texas A&M, and the ICTP out of Trieste, refuse to give into the agents from the DOD, DOE, JPL, NASA and the ESA. All their concerns, arguments, cajoling, and threats did not sway the managing 'fellows' position one inch or iota. ASU is at the helm and they picked Jay and Silent Bob for the task.

Born into privilege, the short-brawny graduate geek from the ASU Department of Physics, who goes by the name of Jason Kay, has had a blast arguing theoretical physics over the last twenty-one days. Thumbing his nose at these titans in the field, and not subtly so, he has basically dismissed everything they believe and hold dear. His contention that *a proof does not make for truth,* is argumentatively sound, and the fact that almost every known theory in physics has found its way onto the metaphorical scrapheap is clearly supported by the historical record.

Jay's stoner like exterior cannot hide his intelligence, distain for the conventional, or the biting sarcasm he wields like a chainsaw, "Can you fossils say Higgs boson, branes, and multiverses? I knew you could."

Being labeled a *closeted forth-dimensional time-space holdout*

22 dildo express

LCTN: SOL-3, CAVE CREEK, ARIZONIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2103ce-OCTOBER-6-SATURDAY
TIME: 06:15zulu (local 22:15pst)

Rolling his eyes, Charles Washington tilts his head to the side and while looking out the window, "Right now, he's in my Jacuzzi getting a blow-job from my X.O."

From the phone he hears, ["Why am I not surprised. Then, I venture to guess Mr. Kay is close by. Where the fuck is he?"]

Again Charles looks out the window, "At this moment he's behind my exec, and by the way she's wiggling I believe he's making good on his handle."

["I'm so fucking jealous of Shelly."]

"I don't know if you want to go there, Claudia."

["No, really, I do! I need the diversion. This job is a bitch. So, should I ask who Somalia Slew is?"]

"You're talking to him."

["Where the fuck did you get that?"]

"It's been my gamers I.D. since forever. What can I say?"

["If they only knew…"] She snickers, ["Ya, hide the Genoa. Anyway, we were going to ask but now you *are* going!"]

"I made a promise to my wife."

["General Washington, you saw the photos and read the text message. Delta Echo is sitting out there orbiting Titan, and it's real! You three shit-heads are being asked for by name, so consider yourself RSVP'd and on the manifest! Do you fuckin' read me?"]

"Five-by-five, Madam President."

23 twinkle twinkle little stars

LCTN: DEEP SPACE (upsilon-Taurus)
CORD: SAO-76608 (47pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-MAY-10-SATURDAY
TIME: 14:35zulu

Fighting in and around a bone of contention, say a planet, requires real time strategy. All those involved in the action are zipping about way below the speed of light (c) and the only time you lose sight of someone is when they have to flee to avoid getting hit—then pick them up again after they tear-ass back into the fray.

Trying to fight in deep space is something altogether different. At speeds ranging from 0.5c to beyond 2,400c such encounters are rare, and more akin to a deep sea submarine duel where both of you are doubly deaf and blind. In these battles you have to scoot-n-snoop, that is stop and wait to see if you can maybe spot the other guy's displacement signature as they rip past while you're floating along all quiet like or, if they're lucky enough, stopping short of your position at just the right time which can give them the high ground *if* they are smart enough to know how not to use it. This is where relativity rears its ugly head in the worse possible way.

It's more like an art than a science, where guesstimate and SWAG is all that you have to realistically work with until you get a clear fix on them. At one AU the information you collect is already 8.33 minutes in the past, and at practical distances exceeding maybe seven or eight AU the idea of sitting for an hour or two can be daunting, if not downright frightening.

Yet, this is a form of combat that rewards those who have patience, tenacity and the skills to observe; however, the Annex is now in possession of an antenna array that gives them an unreasonable advantage. A tool they cannot take full advantage of just yet.

Empty space is full of stuff—it's anything but empty. On the quantum level it's a seething cauldron of nuttiness and duality slight of

24 chanson de geste

LCTN: SOL-3, WARSAW, POLAND
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.01au from SOL)
TIME: 14:35zulu (local 15:35cet)

Jacob didn't ask for this one. Up till now he has spent his career quietly reviled by a knowing few, but recently that hatred has blistered to the surface and under the microscope of a gleeful press who was looking for anything malleably scandalous. Id est…

What was supposed to be a simple expression of gratitude has snowballed into a multi-million signature petition and a political slug-fest in the courts. Jacob did write a public letter in an attempt to put an end to the controversy, but the children rescued by the Annex just a few years before would not be silenced.

Nor were the children of the Earth, and they made up the bulk of the petitioners.

Orderu Uśmiechu, the Order of the Smile, is officially apolitical however, in spite of continued obscurity, in the international arena it has become a most coveted award indeed. Rarely does a nomination cause concern but naming the whole of the now Steel Annex Deputation, with Jacob Graves expressly identified as the Knight recipient, was way beyond controversial. At the United Nations it was more like hitting a hornet's nest, and in many a minds eye, with the General Assembly in particular, they might as well have nominated Sepp Dietrich and all of the Waffen-SS for this badge of *cheer and joy*.

In court it was discovered that the UN did hold some undue influence over the orders Laureates, and since it was verified that the nomination at-issue was solely a grassroots effort by children alone, the court found on behalf of the petitioners.

For the first time Jacob has finally taken the time to ponder all this, and to the bark of a herald, "Sluchajcie! Sluchajcie! Sluchajcie!" he quietly thinks to himself, *why you meddlin' bitch.*

25 donkey boy

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 16:03zulu (local 12:20mst)

In the receiving area at the top of the Spike Nikki-8 dutifully waits for Maria to come out of her office. Being called for by Maria is never to be taken lightly, but the last two times were really no big deal. Nikki was simply asked to tap into a diplomat or two that Maria couldn't read; but from the purposeful activity behind the glass wall in the C3, and their thoughts echoing in her head, she realizes that all is according to plan.

Jessica steps out of the elevator and notices Nikki across the way looking out the window over the air field and pyramids far below. Bracing herself, Jessica makes a bee line towards her and stops just two meters short.

Jessica lazily applauds, "The fifteen year old, I'm amazed."

Nikki bodily turns, "If I may ask, which one?"

For Jessica it's like looking into a mirror—from four years ago, that is. Where Nikki's sister cherubs stopped growing five years before, and the budding pre-pubes' development was arrested just last year, this Nikki, at twelve, has starting to fill out with her hips and breasts rounding off quite nicely.

Jessica grins, "Donkey Boy. You know, Demitri."

So, this is what I have to look forward too, thinks Nikki as she ponders the beauty Jessica has become, "Oh, him!"

"A remarkable feat of accommodation. My hat's off to you!"

"One for the team."

Jessica flips, "Well, he isn't exactly a sport-fuck!"

Nikki flips back, "I took it *all* with grace and aplomb."

26 murder board

DATE: 2313ce-MAY-11-SUNDAY
TIME: 00:03zulu (local 19:12mst)

Operationally it's past midnight, zulu time, and the crew is pretty much done grilling Maria. Everyone else has taken off to finish the Sapphire day except for Bob and Kevin Vossler who elect to hang back for a private consult with Maria.

Like most Murder Boards the participants go round-and-round over the pain points at-issue and still end up at the same place—totally clueless if the plan in question is going to work or not. Adopting a plan depends on the quality of the intel you get, the predictability of the players involved and the *skillz* to differentiate between substantive and subjective, but what sucks about all this effort is that you never really know a plan's true worth until the debriefing which is after the fact. Weighing the risks while betting on the come is always a challenge when planning a mission, but on the by-and-by it's the hair-brained scheme that seems to gain traction. Maria's plan is as bat-shit crazy as they come but it's its *behind the eight-ball* uniqueness that has piqued the board's curiosity considering the situation they're facing. One could say that the positive reception on "the plan" is riding solely on the merits but, mostly, it's because nobody could come up with a viable alternative that makes any sense by comparison.

So, they voted to go along with it.

It is obvious to all that the SA will not be able to conduct themselves like the last time out but, then, nobody in their wildest dreams would ever believe that *anybody* would give up capital assets, and as liberally as Maria plans too, just for a strategic advantage down the road. It's not just counterintuitive—it just ain't natural.

Ending his career as a command chief, Vossler is the perfect kind of asshole to head the Murder Boards out of C3, "You really think this thing will work? I mean...this is risqué!"

Mentally scratching her head, Maria asks, "You mean risky?"

27 handholding everyone by their dicks

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orian)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-MAY-11-SUNDAY
TIME: 19:07zulu (local 13:12mst)

It took less time for the Iron Maiden to make the four zigzag jumps back to the rendezvous point called U-Ey (out near HIP-27427) than it did for the surviving SS cruiser to see the first one get hit. After they recover the twelve fighters they had to follow combat procedure and wait the twenty-three remaining hours before they could double back to Betelgeuse.

As the Maiden backs up to secure hard-dock with the hub of the Carrie Nation, in a polar orbit around Cocytus, Chief Stark realizes that most of the CIC crew have already started to leave their posts. After handing off to Hippo-1 Control the CIC on the SA36 becomes superfluous so, as is the standard practice, only a skeleton crew is left behind.

When Zach himself starts for the exit Jerry gets his attention, "Corporal, if you've got a minute."

"My time is your time, Chief."

"You off duty, son?"

"Not if you need me."

"How about a single-malt? My buy."

"Okay?" Zach thinks for a second then shrugs, "Sure!"

With Scott in tow they hop on the last elevator out of CIC and are silent on their way to the wet deck of the Carrie Nation, and as they step off the elevator Jerry opens the conversation by getting to the point, "Corporal, I have to ask, what are your career goals?"

Zach shrugs, "To do the best I can no matter what job you throw my way. I've been tagged as upwardly mobile and I don't know

28 in flagrante delicto

LCTN: SIERRA HOTEL-B4A (Second Hand)
CORD: SAO-76502.B0305 (296pc from SOL)
DATE: 2264ce-NOVEMBER-2-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 22:05zulu (local 15:15mst)

Xhemal sapian, the Albanian spelling, is going to stick because Bob says so. He is the designated authority here therefore what he says goes. For a pack hunter that spends a lot of its time in water the troopers tasked with tracking and observing them thought it was funny that they couldn't swim a lick. Jokingly they started referring to these beasts as 'Jamal raptors' up until they find out that these gorgeous but monstrously-lethal creatures were in actuality sentient beings.

And that was more than a bit unexpected.

The SA's version of taking-coup is to sneak up on someone or something while cloaked and dust them with invasive nano-chips for data collection via the tacnet. Before they could get enough data for analysis the teams watching these creatures knew something was very odd about them so they called for a professional early on, and Bob cannot believe his luck that he got tagged for this duty.

Corporal, Robert Jackson, is not a zoologist but considering the reports the battalion commander was getting from the bush she thought that anthropology was close enough for now. Bob isn't even an avowed professional in the field. Ever since he joined the Annex he's been methodically studying the language and aesthetic differences between the resident population from the Pleiades as compared to the people from the Hyades, namely 83-Tau, and the divergence from their mutual Australian origins. Each and every skillset, ability or field of interest is documented in the SA so the trainers ended up labeling what Bob was doing to pass the time as "cultural anthropology" simply because they had nothing else to go on.

So, for the first time out, Bob is cloaked in the trees with a fire team following what they have been calling a *rape*. Lions come in

29 freudian wardrobe

LCTN: SOL-3, HAVANA, CUBA (Playa)
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.003au from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-NOVEMBER-22-SATURDAY
TIME: 22:45zulu (local 17:45est)

Jacob didn't want to come here but it was Diego's choice. For his 10th birthday he wanted to hang with his Nana's side of the family and, surprise-surprise, they did not come from his mother's childhood stomping grounds of Lincoln Heights or Echo Park. Maria avoids this island like the plague but Diego does love his grandmother.

Here on the beach beside the Puesta del Sol complex the kids are playing stick ball while Jacob is juggling the tabs between thing one, La Pachanga, and thing two, the Copacabana. When the check for food and drink for the high-profile *¡Familia Cubanaza!* gets this big the business owners tend to get a little on edge. Funny how these things sort themselves out when you hand them actual money.

Especially when the exchange rate is out of this world.

At one time the hotel complex *Playa Puesta del Sol* was the Hope Diamond of the Miramar District but that was a long-long time ago. The epicenter of what was known as 'Playground Havana' in the late 21st Century has not fallen into total disrepair yet, but this and the Varadero are pretty much the only areas that have not come unraveled since those heady days. For quite some time the big-bankroll tourists have been going off-world and itty-bitty Cuba has been fighting for the retro-discount weekend getaway dollars ever since.

Jacob has always envisioned Cuba as a postmortem of the wacky octo-millennial scramjet epoch, and as factual as that may be on the surface he's found that the people here are genuinely wonderful, the food is even more so, and the rattrap ambiance and dynamic culture of this island is positively starting to grow on him.

Here they use paved roads for Cro-Magnon old automobiles that run on gasoline so how's that for atmosphere?

30 truth in wine

LCTN: SIERRA HOTEL-B4A (Second Hand)
CORD: SAO-76502.B0305 (296pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-NOVEMBER-27-THURSDAY
TIME: 10:15zulu (local 25:40mst)

The "big reveal" was a first-rate air-tight mind-screw and had exactly the desired effect which was to throw the attendees completely off balance. When the representatives from the US State Department, the FDA, UN, FIS and the press were told on approach that they were going to meet "aliens" they all rolled their eyes in absurd disbelief because they've been fed this gimmicky bullshit before however, the sight of ginormous sauropods noshing away on tall trees during touchdown should have suggested to them that they were in for something completely different.

The vision of the Xhemal elder, Caesar, greeting them at the debarkation ramp, and a half-dozen more of those things walking freely about, seems to have overloaded their collective startle-reflex, and if it wasn't for Bob and Michal standing there with Caesar you can bet they all would have high-tailed it back up the ramp.

Caesar gave them a quick rundown of the itinerary while on the way to the brewery where he handed them off to Snoopy—their primo brew master. All during the tour Snoopy had to keep reminding the FDA inspectors to note where they were holding to the FDA as well as the Institute of Brewing and Distilling standards out of London. Focus was a little off because this feathered monster was a delight to listen to and so damned well versed on requirements that they themselves had to bone up on before arrival. The one chief-inspector they brought ended up being the voice for the group and he had a wonderful time chatting it up with Snoopy over things like hygiene, mash, temperature and cask preparation.

The protracted discussion at the winery covered a whole galaxy of oenology practices such as pressing, must, racking and the

31 a dual-wielded fuck you

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-NOVEMBER-27-THURSDAY
TIME: 11:22zulu (local 08:30mst)

The drive up the Church Key into New Sydney has always been a short but pleasant trip. Taking this route always reminds Maria of the 2 freeway in Glendale California and how Earths superhighways from the past are slowly fading from sight. The crumbling overpass supports and trusses standing like Stonehenge monuments to culture and industries long past.

It's strange to see cars and roads in the old movies and how people operate them hands-on and yet are basically stuck to that road. With vehicles today floating around like they do people have this sense of freedom that they can go anywhere they want—which is total bunk because if you stray from the preordained flight-paths by just an inch then 'ka-ching' comes your ticket. The last time someone on Sapphire switched off their autopilot and tooled around just 'cause ended up with over thirty citations and their operating license revoked for five years. Only three groups on the Scab can do that with impunity and they are the police, emergency services, and the SA.

Many cities still have paved roads but for how little they are used they've become glorified bike paths anymore. Vehicles with wheels, sans the autopilot, are still around but they are looked upon as an anachronism and unsafe. You can still get a driver's license but the rules of the road, roads without traffic lights or posted signs, are difficult to master or negotiate without a neuronet interface.

Many places, like New Sydney, don't call them cars anymore. The locals here, whose slang is rooted in Australian etymology, call them by a 'chop-up' of the manufacturers name or by the generic *glider* for high end sedans or *barge* for underperforming family sized vehicles. The word *Jetson* has been the patois *de jour* for the small

32 gib fest

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-2-TUESDAY
TIME: 01:37zulu (local 12:00pst)

A combat drop for the first time is a strange experience. By now you have ran simulations out the ass, but it does not prepare you for the stark reality that you're actually going in somewhere uninvited and bust on someone else's ass for real.

83-Tau is on the far side of the Hyades cluster away from the Pleiades. It has no official name but Zmeu tops the list. The second moon of the sixth planet, a gas giant, was one of the first planets to be colonized by Earth from way back when and has since become the ultimate seat of both political and economic power in the Hyades. With just under a half-billion residents and more than a thousand cities and townships, scattered over four continents, thirty percent of that population actually live within New Brisbane proper.

New Brisbane was originally a quaint little city on an island called Bribie Eyot that was about the size of Ireland and just off-shore of Queensland Vista which is the largest continent north of the equator. Theta-2 also has a Queensland named region but they called dibs on New Queensland before 83-Tau could, so Vista it is.

With all the quirky Aussie names for everything you would expect that the gas giant and the planet-moon would follow suit but that was not the case. The original surveyors of the system were Russian and because the gas giant is over ten Jupiter masses, bordering on brown-dwarf status, and dangerously radioactive when close up, in a fit of originality it was named Chernobyl by the survey crew. Since there was no clear alternative, Prypiat became the name of the habitable planet-moon orbiting the gas giant and that name stuck for all the obvious reasons. The Russians did plan to return and colonize but the Australians got there first.

33 always a pall bearer never a corpse

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-2-TUESDAY
TIME: 02:03zulu (local 30:40mst)

Boxter Hartcourt was in New York looking to preemptively block the United Nations from inviting Second Hand to the General Assembly as an observer mission. The news report on the Xhemal is still one day from being released but Maria made a point to send that information, including Cesar's travel calendar, to the Hyades via jpeg. Staff-Sergeant Nelson and Chief Stark's posts, sharing their respective *Black Friday* social encounters, got through loud and clear.

About 7:10 pm local time Hartcourt made a call to a service provider he frequents when he comes to Manhattan. Her real name is Sally Fukushima, but her pro-domme name is Hone-Onna who is a celebrated master of Kinbaku-bi with a touch of sadism. It is said of Hone-Onna that she liberally applies humiliation and pegging and that the safe word is optional while on the clock. If one does take issue with the performance, or tries to top her, she's been known to option aikido, wing chung or sometimes judo for conflict resolution.

At 7:58 pm local time Hartcourt answered the door and it's not long-tall Sally with her petite fluffer-bee Hannya standing there, but Lieutenant-Colonel, Peter Ribot (USMC) and Shane McElroy, retired police inspector of the NYPD. Both are leaning against the door frame dressed as EMTs with a gurney behind them ready to roll.

McElroy grins big with a cheesy, over the top, and blistering piss-poor Aussie accent, "G'day, mate!"

Hartcourt, in his Edo period kimono, was surprised, "Wut?"

With a muffled '*pa-pop*' a plasma jet reached out from a cigar shaped object in Peter's hand that effectively tasers Hartcourt where he stood. They strap his limp body to the gurney and off they go.

34 spit and duct tape

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-2-TUESDAY
TIME: 04:10zulu (local 21:12mst)

Maria is dog tired.

They held the red-eye run to the Carrie Nation till after her meeting with Hartcourt. She intended to only catch a twenty minute catnap to reboot but she ended up sleeping all the way.

Last time she was on Hippo-1 was in May.

This was her command for the longest time and she was proud of it, but now she commands all and she's sick and tired of it. When she was in charge of the Carrie Nation and the five battle platforms assigned to it she longed for her previous command. That was the Phoenix-Marauder, and though a flying junk heap by the end of the war it was her flying junk heap. And when she was in command of that she longed for the days she didn't command at all. At this point, like Bob, retread is beyond her reach.

The meeting tonight took its toll on Maria and she realizes that Hartcourt was right—she could have resolved a lot of issues by simply shooting him. She knows it would only be a temporary fix because some of those waiting in the wings for Hartcourt to die make him look like a saint by comparison.

Harcourt is lawful-evil, as Maria is perceived as lawful-evil so best stick with what you know.

The rescue mission on Orpheus Eyot was such a monumental triumph that Maria did need to make an appearance and share a beer with the team, but the fact is she needs sleep even more. If it wasn't for Kiplinger and his family being on board here she would have found an excuse to bow out.

As it is Maria is stepping down the ramp of the red-eye with a

35 ecce homo plumatis

LCTN: SOL-3, MANHATTAN, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.997au from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-11-THURSRDAY
TIME: 21:35zulu (local 16:35est)

Caesar has just finished talking to the General Assembly on behalf of Second Hand and it couldn't have gone better. People had a hard time believing that Caesar and Sheila were real but they are starting to come around. Their media ratings have now hit 98% and Caesar's social page has been hammered with 34 million friends requests that had to be diverted to a 'Second Hand' group page.

When the news report on the Xhemal Sapiens was first released on the 3rd most everybody thought it was a prank. The net is full of this type of crap that has been reported on before—only to find out it was all bullshit later. Then to think that anyone over five years of age would fall for an animatronic talking dinosaur was beyond preposterous to think of, but the two hour special about the Xhemal and Second Hand webcasted on the 5th with Michal Pitney hosting, of all people, kind of made most viewers sit back and doubt their doubt. If this was a prank then buy all means it's a well-polished one.

Interspace commercial and commerce in the DC region will normally drop into the Willoughby Spaceport, at a place that used to be called Goose Hunt, just a few miles west of Dulles International. On the morning of the 9th when Caesar's charter flight provided a DCN (diplomatic clearance number) it was routed it to Dulles. When the ATC learn it was the Xhemal they rerouted it to Regan National.

Accompanying Caesar and Sheila is Peter Ribot and Senior Deputy Marshal, Angel Griego, with three six-man squads of SA who are being brought in to provide plain clothes security for the Xhemal until a local solution can be found. This will be Greigo's first time back to New York since Riker's Island where he and his company followed Angela Simmons into the fire fight that ended up being a bloody mess.

36 the lesser yhvh

LCTN: SOL-3, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.998au from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-16-TUESDAY
TIME: 01:40zulu (local 17:40pst)

For Maria and Jessica it is 1:40zulu on Tuesday the 16th but here in Los Angeles it's still 5:40pm on Monday the 15th and the commuter traffic leaving downtown LA is starting to thin out. They are both on their second dose of the *jolt* booster-med which gives them about three hours before it starts to wear off. They're hoping to get to the 9:00pm beer run before they totally peter out.

Diego is on local time so she's up an atom.

The café outside the Bonaventure hotel is pleasant enough and if it wasn't for the patio heaters the ocean breeze from a coast twenty miles away would still chill you to the bone. When the weather is cool this is the hang out for most of the SA working out of One Klick across the street. The Co-op and the CIA used to watch everything the Annex did but it was such a fruitless effort that nowadays the spies only come around when it's someone like Maria in town. There was a time when the fear of assassination was an all-consuming worry but that was long ago. The standing Rules Of Engagement still apply today as they did way back when they were first adopted and will continue to do so into the next conflict...if it ever comes.

The obvious-obvious rule is that you don't touch anyone holding diplomatic credentials especially in neutral zones. Regardless of one's war footing this is always considered bad form. Another adopted rule is you never accost any combatant in a non-combatant mode in a mutually agreed to neutral territory like Earth or Sapphire. Busting on someone during R&R is looked upon as uncivil or uncouth nowadays. And what flies in the face of suavity is to gun someone down in the presence of family members or children. Anymore this is considered a no-no and you would think that Emily Post would have

37 doppler kittens

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313-DECEMBER-23-TUESDAY
TIME: 08:28zulu (local 08:04mst)

Jacob just shakes his head to himself, "Standing room only."

Every two years Jacob conducts his military history lecture series which consists of seven classes of twelve, ninety-minute lectures. These accredited courses give the attendees twenty-eight credits if they attend all 7,560 minutes of it. The first time Jacob gave these elective courses he had maybe thirty in the class but now the auditorium before him has 1,200 seats filled to the gills with another 130 troopers hanging out in back. Jacob has always wondered why the class has become so popular but, when brought to his attention by Maria, it is their avowed profession.

Weapons and Warfare in Media and Entertainment is the first of the series and is so damned fun because for twelve lectures Jacob pokes fun at movies and neuronet interactives and how they get it wrong. He also points out where they get it right, which is rare, but when he's done everybody's most cherished action-adventure, scifi and gaming memory of their youth has been so comically lamb-basted that they universally want to stay for the other six classes. *Supply Chain and Logistics* being the last of the series, which is a wrist-slashing bore, but Jacob does manage to make it interesting even though it's not exactly a fun subject. He usually retains more than 90% of the students that start from the first day which is another rarity.

"Okay, everyone, a few things to get out of the way before we get started today." Jacob lifts the lectern and carries it to the side of the stage while saying, "Paula, please stand."

Paula, in the front row, stands as Jacob sets the Lectern down then motions for her to turn around, "Rumors are flying and yes, this is Paula Herrero, of Familia Cubanaza, so ya'll can stop yur whisperin'

38 pearls before swine

TIME: 11:07zulu (local 11:03mst)

In baseball all the focus is on the pitcher yet it's the catcher that directs the team and calls the shots. Diego normally plays as the catcher, and she's brilliant at it, but she's currently in left field until the medical restrictions from the surgery are lifted next month. Batting at just a smidge over .500 she's the best in the league but with those restrictions on her she'll be called out by the umpires if she tries to steal a base—which gives the opposing pitchers some sense of relief because her favorite pastime before becoming a "she" was to steal home right out from under their noses.

With that in mind the other team now finds it great sport to walk Diego instead of honestly pitching to her. In short, the wily and nimble *Vulpes velox Sapphireous* has been effectively hobbled and the opposition is taking full advantage of it.

On most days Maria would be really into the game but today you could say that she's just a tad preoccupied. They have a little over a half-hour before Zulu and local clocks synch for only 0.6 seconds at 11:37:31, and you'd think that the guilt would be eating her alive by now but after all these months setting this thing up she has come to terms with that guilt and cast it off. There's more than enough responsibility and guilt to spread around because what she actually did do here was simply make arrangements for people to act upon choices they made and planned for. What's left for Maria to personally own is this niggling competition between pensive sadness and doubt.

In an improbable stroke of good fortune the *not* having the "need to know" fuck up has already revealed itself, and it's colossal, and Maria is aware of it, but Bill and Scott are leaving her alone and are dealing with it the best they can. The much hoped for post-synch withdrawal and regroup has morphed into a full blown and impromptu RRF operation that they can't mad-scramble on just yet.

Shit has got to hit the fan first.

39 shut the fuck up and get coloring

TIME: 11:39zulu (local 11:38mst)

"Holy shit, Bill! You're fucking kidding!" Shouts Maria over the tacnet link as Nicole screeches up in Maria's glider.

Nicole barks, "Get in!"

With Maria running around the glider to the passenger side, Bill radios back through the link, ["Like, we just found out, like literally minutes ago! Are we gonna hit 'em?"]

Maria hops in and Nicole is already pulling away before Maria closes her door, "I can't believe they're cutting cookies again! If we put if off do ya think we'd be able to launch against it in a day or two?"

With Nicole maneuvering the glider into the adjoining field Bill replies, ["Scott and I agree, there is no way after today. If we pull our people out there's no goin' back."]

Maria tells Nicole, "Geisha Hut on Nufa, it's now or never."

Nicole gives her that *stupid question* look and, "Ah, now!"

Maria sees the reporters by first base and she tells Nicole to, "Stop!" Then to Bill over the net as she jumps out of the car and starts running to the news team, "Bill, we're doin' this but hang for a second, okay?" Then to the reporters, "How old are you guys?"

Opie says, "I'm twenty-two."

The camera operator, Yumi Oshiro goes, "Twenty-four."

Maria puts her hands out, "It's gonna be dangerous. I mean *you can maybe die* dangerous. We're hitting a Geisha Hut! If you come out of this alive it'll be a *hell* of a story!"

Opie and Oshiro didn't have to be told twice and, dragging spare octodroid cameras, they dive into the back seat as Maria hops in front, "Okay, Bill, we got two reporters from the local news outlet with us! They'll need body armor."

40 this job is a sore cock

LCTN: 69-TAURUS-C-3 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76608.0306 (47pc from SOL)
TIME: 11:55zulu (local 07:21mst)

Jacob came blowing into the U-Tau system with forty-seven fighters and two Warthog gunships in tow all-the-while thinking in jest, *things couldn't get much worse*—and all of a sudden, right before his eyes, things get shit serious real fast.

Upsilon-Tauri is a strikingly beautiful three-star system with all of sixty-seven planets and twelve-hundred moons whirling about in a grand-Viennese orbital waltz...via poetic license that is. An alternate view, when one considers the astronomical timeframe, is that this system is in actuality an explosively-violent demolition derby wherein maybe a third of the current orbital objects may make it through the next half-a-billion years in one form or another.

The third planet of the third dim-and-distant star happens to be the solitary habitable one of the bunch and barely habitable at best. Arrakis is a Venus sized world with an eccentric inclination of 37° from the orbital plane, in retrograde, making it both a captured body and not a proper planet by the current 2,112 IAU classifications.

This TCRE35-H body has been going through a reawakening of sorts. With water percolating up from long-dormant underground fault lines what life that did survive the eons of cold/deep space have since exploded onto the scene in dozens of oasis like zones. Because of their size, location and dense flora these oasis' have been named after the islands of the Hawaiian archipelago.

The irony being surrounded by desert instead of ocean.

Arrakis, in spite of its name and desert terrain, is a botanist's fantasyland when it comes to these islands. As for the fauna nothing here is larger than an amoeba so the Darwinian science geeks are gonna have to wait maybe a million years or so before they queue up.

41 low down low

LCTN: TURA-TAU-4 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76618.04 (47pc from SOL)
TIME: 12:12zulu (local 19:40mst)

Maria Ramirez is an exceptional pilot and near the top of her mile long list of competencies is that of a HWG driver. She is qualified to fly guns but her specific forte is zooming about as a Razorback pilot. Flying the Razorback, also known as a slick, means that your core objectives are stealth and evasion and basically flying around or away from the shit. Flying guns however is a one-eighty flip from slicks because you are intentionally seeking to be in close proximity to the shit, or flying into the shit, or instigating said shit.

In her early years Maria has flown dozens of Razorbacks into combat yet in all those sorties she has never fired a shot, but then, when you think about it, the hallmark of a successful slick mission is *not* firing a shot. Maria's meteoric rise up the ranks saw her as a battalion Chief Master Sergeant by the time the war with the Co-op started and she spent much of what followed in support by running the show from a backseat. In more times than anyone could count, in that capacity Maria has proved that she could magically pull victory out of the jaws of defeat and, with her exceptional strategic planning skills, she has become the most revered and feared combat commander in the history of the Steel Annex.

That said, Maria may be large-and-in-charge, in command of the entire SA, but on this mission Michelle Kiel is in tactical command of the AO because that's how they rock. Maria may have mission responsibility but here it's Kiel that moves the 'Rhesus and pieces' around for mission success. Since the recon teams did a fabulous job mapping out the Mari Lug, and quickly adding the subterranean landing pad for the tacnet, Kiel's impromptu assault landing went off without a hitch.

And 'without a hitch' has a half-life of about one minute.

42 orderu zajebiste

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 14:30zulu (local 14:06mst)

In the C3, at the top of the Spike, Colonel Karan has Victoria's undivided attention, "Well, Major, you're trending and it appears that your approval metrics have shot right through the roof."

Victoria huffs, "I'd rather this had been a private affair."

The Colonel nods in agreement, "Because it wasn't word has come down from the Air Marshal. You are to tender your resignation as Squadron Leader immediately. After the coronation you will be invited back into the reserves as a Lieutenant Colonel."

Victoria scowls, "A Wing Commander...and what if we refuse?"

Karan smiles and points, "If not then my orders are to strip that crown off your shoulder and bust you down to one-pip."

"I should have shot that reporter."

"The people like their fighting monarch." Karan then snorts, "So, for a heads up, the bill for your VC is being drafted as we speak."

Victoria snarls, "We will not hear of it."

"Royal assent is not a power of veto. You will turn it down, yes, but expect it to be pinned to your bodice. The people will demand it of you." As Victoria's eyes narrow with rage, the Colonel laughs, "And, as the Yanks say, buck it up buttercup."

"On that, we insist on a DFC awarded to all the flight crews."

Karan agrees, "Done!"

"And while we're at it, throw a CGC up for the Nippers."

"Isn't the Lieutenant two short of a pair?"

"He found his trousers today."

43 double-u eighty-eight

LCTN: SOL-3, CAVE CREEK, ARIZONIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.997au from SOL)
DATE: 2108ce-AUGUST-7-TUESDAY
TIME: 01:26zulu (local 18:26pst)

Charles Washington, for the umpteenth bazillionth time, is on the net and watching the fiery streaks of MK-5 and MK-12a reentry vehicles burst through the clouds in clusters of ten and slam into the desert floor at the Yuma Proving Ground. This project is called Castle Dome but the devices are actually dropping smack dab in the middle of the Cibola Range at the site.

This is the second shipment from asteroid 433-Eros in as many months and the international community is up in arms over it. Not so much that they are dropping tons of gold and platinum from orbit in vehicles designed to carry nuclear warheads, no, nothing that petulantly infantile, they are pissed as Judy because they don't have a piece of that nutso-lucrative action.

The United States, the principal member of the consortium that holds dominion over the patents for the new FTL drive, is pleased as Punch that they will maintain that control for at least another eight years and three months. In fact, at that point they don't even have to share the technology if they don't want to because they simply don't, and the consortium as a whole has decided to license the tech only to the space agencies of the key members.

Which means in ninety-nine months the UK, Russia, France and China will be in competition as they say.

Castle Dome was Charles Washington's last hurrah and it is a huge success. It's been said that everything he touches has turned to gold and for once that's not an expressive adage. The United States has secretly squirreled reentry vehicles into orbit for themselves and their "competitors" and, working together to mine 433-Eros, here's the aurum-mana poetically dropping from the heavens.

44 a bag of unwanted cat

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2112ce-MARCH-17-THURSDAY
TIME: 01:12zulu (local 28:20mst)

The red dwarfs of apón-Pup are part of a binary star system with the larger of the two over thirty-four AU away. The smaller B star has a handful of orbital objects and none of them had what a human would call a proper name-o for the longest time. In the mental and written Nefer Key manacle-speak they were represented by symbols that had more in kind with Korean Hangul glyphs, not interchangeable with their normal mental glyph language, and the original meaning of that writing style has since been lost over the last two-million Earth years after the Nefer Key integrated that dialectic symbology.

Most science and tech from those early days still held to those odd-ball glyphs as a descriptive attribute but, with human languages encroaching on their peacefully stagnant little universe, especially by English exploding onto the scene since the late 20th Century, Jason took it upon himself to come up with real names when he returned from a reconnaissance (i.e. sightseeing) trip in 1998.

Jason had a flair for languages, having been a pirate and all, and on this trip the one thing that shocked the hell out of him and Jacqui was the shear variety and abundance of consumer products on the Earth. They were both enthralled by the endless choices of chain restaurants and they were also amused by how the people made great fun of them—yet frequented them with gusto.

They themselves had to hit the gym while on tour.

Rome had a robust market economy with products from the world over, and where Egypt and Persia kind of creeped the Nefer Key out Rome impressed the hell out of them. Rome had a system that they could wrap their brains around and they did hold them in high esteem. When they came back in the 9th century they were amazed

45 new year old

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.998au from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-31-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 05:56zulu (local 21:56pst)

Monique Ribot is stoked because tonight it's New Year's Eve and all the people she cares about are here under her roof.

Pretty much everywhere humans habitate 2314 started about six hours ago when the commonly accepted UT8 and TAG clocks rolled out all-balls at midnight, but here on Earth this event still continues to drag incrementally along the planetary longitudinal time zones. Well, half of the zones before and half after the Prime Meridian that is.

For centuries there's been an ongoing row over the endless variety of recognized time standards and some confusion over what 'zulu time' actually means but, since it happens to be aeronautical and military nomenclature that owns the zulu designation, its use has transitioned from the Universal Time standards to the now Galactic Atomic Time standard which is in actuality four different clock outputs. First is the ASC (Atomic Spin Counter) Cesium-133 analog, second is the CAC (Compressed Atomic Counter) which is a digestible construct used for things like the UT8 Earth standard, third is the zepto-parsed and ultra-precise SNN (Scientific Notation and Navigation) time-pulse, then lastly is the user-friendly ACT (Atomic Coordinated Time) clock henceforth referred to as Zulu time.

All Earth standards are bounced against the CAC output and are not exactly exact per se. UT8 itself can be out of synch with the ACT/Zulu clock sometimes by as much as 0.74 seconds at any given end of year recalibration.

Then to compound this vexing little problem, every off-world solar clock is also linked to the CAC metronome but the one common thread is that their respective 'sidereal-time' solar days are all slave to Sagittarius-A.

46 free range clover

LCTN: SOL-3, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.998au from SOL)
DATE: 2314ce-JANUARY-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 17:28zulu (local 10:28pst)

On the landing platform at the top of the One-Klick facility, one thousand and eleven meters above downtown Los Angeles, Maria and Jacob are waiting for the limo with Paula, Tyrol and the Clones to arrive. These two joined Bob this morning in a video conference with the UN Secretary General and the President of the United States on how to set up roadblocks to the peace process.

It's not that anybody wants a war, in fact nobody really wants this war, it's just that everybody wants this conflict settled once and for all. Those who understand the history and dynamics between the Hyades and the Frontier and the Co-op and the Annex realize that any negotiation or treaty will simply delay the inevitable.

Which happens to be war.

The people who are truly running the show in the Hyades are a shadowy-inaccessible corporate caste who use their elected ministers as chess piece intermediaries so a discussion over anything, even the time of day, becomes some byzantine legaleze skull-fuck.

The meeting that followed with the President and the leaders of Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany and China was a discussion about Secretary General, Lebedev himself. In their eyes he's gone "full tilt clinton" but they decide to do nothing—except to lend him the rope in which to hang. It was the Russian Prime Minister who closed out with, *'Until we find the right tree let us not talk of the rope.'*

Only the US President and ambassador Mofid knew of Bob's earlier deal with Tillsdale and are frustrated that this group could only come up with the exact same delaying tactic of jurisdictional disputes through the courts, and with no viable alternatives the timetable is set.

47 piñata hombre de hierro

LCTN: 37-TAURUS-E2 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76430.0502 (57pc from SOL)
DATE: 2314ce-JANUARY-3-SATURDAY
TIME: 11:39zulu (local 26:33mst)

Artyom is the name of the AI for the Ryazan-Tottori Mecha gk scientific survey robot that was originally a seventy ton SRAM armored combat Mech. There is an astronomical selection of robotics to choose from for planetary exploration, specifically to limit human exposure to unpleasant environments, but this Sino-Russo design was perfect for the planet, Dedede, that orbits the red dwarf known as Kirby, which kicks the concept of "hostile environment" up a notch or two.

37-Tau-A is fifty times the luminosity of Sol, which essentially deep-fries everything within three AU of it. Then when you toss in its companion stars, 37-Tau-B and C, this means the *too fucking toasty* region fluctuates between three and four AU or so.

This is a relatively young system and, because of the unstable orbits, either B or C or both are going to get flung out sometime inside the next million years but, right now, 37 Tau also has three red dwarfs spinning around it in the outer periphery.

Two of those little guys also future Frisbee candidates.

The second of these red dwarfs, 37-Tau-E, has a pretty damned stable orbit for now but what has caught the attention of the scientific community is the discovery of a life-bearing planet way outside the goldilocks-habitable zone. That is, outside of the goldilocks zone towards the direction of Kirby, which makes it not so habitable or, *id est*, too fucking toasty.

Like all young red dwarfs, Kirby is volatile and regularly pukes solar flare after solar flare which makes a mess of both alkalis and phosphodiester-nucleic bonds, but what they have found on the second planet is a biology that shields these processes as well as provide a thermal ablative barrier from the steamy-scorchiness of Dedede.

48 vacuum sandwich

LCTN: 18-ORION-B2 (Orion region)
CORD: SAO-94426.202 (136pc from SOL)
DATE: 2314ce-JUNE-9-TUESDAY
TIME: 03:30zulu

Æther is the generally accepted name for 18-Ori-A. It was never exactly ratified by the International Astronomy Union, a rather obscure K-class star got the name Aether first, but without regulatory authority or legal standing the name has stuck with the Latin æ spelling in spite of the ballot. Hypnos is the set in stone name for the brown dwarf that orbits Æther at around 220au because 18-Ori-B beat everyone else when IAU Open Registration launched back in 2201.

Hypnos has the distinction of hosting the TAG satellite-clocks in Orion proper. That is two satellites stage-right by about 12au with another 208au between them and Æther. This is inert-deep space free of nebula, yes, but in actually it's a Lagrange point between Æther and Hypnos but who's keeping tabs on a lil' technicality?

The tracks for the TAG clocks are in-line perpendicular to the Zone of Avoidance, pointing to behind the Milky Way, yet nobody can pinpoint where? Some believe they run out to the Great Attractor, a mysterious gravity anomaly in the Laniakea Supercluster, but others believe it's from a possibly larger such anomaly out in the Shapely Supercluster, but the one thing they can all agree on that the center of the universe is in that general direction. Maybe one day they'll be able to peg it exactly—that is if someone would sponsor a mission out to about a million light years past Deneb, in Cygnus, there they could triangulate and get a clear fix.

Fat chance to boldly go, right?

Anyway, where these two TAG satellites appear to be flying away from the ZOA they are in fact standing still. The reality is that the Milky Way is heading towards some future parabola around these clusters, or maybe even in a collision with one? Well, with what the

49 bonus round

LCTN: 53-TAURUS-AB6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76548-00302 (83pc from SOL)
DATE: 2314ce-JUNE-21-SUNDAY
TIME: 09:15zulu (local 01:20mst)

Loki, SA-31, dropped into orbit over Led Myach, the icy moon circling the blue semi-giant, Sapfir Shest, the sixth planet that orbits the luminescent mercury-manganese rich binary pair of 53-Tau at over 4au distance. They're here to pick up a recon platoon that's been training in the treacherous artic conditions on the surface. The names of the planet and moon were Russian to start but a follow on Aussie team used a shitty translator so the phonetic spelling stuck. Just recently the origin and meaning of the names were finally realized but the residents have since become fast accustomed to them.

This system is over twenty parsecs, 65 light years, away from the current field or zone of battle, just outside the Hyades cluster, that it was believed being so far from the fight their war-footing SOP could be done away with on this pick up. It is not unusual for either the Annex or Co-op to loosen things up on low risk operations like this because for the other side to be able to do something about it they would either need the omniscient foresight of god, or security would have to be lax or significantly compromised.

That said, the dime was dropped on Monday, the 1st of June.

Both Chief Stark and Sergeant Nelson have been feeding the Co-op intel on a regular basis but rarely does it all match up so that they can exploit it and not expose the source. The Co-op was aware of this recovery mission but to actually act on this information would require a third corroborating scrap of data—and that came by way of a conversation overheard between two *Corps Diplomatique* types from the FIS over drinks and a losing streak at the Blackjack tables in the Khufu Pyramid and Casino.

The intel reports offered up by Blackstone Services are always

50 dancing gay whirling dervish voodoo pixies

LCTN: SOL-3, HAVANA, CUBA (Miramar)
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2314ce-JULY-3-FRIDAY
TIME: 13:05zulu (local 08:05est)

It's hot and sticky. Not unbearably so but 90% humidity with straight threes on the Celsius scale makes it a bit uncomfortable to say the least. The sporadic Caribbean overcast, a brisk ocean breeze and warm showers do mitigate the unpleasantness to a point.

With space travel being a thing, there was once a huge push to transition to the Kelvin scale, because metric is metric, however Jane and John Q Citizen didn't take kindly to the arm twisting. Both government and industry blindly followed science's lead but no amount of buttering up could convince people that 273.15° was better than 0° for the point where water freezes. While realizing that one scale is as valid as another, be it Metric or Imperial, as part of the hostile push back the Fahrenheit scale came into vogue.

Anymore on Earth most people talk ambient temperature in terms of Fahrenheit (92.0°) and not Celsius (33.33°) and over the last century temperature has been reported on all three scales with Celsius winning favor off world. There was a move to create a new Qelvin scale, with water freezing at 300° but, like Esperanto, it was a farcical effort and an abject failure.

The famed *Herrero Custom Auto Works – Milling and Printing* is located on the edge of the Miramar district at the Ciudid Libertad Airport. In fact this was originally a military airport that was converted to small regional strip for civil traffic and was eventually bought out and operated by the Herrero family for the last sixty-five years. The Auto Works facility is along the north-west part of the runway and the machining operation is next to that with the car lot out front and stocked with anywhere from sixty to a hundred classic cars for sale or consignment.

51 waifer thin

LCTN: SOL-3, MANHATTAN, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2273ce-MARCH-9-SUNDAY
TIME: 15:40zulu (local 10:40est)

What Bob has wanted most since joining the Steel Annex was to become a fighter pilot. 'Was' being the operative word because ten minutes ago word came down from up on high that it's just not in the cards for him. He earned the privilege but he's spread too thin. Flight school would have been a breeze but all those years on Second Hand, having become the unwitting confidant of the Xhemal, has sent Bob careening down the command path like a pinball.

Dancing attendance on the Xhemal being his highest priority.

Currently he's attached to the Marauder, SA15, as a company commander, a Deputy Marshal, but to his frustration he's split 70-30 between his company and dealing with the Xhemal. Bob has gone out on a limb for them so many times that he has earned their undying trust, and because of that they accept him as their designated trustee and representative in all matters human—and no one else.

In a closed session with the U.N. Security Council yesterday afternoon, what was expected to be a simple lateral-pass of Second Hand over to them, ended up being a medicinal dose of butthurt dished out by lil-old nobody, Bob. He was here solo and was coached well, but he strayed from that script because the Xhemal, as a sentient non-human, have their own ideas on how to move forward. They opt for an alliance with the Steel Annex, do not recognize U.N. legitimacy, and since the SA has been autonomous *de jure* for the better part of forty years this "courtesy call" ends up as a diplomatic coup for them.

Bob, currently debating the breakfast or lunch menu options at the stylish corner café at Lexington and 43rd, will find out the full effect of his appearance next week when his old platoon secures the landing site of a UNOOSA mission that is sent to do an end-run around

52 cinquante deux

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-FEBRUARY-21-THURSDAY
TIME: 12:40zulu (local 35:53mst)

"My God, is that a sight..."

At the foot of the Spike, Jessica and Maria are looking out over the ocean past the Kilosphere and Orb-West, so Jessica turns to Maria and thumbs in the direction of the outdoor patio lounge by the cliffs, "Change of venue for my meeting!"

Maria thinks about it, "Why not?"

Operationally it may be past zulu-noon, but here on Sapphire it's almost midnight. On the Earth it can get impossibly dark without a moon reflecting sunlight back, but here there are so many stars you end up with a steady drizzle of lumens at night. That is until tomorrow morning when Kirin becomes an IAU accredited moon.

After eighty years of gravity tugs and massive bombs, Kirin, a free roaming rogue planet the size of Mercury, has been bumped and dragged into a crazy spirographic orbit around Sapphire. With one last cobalt-bluer device popping twelve hours from now, 20-gigatons at just the right altitude, should be the cushy right-cross that'll finally nudge it into a circular orbit out around 470,000 kilometers.

So far Kirin has stabilized Sapphire's axial wobble and brought desperately needed ocean tides as well as the now reasonable weather conditions. This nuke is expected to put Kirin in a position to ensure predictable tides and promote steady ocean currents because the next introduction of fauna from Earth will need it to thrive. If another shot is required to fine tune that orbit then they have a fifty-plus megaton warhead being offered by the Steel Annex, which would do nicely.

Maria, noticing Kirin starting to peek over the eastern horizon, gasps at the sight, "No, we are definitely doing this! Let's go."

53 boxcars

LCTN: CALAR-3 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: M45-B002 (133pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-FEBRUARY-28-THURSDAY
TIME: 05:15zulu (local 30:05mst)

SA deep space dump points are in the millions.

When you look up in the night sky, no matter where you are, everything you see is where it used to be. How far away a star is in terms of light years has a direct correlation to how old that light is by the time it has gotten to you. All objects in space are moving and not in lockstep to one another. Most things are moving away from your line of sight, some towards it, some are moving faster and others are slower—and none of it is ever moving in a straight line.

All relative but askew from each point of view!

This makes navigation a real challenge because one can plot out all those crazy trajectories, in concert around Sagittarius-A, in their dataset but nobody can actually look up and see any of it in real time. The only "right now" view to be had is within said navigational dataset and this makes tracking time critical because if your SNN time is out of synch with the data-model you'll find your aim off kilter. There are no guesstimates or fudge factors when jumping. The further you risk a jump with a bad clock the more ass-up the results.

If your clock becomes irreparably off then you could take a stab at jumping at where the target star is in the sky now, knowing it will have moved on by the time you actually get there, a nanosecond later, but in a busy place like the Pleiades it's so cluttered that another object may have taken its place by the time you dump.

Now, thanks to the Orion Trust, the Annex's navigational data-models are so exacting and, with the accuracy afforded by the SNN clocks, the SA is able to convey any proposed deep space rendezvous on a whim via a simple delimited string of encrypted numbers. Stupidly simple with distance in tenths of Astral Units, the

54 divas

LCTN: SOL-3, MALIBU, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.002au from Sol
DATE: 2318ce-APRIL-19-FRIDAY
TIME: 01:35zulu (local 17:35pst)

Jessica is in a limo, a Mach-glider, racing over Griffith Park on its way out to Malibu with ol' Mac piloting it. She's sitting shotgun instead of riding in the back because Mac is usually a lot of fun to chat with but today he's seems more than a bit preoccupied. The awkward silences leaving her wondering what the hell is eating at him?

They're running just a smidge late because over the last two hours Jessica has been engaged in a "captivating" heart to heart with Monique Ribot. What floored Jessica was that Monique already knew she was Scarab, which was why she stopped bugging her about career goals over four years ago, and that was also about the time when the rumors of Scarab started circulating in the intelligence community, but Monique wouldn't divulge on how she knew back then and informed Jessica that she'll fill her in when the time is right.

With the conversation finally coming around to what Monique was really tunneling for, what Jessica knew about her and her business interests, Monique was surprised that Jessica deemed her off limits just like Maria and family. The one exception being her father and Monique relished in the explanation as to why—and was floored by hearing of Jessica's resourcefulness and outcomes when put to the question. Monique now realizes that the *diamond in the rough* she met years ago has cut and polished itself all on its own.

Walking Jessica to the limo, as a parting gift, Monique points to her own head while saying, "*Ma moltiė*, sooner than you think I will let you ransack this. I'll insist on it."

Now over Malibu, Jessica looks at Mac and asks, "Agatha?"

Mac just shakes his head with a sigh, "I should never have started smashin' on that."

55 moral compass

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-MAY-5-SUNDAY
TIME: 12:34zulu (local 12:11pst)

The 'night-night' sky from Jacoby's Stump, an island estate complex only a stone's throw from Orpheus Eyot, is shocking for the first time. In the umbra of the gas giant, Chernobyl, it is so dark that the stars explode everywhere—except where Chernobyl is overhead.

At ten Jupiter masses, not yet quite a spectral-Y brown dwarf, it's at this weird sweet spot having puffed up to over twice the size of Jupiter. Double that and it'll start to shrink but, as it is, the first time you look up at the night sky you'll fixate only on the black hole.

A field of stars encircling this dead cavity is surreal to behold.

Now, where Jupiter and Saturn each have over sixty moons Chernobyl has only two, Prypiat and Sokol, which the locals call Smėagol, and between them is the Chakram, a ring of dark dust and soot with a cross-section of five-meters by five-thousand kilometers and hard as hell to see unless the light from Zmeu hits it just right.

Piling out of a Trident Star-Clipper, Hartcourt's personal ship, Jessica, Nicole, Eight, Cap and Peanuts have stopped dead in their tracks while looking up at the sky, with Nicole going, "Holy...hell!"

As a stretch limo approaches the airfield, Michelle Kiel steps up behind them with two SA privates in tow who are also from the stumps, Clint Wanganui and Hartcourt's granddaughter, Sheron Pilliod.

Kiel says, "Bit of a mind popper, aye?"

Nicole is amazed, "Ah, yea, you could say that."

Eight is in awe, "I feel like I'm going to get sucked up into it."

Jessica points up, "This is nucken' futs!" She glances at Kiel, "You did say Smėagol was gonna pop out, right?"

56 makin' dyin' lookin' good

LCTN: SOL-3, PALMDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.002au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-MAY-27-MONDAY
TIME: 17:00zulu (local 09:00pst)

Over the last century the high desert has reclaimed much of the Antelope Valley. With Earth's falling populations migrating towards metropolitan areas, like Los Angeles, small cities such as Lancaster and Victorville have been abandoned and bulldozed out of existence.

Palmdale is now a little postage stamp of a community, only twelve square kilometers, whose sole existence is to house the workers for the United States Air Force Plant Forty-Two.

Most of the plant is robotic, with humans only in executive, program management, security and a handful of support positions, and still there is a glut of available housing.

Plant 42 is a busy place, if you're a robot, but as a human it can be slow paced amid all the frantic activity. In actuality this locale has multiple plants, for multiple contractors, running a whole galaxy of multiple projects, but the projects quietly getting all the attention is the joint Northrup, Lockheed and Sukhoi F380 Cerberus production, and F308 conversions.

Northrup had these lucrative contracts all to themselves but, truth be told, terrestrial aerospace companies are stealthily in bed with one another.

Real world competition anymore is only for show.

Anyway, Cerberus production in in full swing, managed full swing that is, allowing for six airframes a day. They could actually puke out more than twenty a day but that would dramatically shorten the production run. Management is even thinking of slowing it down to four or even three per day to stretch out the run so they do not have to mothball it all before the ships start coming back in for overhauls

57 caper emissarius by proxy

LCTN: SOL-3, NEW YORK, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-OCTOBER-1-TUESDAY
TIME: 15:35zulu (local 10:35pst)

"I love what you did with the place!"

"I haven't made any changes to speak of."

"I see that!" Michal Pitney shakes Vasily Lebedev's hand and, "Your taste and sense of decor is impeccable."

"*Da*, Michal, your sense of humor. People complain that's one missing thing from this office." He turns to Bob and shakes his hand, "Marshal Jackson, *dobraye ootro.*"

Bob nods, "Good morning, Secretary General."

"*Nyet*, it's Vasily! Let's be casual like old days, okay Bob?" He guides them to the social pit between the fireplace and the windows, "We should take load off and, as you say, get to point."

Except for the carpet, the office of the Secretary General of the United Nations has not changed one bit since Michal renovated it. This place is a symbol of their station with their working office right next door. Lebedev is the current Secretary General and only a few of his personal trinkets grace this room with his Russian military service and Spetsnaz decorations and mementos on the far wall.

In the pit there's a crystal ice bucket with frozen vodka shots, and after Lebedev hands them out, they raise their glasses with our Vasily offering the toast, "Za zda-ró-vye!"

Michal thanks him, "*Nostrovia! Za fstryé-tchoo!*"

Lebedev nods with a smile, "*Da.*"

Now sitting, Bob says, "Thank you for seeing us, Vasily."

"That depends on which hat you want to wear."

58 welcome to raccoon city

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11, (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-OCTOBER-5-SATURDAY
TIME: 02:20zulu (local 33:05mst)

Cocytus, better known as Cue Ball, has been the recruit-boot training site for the Steel Annex since its inception. The planet was discovered by accident when three early SA assault ships, precursors to the HWG line of drop ships, dumped from a training jump far from Betelgeuse. Not using transitional shift, SOP then, the two follow on ships exit their jumps only to notice the command ship plummeting through the thin atmosphere while trailing a jet of plasma and slam into the surface with the force of a speeding asteroid.

Two things were a result from this accident. First, the Steel Annex developed and perfected the low energy and low observable pre-jump snapshot of the dump site, now SOP.

Second thing is they set up shop.

The astronomy community, who observed this fiery discovery, gave the planet the name Cocytus, and were immediately silenced by the Annex by way of funds to replace their facility that was taking a beating from solar winds and CMEs—even though they were orbiting all of 20au from the star.

The Annex called it Cue Ball, but assigned the two character mission designation of Sierra Papa. With an initial code name of Sump Pump, and having to change it periodically, follow on names included Sugar Plum, Stoic Priest, Septic Pile, with the last being Stock Pot when the Carrie Nation and her sister station became operational.

These names referenced not only the planet but the one and only actual base of operations the Annex has ever had. Almost nobody ever comes to the 58-Ori system so this place was perfect to lay low. The sprawling sixteen square kilometer airfield was shaved water ice, which acts like stone at these temperatures, and in the middle of that

59 bride of frankenstein

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-OCTOBER-10-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 04:40zulu (local 01:22mst)

It's a light rain on Sapphire with small gusts of wind to toss it around, and peeking through a huge gap in the clouds is the moon, Kirin, looking like the left butt-cheek of a Grévy's zebra hanging over the horizon of a choppy sea.

Cricket can at last enjoy the moment.

Bill stopped snoring an hour ago, after about a dozen pokes in his ribs with her elbow, and with the double doors of her bedroom wide open to this view—the breeze and mists that hit her face are just now starting to take its toll. Her eyes are getting heavy, and as she slips in and out of a dozing trance, with actual sleep right at her fingertips, a cottony warmth sweeps over her like a wave and settles on her thighs.

Cricket's eyes snap open and she draws a breath in a panic. Looking around she takes stock to make sure that everything is okay, but as she feels around she realizes it's that time.

"Really, now?" Cricket pushes hard on Bills shoulder, and as he rolls back like a weeble she goes, "My water broke."

Bill's eyes flutter open and, half asleep, he makes an attempt to respond somewhat coherently, "I'll fix it in the morning."

As his eyes snap shut, Cricket's shoulders sag, and while shaking her head she swings her legs around and pushes him out of the bed, "Get up, you slant-eyed bastard!"

Hitting the floor with a crumpled thud, he pops back up and, while hanging on the edge, she says, "I'm having a baby."

Trying to shake the cobwebs he goes, "Well, d'ur!"

She just looks at him and growls, "I'm having it now!"

60 one-eyed got

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-OCTOBER-22-TUESDAY
TIME: 02:10zulu (local 18:10pst)

Monique Ribot is really stoked because tonight most of the people on her expanded give-a-shit list are here under her roof.

Pretty much family is a given but it's always been the younger children that she finds most intriguing. Like Diego's Yin to Connie's Yang, Seth and Mini-Monique have always paired up like glove in hand, yet they gravitate towards Scott's little one now that she's been in the picture. Where Seth and Mini-Mon tend to be reserved, Angela has a demonstrative personality, animated and bigger than life.

Monique has never seen a kid command a room like this one. With two missing front teeth, Angela has been 'Sylvester spitting' her words with precision, and has an exacting mic-drop-and-walk skill not seen even in professional comedians—and this child has mastered it in grade school. Like how Monique kept an eye on young Jessica, she points this precocious blond hyper-synapse of a critter out to Carlos who is now watching her every move like a hawk.

The question is what to do with her?

Where Monique took a liking right out of the chute for Peter's fiancé, Nordi Dukuzumuremyi, she really doesn't know what to make of Jacob's girlfriends. She adores the petite Glados, a sprite of an AI piloted cyborg, but her hackles are up over Sasha Dimitri—and she is fully aware that it's all driven by jealousy. It's not that Monique would want Jacob back, with Tristen du Conde servicing her now she's never been happier, she doesn't want Jacob's memories of her in competition with this meaty-bone of a bombshell.

What bugs Monique is that she cannot pinpoint exactly where she thinks she recognizes Sasha?

61 maus in the house

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-OCTOBER-23-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 09:58zulu (local 09:58act)

Armored units have not faced off since Rikers but in forty-five minutes that's all gonna change.

The big sisters of the Pleiades were pretty much born of a litter, and 18 Tau was included in that mix. 18 Tauri A, known as Nyx, is a young, large and hot star that will not be around for long. Maybe a half a billion years if that? 18 Tauri B, its red dwarf companion which goes by Sriracha Mu, is old, kind of small, not so hot, and will be here for a trillion years at least.

Nyx somehow lost all of its orbital objects shortly after birth but over the millennia it has picked up a motley collection of rogue planets and brown dwarfs, something the Pleiades has in abundance. Only Sriracha Mu resides on the systems proper orbital plane where its planets should be if it had any.

This system has hit the G-Spot for pretty much the entire astrophysics community because nothing here makes sense. Between Nyx and Sriracha Mu, with an SMA that hovers around 60au, are three brown dwarfs and twelve rogue planets that are in fantastically crazy elliptical orbits whose respective perihelions range between 0.8au to as close as 0.0001au and aphelions that go from 1.2au to all of 46au. Then to top that off all of these have been substantially confirmed as captured objects because their orbital inclinations are 48° or greater above or below the axial plane.

What really curled the astronomer's toes was that originally there were four brown dwarfs and sixteen planets but over the years they got to watch three planets get flung out of the system, one careen into Nyx like a bullet, and a young brown dwarf slowly spiral into the hot blue star. That last one took decades and when the end

62 zombie mod

LCTN: NGĀTI-WHĀ (HIP 17401-4)
CORD: SAO-76103.04 (131.9pc from SOL)
TIME: 11:05zulu (local 06:32mst)

Nemo resideo is a nice sentiment but it's not at all practical or intelligent if it means incurring further casualties over a comrade who is dead. Nobody, on either side, wants to leave anybody behind, it's just that if your buddy is a live casualty then, by all means, take the risk but if your buddy is dead, and your ass is in a sling, the standing policy is to motor on—and a desperate firefight while on the run just so happens to qualify as your ass-in-a-sling.

In spite of the improper syntax, *live and let leave* is today's in vogue sentiment yet people will say *relinquam vivet,* and even though everyone knows it's a crappy bot translation it stuck.

The underlining paradox in today's combat is that to exploit your own aggression you run the risk of facing their desperation. Offer no quarter and their "on the ropes rebound" may result in some bad mathematical outcomes, and between Taiji and Ngāti Whā the CDF will be crunching some eye-opening numbers before the end of the day.

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Ngāti Whā, pronounced Naughty Fah, is the name of the forth planet orbiting the star of the same name sans the Whā. It's no longer in the Pleiades Cluster, having just slipped outside a demarcation plane that's actually fluid, but most people will always accept it as one of the gang regardless of some meddlesome astronomical technicality.

Originally settled by New Zealanders who were determined to maintain their cultural identity, if you weren't a Kiwi back then you were not welcome to stay. The local naming conventions are mostly Maori and, like the vast majority of languages, Maori words have different meanings pursuant to context and intended use. Whā will

63 diet of worms

LCTN: 32-TAURUS-5A (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76339.0301 (42.33pc from SOL)
TIME: 10:20zulu (local 288:07mst)

Kvasir is the name for the star 32 Tau. Originally the locals were calling it Odin but they missed IAU Open Registration by a few milliseconds so the posted alternative Kvasir it became. The names for the other key bodies in the system went through without a hitch but, as it turned out, Kvasir and Odin were interchangeable depending on which side of the Mead you were talking about.

Mead, that is Mead of Poetry, is a hot high-mass brown dwarf that is substantially a borderline low-mass red dwarf orbiting Kvasir at six AU. Kvasir is intensely bright but this far out it's the high infrared output of Mead that keeps this little system of thirty moons warm, specifically Fjalar (fē·a·lar) and Galar.

Galar is an iron-carbon planet and the main reason anybody comes to Mead. The moon is a witches brew of hydrocarbons available to anybody who wants to land and scoop or drill for it—smokers need not apply. Where Galar is hot, orbiting close to Mead, Fjalar is farther out where it's not so hot.

About the size of Titan, Fjalar is an icy Nordic wonderland. It is tidally locked and gripped in a perpetual glacial epoch with an exposed patch of liquid ocean the size Australia that continues around the planet under the ice. The waters are teaming with life but on what little crust there is on the surface only traces of moss and fungi cling in desperation.

Two industries that thrive here are refining and sport fishing.

With the exposed ocean constantly facing Mead, the outside side, the side facing away from the warm brown dwarf, is where this planet is at its coldest and where refining what is collected and brought in from Galar takes place. That operation is an ecological disaster zone about the size of Connecticut, and in spite of the constant protesting

64 all your base are belong to us

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 11:45zulu (local 10:01mst)

When Jacob dropped in on the SCC base on the north end of Scab, way back in 2295, the only thing up here was the Co-op's base. After their little altercation the BDF was booted out and our old friends in Security Services took over the operation. Since then a small city of ten-thousand, called New Darwin, has sprouted up just a stone's throw from the base.

The thing is, New Darwin has a strange symbiotic relationship with this base. Obviously it was built to serve the base and to defund the SS personnel of their wages and bonus money all for enjoying said services, but this city is so posh that it has become a hot vacation spot and tourist trap for many coming to Electra and the SS doesn't mind whoring their little city to the public. In fact, the top restaurants, night clubs and escort services in the Pleiades will be found on the Church Key as well as in New Darwin.

Nobody knows who the investors were, or who owns it all now for that matter, but if Boxter Hartcourt is looking for something to do after he tires of politics then it's a sure bet that he'd rather come run it hands on instead of through proxies.

The original purpose of the Co-op base was to dominate the Pleiades, that is when the time came, but with Security Services here anymore it's simply a clever vehicle to readily channel their people on holiday into New Darwin. That being said, the official purpose of this base is to stage their own revolving RRF team.

Security Services, having been on the receiving end of Jacob Graves' Rapid Reaction teams more times than they can count, have modeled their operation exactly after his. In fact, since Sapphire itself is a neutral zone, the SS has been leasing out the old SA gunnery range and proving ground on Black Stump, a massive volcanic island

65 plata o plomo

TIME: 12:04zulu (local 10:18mst)

"*Plata o plomo.*"

Confused, Bristol asks, "Come again, Marshal?"

Maria leans in, "I waited my whole life to frame the moment like that *and* my ass has got both! You know what I mean, Porter?"

Macquarie nods, "I'm bloody glad I'm 'ere for that one."

Putting her hands together, Maria points them towards the General and, "Ya know, Bristol, you ain't gonna understand that for shit, but maybe this guy can help!"

Suddenly, on the wall monitor behind the receptionist's desk, the face of Boxter Hartcourt flashes up three times the size of God's, "Morning all, Major, General Bristol! Marshal Ramirez, you caught me on a lazy morning but I can always scrounge up time for you."

"Thank you, Mr Hartcourt. We kind of have a situation here."

"Yes, I gather." Boxter gives a long face, "It appears we lost a Second Lieutenant during your...confrontation. How sad."

Bristol speaks up, "Mr Hartcourt, we have orders from Chancellor Tillsdale to take the Church Key and—"

Boxter cuts him off, "I hate to be rude, General, but I do know what your orders are, and since I'm now the acting Chancellor, and you were incommunicado, I was forced to intervene."

"Mr Hartcourt, my orders stand."

"No, General, they do not." Boxter rolls his eyes slightly, "You see, Tilly is no longer with us. In fact, Ny Hopen and all that was there is now a crater...no survivors, and with no radioactivity it appears to be a natural...impact event? A tragic end in the pursuit of peace."

"Sir? The war is over."

66 non compost mentis

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2119ce-APRIL-21-FRIDAY
TIME: 13:03zulu (local 17:10mst)

The original developer, Squad, in their wildest dreams would not believe that their baby, *Kerbal Space Program*, has been around now for over a century and is still limping right along. The core app continues to generate revenue and it has been folded and spindled with mod after mod since the beginning. Even NASA and the ESA has gotten in on this by sponsoring a model of the solar system in exact detail with a library of real world boosters and physics and always with the understanding that Jebediah and his crew flew...

So, hats off to Wernher von Kerman they say!

Anyway, this was the game that inspired Charles Washington to want to be an astronaut since he was a little kid, and instead of going into science he opted for aviation, specifically US Naval Aviation. Going to collage on the government's tab was a smart idea, and opting to become a Marine aviator guaranteed him a seat on a fighter aircraft because by then most everyone was in the process of dumping fighters for robotic drones, but the Marine Corps would not hear of it.

Yes, Charles Washington was a shameless overachiever all for the one goal in mind and that was to open doors, and boy-howdy did they open for him. From his lower middle-class upbringing he worked his ass off to get his pilot's license for single prop by the time he was thirteen, double prop by fifteen, turboprop at sixteen and certification for two popular corporate jet airframes before his eighteenth birthday.

He was a shoe in for Annapolis, got the red carpet as an NFO, and after two tours of blowing shit up in the middle-east they begged the now, Major Washington, to become a test pilot, and when NASA announced they were looking to hire on people to pilot a new series of Lunar missions he didn't have to apply—they came gunning after him.

67 theatre in the round

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2119ce-MAY-05-FRIDAY
TIME: 01:17zulu (local 21:30mst)

High up from Charles and Rachel's cliff side home, Port Royal at night is a breathtaking sight. Catering to both civil and commercial traffic recreational sail is the most numerous vessel type moored in the harbor. Every permutation of rig you could imagine, from the simple sloops to rigid-foil trimarans are anchored here, but the dominate rigs as far as the eye can see are the dhow and old school felucca.

The port complex is butted up to the main city of Ipet Hah, and where the architecture of the city is a mix of ancient Egyptian in the core, surrounded by classical Roman everywhere else, Port Royal is a contrast of Egyptian stone permanency salted with modern glass contemporary and, esthetically speaking, these styles don't clash at all. Branching out from Ipet Hah is a new and ever-expanding suburbia, whose style is akin to American Southwest and Pueblo, but the people adapted well to having elbow room instead of being stacked one on top of another back in the city like they have been for millennia.

Most of the residents here on Imi came from old world human civilizations where toilets and baths were communal, with no concept of personal space, so the odd freakishness of western modesty eludes them still even though they now enjoy a sense of privacy.

The surprisingly difficult things to adapt too were transitioning from the Roman 'always left' standard to the modern 'always right' for roadway traffic, but that happened before Charles and Rachel came so the people could not blame them. What the locals could point at them for was the hated metric system—which everyone here resented being crowbarred into their world. Giving up their *passus*, *congius* and *uncia* for meters and liters and grams was like pulling teeth.

Yet, to industrialize on par it was necessary.

68 cannon break

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-21-THURSDAY
TIME: 10:05zulu (local 09:33mst)

Jacob pops into relative space high over Sapphire, and dashes down to one-hundred and sixty kilometers altitude before dropping out of the MDDSH spacial displacement field. It pops like a soap bubble leaving him with a forward velocity of just under supersonic, which is no big deal, but he exits the dash without wings or rudders attached to his fighter which is kind of a big deal.

They had already been ripped off long before he jumped.

He instantly switches on the anti-gravity drive, because it's the easy option, and when he does he feels a bump and hears an electrical 'zit' from behind the cockpit. This is followed by an alert that the AG drive has just dropped off and the left MDDSH nacelle is also now down for the count. In the tacnet, projected in his visual cortex, he gets dished up a delightful little image showing the path a 7.62x54 bolt where it entered the fuselage from behind, then ricocheted against the top-port razor engine, followed by it puncturing the AG drive unit. Turning on the AG killed both it and the port MDDSH node.

Jacob says to himself, "Houston, we have a problem."

Bud comes across his headset, ["Well, this ain't good."]

"No shit, a triple failure."

["I can't say you ripping your wings off going after those two IR5 was a failure per se. That was intentional."]

"I got 'em didn't I?"

["I'm already dead so for me it was a hell of a ride."]

"It was a hell of a ride!" Jacob laughs, then switches coms and asks, "Trixie, you got any ideas?"

69 never knows best

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.000au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-22-FRIDAY
TIME: 19:41zulu (local 11:41pst)

After a hundred and fifty years in a plummeting real estate market, Descanso Gardens has quintupled its footprint in the Verdugo Hills. Now on the third iteration of the beloved Japanese Tea House, across the expanded lake sits the brand new Shōgun Castle adjacent to the century old Cherry Blossom Forest. It's November and the blossoms are not going to blossom for a few more months, so the Cherry Blossom Forest goes for a cut rate this time of the year. Not as cheap as it would be in August, but Maria was able to lock the price in when they scheduled Diego's quinceañera four years ago.

The castle wasn't part of this event but the Gardens threw it in at no charge because they can't lease the castle separate from the forest, so this was a big win for Maria and the family.

It ended up being a bigger win for Descanso Gardens when they were shown the guest list and who RSVP'd.

Because a handful of the attendees are high profile, security for today is astronomically tight. The park is still open for business so on top of the three dozen or so visible Secret Service agents is a whole company of ghost droids running around the place arm-n-arm with Delta operators, and where the park is open the airspace was closed off for ten kilometers in all directions. Orbiting overhead to enforce the no fly zone are four 'beauty and the beast' teams consisting of a white USAF Bulldog fighter and one of the black SA-Cerberus fighters shadowing them as their wingman.

Esthetically, no one likes the Cerberus and pilots have called it the Beluga out of spite, but now that it has proven itself as a monster in the CAS roll it's popularly referred to as the Evil Beluga around these parts, or Waluga for short.

70 distractamundo

LCTN: TURA-TAU-4 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76618.04 (47pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-27-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 08:00zulu (local 12:48mst)

High over the coastal trading city of Nufa, at the mouth of the massive river known as Novyy Belaya, SA32, the Annex battle platform christened the Tamerlane, screeches to an almost instantaneous stop at two-hundred kilometers altitude—and a handful of seconds later it rips out of the area just as speedy-quick as it came in.

In that short period of time they were hanging motionless above the planet, Tamerlane launches five HWG99 Razorback drop ships, referred to simply enough as razors or slicks, as well as six Cerberus fighters, ten Thunderbolts and just one Thunderbird. With no lateral movement, like from an orbital insertion, all twenty-two ships dive straight down for the deck without the pesky heat and buffeting that comes from reentry to slow things down.

Here they're speeding things up.

All platforms have six drop stations underneath the ship and on a combat assault they can drop up to four ships from each station, launching twenty-four ships in all. Because of the time it takes to do that they have to release them below the operational floor of the Co-op spider missiles in case there are a bunch of them scattered about in M3 minefield mode. Here they're launching only one ship per station so for today two-hundred klicks it is.

A quick zip in an' out.

Since there was an open drop station for today's insertion mission, Jacob took that and launches along with the Razorbacks in his littler Thunderbird fighter.

Everything about a drop is counterintuitive because the ship you are in is being pushed up against a cradle attached to one of three

71 tabula pasta

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-4-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 04:23zulu (local 08:15pst)

It is still early Mimisday morning, eight whole hours after the start of Twilight 360, and with Chernobyl high in the sky there is a soft cottony gray surrounding it as the light reflected off the gas-giant highlights the cirrus clouds above the Jacoby's Stump airfield. Except for the rain storms scheduled to charge in at around lunchtime, the sky will remain this way for about another seventy hours until it starts to darken for twenty-six right before the star Zemu rises in the west.

For the people who visit New Brisbane, on the planet-moon Prypiat, with its unbelievably long stretches of twilight and surprisingly predictable weather, it is ridiculously mind-blowingly enchanting.

For the five-hundred million residents here it's old hat.

When someone from Prypiat visits Earth, with its twenty-four hour day synched up with an actual day-night cycle, it is shockingly difficult for them to adapt to the cheerfully bright sunlight, imprecise seasons, and who the hell knows what the weather will be?

A large stretch limo slips onto the airfield and parks beside the Trident Star-Clipper, next to the Security Services hut. Piper climbs out of the driver's seat, and riding shotgun as her guard is none other than Staff-Seargent, Smyth, of the Honey Badgers.

It is 8:15 local and the Razorbacks are just now on approach. They would have been landing on time if it wasn't for Prypiat Traffic Control holding them up in orbit waiting for clearance. The two ships from the Pleiades already had a pre-clearance to enter their airspace to land here, but these ships were from the Steel Annex so the PTC reaches out to ask, *"Aren't we at war with them?"*

Be that as it may a clearance is a clearance, and this happens

72 mutant pygmy

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-B6 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93868.0207 (49pc from SOL)
TIME: 09:00zulu (local 13:06mst)

Most star systems consist of binary pairs and Primus Hyadum is no exception. Primus Hyadum is the name of the primary "A" star that is young, big, red and already starting to die off. Two-hundred AU from that is the much smaller "B" star and this thing is also young, with an orange hue, but it has a long life ahead of it.

When time came for IAU name registration, of the thirty-six submissions for B it was the prank application in Esperanto, Oranĝo, that won that race by seven seconds—and this pissed everyone off. Now days it's just Primus Hyadum, because they happen to be circling Primus Hyadum, and if anyone has to expressly put a name to the actual star their planet is in orbit around then it's now referred to as Baby-Prime and pretty much everyone today is okay with that.

Oranĝo, the IAU name for γ-Tauri-B, has been forgotten.

Then there is the ongoing argument on whether the primary star is actually Primus or Primis or Prima Hyadum, but the locals have drawn a line in the sand for Primus and have told the IAU to get bent.

Anyway, the sixth planet in orbit around the expressly stated Baby-Prime is called Zemlya Dva, which was a web-translator phonetic alternative to the Russian Cyrillic for *Earth Two*, and this has been kind of problematic. See, Russian nationals occupied the planet first but the place has since been overrun by a flood of Australians, now a ninety to one ratio, and they have their own way of naming things.

To them Zemlya Dva is simply Rock, Slime or The Nuddy.

Zemlya, because everybody everywhere here has dropped Dva from the name, is the one planet closest to Earth in every respect except for life itself. Here it's more like how Ngāti Whā was in its early days where bacterial organisms have exploded and is now choking all

73 itty bitty bitchy kitty

LCTN: SOL-3, MESA, ARIZONA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-13-FRIDAY
TIME: 22:20zulu (local 15:20pst)

Here in the Mesa studios they are recording the Tonight Show for webcasting later. Back when they moved it to California they used to announce "from Hollywood" but the NBC studios were actually in the outlier city of Burbank. Because Burbank was not "sexy" per se the hosts then made endless remarks and snide comments about Burbank. Here in Arizona they announce that the show is "from Phoenix" but the studio is actually down the road apiece in Mesa and, just like then, the host today also makes Mesa the butt of jokes because it is notorious for being flat, stodgy, and devoid of any nightlife to speak of.

Mesa is part of the Phoenix metropolitan area, yes, but in a fit of hubristic irony the actual sound stage used for filming the show just so happens to be over the municipal border and squarely in the city of Apache Junction. Now, with the offices, the bulk of the studio complex and the tour itself in Mesa then it's kind of a moot point—but it wasn't exactly a moot point with this building sitting in, not Maricopia County but Pinal, because with the property tax falling in arrears the first year they had to puke out five-million in ransom to get it back.

Still, streaming from Phoenix sounds sexier than from Mesa even though Phoenix is 22 miles away as the crow flies.

This is Caesar's sixth consecutive appearance on the program since his debut in 2313, but this is the first time that his mate, Sheila, is a no-show. The last four appearances she was with him on stage and the audience loves her biting tongue, in fun contrast to his wacky stories, but Caesar must go at it alone for tonight.

Stepping up to the host, Mikhail Popov, they both reach out to shake hands as Mikey asks, "Where's our Sheila?"

"Sheila-babe sends her love, Mikey!"

74 sunset strip tease

LCTN: SOL-3, HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-14-SATURDAY
TIME: 01:10zulu (local 17:10pst)

Everyone on Earth owns a floater and the top one-percent can maybe afford a high-end glider or two, vehicles that have replaced automobiles over the last century and a half, but autos are still around. Cruising is about the only thing you can do with the infernal things so it has become mostly a rich man's hobby to pass the time and throw buckets of money at. A lot of common folk also have automobiles but those are usually a mod, or a repro, or some rat-rod they took forever and a day to cobble together—lending to some very envious results.

Be ye rich or poor this community accepts all comers.

Most of the major metropolitan centers in the United States still have paved roads, and where cruising used to be scorned and ran out of town the cities of today, with long stretches of retail storefronts and restaurants, aggressively compete for that now desired traffic. In Los Angeles, back in the day, it was Whittier and Van Nuys Boulevards where cruising first started, but nowadays it's Foothill Boulevard on the first Saturday of the month, Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards on the second Saturday followed by Redondo Beach on the third Saturday. Well, that being the Pacific Coast Highway from South Redondo all the way up north to Manhattan Beach.

Where 77 Sunset Blvd in West Hollywood was the location for the long forgotten Dino's Lodge, six klicks east, here in the Los Angeles portion of Hollywood, 77 Sunset Blvd is the location for a very popular watering hole called Rufie's Landing, and where all of the freeways have long crumbled away, the short quarter-mile stretch between Hollywood and Sunset Boulevard's is the only segment of freeway that survives to this day.

Knowing Monique's plans the state gave it to her for a song.

75 short straws

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-17-TUESDAY
TIME: 15:22zulu (local 12:35mst)

In her capacity as the acting Secretary General, *Pro Tem*, Cricket Washington has been playing the General Assembly of the Federation of Independent States like a fiddle, and today they are all dancing to her tune.

The thing is, the hundreds of ambassadors sitting here in the GA think they've been dancing to their own separate and unique tunes that they composed, but that's the kink with the modern-experimental symphonic abstracts. Each of the musicians is reading the music and playing the notes and bars that they themselves wrote in contribution to it but, with a conductor adept at editing and compromise, to the observer it all comes together complete, in concert, with the *fortissimo* crescendo here cresting in about twenty minutes—at about the time the sweet potato pie is being served.

Lest we forget, Cricket is providing lunch and as the jingle goes, 'Nobody turns their nose to KCMoe's!'

For a podunk Kansas City BBQ, this thing stormed the culinary world when it finally branched out from Clay County three decades ago. It was Clementine Ozo, Jose's mother, who inherited it from her parents after they resurrected the family business once they figured out how to smoke the cheap vertically-farmed meats when nobody else could pull that off. Clem took the reins and was the impetus for the expansion and elevating their menu into mainstream consciousness. Even their Vegetable Bakes will poleaxe the taste buds, so if one is not calling the vegans in for first dibs on that then the fur will fly.

When one enters the lobby to the Spike you walk right into the concierge counter. To your left is an admin satellite office for the SA, and to your right you have the new corporate offices for the CXi

76 zero degrees of separation

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.002au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-25-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 16:10zulu (local 08:10pst)

"*Ma mie,* civilized or scrambled?"

"What...else...is there?" Diego playfully says to Léon.

Léon rolls his eyes at her, "*Un merdeux!*" He then turns to Jessica, "As for you, *ma beauté aux cheveux roux*, what have you?"

"Ah, civilized!" Jessica looks at Diego, "*Quelle petite merde!*"

Diego laughs at her sister with, "In a pig's eye!"

Jessica's leans in towards her, "*la oink.*"

Léon asks Angela, "What have you?"

Angela cringes, "Uncivilized?"

Léon shakes his head with a huff and looks towards Brie Kiel who asks, "What are we doing here? What am I asking for?"

Jessica says to her, "Your Christmas egg-in-a-hole."

Léon protests, "The way I make it, it'd be a proper basket!"

Brie says, "I'll go with civilized?"

Jessica adds, "That's a soft yoke."

Brie nods big, "Yea, let's go with that!"

Léon beams, "*Oui, mademoiselle!*" He then leans down over Diego and quietly says with a little laugh, "*Petit connard!*"

Diego looks up at Léon, with a huge smile, and she gives him the sweetest kiss, "Love you too!"

Having gotten everyone's order, Léon pats her shoulder and heads for the kitchen, while Connie asks Brie, "Having fun so far?"

77 slay ride

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
TIME: 19:23zulu (local 19:23act)

Here on Taiji things are simple because there was no klaxon, no alert or alarm, nor was there some stealthy Secret Sam go-code to watch for. Everybody here knows how to tell the time and when time came, they quietly gave their loved one's a kiss goodbye and made tracks for where they needed to be with just the clothes on their back.

And jumping-off at 18:00 they wouldn't even need those.

The citizen soldiers for the five houses didn't lift a finger when the forces of the Co-op landed last October. They sat it out, they let the Annex fend for themselves, which surprised a lot of people but the field commanders for the five houses said it was because they had a bitter case-of-the-ass for being sold-out to the PADF.

That was what they said, and it is believable considering we are talking about Taiji, but off-world some believe it was because the Annex had turned tail in the face of superior forces so why bother dying for a lost cause? Then again, knowing all the players here, that second explanation was not as believable as the first, but now there is a small faction who are gut-positive that the apparent apathy from the locals was simply a devious ruse.

Before the CDF could concoct and execute a plan to pursue options to counter that third possibility, by way of targeted arrests, interrogations and raids, because that's how they rock, they get tossed a cooked grenade!

The ghost droids and PacMan drones the Annex dropped off five weeks ago has been more than a one-off speed bump in the CDF's plans, but as it turned out it was still just a speed bump—one that brought everything to a crawl and that was the idea. The problem here for the CDF is that the population on Taiji is armed to the teeth so how does one go about pulling their military grade teeth and maybe a

78 deus ex machina

LCTN: BETELGEUSE (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271 (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-30-MONDAY
TIME: 10:15zulu

Long ago, the five Battle Stations of the Annex were created for a previous world. A simpler time where the old displacement drive systems dragged incrementally to get up to speed, and to spool for a jump took hours. Everything then ran in slow-mo and a huge station, bristling with particle, plasma and rotary cannons, with a shaker full of missiles, would have been a frightening thing to square off with.

The Annex was going to create a new Battle Platform series, double up the complement, and cut the number back to maybe ten at most. The idea was to rely on the stations to taxi the platforms to the fight, but in their wildest-n-wackiest of dreams nobody could anticipate how crazy-fast things were going to get a half-century later.

Pepperidge Farm remembers, as they say, and when people look up where that idiomatic phraseology came from—the mocking irony is not lost to them. What seemed logical and necessary then is now a quaint strategic fantasia relegated to retro scifi.

Or specifically, the alternate history genre.

As with the platforms the stations have also been upgraded, and even though they move pretty damned quick nowadays, they are not quick enough. They can take on two or three cruisers alone but past that it'd be death by a thousand cuts.

They were never to see their full potential, as envisioned back when they were first designed and built, but the truly invaluable benefit to the Annex is the mobility they offer and allowing them to refrain from relying on immobile planet-side bases. That is, nothing static that could be bombed from above. These five stations can sneak around from secret place to dark recess or hidey-hole unseen, and have become priceless to the Annex for both their stealth and the

79 short curlies

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-31-TUESDAY
TIME: 18:01zulu (local 03:09mst)

"Holy shit!"

"Holy shit, what?"

"This shit!" Says Griego, handing the letter to Angela.

Angela reads it and does a double take, "No shit!"

"What?" Asks Mahko Ozo.

"Check this out!" Angela says while handing it to Ozo.

Ozo reads it and, "Holy shit is right!"

He hands it over to Butter Hewlett and Thomas Chase who read it together, with Hewlett saying, "Oh my Lawd!"

Chase laughs, "This is the nuckin' futtiest thing I ever read!"

Here on Cocytus the last of the ghost droids are meeting up on a Level-30 drift tunnel, four kilometers under the Arklay Mountain base called Raccoon City. Fifteen days ago there were eighteen droids who entered this fight but now there are only five left. In command is Griego and he is the only one still in their original mech. The others have significant combat damage with Angela, having booted up the last of the spare droids a week ago, losing her left arm yesterday.

An encrypted tar-file came in from the Spike at 18:00 right as Griego was opening the envelope given to him by Hershey, and this has been the only thing that has come to them from the outside since the BDF landed in October. Even though Angela out ranks Griego he's been running this show, so his droid also serves as their share drive. After unlocking and bursting the tarball he posts their files.

Griego goes, "Ya'll got WADs, come an' get 'em!"

80 by their fruits

LCTN: SOL-3, MANHATTAN, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
TIME: 21:30zulu (local 16:30est)

It is 4:30pm in Times Square and they are finishing the set up for tonight's festivities. With the stagehands wrapping up the sound check and the pens for crowd control having been roped off, all they need now is the Master of Ceremonies, the musical act and the regulation milling throng to set things alight.

Mikhail Popov has been the MC for as long as he has been on the Tonight Show and he is sick and tired of it. It is his last New Year's as MC and, at his insistence, they have The Cover Girls for tonight. Not say, Brittney and the Cover Girls—just The Cover Girls. This act is all about doing covers of other artist's work, while trying to best them, and with a virtual galaxy of pop and rock spanning three centuries in the public domain they never seem to run out of material.

The Cover Girls was Brittney's springboard to stardom, but she has kept in touch and in good standing with the band ever since her replacement took the reins. The two will be performing together so it will be like a time-loop paradox for the fans who'll be watching.

Because of that, the NYPD expects a huge crowd for tonight.

For three years now the New Year's Eve Event Committee has pushed hard to lure Adolphina Herrero here to activate the ball drop all because of the CMH. What Adolphina feared did come true, that being everybody has started to look at her differently after having been awarded the damned thing. In spite of it feeling like a boat anchor around the neck, her signature *Cubanaz*a war cry is more popular now than ever—all because that's what everyone can hear her shouting over her body cam when she ran into that fight and while blowing the shit out of the Taliban and their guns from rampart to parapet.

Tía loca Adolphina is decidedly *personae grata* in spades now.

81 sunk cost fallacy

LCTN: U-TURN/GORE POINT (Orion cluster)
CORD: SAO-113161.04012 (321pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-1-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 00:47zulu

For a lowly east side gang-banger, Maria has come far indeed!

The leaders and entourage of delegates for the most powerful countries on Earth, namely the United States, Russia, China, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Japan and Australia are here. It was reported this was to be an Orion Nebula sightseeing junket on Air Force One and, for all intents and purposes, it was.

The demo was a resounding success but you couldn't tell that by all the long faces of the people wondering around the floor of the stadium—at the very bottom of the dish side of the Carrie Nation. Everyone here is still in a palpable state of shock by what they just saw a half an hour ago, as well as by what they are standing inside, so chalk one up on the big win column for lil' Maria!

Everyone is milling around trying to digest everything as well as trying to swallow what Maria has just dished out to them, and has generously offered to them equally through the CXi, which she says has changed its status from an *initiative* to an *institute*.

Through the transparent floor below their feet they can see six brand new Trung class platforms, as well as a carousel like space station holding twelve more of these ships near completion—seven of those slated for the CXi at no out of pocket cost—and all this at the tail end of an off the beaten path compound dual-binary star system.

A system outside the thousand light year limitation zone.

The main star, what the Annex calls U-Turn, is the largest and scorchingly bright star of a binary pair that is over 1,800au away. Surrounded by a veiled nebula is the local dim binary pair that consists of a red dwarf called One-Eighty and a brown dwarf named Gore Point,

82 you gotta be shitting me

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-3-FRIDAY
TIME: 04:01zulu (local 14:18mst)

In Maria's new north-east corner office, near the top of the Spike, Jacob and Vossler have joined the meeting Maria was wrapping up with Scott, Bill and Glados, "Good, you guys are here!"

Vossler asks, "What's up?"

Maria shrugs, "I have to give Luc über-props for being a real quick study. Since the DPKO op for Fifty-Two has terminated—"

Jacob snorts, "Yea, I hear the under-secretary was livid!"

"Ya think?" Maria chuckles, "Well, he suggested we bypass talking to the UN altogether! Cut them out and invite who we want from Earth to his FIS speech here—then do a diplomatic tour of those countries there, and I have to say he's making a great point."

Bill huffs, "That'll get a rise outta 'em."

Scott nods, "Exactly!"

Jacob asks, "Media tour?"

Glados says, "I don't know about that yet."

Maria adds, "Glad and I were talking about it. We may want to put that off until shit settles down. The Xhemal were primitive but the Nefer Key are not, so people will need time to acclimate."

Vossler nods big, "That sounds like a good idea."

Maria throws out, "We got Jessica and du Conde working with Luc on sweeping the last two centuries under the carpet, and figurin' out how to spin the *probatus* gospel truth to the public."

Bill says, "Yup, best git our lies in order!"

83 caught in a mosh

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
TIME: 12:00zulu (local 12:00act)

Here on Taiji the last ten days have been non-stop chaos for the troopers of the CDF. With the conditions perfect for a hit-and-run guerrilla campaign, Giáp's people have been running roughshod over their armored patrols, and with twelve-noon-zulu fast approaching the CDF knows that it's only going to get worse when the Annex shows up to add to the madness. What they're bringing to this fight is unknown, but the Co-op planners think they are ready.

The problem here is that the Co-op finds itself blind in a world enveloped by heavy storm clouds and shit visibility. They are battling an invisible enemy that commands the field, who picks and chooses when and where they want to fight—so this would not be considered a winning formula in anyone's playbook!

Still, prepared they have...

Over a thousand spider missiles are lying in wait in low orbit, and if anybody is stupid enough to pop in and hover to drop above 180 kilometers, which is the spider's operational floor around Taiji, it will not turn out well for them if they loiter past six seconds. Below that is a count of 352 Djinn fighters buzzing around in a constant CAP above the storm clouds. Then to top it all off, in a geo-equatorial orbit, which looks like a polar solar-synchronous orbit around here, are eight Epée cruisers hanging-ten above Taiji at 32,000 kilometers. On top of the six-second lag to confirm an enemy ship, they can't shoot accurately at this distance nor can they shoot down using the planet as a backstop because of civilians meandering on the surface. From here they can zip in and snap fire their cannons when a fight actually starts and the commercial traffic clears.

For a defensive posture this ain't exactly half bad but defense, in and of itself, is almost universally considered a losing proposition.

84 new roflstomp shimmy

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-B6 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93868.0207 (49pc from SOL)
TIME: 15:25zulu (local 10:07mst)

When your expectations are so low, it is nice to be surprised!

The last four weeks stuck on this Warthog, slithering in and around the rock formations of Zemlya Dva with David Gilroy, an avowed bottom by day, ended up being a lot more fun than she ever could have hoped for. Problem is, Michelle Kiel dreads the fact that their daily dance and horizontal-mambo seasons have come to an end.

Even though she was amazed by how masculine he could actually be when she was on her back, the thing she'll miss most are the long-long conversations with him...mostly about nothing.

Michelle can't be jealous of Scott, like she has been of Maria, Nicole and Cricket all these years, but she realizes that she can only kick herself in the ass for falling asleep at that wheel.

With a few minutes to go before launching the mission, Gilroy, sitting across from her in the WSO seat, looks up and asks, "Have you picked one for 'new roflstomp shimmy' yet?"

Gilroy has this strange penchant for naming the fire-missions he designs, as well as playing music as he and the HWG pilot sit and wait it out—all while the ship's AI runs the program by launching the weapons as well as zig-zagging the ship all around to avoid any return fire, and today is no different.

Michelle nods, then reaches out for the transparent alon wall between them and taps on it. Her desktop pops up and she touches a file, swipes across the screen and drags the file from the desktop to drop it on the open wall separating them. He leans in and reads the file name as '*NRS*.'

"WebM format, it's an oldie I take it." Gilroy looks up and his eyes focus in on Michelle as she nods, *yes*, so he smiles, "Well then,

85 let me sing to you the song of my people

LCTN: POLARIS-B4 (Ursae Minoris)
CORD: SAO-308.0202 (133pc from SOL)
TIME: 20:45zulu (local 35:52mst)

Javan, also known as Yawan, was the fourth son of Noah's son Japheth, or Yapet, or *Yāp̄eṯ* if you want to get all crazy with the accents. Okay, Javan, pronounced "ha-*vuhn"* around these parts, is also the fourth planet orbiting the star Yapet—which is the most recent codename for the star otherwise known as Polaris-B.

Nobody here liked Noah as the codename for Polaris, that is Polaris-A when splitting hairs, but Yapet stuck for Polaris-B. Javan, in orbit around Yapet, is the only habitable world around here, which means that by the roll of the dice it could have been Gomer or Magog or Madai, Tubal, Meshech or even Tiras, but Javan it is!

The Rains, the push for Orion, has been pushed out to May.

The greater intel-community has been referring to Javan as the *Fondue Pot*, a random name pulled out of someone's ass when the two-letter prefix of Foxtrot-Papa was issued by the CDF back in 2313. This was far better than Village Inn, their old codename for Nu Ari, or Nu Ara depending whose map you're using, but that operation didn't stay Village Inn for long. With the intel sense of humor they started calling it things like Virtual Indigestion or Vacuous Infidel—anything so that they would never have to say 'Village' and 'Inn' together.

Oh-oh-oh! ...Verbose Idiots.

Anyway, when taking delivery the CDF did not know what the contractors here were talking about but since it was Boxter footing the bill, for what his people were calling *Tevat Noah* during the planning and construction phases, he thought the biblical references would have been obvious. All the meetings to establish a schema crosswalk were infuriating, but once in place it was simply a matter of a few weeks before PB and B4 were dropped for Yapet and Javan being adopted into CDF taxonomy. It goes without saying that Tevat Noah lost out to

86 angry birds mode

LCTN: POLARIS-AB (Ursae Minoris)
CORD: SAO-308.03 (133pc from SOL)
TIME: 22:20zulu

Having entered into the LSO recovery approach, Maria performs a rolling touchdown on the port flight deck thirty-seconds after Boxter's ship had landed. They both taxi onto the same elevator forward of the sail, the superstructure joining both the dome and dish sides, and the Iron Maiden makes the jump from Calar-3 to Polaris while they were descending together to the main hanger deck.

Both move into the airlock and the hatch closes behind them.

As the elevator goes back up, the lock floods with atmosphere and opens to the hanger. The Thunderbird taxis out and circles back around and heads deep into the hanger while the Star Clipper pulls out of the lock, and is personally walked by the flight operations mini-boss towards an adjoining parking space for a hard shut down.

Porter and his fire team step out and trade salutes with the escort waiting for them, while Porter asks, "My good man, would you prefer us to leave our pew-pews behind on the clipper?"

The gunnery-sergeant shakes his head, "Naw, Colonel, it's no biggie! Just make sure your shit is safed and slung."

After Porter and his team clear and sling their weapons, he signals for Boxter and the guests to come on out.

As Boxter, Wanganui, Bristol and Alcock step off the ramp, Porter says, "Gunny, you lead an' we'll anchor."

Boxter thinks nothing of this, but it is shocking for Wanganui and the generals to see that Porter and his fire team are allowed to bring their weapons onto the Iron Maiden.

In the aft quarter of the hanger, far from Boxter's ship, Maria hops out of Jessica's Thunderbird, pops her helmet and tosses it to

87 angel's share

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-4-SATURDAY
TIME: 00:18zulu (local 03:36mst)

Along the edge of the cliffs, between the Spike and Orb West, overlooking the mouth to Bludger Bay, is a network of outdoor patios and a micro-amphitheatre that are served by an underground lounge that is frequented by both locals and tourists. The lounge is expanding to accommodate a new bar to serve two brand new restaurants under construction that will flank it, those being *olá* and *Tabula Pasta*.

If you are not at the casinos then this lounge is the only place on the Church Key that serves drinks all day, every day and through the night. It's called Twenty-Four-Seven—even though Sapphire has a 32.4 hour day divvied up into 36 hours of 54 minutes each or, more specifically, 60 minute hours with a 0.9 of a second-second.

Twenty-Four-Seven just seems familiar and cozy.

There are always people here, a constant stream of people from different worlds and different time standards, and for them it can be breakfast, lunch, or midnight or whatever. Most everyone goes by what is referred to as E-Z time, or the Earth/Zulu standard, and they do this because it is easier when traveling. What they don't realize is that they are referencing UT8 and not zulu itself—and these clocks can be off by a half second or more but who's counting?

A pair of fighters, a Thunderbird and a Cerberus, drop from orbit and descend along the eastern approach. They level out coming around the pyramids and Orb South, pull a one-eighty and silently slip over the cliff-side lounge. Slowing to a near hover, they land and shut down by the grassy knoll in front of the Spike.

In their JACCs, Jacob and Peña fly back to the northern most patio, the one permanently reserved for the SA, and set down across from Maria who has been telling Scott and Bill stories while waiting.

88 village idiot savant

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2198ce-APRIL-1-SUNDAY
TIME: 19:18zulu (local 41:50mst)

Charles has been waiting for this day now for ninety years...

Dolphin Reel is a binary system of two tidally locked planets, Sashi and Imi. They are almost exactly the same size and mass, and their orbital barycenter point in space is pretty much dead center between the two. They orbit around the red dwarf star, *Rouge Deux*, which is the smaller of the local stellar binary pair of it and the notably larger red dwarf, *Gros Rouge*.

Gros Rouge is actually a borderline K type star, but Charles can only guess at its surface temperature, and since it's very red to the eye he classifies it as a red dwarf by default. The thing he can tell at simple face value is that Rouge Deux is probably old and Gros Rouge, with its spastic solar flares, fitful magnetic prominences and high metallic content has got to be a much younger body. They've been together for tens or maybe even hundreds of millions of Earth years but, one thing is for certain, they didn't hatch together. Then when you really think about it, Rouge Deux may be the older, stable and boring one but that's kind of a good thing.

From the city of Ipet Hah, on the side of Imi facing Sashi, Sashi has an angular diameter of 2° in the sky. Rouge Deux, with an angular diameter of 1.5° is currently being eclipsed by Sashi, which is common, but Gros Rouge is nowhere to be seen! Dolphin Reel has an orbital inclination of 6° to Rouge Deux, and its orbital plane has an inclination of 12° to Gros Rouge, and from Imi you would usually be able to see at least a slice of the zany younger brother from a different mother but they are currently aligned four in a row.

Not exactly unheard of but this event is rare.

Dolphin Reel has a year that runs precisely 1,008 Earth hours

89 brainless trust

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2248ce-FEBRUARY-28-MONDAY
TIME: 23:22zulu (local 63:30mst)

The first time you lay eyes on the Nefer Key it's like you're an American G.I. in 1946 occupied Japan—they all look exactly alike.

For the first few months here on Imi you'd swear they were cookie-cutter fembot gingerbread babes, insomuch as you really can't tell the differences between them. After eighteen months the opposite holds true and the calliope of nuanced dissimilarities in their faces and figures stand out and none of them look the same ever again.

As a whole the female Nefer Key have this neotenous, almost *kawaii* vibe to them, where even those who are many thousands of Earth years old still have the cut, build and beauty of a nineteen year old prima ballerina from the Bolshoi. That is unless you glance at their tongues, which is jet black through their first five or so thousand years transitioning to dark gray by six. The long and short of it is they are all gorgeous and in freakishly great shape for life.

Here at Port Royal, hovering motionlessly over the water by the docks, is the first morning shuttle from Sashi that is disgorging three-thousand Nefer Key ladies into the city. A fair majority head on out to the central city temples to get their freak on early, but a growing number take their time by hitting up on the retail shops and coffee bars before they trek out to the burbs to hook up with their regular human guy, or gal for that matter.

Charles is sitting here by the ramp of the saucer with his ex, Rachel, along with Jason, Lilith, Aat and three of their three-star army commanders, Belle, Alexi and Zora. Aat now has the four-star bars that were her husbands and Lilith wears the five-star clusters plopped on her by Charles. Long ago he and Maat have both been elevated to Tribunes by the Nefer Key, and before the end of business day today,

90 concha like a stradivarius

LCTN: SOL-3, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.998au from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-8-SATURDAY
TIME: 10:30zulu (local 10:30gmt)

From inside the famous Australian State Coach, surrounded by the last horse cavalry unit on Earth, known as the *Blues and Royals*, Maria asks, "What's with Alastair's apology yesterday morning?"

While waving to the cheering crowd overflowing The Mall, Victoria glances at Maria and, "Me Nippers happens to be an astute practitioner of what the royal family calls, Dontopedalogy."

Maria huffs a small laugh, "The fuck is that?"

Victoria cracks a smile, "The art of foot in mouth speechcraft."

"As a professional myself I am kinda curious, what'd he say?"

Continuing to wave, Victoria goes, "The bloody media won't stop banging on about our VC's so, in a snit, he straight up says to this hackette that he'd rather pitch the medals in the loo if he could."

Maria notices a young girl pointing at her, so as Maria waves back, "The third and fourth squads you ran into, you went at 'em like god-damned Judge Dredd so waddaya expect?" She looks at Victoria, "As long as you live, *cariña*, you'll never hear the end of it."

"Afraid of that." Victoria rolls her eyes and resumes waving, "By Sod, I do wish your people would'uv yanked me chain."

Maria reaches up and touches a white, gold and green wreath Star Ribbon, the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, dangling around her neck, "How 'bout you'd take this thing back?"

"Not on your life. You earned it, darling."

"The order still kickin' up a fuss?"

"After Polaris those toffs, as you would say, fuck the shut up!"

91 stranger danger

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-10-MONDAY
TIME: 05:22zulu (local 05:22act)

Back in the old days, before the hot mess that was Saiph-6B, the troopers of the Steel Annex were referred to as ghosts and even shadows, but that was way before they adopted holo-cloaking tech. Camouflage then was from a chroma-diffracting skin that changed their appearance like a chameleon or, more specifically, mimicked the cellular mechanisms of cephalopods such as octopi or squid.

As a CYA this digital-chromatophore pixel matrix that covers the JACC is still in use today, with the AI dialing in the appropriate camo-combo under the cloak, but everybody forgot about that. When not cloaked the normal skin is perfect for dusk, when the local star is dropping below the solar horizon, and at night.

When not cloaked or camo'd up the JACC has two distinct settings to choose from, one being a variable matte-black scale from a sooty gray to charcoal black, depending on the lighting conditions, and the second being an active photon absorption mode referred to by the troopers as *shadow à la mode*.

The cloaking-tech has been strictly relegated to daytime use because it happens to be a radiant technology that projects light. Turn that shit on at night and you suddenly become as conspicuous as any Spy Boy on Fat Tuesday in the French Quarter!

Point being, the cloak in the real world has never been 100% effective like it is in scifi worlds, and the three things that'll disrupt the photo-mechanics are water, motion and proximity. Proximity, *id est* distance, is the easy fix 'cause all you gotta do is to give a wide berth. As for motion, well, this is another no-brainer of a fix simply by going at things slow. The standing rule is 5x50. That is, invisibility to the human eye is achieved at about five kph outside of fifty meters.

92 there be dragons

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-18-TUESDAY
TIME: 02:30zulu (local 25:54pst)

On Second Hand, Victoria's friends and family had a blast with the Nefer Key, and of all the photos that hit social media it was the videos of Chell's kids acting out a few choice action sequences from Jurassic Park, with Luc and Alexi, that blew all of their approval metrics through the roof. The one scene where they get caught and eaten alive by the juvenile raptors was the biggest hit of all when their mock screams turned into hysterical laughter—because the kids mercilessly tickled the crap out of them with their teeth and claws.

Many in the general public had concerns about the Nefer Key, but any lingering doubts have died with these antics.

On Sunday, Wednesday here at 83-Tau, Jessica and Michelle delivered everyone to the Jacoby's Stump airfield and left, but on the way out Jessie kicked two of their six ghost droids overboard. It was Maggie and Paleo's job to guard Victoria, with orders to stay out of sight while shadowing her—and no one else.

Jessica and Seth assured Maria that Victoria was going to be fine but Maria wanted to be doubly sure about her safety. They didn't clue her in on what was going to happen to Piper because that would have made a colossal mess of things.

So, the die has been cast.

Jessica had clearance to fly low over the Queensland Vista on the way out, and with Michelle piloting they enter Julia's Other Creek, a seventy-kilometer long by twenty-five wide valley in the middle of the savanna that's five-hundred kilometers north of New Brisbane. At low speed, they are following a lazy-shallow river that snakes down the entire length of the valley.

93 trash run

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 04:10zulu (local 17:05mst)

It's late afternoon here on the Church Key, and at the flight line outside the Spike there is a mixed cargo and passenger build of the HWG99, an *a4* configuration, that is not close to being ready to launch. On the deck at the top of the ramp, outside the cockpit, are twelve pallets of cargo destined for the City of London facility that need to stowed, that being secured in the hold, before they can take off.

This is a load-master's job but the crew is not here yet.

There are forty-eight seats at the back of the hold, towards the front of the ship, and passengers are already starting to load up. Forty-five passengers are on the manifest to be dropped off in London with the cargo, but another passenger was added an hour ago and now the ship must detour to Los Angeles to drop them off first.

At the top of the ramp, among the pallets, Maria is on the tacnet and talking to Paleo and Maggie who are on Prypiat, "You two still have that PacMan tagging along with ya, right?"

Maggie says, ["Yea, an' we each got three of those micro recon droids they gave us with the nanoids."]

"Good, okay, Blue Boy was their leader and the female is his daughter, so we suspect that there may be a power play between them when she gets back up north."

Paleo laughs, saying, ["I don't know if you've been keeping up on what's going on here but, last time I looked, these Jabberwocky's happen to be animals?"]

Maria throws out, "I know, I know, intelligence is not always an indicator of sentience, but we have reason to believe that there is a lot more going on here than what we've been told. Why Prypiat covers up the existence of these animals, well, you're gonna find out why!"

94 here comes the tickle monster

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-20-THURSDAY
TIME: 13:35zulu (local 13:35act)

In the Salt Mine, the C3 complex carved out from solid rock, deep below the Nine Iron Smash here in Tareyton Greens, Cyzk has just watched the video feed from Eli Plunket as the CDF Major who was interrogating him, that is beating the crap out of him, puts a small 6mm breezeblock pistol up to his forehead and squeezes the trigger.

Eli's lights go out but the chip-audio stream continues with the Major's assistant saying, ["You shouldn't have done that, sir."]

["And why the bloody balls not, staff-sergeant?"]

["The locals will not take kindly to it."]

In the CIC, General Giáp kills the feed, while saying to Cyzk, "An' they didn't take kindly to it. See, Moidah, the Co-op's offer to the Five-Houses was making everyone not yet in this fight straddle the fence. The proposed profit sharing was brilliant, but this stream seems to have settled all the arguments."

Cyzk nods, "It looks like it lit a fire under them, but why Eli?"

Giáp shrugs, saying, "Everyone out there grew up with Eli! He was referee for every championship fight on Taiji for the last thirty years but, as a day job, he was archdeacon for the Anglican dioceses of Tareyton Keep."

As Vossler, in a JACC, and the ghost droid piloted by Maggie, step up to them, both covered in debris and smoldering ash, Vossler pulls his canopy off and says, "I 'eard everyone loved the old goat!"

Cyzk does a knuckle tap with Vossler, and, "Havin' fun, Voss?"

"A right ripper of a grand time!" Vossler thumbs towards a screen showing the live-feed outside the main clubhouse, right above

95 cado monkey

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-26-WEDNEDSDAY
TIME: 04:35zulu (local 25:08pst)

The viral video of Piper fearlessly gunning for the monster that was slaughtering their people on the Queensland Vista, and killing him at the loss of her own life, and Victoria bagging two, to protect her as she fell, then letting the little one go free—made them both heroes in the minds of most everyone, everywhere. Piper's witty repartee with Victoria as she laid there dying made her a superstar...

Where E-Z Wednesday is just getting started (i.e. UT8-GMT) Wednesday here on Prypiat is coming to an end. Brillig was cancelled for today, and here at Boxter's home both friends and family are in the central ballroom watching just one of several hundred posted streams taken during the funeral procession—by the over ninety-five thousand people lining the two-kilometers between the cathedral in the upscale West Banes to a park where Boxter's Star-Clipper was waiting.

The eight Pipe and Drum bands in the procession, locally and sent from the UK by Victoria, was an impressive sight indeed, but it was the Second Line Preservation Band, the group that befriended Boxter and Piper all those many decades ago in New Orleans, that escorted her casket from the ship into the Star-Castle.

The Star-Castle of Prypiat, a Bastion Fortress that serves as the home of Nigel Kiel, was opened for the funeral attendees for what is now being coined as *the sendoff of the century.*

Nobody knew what to make of this band when they received the body while playing the morose "Closer Walk With Thee" but it was when they switched gears into "Over In The Glory Land" followed by "When The Saints Go Marching In" that transmogrified this solemn procession into a much needed celebration.

The SLPB did make a pinky-promise to Piper that they'd play

96 falgun purnima

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-MARCH-01-SATURDAY
TIME: 17:20zulu (local 17:20act)

The trash run this morning into Tareyton Greens dropped off 320 lamb and ten cord of Delhi Maple, special delivery from Nepal to the eighth fairway closest to the main clubhouse. This is four-times what it would take to feed regiments 3608 and 3611 but, in the minds of the Gurkha, everybody is welcome to their celebrations.

General Giáp's famous Duck Hook regiment, the remaining combat effective unit left from his elite Third Mobile Cavalry is here, as well as all the crews from the C3/CIC called the Salt Mine.

Also, since the Nepalese are notorious for their generosity and hospitality, they invited the lone CDF regiment cobbled together out of what was left of the Thirty-First Armored Division. Here they're posing as the CDF "occupational forces" staged just outside of Tareyton Keep, solely for optics just to shut the Bank of New Sydney up.

They were stunned when the invite was delivered to their CO.

Known as the festival of colors, Holi is a favored celebration by many Nepalese that memorializes the death to the demon, Holika. Normally there would be parades and drums and horns and all kinds of mosh pit craziness with everyone pelted by handfuls of every color of the rainbow, in powdered form, liberally thrown about but, since they are technically in an AO, here they opt for camo paint.

With the eighth fairway turned into a string of BBQ rotisserie pits, hundreds of Gurkha men and women are going around painting the faces of the CDF troops who are waiting in line for chow. The troops from Duck Hook and the Salt Mine, however, they are sporting a black eye painted under their right eye. The people of Tareyton paint it under the left eye as a sign of unity and celebration, but under the right it's an expression of dissent and protest.

97 steal your face

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-MARCH-11-TUESDAY
TIME: 11:45zulu (local 07:32mst)

In Jessica's prized southern corner apartment on the 100th floor of the Spike, a half-kilometer up in the air, one floor right above Cyzk's in fact, Scott steps up to the family room side of the kitchen counter and bumps his hip into Gilroy's while quietly saying to him, "I'm amazed you're able to walk, dude."

Gilroy huffs a laugh, "You wish!"

Jessica was pouring her coffee on the kitchen side and says to the two of them, "And on a Monday night."

"With our schedules ya gotta get it in when you can, sugar!"

Jessica rolls her eyes then, "Oh! Guns wants to talk to you."

"Three weeks, we keep missing each other. Is it important?"

She shakes her head, "Naw, just whenever! It's a little thing so when you get a chance go see her, okay?"

He shrugs, "I got that fire mission in a few hours, and I don't know what their plans are for me afterwards."

"Like she said, it's no biggie, so when you get back is good!"

Angela has entered the room and bumps into Gilroy with her hip like her father just did, "Mornin' hot stuff!"

Gilroy picks her up and, "How's the new school, Little Klicks?"

"Laurel Springs' zoom-room sucks laggy fat ass, but It'll do!"

Gilroy recoils, saying, "Oh my! You go brush those teeth, girl! Like to kill some'un with that stanky breath!"

Angela caterwauls in his face going, "Muaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

98 seal club valley

TIME: 20:15zulu (local 17:02mst)

Jacob pops into relative space high over Sapphire, and drifts down to one-hundred and fifty kilometers altitude before dropping out of the MDDSH spacial displacement field. It pops like a soap bubble leaving him with a forward velocity next to zero, relative to the oceans far below, which is no big deal, but he exits the dash without the canopy attached to his fighter which is kind of a big deal.

It got completely shot away thirty minutes before he jumped.

He instantly switches on the anti-gravity drive, because it's the convenient option, and mostly to prevent his ship from spinning out of control as it goes into freefall—transitioning from space to an altitude with the millibars necessary for atmospheric flight. Without the canopy he is exposed to the vacuum of space, yes, but in his JACC the severe buffeting from the high-altitude winds while leaving the planet, Yunga, was simply an annoyance. What extended beyond annoyance, and into excruciating, was where the spiral blades that snipped his legs with the force of a JATO-rocket powered Guillotine, below the knee on his right and above the knee on his left, have no thermal protections. When leaving Yunga, the freezing winds that slammed into the stubs of his legs caused such extensive frostbite it destroyed two centimeters of tissue past the blades.

Entering the atmosphere of Sapphire, he gets to do it again.

Yemi Kagame blows in from her jump forty kilometers away and has been orbiting Jacob and his fighter, ["How you be doin'?"]

Jacob is exhausted from the pain, but he manages to laugh, "I've been better, Ouchie! Thank you for taking care of those two guys that were on my ass for me. I owe you for that."

["You be *maga-kolo*, you know, crazy-crazy! Next time you no hear me, and target fixate like that, I'm gonna let them have their way wit' you'z! You get me?"]

99 deep in the lair of the tasmanian devil

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-MAY-5-MONDAY
TIME: 09:03zulu (local 24:08mst)

The astronomy community, mainly the Orion Trust, has been reporting that Betelgeuse went out in a Type II Supernovae, even though it had all the earmarks of a Type Ia event. What was worrying everyone, to keep the cover up covered up, was the remnant...

What was going to be left behind?

There were all kinds of pots and side bets on the outcome, ranging from black hole to Earth-sized white dwarf, but if the core was in a carbon/oxygen fusion stage, less than a thousand years from the one-day iron death phase, then maybe they'll get that neutron star they were crossing their fingers and praying for.

In a span of a short hour, the brick from the QP-Gun shot had succeeded in crushing the core into that neutron star they wanted instead of falling short and making a mess of things.

What they didn't want was a mystery that defied the theories, but here they were left with an even greater mystery, and that was how in the hell did it work out so damned well? Nobody really thought they'd get an actual neutron star out of the deal, but here it is in all its blisteringly-hot and spinning glory. The thing they have to come up with an explanation for is why the remnant is following the bulk of the nebula that is expanding out from the nova event? They've seen this before but the neutron star has always flown away from the nebula after an asymmetrical supernova. Here it's chasing after it?

The models the Trust builds to explain this will be designed to confound and mollify the public, but any expert who would challenge them are already in on the secret, so they'll get their cover up!

What they wanted to uncover was the star itself, and the pics

100 echo park slice an' dice

LCTN: SOL-3, ECHO PARK, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-01.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2273ce-MARCH-28-FRIDAY
TIME: 03:15zulu (local 19:15pst)

"*Penche pendeja!*" Maria hisses into the face of Wanda...

Maria has no idea what came over her, outside her aunt's home here in Echo Park, but with her husband of three hours at her feet, gasping and clawing at his throat, something clicks inside her. Maria kicks Wanda in the crotch, snatches her straight razor back from her ex-lover, and then spins around inside her flannel shirt that two local gang-bangers from Crazys were holding onto. Slipping out of the shirt, with her own blood squirting out from her neck, she slits both of their throats, then swipes the blade out at her cousin, Junior, where the razor slashes him across his face and gouges his right eye.

With Junior pulling back and cussing up a storm, and the two bangers gurgling as they die, she grabs her own throat to tamp off the bleeding while she stomps Wanda in the back of the head, driving her face into the ground. Looking at her now dead husband lying there, she whips the razor around Wanda's neck which gives an eerie shlorp when she pulls the blade and it wedges in her spine.

Leaving the straight razor behind, Maria throws herself into her floater and takes off. A sedan glider pulls up to Junior, who jumps in and they tear ass after her. Maria zig-zags her way onto Bellevue and shoots west, and when she runs into Glendale Boulevard she leads them south towards downtown Los Angeles.

01001110-01010101-01000010

"Pinky Pie, who'da *gavacho?*"

It's been five days and Maria is in a hospital gown, pulling an IV cart along with her, at the top of One-Klick with a beer in hand.

101 ministry of love

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.02 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-2-MONDAY
TIME: 10:21zulu (local 08:45pst)

Bill Nguyen has had the best four years of his life, and if Bill could whistle fitly he'd be whistling up a storm. He has a gorgeous wife, and they have a gorgeous daughter, and this whole time he's been in command the universally coveted SA36, the Iron Maiden.

With a happy bounce in his step, Bill enters the lobby of the Spike and stops at one of the eight tabletop concierge kiosks available to anyone who asks for help or is not recognized by the AI.

Bill glances up at Jacob's old Thunderbolt that's hard-mounted to a suspension rig used on the old MAD cruisers before they were reconfigured into battle platforms. The SA saved all of them in case a need ever arose, but hanging Jacob's ASF47 from the ceiling is the very first time they ever dug one out from storage.

The ship slowly rotates with a slight bank above the lobby, still missing its wings and rudders, and everyone loves seeing Beatrix above as the full body hologram of her pops up beside the counter, "Hello, Field Marshal! What can I do for you?"

"Hey, Trixie, here for my meeting!"

"I see, for ten-thirty! Well, Bill, I'll hold lift eighteen for you."

"I'll take it, cutie patootie! My undying thanks to you, Trixie!"

Bill trots off for his elevator, hops on and in ninety-seconds he's steps into the main lobby of the Annex on floor 321 of the Spike. He shoots his finger at the receptionist as he blows past her, and as he enters the executive lobby to Maria's office...

"Awe, shit!" Bill punches at the air with both fists and stomps a foot, "Musical mutherfuckin' chairs!"

102 third time's the charm

LCTN: 95-TAURUS-4E (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76727.0402 (48pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-12-FRIDAY
TIME: 17:01zulu (local 11:10pst)

If you happen to be new to this region of space, between the Hyades and Pleiades clusters that is, what grabs your attention most are the names given to the stars and planets around here.

Almost all of the systems up to thirty parsecs from the Earth were named by either the scientific community, or the survey teams sent out by the members of the old FTL-Drive Consortium—that being the United States, United Kingdom, Russian Federation, Republic of China, and the French Republic. To lock in these holdings, early on the member states took heroic measures to send in civilian settlers as well as diversified holding companies to set up shop.

While focused on incorporating their colonies, when FTL-Drive was finally wrestled from the consortium's control it didn't take long for the rest of the world to vault past them.

The original Russian teams that surveyed this region of space were supplanted by settlers out of Australia, New Zealand, Ukraine, Czech Republic and Canada. The Aussie's and Kiwi's were the first in and, with the two notable exceptions being 83 and 94 Tau, they ended up naming almost all of the habitable systems in a 25ad patch of sky between 30 and 160 parsecs.

Everything in this region has an Aboriginal or Maori vibe to it.

95 Tau was named after a long white haired aboriginal beast called, Yowie. Gas giants with habitable moons are a common thing to find around bright stars, and the grey and reddish stripped gas giant, three astral units away from Yowie, was named after a rose-crested cockatoo, the Galah. Its big moon, where everybody here lives, was named Cooee, which means "come here" so, in that spirit, that's what people did!

103 damnatio memoriae

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-14-SUNDAY
TIME: 23:20zulu (local 10:00pst)

It may be late-Sunday evening most everywhere, pursuant to Zulu-time and our CE-calendar, but here on Prypiat it happens to be early morning Wednesday, the year 9-610. A year, the time it takes for the planet Chernobyl to orbit Zemu, is just a smidge over 20 Earth years so here the 9 in 9-610 indicates the current year since the ANZAC Ninth Exploratory Task Force landed on Prypiat, two centuries ago, with 610 denoting the week count for the current year.

And yes, the settlers who followed them, and got fed up with the stumpies ruling, became the House of Anzac on Taiji.

A week here is 11 days of 26 hours and 12 minutes each, so on next Wednesday's High Moon there will be a planet wide New Year's celebration when it rolls over to year-week 10-001.

Michelle Kiel, the de facto ruling head of state here on Prypiat, now the sole stakeholder in the *Kiel Landgut GmbH*, an estate that acts as the leading SCC lender, as well as the sitting Chairman for both the Cooperative and the Corporations Commission, planned her wedding to not upstage the up and coming New Year's holiday. Long ago when they cut their week back from 12 to 11 days Wednesday became the calendar weekend, so this being a double-digit rollover Michelle is springing for the citizens to take the week off—and those who do work "the estate" will offer them triple time.

This wedding is the Hyades social event of the CE-decade and, where Piper's funeral was a downer, today they have a new Kiel in charge. Shelly has been making political waves in the short week after being installed on the Commission, and carrying the notes for the war means she proxies all the votes.

Then again, yet again, no one here dares to unseat Michelle...

104 alienation

LCTN: SOL-3, SURREY, UNITED KINGDOM
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.000au from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-18-THURSDAY
TIME: 06:05zulu (local 06:05gmt)

The Alien franchise comes full circle back to where it began all because Monique didn't want to pay Pinewood rates. Monique caught wind that Pinewood was toying with the idea of razing the Shepperton site, but they were not going to shut it down until they found a buyer for the land and, as things go, a new subsidiary of hers had a contract signed and a check cut before the week was out.

Here is where it pays to read the fine print because three months later, when the last production wrapped and left, her people had control of the facility and soundstages that weekend before the wrecking balls arrived the following Monday.

The demolition crew had bulldozers and her goons had guns, but it was the injunction in hand that won out. Pinewood Studios was not at all happy about this turn of events because Monique now has a secure foothold in the United Kingdom.

The rich history of Shepperton Studios may go back centuries, but on the business end all of the media companies here have either moved out or merged with Pinewood. On the facilities side, except for a few brick exteriors, most everything here is reasonably new with nothing older than seven decades.

Today they are filming in the latest build of Soundstage-H, a 3,000 square meter interior tank superstructure that's all set up as the Promenade of a space cruise liner from the long gone Princess Cruises where, on storyboard timestamp 033:060, it has docked with the Alien infested Orion Nebula station...

And the airlock between them is going to be opened shortly.

Connie looks over everybody and asks, "Ya'll ready for this?"

105 taco tuesday

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.02 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-30-TUESDAY
TIME: 15:21zulu (local 09:54pst)

When the FIS moved over to their new stadium sized facility, just north of the flight line at the foot of the Spike, the lights went out in the auditorium they've been using for a mere twenty-three minutes before they flickered back on and the CXi slithered right on in.

Since their new digs had new everything what few members of the General Assembly still there, weeks after the closing of the ninth and final session of the GA, simply grabbed their mugs and purses then waddled out—leaving all of their chairs and equipment behind. Yes, they'll return as the Diplomatic Convention next October but, much to their annoyance, the *hoi polloi* Assembly of the Commons will be meeting for the first time in February and totally upstage the DC.

In their minds, the great unwashed shouldn't require a voice.

Anyway, that all happened mid-December, on a Wednesday, and Maria really wanted to reconfigure the auditorium as soon as possible but, with the ongoing and pernicious infighting between all the scientific cabals, she has decided to put this off indefinitely.

Which is okay 'cause the space is useful as is!

What's not okay, and this has been annoying the crap out of Maria as of late, is the nonsensical shit on the docket today. A small group of idealists have been bending a lot of ears over the last few years, and it's all come to a head on the floor. Originally, these people petitioned the CXi to adopt a series of implacable and unwavering operational mission directives. After hitting that wall they then tried the FIS to no avail, but now they're back and flipped the script! Today they are motioning for the adoption of a "code of conduct" towards the same affect, and even though Maria respects their tenacity in this, it is her job to cock block 'em yet again...

106 grand theft auto

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-A5 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-98368.0104 (49pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-FEBRUARY-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 06:30zulu (local 10:08mst)

Here's an idea...imagine if you could take all those metal and element rich asteroids, planetesimals and nebulous debris spiraling around the red dwarf One-Eighty, way out at U-Turn, and toss it all into complementary orbital tracks around a run of the mill gas giant like GTA5, which is about the size of Uranus, what would happen? In short order all of the smaller-faster objects will ultimately catch up to the slower-bigger objects and sort of start clumping together.

Like with Earth's moon, it happened out here at y-Tauri-A-5.

Gamma, the "y" in y-Tauri, is why the fifth planet orbiting Primus Hyadum, that being the prime-Alpha star of the 54-Taurus binary system, is referred to as GTA5. Its proper name happens to be Corvette, but the legions of workers from Zemlya Dva have shortened it to Vette. It has three planetary sized accretion moons, those being Sloop, Frigate and Schooner but, as with Vette, the labor force has also rebranded them Scow, Frag and Scorch.

About the size of Charon, Luna and Titan, respectively, the three are being aggressively quarried by the Co-op. From space one can see that they're being strip-mined on a planetary scale, but on Scorch they have standing water, breathable air, some clouds, some rain, and an archipelago of four lush-green oasis like industrial zones similar to Arrakis out at 69-Tau.

In sharp contrast to the surface of Scorch being turned over, all over, each of these well-manicured industrial parks is on their own mesa like plateau. Three are about the size of Manhattan, with the main one at over twice that landmass. With no environmental, labor or safety agencies to confound and annoy the over two-thousand manufacturing plants that tinker away here with impunity, the site has

107 violent delights

LCTN: 51-TAURUS-A2B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76541.0105 (54pc from SOL)
TIME: 06:56zulu (local 10:34mst)

Stumbling onto potentially habitable worlds orbiting gas giants happens to be a common theme in human exploration, but finding one where we don't have to do anything to the place before we break ground and set up shop has been the rare exception—and Maui tops that really short exception list.

Tū, short for Tūmatauenga, is the primary star of the 51-Tau star system. The fifth of twelve planets, Taranga, is a gas giant about the size of Neptune and in Maori tradition is the mother of Maui, the largest moon in orbit around her. There are thirty moons orbiting this planet, notably Hina and Tuna who share a common barycenter on an orbital track about a million kilometers out.

Then we have Tāne, the secondary B-star in the 51-Taurus system, which is an orange dwarf that is host to eight planets. It's second planet in orbit, Rongo, is an agricultural export powerhouse that's very much like Maui in that they didn't have to do anything to the atmosphere for people to move in like they did.

The manufacturing and storage arrangement between both Maui and Rongo are kindred spirits to the Zemlya Dva and Scorch relationship out at 54-Taurus. The difference being is that when GTB6, that being Zemlya Dva, got hit on the same day Javan got stomped out at Polaris, the Co-op mothballed the storage and distribution operations here on Rongo. Components and product are now shipped directly from Maui, so when the Annex showed up over Rongo, fifteen minutes ago, the BDF knew in their gut that it was diversionary.

Maui must be the real target, but when will that happen?

Anyway, the CDF would have sent half of their air assets, totaling eight-hundred fighters consisting of a mix of the Djinn and a smattering of the new Enfield, but the BDF is in control of air defenses

108 stukas over disneyland

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-A5 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-98368.0104 (49pc from SOL)
TIME: 07:16zulu (local 11:12mst)

The two remaining anti-air Mechs are in a mad scramble to get away from Command-One and Two who are trying to chase them down here in Toon Town. It is almost comical how they're racing back and forth between huge blocks of stacked conex containers because, if you didn't know any better, you'd swear these machines are in a panic. They're not, but with the short-choppy strides they are taking in the light gravity of Scorch, all to prevent hang-time while bouncing up into the air, makes it look like these robotic monsters are having a good old-fashioned tail-between-their-legs freak out.

Tomorrow during the press briefing on Taiji, General Giáp will show a video of them in the container yard in hot pursuit while these robots are executing their escape and evasion protocol, along with Yackety Sax playing in the background, and everyone will have a great laugh with it but, right now, things are deadly serious.

Giáp goes, "Put the micro up its arse, corporal!"

With the general pulling his weapon back from the corner, the squad's corporal swings his BR1 around that corner and, spotting via the optics, fires a Micropede after a mech that is racing away.

"Shit!" The corporal pulls back as bolts start to shred the edge of the conex container they were using for cover. With pieces of metal being ripped from the box, he says to Giáp, "On the way, sir!"

With the firing having abruptly stopped, the general pulls his weapon around the tattered box and, seeing the monster take a corner into a crossing lane two blocks down, and the missile that was fired miss the thing and destroy empty containers down range, he grins big, "Slippery bugger!" He then dives around the corner, "Follow me!"

The entire squad is right behind the general as they pour onto

109 in your base an' killin' your doodz

LCTN: 51-TAURUS-A2B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76541.0105 (54pc from SOL)
TIME: 07:33zulu (local 11:29mst)

Rongo was a disaster for the SA. What was supposed to be a quick an' dirty diversionary attack fizzled out when only eighty fighters diverted from Maui. Forty-five squadrons remained behind, and when these guys did show they hung out in space only long enough to cover the ninety-six on Rongo to get out and race back over to Maui.

This was a planned move, the result being that Maui is now on full alert, and they have almost 900 fighters—minus the ships Jessica and the rest shot down near the Kai Pai fashion district.

Which was 48, and that brings the BDF numbers down to 848.

The real targets here at Tū have always been the industrial cities of Kolohe and Whanoke on the massive Greenland sized island of Whare Kino on the other side of the planet Maui.

Kai Pai and Whare Kino are on exact opposite sides of Maui so any direction of travel from one side to the other is as good as any other possible direction you could pick. With their fighters scattering to the northwest for Whare Kino, Jacob and Kagame opt for the down under route over the southern pole while the Warthog recovers the four SA pilots, Jessica's Hydrapedes, and all 48 of the BDF pilots and then dropping those guys off at Kai Pai.

Now at sixty-one kilometers in altitude, holding at Mach-18, Jacob radios Kagame, "Isn't that field commissary goin' up soon?"

["Yea, on Aroha Mai. You out?"]

"I thought that was to be on Aroha Atu?"

["Was, but twenty minutes ago one of our Grigori's was shot at from Atu, so the exchange is getting rerouted to Mai."]

"Well, right now I'm kind of Winchester on Mew-pews."

110 periwinkle

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-761311.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-FEBRUARY-3-SATURDAY
TIME: 11:03zulu (local 25:32mst)

It may be midday Greenwich time in the UK, and for everyone living on zulu time, and the E-Z time standard for that matter, but here on the Church Key it's early evening with Electra slowly dropping below the horizon. The sunsets of Electra on the planet Sapphire can be electrifying, and from the top of the Spike they are doubly so, but the windows in Maria's corner office face north and east. Not really an issue because with the entertainment interface she can switch them to any view she wants from any window on the Spike.

Jacob was told to come on in when he got here, and entering her office, she points to the side chair in front of her desk and goes, "*E'y pachuco!* Take a seat while we wrap this up!"

Jacob nods, sits and, "Pins and needles!"

He can only hear Maria's side of a two-way conversation on the CXi version of the tacnet, "I don't care, John! We got the fuckers down to seven, then they push for nine, and now they want twelve? That's a hard hell no, fuck no, piss no, shit no!"

She puts a hand up to her ear and goes, "This is retarded!" Then after a few seconds she almost shouts, "They meet on this again when? Monday! Okay, let the fuckers know I'll be there on Monday and they'll see it my way. Admin gets one and they get nine and that's it! If these prima donna dweebs don't like it then they can tell it to my face when I get in theirs...Monday!"

With the call cut, Jacob is chuckling, "What was that about?"

Maria puts a finger up, "First, let me tell ya I talked to Bud." She crosses her arms in front of her and leans forward on her desk, "Now, I may be out of the chain but I'm not out of the loop. Get me?"

111 roadside picnic

LCTN: CALAR-3 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: M45-B002 (133pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-APRIL-15-TUESDAY
TIME: 09:11zulu

Always cautious, the Nefer Key exit their jump ninety-six light minutes away from Calar-3, and it takes them all of forty minutes to leisurely transit the 1.728 billion kilometers to the rendezvous orbit a mere one-million klicks above the surface of the brown dwarf.

Also always fashionably late, today by over eleven minutes, Delta Echo slips into that orbit which is clockwise by their orientation, and inside a few quick seconds after they drop out from their spacial displacement field the Iron Maiden blows in. Within a genie blink, it stops on a dime two klicks behind Delta Echo and, because of its orientation, in a counterclockwise orbit by comparison.

The beauty of space travel, or a chigger itch of an annoyance, is the constant reorientation when establishing up as opposed to down at any given system. Usually the axial hub above a counterclockwise spin denotes north, and there are some exceptions but they usually have to do with the orbits of objects out of synch with the host star like with Prypiat and Chernobyl out at 83-Tau.

At any rate, SA36 maintains its upside-down orientation while it immediately executes a full on one-eighty spin before dropping out from their MDDSH soap bubble. Then, while Delta Echo executes a nose down quarter-turn to orient their underside docking port to the tail end of the Iron Maiden for mating, a Warthog and four fighters drop onto the deck of the Maiden and roll up onto two elevators that descend into the hanger deck below.

With the alien ship at a right angle to the platform, and the more nimble of the two, Maiden Control calls out, [“Delta Echo, you are clear to approach for docking.”]

Luc radios back, [“*Merci!* Thank you for the clearance, Maiden

112 locusts of control

LCTN: BETELGEUSE (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271 (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-1-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 00:01zulu

As a lowly east side chola, Maria is here to fuck this monkey...

The leaders and entourage of delegates for the most powerful countries on Earth, namely the United States, Russia, China, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Australia are here. This lil' detour from their sightseeing junket of the Orion Nebula on Air Force One was planned for, but they have no idea what they're about to witness.

The demo is just sixteen minutes away, but this "event" was already initiated some 37:30 hours ago when the Annex launched the firing sequence to their QP-Gun. Those in attendance are not clear on what it is they're here to see, or that it already happened, nor are they aware that they are all about to squeal like a scalded-ass ape.

The people are running around offering toasts and celebratory cheers with the hundreds of flutes of champagne Maria had poured and ready to go when New Year's rolled over just a scant minute ago. The smiles and well wishes are honest, but somewhat reserved, all because they have no idea where they are or how big this ship is.

They know they're standing in a stadium, and this stadium is in what exactly? The normally transparent floor they are walking on is currently occluded, like black obsidian, and even though light is not getting through they can feel a slight radiance of heat drifting up from it, so whatever it is they're here to see—it's close.

They don't notice α-Orionis slowly appearing below their feet.

The Nefer Key delegation was brought in thirty-minutes ago, after the other delegations have settled in, and in that half an hour the station's Group Marshal, Nancy Yoon, with her SYLNb neuro-cybernetic sidekick, Carrie, have been making the introductions of the Nefer Key

113 all it takes is all you got

LCTN: SOL-3 GLENDALE, ARIZONA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-FEBRUARY-23-FRIDAY
TIME: 19:10zulu (local 11:10pst)

In the Cactus League, the Camelback Ranch of today is the third build of this spring training facility. The Dodgers bailed on it 200 years ago for another locale out in Scottsdale, then they moved to Chandler, then to the Salt River Pima res when that land went private, but when Monique bought the team five years ago she had the site out at Camelback Ranch rebuilt. Here today is the inaugural game at this new facility for the first 2323 preseason game.

Today the Dodgers play the Giants!

This is a rivalry that goes back to the 1889 World Series, that was officially locked in on the following year when the "Bridegrooms" joined the National League. The animosity between the teams is still going strong after 433 years, but now it's all in good fun. When the Dodgers meet the Giants this coming April for a regular season game it will be the 8,369th time they'll face off.

Over the last three centuries, MLB farm teams have come and gone, swapped hands and moved many times. Diego was signed up with a Double-A team, the Albuquerque Trash Pandas, but when the Dodgers needed a shortstop Monique warned the General Manager that if they bring Diego up to the majors, only she can send her back down.

So, they brought her up.

Everyone thinks that bringing Diego up into the Majors was a gimmick but the truth is, as a shortstop, the girl is fast, can pronk into the air like a springbok, catch and throw like a champ, but the real reason they brought her up is that she can get on base. Diego can't hit big, but batting .455 on her first season with the Panda's caught everyone's rapt attention. Yes, she rarely gets past first base on a hit but who cares? It's a base—and she can run like the wind on a steal!

114 number one on my personal spank bank

LCTN: SOL-3 GOOSE HUNT, VIRGINIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-MARCH-28-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 11:45zulu (local 06:45est)

It is nuts to see Diego dressed nice and ready to go this early!

Dawn heralds the first day of a two-day break before the MLB regular season starts this Friday, but yesterday afternoon, while her team celebrated the last preseason win, Diego was hotfooting it out for the mail run in from One-Klick that just landed at the Padre's facility.

Dropping Diego off here at Goose Hunt just made sense.

The Steel Annex has a fenced in quarter square-kilometer of the airdrome, what everyone here calls the freight yard, east of and butted up to the Willoughby Spaceport. A quarter of that is the service center to support ships coming in and out of Home Base.

For a facility with a civil bent to it, the SA has a surprisingly high volume of missiles and bombs and bullets stored here. They also have a shitload of CWR-RAT food packets sitting on the pallet racking that they cycle out through the Annex facilities here on Earth, but half of those pallets actually have ghost droids cocooned inside. With those the Annex has a tightly packed, kami-origami bundle of six droids, a whole squad, so if the signal goes out they can burst, unravel and hit the deck shooting inside eight-seconds.

These pallets are also rotated through their facilities, and they have anywhere from four or five companies of these evil things up on the racking at any given time.

For Diego, the geezer squad of six retreads that run this place were a blast and a half to hang out with. Between the bar-b-que and pool table, the hot-tub and 37 hands of Texas Holdem, Diego surprised herself when she actually got her ass out of bed in time to shit-shower and dress with a half-hour to spare! Any other morning her tail would

115 accademia all'assassina

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-APRIL-21-SATURDAY
TIME: 22:12zulu (local 25:20mst)

Back in 2275, Jacob, Cricket and Maria were sent in different directions with the hope they could be salvaged after the events out at Saiph-6B. In an attempt to keep things quiet they were code named after the three wise monkeys, that being *Kikazaru*, *Mizaru* and *Iwazaru* (*id est*, hear, see and speak no evil) so that if anything got out about them then it would be hard to link it back to the three.

It got out and everybody knew it was them.

The rank-and-file viewed these three monkeys more as tragic figures rather than heroic. Jacob wouldn't listen to his handlers and yet he survived because he didn't subscribe to their training. Cricket couldn't cope with the visons of death Jacob left in his wake when she went to collect their fallen. Maria, for the first time, wouldn't say shit if she had a mouthful, fact is she was rendered speechless by these events, but if you were to say anything off-color about Jacob or Cricket now she would claw your face from your skull. With that said, no one was surprised when she ultimately nailed the bastard who ambushed Jacob then wiped out their platoon days later.

Saiph-6B bound the three in a way no one could comprehend.

So, to review, each training cycle from Cue Ball goes on to deploy as an operational company for at least half-a-year before being broken up, that is if they are to be broken up, and keeping with tradition, fifty-years after Cue Ball they are all scrounged up wherever and sent to the Church Key for a *lil' fēste*.

Here tonight in the western banquet room on floor 210 of the Spike, we have five of "the split six" who were shuffled off to Bob's old company attached to the Marauder—where the balance of the training cycle was sent to the Sawney Beane. Over the years, the six kept in

116 not exactly a pickle surprise

DATE: 2323ce-APRIL-22-SUNDAY
TIME: 00:23zulu (local 27:27mst)

Babette sighs, "*Tu me manques.*"

Ninety minutes have passed without them saying an actual word to each other. There was a lot of heavy breathing, a few grunts, then the occasional crying out by her to punctuate a heated moment, but words were not exchanged until just now.

Many have tried to have a relationship like theirs but it is simply not sustainable. A few months at best for most, but nine and a half years is totally unheard of. Pacing was key for Jacob and Babs, sometimes they were many months apart, one time by as much as twenty-five while he was recuperating at Monique's—because pinching exclusive tunnel-time on a secure wormhole was next to impossible with the war hogging every byte of their bandwidth.

Then with Michelle maneuvering herself into a prime position to "volunteer" for Jessica's Mission Oversight flights into Los Angeles, this made it easy-breezy for Guns to slither on into Jacob's bed when there was so many hours to kill between their meetings...

And compiling drop simulations gave them ample downtime!

Now, everybody has something on the side to pass the time, be it live or digital or dead it does not matter, but where Michelle didn't mind Maria or Asajj in the slightest, Babs was something altogether different! See, Guns kept in touch with her old gunnery instructor for the Warthog, that'd be Bud, and she knew about Babette and Jacob for years, but when Michelle actually met Babs, well, curiosity ended up getting the better of her—and they became regular too! Small world, yes, but Shelly can partial sum on the fly where most people suck at it.

Point being, Jacob also sucks at basic math, "Missed you too."

Babs nods slightly, and then slips out of bed with a smug grin.

117 pee towel

LCTN: 44-TAURUS (rho-Tauri)
CORD: SAO-76485.6A (63pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JULY-2-MONDAY
TIME: 07:07zulu (local 04:40mst)

At 92au the Annex has rendered the dump zone on a jump to a measly 3-kilometer radii from the point of aim—which is kind of like punching the eye out of a fly at ten-thousand statute miles with an old Red Ryder BB-gun. It took the compiled data-points from millions of jumps to hone the projection algorithms, as well as the now third-gen WormTrac in service, to accurize their navigational system to this level of incomprehensible scifi sorcery. Then again, based upon the anchor point on a Trung, that being the RFID chip in the kiosk on deck-18 in the stack, one could argue that the dump zone is in actuality around 300 meters in radii, or maybe even less, however there is no way one could actually peg that since both the point of aim and the exit point post jump always end up inside said Trung, so 3-klicks stand as is!

With the new CXi navigational repository, SANDi, being added to the universal Sagittarius-A Navigational Databank, the Annex may very well be able to tighten that target radii considerably.

And yet, never to publish those results.

Anyway, the point of aim on a jump in proximity to a celestial body always...*always*...dumps outside of or along its trailing edge, and where deep space transitional shift is an industry standard, 1,023kps towards a gravity corridor that lies beyond the Zone of Avoidance, when that point of aim is close to a star one should also account for Rotational Drift and the Lateral Rise off the galactic orbital plane. If the target is a planet or its moon then they also have to work in those orbital mechanics ta boot!

So, the sixth planet that is spinning around Vása, *id est* ρTau, is the gas giant, Nazgûl, and our target for today is its habitable moon, Arda, and if you haven't guessed it by now—the naming convention for

118 rodeo clowns

TIME: 07:54zulu (local 04:57mst)

With the CDF completely blind to Mook and Raven following a laser-straight decent towards the Harad, when hitting nine-kilometers above the Núrnen Sea they finally drop below supersonic. At the same time thirty-six battalions, now at treetop level, are approaching their second to last nav-points, and just forty-eight seconds away from the turn towards the north—Seventeenth Calvary *finally* starts to roll out for the Tropic and the Morannon Gates.

Always operating on zulu time, the CDF divisions have already synched up to ρTau local time, and with their attack set for 6:45mst they were treating their people to a steak and eggs buffet! The bombs were supposed to start falling at 6:20 sharp, followed by a twenty-five minute delay until roll out, just to make things look responsive, but the SA appearing overhead shit all over their plans.

The troopers dropped the trays and scrambled for their tanks!

Cyzk thought that if they were ready to go it would still take anywhere from six to eight minutes to push off, but their troops were scattered so it took seventeen to get it in gear! Problem is, the enemy droids haven't launched any missiles or mortars yet?

Hidden Fortress was the Steel Annex's effort to get their ghost droids captured by Co-op Security Services and this was pretty easy once the SS understood that some massive shock or trauma could paralyze the upper brain function of these droids. This left a robotic simpleton that would comply to most tasks, but the damned things would knee-jerk respond to anyone stupid enough to appear in an SCC uniform, dress or field BDUs, ACE fighting suit, or if fired upon.

Do anything moronic and the mayhem protocol would kick in!

Groundhog Debutante was the Security Services side of that equation where they had to learn the hard way that if they refrain from trying to poke around inside a droid—the monster won't self destruct!

119 hellzapoppin'

TIME: 13:23zulu (local 10:56mst)

The job of the Wild Weasel is challenging, dangerous, easily fatal, but...it can be fun! This is especially true when enemy Triple-A and support are locked down protecting a stationary asset. Whenever some AAA robotic is stuck in a square-kilometerish defensive sector, then working the kill is straightforward for most Weasel pilots. It's the Rodeo Clown order-of-battle where things get squirrelly.

The WW-OOB is always simple, it is always flat. The RC-OOB is a bitch an' a half because it's flat, yes, but also geographically fluid. SEAD while on the move, with endless cross-over, the Weasels end up butt-bumping each other while running down anti-air mechs.

Weasel teams on station workout in an assigned 3D partition (cylinder, box or wedge) paired in a high-low mix where one baits and one shoots while working said partition however, in Clown mode those spaces are constantly shifting over the topographical landscape.

Annex fighter pilots first start off on CAP, air-to-air combat, and when they prove themselves capable they're introduced to ground attack and interdiction—followed by SEAD training where they certify as a Weasel. Before they get a hunting license here, they're pushed into the CAS pipeline! Flying both the ASF74 and the 47 makes them feel invincible, but for Close Air Support these pilots transfer to the F380 and the Cerberus airframe looks fragile as fuck...though it's not.

Once CAS certified they *then* can go back to fly as a Weasel!

Learning to work as a Rodeo Clown is, well, the worst possible on-the-job training one could conceivably imagine! In SEAD you don't have that terrifying 'danger close' pressure constantly haunting you while supporting the guy on the ground—where that small arms fire hose-down is a chronic worry when forced to default to the old Mark1 eyeballs at forty-meters AGL, right above stall-speed, when the ground guys urgently need warheads on the bad guy's foreheads. No, as a Weasel you and your teammates have all the elbowroom in the world