

jacc in the box

JNTB PART
02

pearls before swine

nicholas ralph baum



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PART 02

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PART 02
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DEDICATED TO
MY GIRLS:

Alexandra Petrovova
(stitch)

Madesyn Vincent
(minion)

Angel Petrov-Hibbard
(monstre deux)

Krysten Miner
(monster)

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He who would foresee what has to be should
reflect on what has been

— Niccoló Machiavelli

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."

["I'm glad we can communicate, Chuck. I don't care what you tell Mud. Fuck, tell her the truth! Make it all clandestine and shit! That'll shut her up."]

"Yes, Claudia."

["The Air Force is fueling up a Crew-Dragon and it'll be ready to fly tomorrow night."]

Washington chokes on his drink, "Those are museum pieces!"

["They always keep a couple of sticks operational, and they've proven handy. They also have a near perfect flight record, and you are type rated are you not? So, don't argue."]

"If you say so."

["And, Chuck, keep a tight leash on them. I want the three of you at Camp David the second you get back for debriefing. Oh, and bring Mud while you're at it! It'll be great to see her again."]

Charles rolls his eyes again, "Debriefing? This time ya'll had better make sure the first lady is out of town."

Over the phone the President growls, ["Just get your asses to Vandenburg!"]

01000010-01010010-01000010-00100001

Rachel Washington, Charles' wife, approaches him as he sits on a swing by a fire pit. Every time he looks at her he is amazed by her impossible figure which is the type only realized on the *mud flaps* of 18 wheelers and pickup trucks—which earned her that nickname when she was just a teen. The virtually transparent mesh covering she wears reveals her full hips and bust transected by a wasp-like waist. Magically endowed with the spirit and semble of Jennifer Tilly, Rachel drips of sex as would ones brow by just laying eyes upon her—without the camouflage afforded by a hot and humid day.

Yet, in spite of popular opinion, Chuck *did* marry Rachel for her brains. He, a fiscal conservative, and she, a tree-hugging liberal, were hostile adversaries in debate way back in high school. In time they developed a friendship of sorts and kept in touch throughout their college years. When Charles got out of Annapolis their mutual respect led to an unplanned five-day whirlwind romance and, much to their surprise, nuptials in Vegas.

Now, after twenty-four years being married to Rachel, ten of which he was in space, two kids and a little nip and tuck—she looks almost the same today as she did when she was *mutherfucking* him on counterpoint that cheerful spring day he first met her at seventeen.

Rachel hands Charles a glass of wine and plops down beside him with a bounce, "So, Chucky'poo, who was that on the phone?"

"Your doppelganger."

"Claudia! Hum...considering the number of calls you were getting before she did makes me think that either someone got real stupid, or something blew up. Care to share?"

Charles may be a Marine aviator, an astronaut, a national hero, and pretty damned smart in his own right, but Rachel is, by his own admission, light-years smarter than he, "Claudia wants us to pay her a visit when I get back."

Rachel thinks for a few seconds, "Do you feel it?"

"Wha'?"

Rachel smiles, "I feel a bipolar episode coming on, so you had better level with me before it percolates to the surface, darlin'."

Charles takes the remote and cranks up the music, then says with minimal lip movement, "She wants me to tell you the truth."

Rachel immediately picks up on what's going on, "What's with all the cloak and dagger shit?"

He hands her a folder and she opens it. The first thing she sees is an email, and in it she reads, *...Delta Echo transmitted the following text: Let's chat :o) You will send emissaries, but please bring Drama Flakes, Pushy Harder and Somalia Slew.*

She frowns at this, but then when she looks at the photo on the next page she laughs, "Damn! It looks like a dildo!"

"They're calling it the Dildo Express. And, yes, before you ask, it was Claudia that blurted that out. She's the Pres so it stuck."

Charles takes the folder from Rachel and tosses it on the fire, "You know, anymore it's not an issue of national security—"

Rachel cuts him off, "What do you take me for, an idiot?"

"Well, no, sweetheart!"

She huffs, "Look, E.T. has come a knockin' at our back door and they're asking for you. You *are* retiring soon, so I'll let ya off the hook on this one, but just this one, flyboy."

Relieved, Charles takes a sip of his wine, "Thanks, hon."

"Who else is going?"

"A state-department level rep from us, Russia, China, France, Great Britain and Germany."

"All spooks?" Rachel asks meaning that they're all part of the intelligence community.

"We need people who can shut up. I'm not sure about the boys, though, but *they* want to see 'em."

After a short pause Rachel adds, "If you haven't figured it out yet, Robert is the prize for some odd reason."

"Okay, I'll buy that, but why Jason?"

Rachel scrunches her face a tad, "I can't exactly wrap my brain around it, but you know he's not the clown he portrays himself to be. My gut now tells me Jason is a player in all this."

Charles nods with acknowledgement.

Rachel puts her wine glass down and turns to her husband with a sly grin, "Jacuzzi?"

Charles nods with a smile, then scowls, "You know the rules, hon. No dick while I'm gone."

She whispers, "damn!"

01001110-01000110-01000001-01001000-01010010-01010101

Robert and Jason were stoked. Where riding a space plane is best described as blasé anymore riding a *stick* was totally old-school and exhilarating for them—even for Charles. The three ambassadors that went along for the ride were more like gripped in wide-eyed terror and scrambled to get through the air lock when they finally docked with the Enterprise.

The first of four of the new spatial-displacement drive ships being constructed in orbit, the Enterprise was only half-way outfitted when they started doing trial runs out to Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.

This is the third installment of "Enterprise" in NASA's history and the old-timers at the agency are tired of it. The first space shuttle, the one that never made it into space, was named that. The very first *publicly known* space plane was also named the Enterprise and, since the popularity of that old scifi mythos lingers to this day, this ship got saddled with it for all the obvious reasons. Because Challenger and Columbia were names long retired the agency dusted off Atlantis, Discovery and Endeavour for the Enterprise's sister ships.

The four-minute run to Saturn exceeded 20c, and as they slip into formation with Delta-Echo, orbiting the moon Titan, it's the alien ship that closes in to connect with them.

While pressurizing they get a text that the atmosphere on

board is Earth-like and that their respective fauna is neutral to one another, and even though there was every reason to believe them there is still some unease at the thought of exposure. So, after a quick debate and a leap of faith, they elect to leave the bunny suits behind.

They're going into quarantine anyway.

"What the fu!" Was the collective gasp from all those in the air lock of Delta-Echo as they drift towards the floor at 0.15g. When everyone picks themselves up from off the floor the force of the artificial gravity quickly rises to 1g—and this blows away all their minds except for Robert and Jason. They were not surprised one bit.

A doorway opens up and they all file through into a perfectly appointed conference room. The outside of Delta Echo has no visible features whatsoever, but the floor of this room is like a window to the outside giving a spectacular view of the Enterprise and Titan far below.

Another door slides open and three very-human beings walk through, with their leader gesturing to the chairs around the table, "Everybody, take a seat. Glad you could make it."

When they all sit, he says, "By the surprised looks when we walked in I believe you were expecting little green men. In actuality, they're kind'a gray, but before you meet 'em I'm gonna give you some background on us. My name is Marcus Cnaeus Septimus, but you can call me Mark. I was a tribune under Cestius Gallus, and when we got our asses kicked by the Judean's I was picked up by our benefactors after I was left for dead."

The lady to Mark's right speaks up, "I'm Jacqui. The Mohawk butchered my family and took me in. I ran away shortly after that and got picked up. I was four, and I don't remember any of it."

The black man to Mark's left speaks with a Jamaican accent, "I am Abeeku, a runaway slave, and I remember every bit of it."

As if on queue, Robert looks at Jason, "What's your story?"

Surprised, Jason laughs, "What makes you think—"

Robert cuts him off, "It's all very crystal-clear to me now."

"You really want to know?" Jason shrugs, "If you can believe this, I was a pirate under Captain Morgan. On a raid I got gut shot and fell overboard. Hours later these fuckers fished me out and I still had some fight left in me—swinging this cutlass around and shit. Mark had to punch my lights out to get me to stop."

The Russian representative speaks up, "You have agents."

Mark shakes his head and puts his hands out, "Not spying. Watching over individual people is more like it. Like Robert, here." He

leans over the table, "They've been watching you, our species, as they watch over many other species, and now that you're on the road to expansion they want to back off and let you come of age."

Mark thumbs back at an image of the Milky Way as it flashes up behind him—with a small mark indicating where the sun is, "This is where you are, and for one thousand light years in both directions along the Orion Spur is yours to do with as you please. That is, if you knock your shit off and exercise good stewardship."

The Chinese rep then asks in broken English, "Please define what mean you by good stewardship."

Mark frowns, "We are an interesting species. Our benefactors see us as an attractive and noble life form with the greatest potential. They are amazed by our diversity and adaptability, yet are taken aback by the endless variety of ways we find to destroy each other. To say that they're concerned is an understatement but you'll have all the space you need to come to grips with your combative nature."

The United States rep interjects, "The threat implied does not go unnoticed, you understand."

"Nor should it." Mark gives a nervous smile, "But, we're not here to negotiate. You representatives are here to hear what we have to offer, and it *is* generous, so use it wisely. End of discussion." Mark sits back, "Now, would you like to meet our benefactors?"

The United States rep then asks, "They have a name?"

"They've been called lots of things by many peoples, but they themselves have a telepathic language, sort of a mental hieroglyphics where the concept of *us* or *we* translates as '*that which we are*.' The early Egyptians they picked up called them *Nefer-Key*, which means beautiful monkeys. For them that was high praise—so it stuck."

Jason pipes up, "I used to call 'em *les petites merdes gris* for the longest time, but that didn't go over too well when they learned French."

The door slides open and two five-foot, four-inch beings step through. The robes they are wearing drop to the floor and they stand there like two budding teenagers—naked for all to see. Even with their black anime eyes, and diminutive features, humanoid looks humanoid regardless of origin and color of skin. Gray, hairless, athletically built and cut, they are truly gorgeous creatures to behold but, upon review, the strangest and most remarkable thing about these two is their shocking similarity to human beings.

Jason leans over to Robert, and not too quietly he whispers, "The babes taste like Captain Crunch!"

The female Nefer-Key wrinkles her nose, and comments, "Thank you for the compliment, Jaye, but, once again, your endearing charm is overshadowed by your insufferable fuck-tardary."

Robert looks at Jason, "You two have history? Girlfriend?"

"No, my wife."

Bug-eyes all around. Nobody was ready for that one.

The aliens start to don their robes, and as the female walks around the conference room table towards Jason, the male speaks up, "Personally, I would have preferred someone more monochrome for my granddaughter, but Jaye has proven to be a viable addition to our family, and *vastly* entertaining. Hi, I'm Luc..."

As Luc goes about glad-handing the representatives, the female reaches Jason and leans over to kiss him—once, then twice, and when she pulls back her little black tongue flicks the tip of his nose, "Let's get you freshened up. I'll scrub your back."

Jason gestures to Robert, "Lilith, I'd like you to meet Robert."

As Lilith shakes Robert's hand he notices that she has three slender fingers and an opposable thumb that look normal enough, and a second littler thumb—much like a Koala.

Lilith smiles as she coaxes Jason out of the chair and starts to lead him away, "Pleased to meet you, Robert. I've heard so much about you, but we have a time crunch here and I want *all* of my husband's time."

Before she drags him out the door Jason looks back towards Robert, "Sorry, bro, but this I don't share."

Charles and Robert just stare at the door, but it's Charles that quietly intimates their thoughts, "Never thought I'd be jealous of him."

Robert nods with a whisper, "No shit."

Just then Luc takes Charles by the hand, "I'm privileged to meet you, General Washington."

Charles and Robert stand, and Charles says, "My pleasure, Luc is it? Look, I have to know, why are we here?"

As Charles gestures to himself and Robert, Luc laughs, "Well, we are to the point, aren't we. In short, we need an intermediary with your species and we would like to choose Robert for the task. Mr. Graves is exceedingly intelligent, as well as politically neutral..."

Luc shakes Robert's hand, "It's simple, really, just be *the* point man for us, Robert, and we talk to them through you. And, by the way, your ideas on V.P. generators and worm holes are on the

right track. Your ships will be jumping in no time."

Robert thinks for a second, and shrugs, "Sure, I'm game."

Luc turns to the political representatives, "So, gentlemen, you heard right. Mr. Graves is now our primary contact with you. He is the most important individual on your planet next to all your leaders. And, please, maintain his anonymity in this."

The German representative speaks up, "You're shitting us!"

Luc takes one step forward, "Respect our choice or the offer we made you will be withdrawn. This also is not negotiable."

As all six of them reluctantly nod in agreement, Luc smiles, "Excellent! Come on, everybody, let's all take a tour the ship."

On the way out Luc turns to Robert, "Son, you'll be interested to know that after several million of your years we have become rather boring, and studying your planet has been very rewarding for us. Your beings are diverse, and your cultures rich, and your languages, arts, literature and entertainment have brought a breath of fresh air to my people. We may be an advanced species, yes, but we have gained much from yours..."

Charles was about to follow when Mark subtly gestures for him to hold back.

Luc laughs, "To have you know, a lot of us have gotten so hooked on some of your television programs that when *Joan of Arcadia* got cancelled the popular vote amongst us was to throw a rock or two down on CBS studios!"

Robert blinks his eyes, "Joan-a-what?"

Luc playfully throws his hands up as they step out of the room, "Cooler heads prevailed!"

Now alone, Charles turns to Mark, "Okay?"

Mark smiles, "Looking forward to retirement?"

Charles shakes his head, "No, not really."

"Well, I *am* looking forward to mine, and that's why you're here, General Washington."

"Please, call me Chuck. And the why is?"

Mark pats Charles on the shoulder, "Okay, Chuck, we have a little proposition for you."

0000001010

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

hand. Where electro-magnetism reigns supreme above it and gravity rules below at the Planck level—where the structure of space itself is surprisingly Einsteinian smooth.

Again, ol' Albert got it right but for the wrong reasons.

In KISS our vacua-energy bubble of space consists of an ever expanding clot of tightly integrated string particles. There is such a glut of these wiggling loops and coils that if they suddenly attained mass our universe, now believed to be a sphere a little over fifty-five billion light-years across, give or take, would become neutron star dense in a blink of an eye. In spite of all that there's a lot of room for movement in that-there stuff. Just as particle pairs pop in and out of existence at the quantum level, worm-holes do likewise down in the Planck, and as these pairs are stripped apart by black holes, or the affects of spatial displacement for that matter, many times a particle or two may find their way racing down a string-lined tube. Ripples and waves in gravity are relative and take time to get places, but these rogue particles get to you in less than a jiffy and with the right tools would allow you to see some things in real time as they say.

Bathed by blue light in the CIC of SA36, Command Chief, Jerald Stark, the de facto captain of the Iron Maiden, quietly contemplates the clock as his ship slowly rotates in a silent-running ballet against three cruisers from the Co-op. With all eyes glued on him he once again reviews the events that led up to this moment.

It was clearly a set up.

A few hours ago the AMS Gonzalez, a slow short-haul roll-off, was stopped, and ironically so, by the SS Gonzalez, a light-cruiser that had been lying in wait and obviously so. According to protocol a surprise inspection by the Co-op requires them to stand by and wait for a ship and representatives from the Pleiades to be present before boarding; however, the inspectors for today were Security Services personnel and protocol was not to be adhered to this day.

The Dashi, SA23, blew in and had a boarding party on the freighter before the SS inspectors found what they came looking for.

It was all over a receiver, the thing that defines a gun by law, a ten ton clapped-out piece of junk from a ninety year old plasma canon that had been stripped down for scrap. It was on the approved manifest, approved by the Hyades to come through for recycling, but the SS was out to start some shit and thought it better to impound the ship for carrying contraband and take the crew into custody for smuggling.

From the video feed transmitted by Dashi's boarding party the situation quickly developed into a Mexican Standoff that was cut short

by Security Services who shot first. The fire fight itself was over in a few seconds with everybody getting hit except for two SA troopers who snuck around and mowed the surviving SS down from behind.

When the Dashi's Command Chief ordered a hammer shot across the bow as a warning to the SS Gonzalez it was they that fired one into the Dashi for real. It was a critical hit in her port side, well placed at the root of the flight bay—that was immediately answered to by the Dashi with a full broadside from six plasma cannons blowing the light-cruiser apart.

It's strange to watch a ship the size of the Gonzalez torn to shreds the way it was. One would expect fantastical explosions, with balls of flame and such, but this is never the case in the vacuum of space. As holes are punched through the cruiser the explosions act more like expanding gaseous sprays that glow eerily blue and white from heat close to the source. The debris from the strike scatters like crazy, but that is the full extent of "spectacular" in any space fight. That is, unless you pop a nuke—which is not as exciting as it would be planet-side, but it still ain't dull by any stretch of the imagination.

As the freighter high-tails it for the Pleiades, at its top speed of 43c, the Iron Maiden slithers in to cover the Dashi as it charges up for a double back-flip towards Electra but, before SA23 could jump, three heavy cruisers blow into the area and spoiling for a fight.

The Dashi immediately dumped the charge for its jump and raced off at best speed to follow the freighter as the Iron Maiden sat there in the dark—waiting for someone to make a move.

By taking the time to look at the residual gravity wake the three cruisers saved their asses for the now because they realized that a second battle platform was already there, but where? Eager for an easy kill they stopped too close and were past the initial gravity wave signature of the Maiden. They can only narrow its position down to within a thousand kilometer wide zone, and this makes it impossible to shoot at without something else to go on.

So, after giving the freighter and the Dashi a twenty minute head start, Chief Stark decides to make a splash...

The Iron Maiden kicks in it's MDDSH engines and streaks off towards the Pleiades by following the same path as the freighter. After about a minute at 1,800c she starts to cork-screw around the freighter's track at an increasing speed. After about three ever widening loops the Maiden switches into creating a zig-zag pattern around, through and then outside the track.

The Maiden, at a quarter AU out, then shoots along parallel to the track for about a half a minute and suddenly stops. The ship then

draws a box, and at each corner she dumps a flight of Thunderbolts overboard. Intersecting the point of origin she then slips back through her approach track at a tenth of light speed and stops after a few seconds. She then immediately backs up through that same track and stops short of the gravity box she drew.

Turning hard-about the Maiden kicks in her main engines, but instead of an oxygenated burn, she dumps tens of thousands of tons of hydrogen fuel through the engines that was heated up to about 23k. Blowing the gas out from high pressure drops its temperature dramatically, but it will still put out enough of a heat signature, however slight, that liquid helium cooled thermal sensors may be able to pick up on it. The gas should dissipate quickly enough so that, when the Co-op does show up, determining a direction of travel or marking a vector will be next to impossible after a few minutes.

The haze from the cloud will still be there for quite awhile.

Approaching their box, but now drifting outside the track, the CIC staff notices on their new-fangled WormTrac array that one cruiser drops out of their run about a tenth of an AU short from their position. Five minutes later another cruiser slithered up at 30c and exits his dash a whole AU parallel with the Maiden, and ten minutes later the third cruiser streaks by along the freighters track at 1,200c and screeches to a stop five AU past their position.

Chief Stark is not watching any of this. Jerry is working this thing without using the WormTrac array and had to wait to see the gravitational burst and wake from the first cruiser on the old GravTrac.

To get an in-depth feel for the dynamics of these kinds of encounters the GravTrac display is a thirty-meter wide hologram that is projected overhead. Everything relative takes time and Jerry had to wait nine more minutes to see the second cruiser drop off.

Six minutes later Jerry watches the third cruiser rip past.

That last one was an obvious lure and, much to the chagrin of the Co-op, Chief Stark didn't snap at it. He learned from the best, and the best beat into him three things: patience-patience-patience.

Jerry looks over at Scott Rutledge and asks, "The third cruiser stopped about four AU or so, right?"

Scott is surprised, "Want me to tell you?"

Jerry nods so Scott gives it up, "Five."

"That gives us a little over forty minutes before we see him."

Mentally working the angles, Jerry steps out onto the floor and walks slowly through the hologram showing the tracks of the

gravitational waves that emanated from the drop off points and the pathways leading up to them. From under the drop off point of the first cruiser he walks to the Maiden's position and looks back as if he full well knows what they're doing.

Turning to look at the position of the second cruiser Jerry quietly says to himself, "Okay...let's twinkle twinkle little stars."

Without looking back he says to Scott, "Ramirez was right."

Scott, who is now standing by asks, "How so?"

"I'd give my right nut and twenty years off the top of my life just to trade off half of our hydrogen and oxygen fuel, shit we don't really use, for tanks of cryogenic helium about now." Jerry hangs his head, "That is, if we wanted to maneuver for a shot, or get the fuck out. Which the later is more my objective about now."

Scott mentally scratches his brain, "You'd take the shot if you had it, right?"

Jerry looks up and points at the first cruiser, "It all depends on this clown. There is a secondary wave behind the heavy knuckle he laid down. He's very aggressive and if he comes in too fast, and hits that frosty cloud of H^2 , I'm gonna bust him in the nose for sure. As for the others, well that depends if I have a solution or not, but I'd rather not."

"We are at war now."

"Ya, Scott, we're in a state of war, but it's better for us to find out what they've been learning to do over the last decade and let them live to continue doing just that. A draw here would put us in a much better position than offing one or two of these fuckers. They keep trying to coordinate amongst themselves and it puts them at a disadvantage. If they ever figure that out then we'll be on a more level playing field, and that would suck."

Jerry looks over at a tech, "What's the external temp?"

A tech looks up from a console, "I was about to tell ya, Chief, it's hitting three-point-seven-five."

"Crap, we need to get it back under three-five k. I want you to start transferring heat to internal air and shut down all non critical systems. We're gonna have'ta cook on this one, people."

Normally the Maiden's external temperature is maintained to closely match ambient space which is normally 3 Kelvin in most places. So cold that hydrogen freezes. If the ship has to radiate heat this is accomplished through the flight decks. When the Maiden dropped off to cover the Dashi she buttoned up by closing the drop bays and

covering all windows to the outside including the dome on the underside of the ship. The flight deck is instantly chilled and heat is now trapped inside to reduce any thermal signature to the enemy's He-chilled sensors. The problem is that when the heat sinks top off the ambient air gets it.

Jerry then asks another tech, "We have two markers, but do we have any from Little Horn flight?"

The tech answers, "Negative, Chief. They're lookin'."

Jerry then calls out for all of CIC to hear, "Okay, everybody listen up! Sergeants Nakayama and Zabel, here are your standing orders. Keep our aft towards the center of the cloud. Preset the hammers for a full particle burn. If target number one so much as dingles that cloud you will take the shot. Confer with me before you do. After the burn you will immediately switch the hammers over for a plasma pulse and fire one salvo at will. Shotgun pattern in full choke. Do you copy?"

After they acknowledge Jerry then calls out, "If we fire I want Tape Worm flight to zip over there and give us a damage assessment. If their aft section is still whole I want them to punch a couple of centipedes into the engines. I don't want anything salvageable. Give them the stand by order."

Jerry then raises his voice a might, "As for target number two, I need to triangulate, people! Laser up to Gargoyle flight and get their eyes on this as well."

The Chief then looks out towards target number three and calls out, "How many valkyries we have ready to launch against both these targets?"

A tech calls out, "Twelve missiles ready to go, Chief."

Jerry thinks for a few seconds, "Make it thirty. We may have to make it look sloppy if we shoot at three."

After a moment of silence Scott pipes up, "If you use the boom you could get a good triangulation, can't ya?"

Jerry looks at Scott and points towards the first target, "This guys is too close and coming in hard. Deploying the boom takes time, and getting it back in takes way too much time if he starts to climb up our ass. I don't wanna cut a boom loose in a pinch, and I don't want to hear about it if I do."

Jerry then looks out over CIC, "By a show of hands, how many C.I.C. noobs do we have on rotation that don't understand what we're doin' here?"

Seven, including Zach Nelson, raise their hands so Jerry motions for them to, "Come on down!"

He then points to Scott, "You stay here too, motherfucker. It's time for you to git edjimicated."

The seven step out from the shadows and stop at the edge of the hologram, only to see Jerry motion for them to come in, "Gather round, people. You can't see from there."

Jerry arches his back and stretches as the seven step up, "In the last war there was two hundred and twenty-one deep space engagements. Out of those only seventeen ships were destroyed, and all of them were from the Co-op. Of those, eight were victims of Marshal Ramirez, and I watched her do 'em all. Back before that shit started Ramirez was saying, and quite loudly, that there was a huge gap in our understanding of how to conduct deep space engagements. She just made Senior Chief, a Romeo-Nine, and her Field Marshal told her to bone up on it and get back to him when she had something for them to look at."

Jerry looks over the seven with a perplexed look on his face, "And you know what she did? She studied submarine warfare of all things. Both World Wars and all the peacetime encounters between the United States and the old Soviet Union. Ya know, ya gotta love the U.S. Navy 'cause they keep thorough records. She then read every historical account she could get her hands on." Jerry then smiles, "She even read fictional stories, novels in fact, and those, she said, gave her incredible insight. Written by a Tom...somebody, I don't remember. Anyway, she devises a tactical manual showing us how to do it. Her methods were stupid-simple and direct, and you want to know what happened?"

After a few seconds he laughs, "Nothing."

Jerry throws his hands out, "Nobody was listening! Nobody gave a shit! Nobody in their wildest imagination ever thought we'd be fighting the Co-op. Ya, we made contingency plans for it but nobody took it seriously until they did a Peel Harbor on us."

"So, here we are sitting all stupid and shit out at Forty-Four Tau when the Co-op blows into orbit with five cruisers and tell us to G.T.F.O. Now, we were in our jurisdiction, but the Co-op has always thought different about that and decided to give us a full salvo. Five plasma bursts hit the Marauder solid on the Starboard and killed over two-hundred including the Field Marshal. The ship was a mess and we were bleeding out, but they totally missed the engines and the aft section, so the Chief had the MDDSH kicked on to mitigate air loss and called Ramirez up—all because I made him read her manual."

Jerry raises his hand, "Question, what do you get when you combine plasma, combustibles and atmosphere? Anybody?"

Zach blinks his eyes, "Fire?"

Jerry points to him, "Ding-ding-ding! Whoosh, baby! Instant conflagration! Anyway, the Co-op was demanding that we drop the field for boarding or they were going to finish the job, and the Chief was back-peddling trying to buy time to plug the holes when Ramirez waltzes in."

Jerry laughs, "For your edification, Ramirez swings the biggest balls I know 'cause, without saying a word, she walks onto the bridge, yanks the pilot out of his seat, jumps in, and on manual controls we take off at about 200c! She starts turning here and there all crazy like—all the while the bubble surrounding the ship is filling up with smoke, and secondary explosions were blowin' holes out the Starboard bay, which was loud as fuck, and somehow though all this shit she hears the Chief shout at her to drop the field. In an instant the cloud and debris around us disperse and the fires are instantly—*poof*—gone! The fires were out but the ship was a fuckin' wreck."

He shakes his head, "As she predicted, they show up around thirty minutes later and we take off again! Marshal Ramirez earned her salt that day by showing us how to do what we are doing now. She got so good that six years later she nailed two kills in one sortie, and went back out and got a third inside twenty-four hours. One time she even got them to shoot at one of their own, which she refuses to take credit for, but after three days on the run everything was total confusion. Well, for the seven of them—not for the one of us."

Jerry has already stepped over to the location of the second target, points up and runs his finger along the lines floating over his head, "So, here we now have three markers on this guy. These are simply points where the target occludes or perturbs light from a background object they pass by—from our point of view. This tells us the direction they're going, but we don't know where along these lines they are. We have to wait and get a marker from another source to set up a firing solution and we're using the fighters for that. I'd rather spool out the boom array but the guy behind us is charging in and I don't want to take the chance of having to cut it loose."

Jerry shrugs, "Then there are thermal signatures, light and radio emissions that could come into play if someone gets careless. Academically, like I said, it's real stupid-simple, but doing it for real is a mental skull-fuck. Questions?"

One private raises her hand and Jerry picks on her, "With all this, what does the WormTrac give us?"

Jerry thought that would be obvious, but apparently it's not, "Give us a heads up? Look, if we were to use it for real we'd scoot up closer and triangulate faster for a shot. In simulations we were able to consistently pick off anywhere from two or three of their cruisers per engagement. Yes."

Jerry points to Zach, and Zach asks, "What would happen if the Co-op got it, or came up with their own version of it?"

"Things would get real weird real fast, but the sims tell us that the chasee still holds the advantage. Also, our grav-arrays and optical imaging are two-fold better than theirs, and we have new systems coming on-line that will improve on that, but, argumentatively, we won't know for sure until we're faced with that eventuality."

It was just then a tech calls out, "Chief, we have a fix from Gargoyle flight for target two. On display."

Looking up, Jerry sees a forth line drawn in from where the fighters were, and a red line now appears emanating from the second targets drop off point showing the direction of the cruiser and cross hairs sliding along it indicating the targets projected current position and trailing position on the clock. Taking into account the drift of the maiden from their own drop off point, the motion of the fighters relative from where they were deployed, and the markers themselves makes for a very complex calculation indeed. A solution that was puked out inside a second by the CIC tactical computer.

After a moment of deep thought, Jerry calls out, "Okay, we'll go with this, but I want a confirmation before I'm comfortable with it. Let's keep our eyes peeled people."

Noticing that the noobs have stepped out of the hologram, Jerry motions for them to come back, "Where ya goin'? Jeez! Get back here. You need to finish this thing."

As they step in Jerry asks the techs behind him, "How much time till we see target three?"

One replies, "Twenty-seven minutes, chief."

Jerry nods and asks, "Okay, let's set up a contingency. Corporal Long, I want the overhead loaded to a file and have it constantly updated until we transmit. I'll have an audio clip in the queue for you to attach in just a minute."

Through the tacnet, Jerry pulls up a simple audio device that hangs translucent in his vision. All he has to do is to think or say *record* and it will record whatever he tells it to. He quietly steps to the far end of the hologram, away from everybody, and looks back over all the people in the CIC.

War is not what anybody *really* wants, but it was inevitable. One by one he glances at the older faces of veterans working the CIC who have fought and know what horrors lay before them. He then drinks in the faces of the seven youngsters, those who will be fighting this time around, and fears for their future. Like the last one, this war is not going to be quick or easy, and he wonders how many of them will make it through the duration.

Ask and ye shall receive they say, and the tacnet gave Jerry what he didn't want to know. The thought came to mind so the net immediately provided the information and rudely so. Statistically, as compared to the last war, 2.19 of the seven will die over the next fourteen years, but which ones? In his mind Jerry picks two of them at random, and a leg off a third, and the creepiness of this thought he finds troubling.

"Voice record on." Says Jerry as he turns away from that image, "This is Command Chief, Jerald Stark of the S.A. Three-Six. From the display you can see we are currently in a hostile engagement near Upsilon-Taurus with three Security Services cruisers, and were forced to fire on target one. We have a clear solution on target two and are requesting authorization to launch a strike on that cruiser which is about one-point-zero-eight A.U. away from our present position. You have the count down. If we do not hear from you by the thirty second mark we will disengage and echo-three back to the Carrie Nation. Chief Stark, out."

Jerry turns and walks back through the hologram for a private chat with a Corporal Long, "Corporal, the audio is in the queue."

"Got it, Chief."

"Attach it to the display file. The second we fire on target one I want you to make sure that the count down to target two is running. Once I give the order you will speed-dial it to G.O.P. Command and Control. Got that, Long?"

"Copy-copy, Chief!"

Jerry nods with approval, and as he turns to join the young bucks in the hologram, Scott asks, "Jerry, how we doing on this?"

Looking into Scott's eyes, Jerry smiles, "You really don't like doing this, do ya?"

"You have to ask that? Fuck, no, I hate this shit! I'd rather go punch-drunk crazy in some slug-fest over a Homer-infested piece of turf any day instead of this waitin' around and sneekin' around shit."

"You want to know something?"

"What?"

Jerry leans in, "So would I."

Zach is startled as Jerry steps up behind him, "Okay, corporal, what are you thinking about?"

Zach turns around, "Thinking about, Chief?"

"Ya, what are you thinking about? We got time to kill, so?"

Zach looks around and shrugs, "I was thinking about how cool your job is. I mean, this is some scary shit, but you are so damned cool about it. If you don't mind me saying—you make Picard look like a pussy."

"Well, Picard ain't a pussy, but thanks."

"You a fan?"

"Are you going to out me? I'd rather you not. I have a reputation to keep."

"Chief, you are all kinds of whoop-ass style points." Zach gestures to the hologram, "Knowing what I know now, if it were anybody else running this show I'd be pissing myself."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, but we're in a pretty good position here. Target one is coming in behind the H² cloud so he really can't get a fix on us at all. Target three will not be able to get a clear solution on us at that distance and angle, so we can focus on target two. And, as for target two, from his vantage point we lucked out because we've been running along a deep space corridor that we will enjoy for only another twelve minutes. At that time we'll be cutting it close to the star Botein and this gives me a choice. From there we'll have eight minutes to either bug out, or we can blow the rest of the H² in our tanks and put out a big plume behind us and mess up everything for five arc seconds from his point of view. And, as I see it, I have maybe five minutes to decide on what to do."

"On a hydrogen dump which direction would you take us?"

"Towards him, of course! Look, he would not be able to see us against the cloud because with this ship we'll be too cold, and he would not expect it because it's just not our style. But, for *my* edification, what would you do, Nelson?"

Zach replies with no hesitation, "I would wait. We don't know where target one is so I'd wait to see if he sticks his head out. If not, then I'd take the shot at target two and get outta Dodge."

Jerry stares at Zach with a deadpan look, trying to make him flinch, and Zach brazenly stares back. The kid got it right. Usually it takes a few tries in the simulators for someone to comprehend this stuff, but he has a complete grasp of the situation and this is rare.

Zach did make corporal right out of boot and this proves to Jerry that they chose correctly putting him on the path to becoming an XO.

Jerry smirks, "You're right. I'm impressed."

"Don't be, it was a trick question." Jerry blinks, so Zach elaborates, "Chief, if you were going to blow the tanks you would have done so only to buy time to get a fix on two, but you have that solution so why bother? Wait for one to show up."

"Like I said, I'm impressed."

Just then Sergeant Zabel calls out, "Chief, we have a firing solution on target one."

Jerry turns to him, "Talk to me."

"Thermal signature, up on display, bearing one-eight-seven, ascension zero-zero-two. Initiating particle burn."

Raising his hand, Jerry looks up, "Hold on a sec."

He sees the cross hairs of target one sliding through the H^2 cloud, heading towards them, and when they are about ten seconds from exiting the cloud he points to Nakayama and orders, "Fire."

On a ship this size nobody can feel or hear the hammers fire in particle cannon mode from the CIC. On the outside nobody can see anything emit from the guns except a ghostly hue exiting the muzzles. The particle blasts are practically invisible in space—nothing like the spectacular fire hose of sparks and light shown in the movies and neuronet interactives. Watching this from the source is rather disappointing, but at the receiving end it's a cataclysm.

The beams hit the target instantly, and because they were close, on a monitor they watch in real time as the faint thermal blob of the cruiser suddenly lights up with what appears to be jets of hot gas venting out in all directions.

Calmly Nakayama informs them, "Plasma launch in four, three, two, one, on the way!"

Where in particle mode the hammers don't look like they are doing much of anything—plasma mode is altogether different. In particle mode protons can be sent on their merry way without much effort, but plasma needs something to hold onto to throw it any appreciable distance. The sequence starts with a robotic node about the size of a beach ball suspended in the receiver of the cannon. It is then charged with a meter thick sphere of plasma superheated to several million degrees Celsius. When the charge peaks a thirty ton skid, attached to rails, slingshots the weapon towards the target and absorbs the recoil by sliding back into the receiver with a violence.

This is total eye-candy that you can feel in the CIC.

In the hologram everybody watches intently as twelve blips race towards the target—gaining speed and constantly adjusting trajectory to converge on the cruiser in unison. Between the velocity of the plasma nodes, which actually had to slow down because the cruiser was coming in too fast, the weapons hit the front of the ship like sledge hammers at just over 90 kilometers per second.

Amidst a collective of ooohs and aaahs and whoops and cheers, Jerry turns to Corporal Long, "Transmit now."

01001101-01001111-01010100-01000100

It took all of thirteen seconds from Jerry giving the order to transmit for the display to transverse a worm hole and pop up in the Command and Control Center at the top of the Spike on Sapphire.

Bob is pissed because he knew this was coming and didn't want to be here in this capacity when it did. He was hoping to retread back into the ranks, but when the Frontier separated from both the core and the United Nations, and the SA joined forces with the Frontier's own version of the UN, the Federation of Independent States, the FIS up and voted him in to be the new Alpha-6.

They begged him in fact.

There has always been a disconnect with the old Alpha in the UN and the SA, but with the last war there was a complete severance of ties. This Alpha, on the other hand, is a political appointment from the ranks of the Annex and functions in an ambassadorial role as an observer mission outside the normal voting body of the FIS' version of the general assembly. Whereas The Holy See has also been granted observer status with the Federation, and has no throw weight, the Annex *is* the throw weight for the frontier states. This is not exactly what Bob was interested in doing, being saddled with the job of coaching their Secretary General day and night in the subtleties and pitfalls of nation and consensus building, but with the newness of the FIS Bob had little choice but to accept the job or see it fail.

When the situation out at upsilon-Taurus blew up Bob, and many of the SA commanders on site, moseyed on up to the C3 to see what they could do to help, but as it was all they could do is stand around and wait for something to happen.

It's actually pretty quiet in the C3, with an underlying tone of melancholy to further darken the already dark ambiance of the room. For that last hour all they've really had to do was to suck down coffee and crack lame jokes in a fruitless attempt to lift their spirits—anything

and everything to take their minds off of the wait.

They didn't have to wait long.

Overhead the hologram display from the Iron Maiden pops up and runs in fast forward while Chief Stark's message broadcasts through the sound system. When the display hits the point where the thermal image of target one shows up it switches over to normal speed. When the Chief's message ends they watch as the plasma weapons hit the SS cruiser dead on.

You can hear a pin drop in the C3 as they all look at the countdown clock while it passes the seven minute mark. Bob looks over at the black glass wall where his office used to be, and is now occupied by Maria Ramirez who has yet to come out. Everybody knows she's in there, they saw her go in, but whatever it is she is doing is a mystery to all. Maybe she is watching them to see what their reactions would be to this situation. Bob has done that in the past, but this has never been her thing. That is, until now.

Bob suddenly realizes how unnerving that practice is and, more likely than not, she's just giving him a taste of his own medicine, "By a show of hands, how many say we take the shot?"

Of the three Marshals, six Field Marshals, two Deputy Field Marshals, and a Command Chief, only half raise their hands—which means the debate is on.

Bob stays out of the argument. He knows what the military answer is, and he knows what the political answer is, and he knows what the big-picture answer is, but for a simple yes/no question none of the answers have a two to one match. The military answer is obvious. The strategic view has been to not beat them up so severely that they get totally spooked, but when faced with the political question in his mind it's a win-lose both ways.

The discussion started out civil enough, but with the deadline looming overhead it was getting heated fast. With three minutes left to go Maria slithers out of her office and pulls up behind the group who are now on their feet and in each other's face.

Bob was on the sideline and smiles as he watches Maria simply clear her throat, "We done here?"

Now mute, like little kids they feel somewhat embarrassed that their discussion was getting out of hand, but it was the Chief who had the gumption to speak up, "Sorry Marshal, we've got some strong feelings 'round here."

"Don't apologize, Chief. All of you are right because there is no wrong option, but here are some things to think about. We are in a

state of war now. No doubt about it." Maria then gestures up at the hologram, "And, Chief Stark does have a solid fix on that cruiser. If he doesn't sack it then we're bound to meet this bad-boy again and it may not end up in our favor the next time."

Maria glances over at Bob, "And, yes, it's been our standing orders not to hit them in these engagements too hard because they just might turtle up on us; but if we can make them do that then it can buy us some time to get the next six replacement platforms outfitted and deployed. And, if not, they'll have one less cruiser."

Nodding heads all around, so Maria asks, "So, if you have any reservations nuking the sonofabitch then speak up now."

She then looks over at Bob to see what reaction she gets out of him, but he simply gives her an approving, yet grim smile, and a subtly given thumbs-up sign.

After a whole ten seconds of silence, Maria turns to a C3 staffer, "Corporal Vossler, message to Iron Maiden... Take the shot. Confirm and Echo-three to Hippo-One. End message."

01000010-01001111-01001000-01001001-01000011-01000001

The four fighters from Tape Worm flight reached target one in less than a quarter minute after the plasma did. The first half of the ship, which was primarily flight ops, was rendered into a debris field that was drifting out from the blast zone. One of the engines was pulverized by a plasma hit, so the flight leader punched two centipede missiles into the intact one for good measure.

Even though this ship was a total loss they will learn later, and much to their relief, that more than seventy-percent of the crew and compliment attached to the cruiser survived the attack.

Now it's time to wait.

As the minutes slip away Zach decides to lighten things up by asking Jerry on the sly, "Janeway, would you?"

Jerry was not expecting that and quietly chuckles, "I'd fuck her in the ass and steal her command. How about T'Pol?"

"Have to chip through that frigid labia of hers to git to the goodies, but sure." After a few seconds Zach leans in and asks the stupid question, "K'Ehleyr?"

"D'uh!"

"A mile to the source?"

"You bet!"

It was just then at the ninety second mark when the text message comes through from C3. The alert flashes in Jerry's head and he pulls it up with a frown.

Jerry turns to sergeants Nakayama and Zabel, "Got that?"

Zabel responds, "Yes, Chief. Orders are to take the shot. Firing solution is good to go."

"Standard pyramid. You know the drill."

Nakayama announces, "Launching Valkyries."

They feel an ever so slight jostle as five, seventeen-ton missiles are launched into space and spread out.

Nakayama gives an evil smirk, "Five big balls of kiss-my-ass in three-two-one, mark."

Everybody watches the blips on the monitor as they suddenly zip off towards target two.

While Zabel give the orders to the bridge for the approach and confirmation one of the youngsters asks Jerry, "Chief, we don't see the missiles on the holo. How long till they reach the target?"

"They already have."

"oh."

The MDDSH engines kick in and the Iron Maiden streaks out to a half-light minute from where the bombs went off.

When they stop Zabel calls out, "Eleven seconds people."

On the monitor they watch as five bombs, 50-megatons each, blossom to life. Like a sideways pyramid they are positioned out at four corners of what would be the base, with the fifth covering the center outside of the box. Each of the eight-kilometer wide fireballs are evenly two kilometers apart and they look like blinding suns as they instantly expand then hang in space.

Flying sideways, the cruiser hit the fireballs at high speed right as they pop. Coming out the other side the CIC crew picks it up and displays the ship on the monitor.

If they had a few seconds notice then they could have kicked on their plasma shields—which could have mitigated much of the severity of the blasts. As it is the cruiser is now scorched and tattered, and venting air from the flight deck in the bow. In the aft it is dumping fuel, and between the two it starts to flat spin.

After a moment of silence, Zach asks, "Can they recover?"

Jerry shrugs, "Ya, if the fuel doesn't mix and—"

Just then the fuel tanks on the side that was venting blow out, and the following continuous burn makes the ship spin faster and faster and out of control.

Zabel informs them, "Estimated G's at twelve, and climbing."

All Jerry could say was, "Crap."

The centripetal forces at work here will make it impossible for anybody to stabilize the cruiser in time to help any survivors. Of the capital ships the SA took out in this fashion during the last conflict four of them suffered this same dreadful fate, and a paltry eleven people were rescued, those who by sheer luck were able to jump ship, only to give horrifying accounts on how their crewmates perished.

Instead of letting these people suffer crushing and confusing deaths, Jerry turns to Nakayama, "Put 'er down."

Another Valkyrie is launched. It takes just a few seconds for it to reach the target, but those in the CIC have to wait thirty seconds to witness the *coup de grâce*. On the monitor the bomb goes off right beside the cruiser, and from this strike the ship is totally vaporized.

There is no celebratory cheer on this one, but a wearisome pall that descends over the whole of CIC.

Jerry clears his throat and asks, "Internal temp?"

Zabel responds, "Three-zero-seven, Chief."

Jerry sighs and starts barking commands at his crew by ones and twos, "Let's open it up and dump some heat before we scoot. I want all systems on-line. Boys, take us out of here and prepare for jump. Echo-Three in five minutes. Inform the flights that we'll meet up with them at the rendezvous. Let's get this on the hump, people!"

It was only Zach who then overhears Jerry quietly mutter to himself with a sad quiver, "I wanna get the fuck outta here."

The Iron Maiden races away and quickly increases her velocity to 2,000c. After three minutes of twisting and turning she drops off and spools up for a jump.

When the charge is set what looks like a baby black-hole yawns and swallows her whole.

0000001011

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*.

Nikki, number Twenty-Nine that is, the one the Annex rescued from the Queens facility, transmits into Jacob's mind with a snicker, <"Bitches, plural, it was a group effort...">

Jacob does well containing the rage-fit building up inside as Nikki gleefully tells him the full extent of the conspiracy.

Like Nikki-8, Fifty-Two's de facto front-man with the Annex, Nikki-29 happens to perform most of the functionary tasks for their collective. Standing beside Jacob, along with du Condé, Nicole and Cricket, this Nikki is just one of 2,800 children on the stage and lining the walls of the auditorium—each of them representing a unique genome of the clones rescued only four years before.

The image of all these children, saved from a fate worse than death, has quite a sobering affect on those attending the ceremony. Everybody knows what the SA did that day, *à la Représailles de Paladin*, and how Jacob spearheaded that effort, but now all of the rotten things said or written about him fails to ring true as they hear first hand how he has taken a personal interest in their development and wellbeing since. The rescue mission, in and of itself, warranted the award, but what Jacob has done for these children afterwards has left no doubt as to his worthiness.

In the eyes of these children he has become "Papa J" and in another first that's a handle he can be proud of.

To the sensibilities of those from the Annex the ceremony in progress is tortuously gay yet mercifully quick. Between the rose and lemon juice, without the aid of a decent vodka, they get an alert over the tacet about the situation turning sour out at upsilon-Taurus. Yes, it's Jacob's command that is deeply involved in the action but it's also obvious that there is nothing they can do from here except hope for the best and enjoy the post ceremony entertainment.

As beautiful as it is, breathtaking in actuality, the second movement of Gorecki's third symphony has never been considered an uplifting experience but, much to everyone's surprise, with the children on stage in-chorus it actually manages to become just that! Even though this interpretation is not as haunting it inevitably tugs at one's heart strings nonetheless.

At least Ewa is less gay this time around.

As part of a settlement, to bypass the appeals process that is, a suggestion offered by one Alex Demitri, the precocious twelve year old who started the petition, was a limited, one-time alteration to the Ewa medal. This was jumped on by the Congress of Laureates, thinking it would delegitimize the proceedings here today, but it blew back in their faces when (in SA black and red) the award was more

than well received.

Ewa, the smiley face symbol of the order, went from cloyingly saccharin-sweet to wicked-cool with a simple pallet swap.

Sitting between Nicole and Nikki, Jacob is currently struggling with three things. First is sitting between Nicole and Nikki. They're holding hands and making a good show of it but he would rather be strangling both of them about now. It's true that Nicole likes a good gasp on the by-and-by, but Jacob wonders what her reaction would be if he were choking her in earnest. Oh, to dream...

Second is Jacob's new vision of hell—which is sitting between Nicole and Nikki while a troupe from the Mazowsze tradition of folk dancers do their thang. Their smiles and spinning and bouncy-bouncy already makes him want to slice his wrists along the radius. Yes, admittedly their performance is quite superb, but Jacob has had more than enough *cheer and joy* for one day. Oh, the humanity...

Lastly, while all of the above is chuggin' right along, Jacob fights to keep a straight face and swallow the primordial shriek ready to burst from his lungs as he responds to Maria, yet again, cluing him in after the fact, <"Oh, fucken' hell!">

Over the neuronet, Maria's voice snaps and crackles as it pops from one wormhole to the next, <"Christ, dude, we needed to change your image!">

Jacob adds, <"And start some shit!">

<"Yes, well, when opportunities present.">

<"With the stone, I got two birds to give ya.">

Maria chuckles, <"That's very cliché of you Jake, but yes. It worked out way better than we expected. And, you did play your part rather well I might add.">

Jacob snarls in his head, <"My God, I'm tired of being a pawn in your machinations.">

Maria laughs, <"Hey now! That's a mighty big word for you to be using, don'cha think? It might hurt *yur widdal bwain!*">

<"Fuck you.">

<"Ooooooh-hoo-hoo, don't tease! I could use a kick in the ass."> Then after a short pause, <"Answer me this, would you have gone along with our little intrigue had you known?">

<"This is all about that Alpha shit. Hell no!">

<"There's your answer, sweetheart! And...">

Jacob waits a few seconds then asks, <"And?">

<"A communiqué from the Iron Maiden. Give me a sec.">
Maria clears her throat, <"Alright, Jerry nailed a cruiser near 69-Tau and he has a bead on a second one. He's asking for orders.">

Jacob points out, <"He doesn't want to do it.">

<"It's his prerogative! He should make the choice.">

Jacob protests, <"Killing thousands in a single shot does not make for a good afternoon. His choice would be to leave.">

<"Then he should leave..."> Maria asks, <"Then, maybe not? Okay, Mr. Crystal Ball, what do you think he should do?">

<"What *you* think he should do. Look, if he bugs out the fight is on, guaranteed. If Jerry puts this one in the bag then maybe the Co-op will back the fuck off. What do *you* want to have happen?">

<"I want a little more time.">

<"We only get six months. Maybe nine, tops.">

<"That's enough.">

There is a silence that Jacob breaks with a little insight, <"Here's something for you to gnaw on. If Kiplinger contacts Bob about this then he's blowing smoke up our ass. If he calls *you* then he will be serious about hittin' the breaks.">

<"Sure about that?">

<"Come on, you know Kip!">

<"He's the only decent one of the bunch.">

<"I'm worried about him.">

Maria snorts, <"Concern for the enemy? That's a twist.">

<"He's good people.">

Maria then hurries, <"Look, the silverbacks are arguing in C3, and I need to get out there before we run out of time.">

<"Have fun.">

Introspectively, Maria sags under the weight of her decision, <"You know, Jake, I was hoping to end my career playing solder rather than doing it for real again. And, now, in this capacity. This job is a shit job.">

Jacob sighs as the connection is broken. Talking to Maria has again smoothed over his hackles. Surprisingly, her sarcasm and sense of humor, insulting as it is, has a calming effect on him. So much so that Nicole and Nikki get to live another day. *Oh well*, thinks Jacob as the dancers wrap up their performance.

On stage they finish with a lethal dose of *Hej Sokoły* to round things out. With this song everybody sings and bounces around in chaotic celebration. The theme of the song doesn't exactly fit the proceedings here but it's such a popular folk tune that nobody seems to care. Upon reflection the one absurdity that comes to Jacob's mind is that, whoever chose it, maybe they were trying to implant a simple suggestion. That being: *die motherfucker, die!*

Jacob laughs inside, but when the singing and dancing peaks a beautiful young girl, armed with an accordion, steps onto the stage and adds to the madness. Thankfully it was hard to hear that evil contraption, but what didn't pass unnoticed was that they swapped the word *sokoły* out for *myszolów* in the chorus.

Maybe that message was not subliminal as he once thought?

The reception afterwards was the purest definition of irony in its most transcendental state. To start things off the receiving line is beyond uncomfortable because the attendees react to Jacob as if he were some kind of leper, or a pit bull, or a leperous pit bull. This is a man belonging to an organization they have an avowed loathing for, and he is their star performer, and here they are congratulating him, what they see as the embodiment of walking evil, on his good works.

If he were a smoldering char, with ashes dripping and sulfur fumes scorching the air, this man would be easier for most in line to accept. Evil must fit the part. What they are witness to is Jacob being tall, handsome, cheerful and engaging—not at all what they pictured in their minds. Not at all hard to warm up too, and begrudgingly so the waters are starting to lose their chill.

Where it turns around for Jacob is when one young lady takes his hand and can't look him in the eye. She's in tears. Jacob touches her chin lightly and speaks ever so softly, "Are you okay?"

She is taken aback and looks up.

Evil is not gentle, nor does it show genuine concern, and in an epiphany, thanks to Nikki, she realizes that this man is not evil. He is not a criminal nor is he a mass-murderer. He is a soldier. It's hard for some people to distinguish between the two, and many choose not too, but the young miss is astonished by this realization and she reaches up and gives Jacob a quick peck on the cheek.

Jacob thinks, *Wow, that was unexpected.*

The receiving line starts to roll up and when du Conde reaches Jacob he takes him by the shoulders and kisses both his cheeks, "Bravo!" du Conde then steps back, clasps his hands together and throw them out, "*Un autre chapitre à la Chanson de Geste!*"

That was also unexpected, and way over the top.

The beauty of the neuronet is that Jacob knew in real time when “hey falcons” became “hey buzzard” and he understood the outrageousness of du Conde’s statement. The comparison between the actions of the SA to the legendary Paladin of the Songs was totally asinine because there was nothing heroic about what the SA did. Justice was dished out that day—retribution, plain and simple. Yes, the protests out of the G.A. were loud and long, but with the final tally nobody could argue with results.

Nicole turns to Jacob and asks, “Platitude or banality?”

Jacob thinks about it, “Hum, tough call.”

du Conde objects with a smirk, “I take exception to that! You will accept the praise you get here today. It’s well deserved. I insist!”

Jacob smirks back, “All the other times you talk about me you talk smack about me. Why the change in tone?”

du Conde laughs, “Today we sing your praises. Tomorrow, well tomorrow I’ll be back to smacking your name around. Deal?”

Probing, Jacob asks, “Oh, so you know?”

du Conde give an almost comical wide-eyed response before he turns away, “By whatever do you mean?”

Jacob now knows that du Conde knows what’s happening out at upsilon-Taurus. Jacob also knows that he already knew it was going to happen. Jacob also knows that du Conde knows that they know that he knows—and he meant to let on.

As du Conde joins the reception Nicole transmits, <“He’s so transparent. It’s nauseating. I hate that fuckin’ snake in the grass.”>

<“He conveying a message.”>

Nicole grimaces, <“Ya, *look at me gloat!* That’s what that pompous ass is saying to us.”>

<“I’m not so sure about that. Ask yourself, what if our most vocal detractor was in-actuality...an ally?”>

<“Him!”> Nicole is startled and speaks out loud totally out of character, “That’s the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard!”

Jacob shrugs, “I’m just asking! That’s all.”

Nicole shakes her head, “Every time I think you’re smarter than the average bear you say something stupid as hell.” She then steps away, “I’m gonna hang out with du Conde. At least I know he has half a brain.”

Jacob warns her jokingly, "Don't shiv him!"

Mockingly, Nicole throws her hands out but with less exaggeration than du Conde, "By whatever do you mean?"

Jacob thinks for a minute and looks down at Nikki who is still standing beside him, "So, what do you know?"

Tight lipped, Nikki rolls her eyes, "By whatever to you mean?"

"Look kid, my bullshit-o-meter is like...pegged! The two of you spend time with that fuck-wit every month, now that he's your advocate. So, tell me, what gives?"

Nikki's coy façade drops, "You are smarter than the average bear. I have to give you credit."

"Then what are you saying?"

Nikki drops the hint, "Nooothing."

From deep in the clue bag, Jacob is annoyed, "Oookay."

Nikki smiles and takes Jacob by the hand, "Here, I want you to meet someone I've been spending quality time with."

Crossing through the reception, the waters now tepid, Nikki fills him in on Alex Demitri and his mother, "Just so you know, Alex's intelligence is off the scale but he keeps his feet on the ground. So not the narcissist and that's a plus. His stepmother is Ukrainian, his father Italian, and both are very European but they live in Austin—"

Jacob asks, "Texas?"

Nikki recalls, "His mother put it this way, 'In Italy employees are artisans, in the States they're employees.'"

Jacob nods, "She's gotta point."

"Look, his father is bloody rich and he would shamelessly overindulge his son if he could but, surprisingly, Alex doesn't take advantage until things like this come along."

Jacob interjects, "That's why you tapped him."

"Obviously, and it wasn't hard to do..."

Jacob comments flatly, "Dare I ask."

Nikki then adds, "And, just so you know, it was his mother who chose *Hej Sokoly* and changed the lyrics to honor you."

"I was wondering about that."

"Thought you would notice, and she's dying to meet you."

Jacob simpers, "Ya, I bet, Sold American."

"Hu?" And when Jacob waves Nikki off in a *don't ask* sort of way, she just shrugs and makes the introductions, "Jacob, meet Alex."

That twelve year old boy is now a handsome fifteen year-old who takes Jacob's hand with a firm shake, "Pleased to finally meet you Mr. Graves."

"It's Jacob."

"Okay, Jacob, my mother, Sasha."

"My pleasure," Jacob takes his mothers hand and he suddenly thinks he recognizes her from somewhere, "You seem familiar? Have I met you before?"

"No, Mr. Graves. I mean, Jacob! But, I do get that a lot."

Jacob is instantly taken by Sasha's heavy Slavic accent which, to him, seems out of place with how she looks, "I can't place it. Where have I seen you before?"

Sasha flat out tells him, "Try, Claudia Willoughby?"

"Oh ya! President Willoughby was smokin' hot!"

Jacob's embarrassment for that outburst was cut short by Sasha's approving grin, "Thank you, yes!"

Alex nudges Nikki in the arm, "Think they'll get a long?"

Nikki disagrees in jest, "Naw, never happen."

01100100-00101000-0101110-0101111-0101110-01100100-00101001

It's pushing midnight and Jacob deserves to feel cheap, and he does, but for once he's okay with it. Even though he's had a lot of lovers in his lifetime, his count pales in comparison to the average Joe to who sex is as common as a simple hand shake with the variety of partners in any given year analogous to a fist full of trail-mix. Jacob has no compulsion to jump into bed with just anyone that comes along but the encouragement from Maria, earlier that night, made it clear to him that he was the door prize and was expected to perform.

So, like the circus seal that he is, perform he did but less out of obligation and more out of genuine gratitude.

Jacob prefers women with more athletic features and Sasha doesn't exactly fit that bill of fare. Voluptuous, buxom, with a slender waist and a *Willoughby* strut, Sasha turned out to be an amazing woman for Jacob to be with. He has not experienced anything close to this night since he was shagging Monique Ribot decades before. On reflection, being with Sasha makes him want to go back and sample that after almost forty years just to refresh his memory.

Spooning Sasha, their bodies melded into one another, Jacob is more than a little blown away by how she has made everything better today. After meeting her, Sasha ran the gauntlet for him at the reception, so much so that by the end most of the attendees were accepting—if not downright friendly towards him.

Then there was dinner with the kids, Nicole, Cricket and, of all people, du Conde who invited himself. To everyone's surprise the guy was actually likable, funny and, this pains Jacob to think, a blast to have around. To the extent that after Nikki and Alex took off, and one drink too many, he, Nicole and Cricket decide to go clubbing leaving Jacob and Sasha to themselves.

This was one of those rare, perfect moments in Jacob's life.

Now that he thinks about it his time with Maria and Nicole always had some underlining conflict where their interactions were more like the block, parry and thrust right out of an *Épée* melee. Yes, intimacy and sex was always spot-on-target with these two but for quite some time Jacob realizes that he and Maria ruined a perfectly good relationship by getting married and, as much as it pains him to no end, Nicole was beyond repair. Thinking back, Jacob always had a fondness for Monique but he was simply on the books to service her. What little they had was small-talk superficial with the true depth of their emotional connection being left unexplored. Cricket, his regular lover nowadays, is accommodating and undemanding, and just kind of there. Jacob enjoys the time he spends with her because she's fun in bed but a friend with benefits doesn't exactly qualify as a love interest on Jacob's tally-sheet. Then there was Maggie...

Yes, ol' Maggie was Jacob's ticket to happiness but that was short lived to be sure. It hurt to the point that he long ago blocked all tacnet file retrievals of her unless he chose to mine it himself, which he has yet to do, and actual memories of Maggie have faded to a faint whisper that anymore brings a fond smile inside. No longer the welling of tears, a fifth of Scotch and a gun barrel between the teeth.

Jacob wonders why these "perfect moments" only come from absolute strangers like Sasha? Jacob wonders why all his relationships eventually develop some underlining case-of-the-ass for him? Even Cricket has proven to be a virtuoso in passive-aggressive aloofness and that has made him want to cut it off with her more times than he can count. Maria says it's because he's too good of a man to start with. Too giving of himself and too willing to listen, and way too much about *them*. According to Maria most women secretly desire an alpha bad-boy to become that way for them—because of them. Like Maria admits they resent Jacob because he is naturally that way and didn't have to be molded into the role. For most woman it's a bone kill.

That's some fucked-up logic, Jacob reasons as Sasha sighs big, "Thank you for curling my toes."

Jacob grinds into her slightly, "Actually, it's my pleasure."

"Aaaah..." Sasha is clearly affected by Jacob working it, her back arches slightly as she puts her hand on his thigh getting him to knock it off, "Yes, we'll have to do this again soon."

Jacob gives her little pecks on the nape of her neck, "M'kay."

Sasha snickers, "Veeery soon!"

After a minute of lightly stroking her flank with the back of his fingertips, Jacob asks, "Sasha, I'm curious."

"Curious away." She says with a smile.

Jacob clears his throat, "Not to pry, but did Nikki tell you anything about herself or her situation?"

Her smile fades, "Probably more than you want me to know."

"I was afraid of that."

"You don't seem too worried about Nikki trying to escape."

"Why? I know right where she is and what she's doing."

Sasha snorts a suppressed laugh, "Ya, my son!"

Jacob ponders, "Escape, interesting choice of words. How much do you know about Nikki? What has she told you?"

Sasha avoids that question with her own, "You think they're that dangerous?"

"Beyond comprehension if left unchecked."

"Jacob..." Sasha's flexibility is almost surreal as her upper torso twists and she looks back, reaching up to caress Jacob's face, "Would you really hurt them?"

Jacob looks her in the eye, "Not my choice. It's all hers."

She nods, "I hope it never comes to that."

"That's two of us."

Sasha, looking for honesty in his eyes and finding it, gives it up and kisses Jacob deeply. In no time at all they are melting into one another's arms.

Much to her delight *very soon* comes earlier than expected.

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."

Jessica wags a stern finger at her, "No-no-no-no, it was more like open-mouth astonishment and moaning like a whore. Your normal M.O. You know, like a pro!"

Nikki snaps back, "At least I'm not fucking my nephew."

Jessica smiles, "You would if you could if you had one. Josav and I are exclusive, and I'm not out there spreading my legs for everyone and their second cousin just to win a popularity contest."

Nikki makes one statement of fact, "I am popular."

"That may be..." Jessica grins big and leans forward, "But I won't have beef-curtains by the time I'm eighteen."

Nikki didn't know what those were, but in a tenth of a second her brain pings the neuronet and it feeds her the data and an image. Unprepared for that tidbit of information, damage not seen in two centuries, inside she laughs at Jessica's slam.

Outwardly, Nikki scowls with disgust, "Yeeew, that was sick."

Jessica ponders the insult, "Ya, that was, but your reaction was priceless."

It was just then that Maria pops her head out with a worried look, "You two getting along?"

Nikki says flatly, "Yes."

Jessica doesn't look back, "We're fine!"

Maria watches them for a few long seconds, then, "Okay."

As Maria slips back into her office Jessica and Nikki stare at each other for the longest time, but it's Nikki that backs down, "After four years you still hate me."

"I don't hate you." Jessica shakes her head slightly, "I think you're fuckin' dangerous." Jessica's face then brightens up, "And, I so love poking you with a stick as one would a rattlesnake."

"Me? Dangerous!" Nikki nods towards Jessica, "No, you're the scary one. If they only knew how deep of a dive you've made they'd string you up by your—"

Jessica cuts her off with a growl, "You don't know shit!"

Nikki shrugs, "I'm not saying anything but, honestly, you should be caged right along side me."

Jessica leans in, "I have no ambitions in this life except to fuck with you."

"No?" Nikki smiles, "Could have fooled me." Her smile fades, "Look, we have to work together. How about we get along?"

"How about you keep the Beta-Set away from my mom?"

"They're adults, they can make their own choices."

"Bitch, you fuckin' seduced her!"

"You don't say." Nikki feigns contemplation, "You sure about that? I don't remember Nicole trying to fight them off?"

Jessica pleads, "My mom is vulnerable."

Nikki nods, "She needs a lot of affirmation."

Jessica snarls, "You need to reel those two cunts in!"

Nikki stands firm, "Nicole can choose for herself."

"It's a ragged edge you are walking along, Nikki. I so fucking know when the rest of you come of age...well, the collective you are gonna throw yourselves at her like bees on sugar water. Just like you plan to do with Donkey Boy. A sea of Nikki flesh to dive into!"

Nikki flips, "My trysts with Alex are an investment, pleasant even, but with your mom, well, consider it bonding."

Jessica snarls, "Consider yourself warned."

"Okay, but Nicole did find it strange yet rewarding. All in the same breath!" Nikki then smirks, "And she sure does love her salad tossed, amongst other things."

Jessica bares her teeth at that last remark.

All she wants to do now is to kill this Nikki. Yes, Jessie can accomplish this task with a simple thought, it'd be a breeze, but in her mind this warrants something more feral and savage as payback. Instead of cutting her down with words Jessica transmits into Nikki's mind the image of her stomping the crap out of the little trollop, followed by slow dismemberment with a dull k-bar.

With that Nikki now realizes she went too far, pushed a button she should not have, and sheepishly admits, "That was uncalled for."

With quiet wide-eyed rage Jessica whispers, "Ya don't say!"

"Look, Nicole now belongs to something that has given her a sense of stability. You allowed for this. Least we forget..." Nikki points to Jessica, "It was you, yourself, that arranged for this."

"Just stay the fuck away from the Omegas."

Before Nikki could respond Maria pops out again, "Okay, ladies, I can sure use your help about now."

After a pregnant pause, eyes locked wide with hostility, the two peel away and step into Maria's office.

As they stop at her cluttered desk, Maria states more than asks, "I take it you both know what's going on?"

In unison they say, "Yes."

Maria looks at Nikki, "Oh, really?"

Nikki throws it back at her, "*You* are off limits, remember? Not your people. Also, I believe you didn't expect Security Services to bite and show up at *upsilon-Taurus* just yet." Nikki puts her hands out, "Just a guess! Not a mind-read."

Jessica adds, "I'd say *du Conde* pulled it off too good."

"We have Nikki to thank for that, but let's pick this up later..." Maria thumbs back at the screen behind her, "I got this goin' on."

On the monitor behind Maria is the stern face of the Co-op's Chancellor. As with all sub-space communications, after ten or twelve seconds, the image cyclically snows just a tad—then twitches back into focus as the signal switches from one wormhole channel to the next.

Jessica gestures to the monitor, "Who we working on?"

Nikki volunteers, "Ranch Kiplinger."

Maria adds, "Same drill as before. Feed me text. Step out of camera shot and let's find out what the fuck he wants."

Maria already knows what Kiplinger wants, but before she opens the channel, Nikki asks, "Do you want to know beforehand? I've met him, remember?"

Maria looks at Jessica and Jessica shakes her head, "I won't be able to do anything until you open the channel. I don't know why that is, but open that line up and I'll be wired into him."

Then to Nikki, Maria asks, "Go ahead."

"Fear."

Maria and Jessica go, "Hu?"

"Security Services found out about the negotiated settlement he was working on with Pitney and Jackson." Nikki then grins, "By the surprised look on your faces I take it that you didn't know about what they were doing."

Clearly frustrated by the news, Maria says, "If Jackson doesn't share then it's not my job to know."

Jessica quietly admits, "I knew."

Maria gives Jessica a scowl so Jessica throws her hands out to her sides in protest, "It's not your job to know!"

Maria huffs, "Point made, it's not for me to know...yet." She looks to Nikki, "Tell me more!"

"Everything?" Nikki asks. Maria nods yes, so Nikki gives it to them, "To stop the settlement the hawks, specifically Hartcourt, put Kiplinger under arrest and in a knee jerk reaction tried to start the war today. And yes, du Conde did come through for us on this one, but now that Chief Stark spanked them as bad as he did they want to put it off to give themselves time to regroup. Replace the losses and plan better. As it is, Kiplinger stays in power for the time being, but that power is now totally superficial and any settlement offers at this point forward are, as you would say, Marshal, without foundation."

Maria is genuinely concerned, "His life is at risk?"

Nikki confirms, "Very much so. His family too."

Maria motions for the two of them to get in place, "We'll see If you're right, Nikki. If you are, this won't take long."

The feed goes live and Kiplinger manages to keep it light, ["Oi, Ramirez, you kept me waiting long enough. I was beginning to think I needed a tee-up."]

"Hey, Kip, I hear you've been having a bad day."

["Short-game is in the loo. Bugger-all I can do about it."]

Jessica nods to Maria confirming what Nikki said, so Maria runs with it, "So, if you wanna kiss and make up then I'm good for it. Otherwise, we're just gonna hunker down and wait to see what the dumb-shits in your Security Services do next. Like, my God, what were they thinking?"

["Honestly, it was an unfortunate misunderstanding."]

Maria leans back, "Ya know, Kip, you're so convincing you make me want to believe you; but, our hackles are up."

["Marshal, I promise, it ends here."]

Maria reassures him that she knows the truth, "For the now."

Kiplinger knows that there is no point in arguing that, so he apologizes, ["Sorry about the Dashi."]

"Shit happens. That blows but it goes with the territory."

They look at each other for a few long seconds. Maria offers no apology for the three cruisers, and Kiplinger didn't expect it.

Kiplinger simply says, ["That it does."]

"Keep in touch, Chancellor."

["We should. Hooroo!"] And Kiplinger cuts the transmission.

Maria leans back in her chair with a pencil in hand, and while staring into Nikki's eyes she starts tapping the pencil on the edge of her desk, "So, you were right all along. You being honest and shit makes me wonder where your loyalties lie."

Instead of playing *stare down* with Maria, Nikki is curious about the yellow writing object in her hand, "What is that?"

Maria lifts the pencil up, "This?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"A pencil?"

"Whoa, I've never seen one!"

Maria shrugs and tosses Nikki the pencil, "Ticonderoga Number 2. You can still get 'em."

Astonished, Nikki says, "No way!"

Maria reaches under her desk and pulls out a whole box of pencils, and a sharpener, and tosses them on the desk top, "Here ya go, Nikki. Enjoy!"

"Seriously, thank you!"

"Look, Nikki..." Maria thinks hard about what she now says, "Thank you for your help. Ya, we got Jessica and she's capable, but we do appreciate your help whenever you can give it to us."

Nikki nods her head, "It's my pleasure."

Maria points to Jessica, "Look, I hate to cut this short but I have to get out to the Carrie Nation and I need to talk to Jessie before I go. Again, I want to thank you for your help."

Nikki turns to leave, and before she steps out the doorway she looks back at Maria, "Maria, my loyalties lie with those who will win. That will be you."

Maria challenges her, "You sure about that?"

"I have a good idea what you plan to do." Nikki then assures her, "It didn't come from you, but your people are not as discreet with their thoughts as you are."

Maria asks curiously, "And?"

"Like I said, I'll stick with the winning team."

Maria ponders, "You know, I keep looking for a reason to end your ass, and I can't find one..." Then with a laugh, "Yet!"

Nikki adds, "And, I won't give you one."

It was then that Jessica pipes up, "Me? I don't need one!"

Nikki totally blows her cool and shouts while pointing towards the lobby, "Can we talk!"

With a smirk, Jessica looks at Maria while pointing at Nikki, "Give me a minute. Okay?"

Maria says with some urgency, "Make it fast."

As Jessica steps past Nikki, and into the lobby, she whispers to Nikki, "My, we have a temper."

Before Nikki follows her she says to Maria, "It'll be Polaris."

"What about Polaris?"

"That's where they are going to build up their forces. That'll be their jumping off point. Jessica will confirm."

Stepping out into the lobby Nikki faces Jessica down, "Off me now or shut the fuck up! I'm done."

With a shiver, Jessica smiles, "Ooooh, choices."

Nikki is pissed, "I mean it, bitch. I am sick of your shit!"

Jessica protests, "What do you want me to do? Be nice?"

Nikki didn't have an alternative, "You might consider it? I'm not getting off this planet, even if the Co-op takes it I'm stuck."

"What do you know?"

"Pretty much everything and, no, it did not come from Marshal Ramirez if that's what you're wondering."

Jessica shrugs, "I believe ya. Few people have the discipline of thought my Aunt Maria has."

"Most everybody else is transparent to us." Nikki adds, and as Jessica nods in agreement Nikki asks, "Doesn't it get old?"

Jessica wonders, "What?"

"The constant hurricane of thought that surrounds us. If I couldn't filter out what I choose to hear, or if I could not blot it out completely, like we can, I'd...I'd go insane."

"Ain't that the truth." And after a short introspective silence, Jessica gives in, "Being nice, to anybody, is not my style. And the idea of being even cordial to you goes so against my grain it's breathtaking, but...let's say I don't have to be an asshole all the time."

Nikki starts to say, "Maybe even we can—"

Jessica cuts her off, "No! I'll never like you."

"That's not what I was going to ask, but it would be nice."

Jessica gestures to her to ask her question, so Nikki tries again, "Maybe we could do lunch? Start fresh."

"Don't push it." And while inching back towards Maria's office Jessica says, "And, while we're at it, stay away from Seth."

"Such an unremarkable child..." Nikki then quickly adds with some panic, "No insult intended! I mean that I was anticipating *more* considering his pedigree."

Jessica stops and shakes her head with disbelief, "What were you expecting? Muad'Dib?"

"Hu?" Nikki asks, confused.

Jessica rolls her eyes, so Nikki taps the neuronet again as she summons the elevator, "Dune?"

Jessica shrugs, "It's dumb as fuck, but you'll enjoy it. I did."

"I'll download and rip it."

Which is to say Nikki is going to queue it up at night—where by morning having 'read' the book will have been implanted in her memory. She could do it on the go but the results are not clean and more like having scanned the Cliffs Notes. An all too common practice anymore that purists, those one-percenters who still use tablets or buy hard-copy, insists that it short-changes the experience.

"How about reading it! Doesn't anybody actually read books anymore? It's not like you don't have the time."

Nikki nods her head, "Okay! Why not?"

Jessica can feel Maria getting frustrated, so to cut this short she draws a line in the sand, "Look, my mother will have to fend for herself..." *But only so far* is implied yet not said—and understood by both. "Just steer clear of the Omegas and we'll get along."

"Fair enough."

The elevator opens and Nikki gets in, and before the doors close Jessica calls out, "Oh, and Nikki!"

Nikki's head pops out, "What?" She steps out while holding the door. "Normally you close our discussions with a dig, so what is it this time?" Then in a severe country drawl she adds, "I'm just all a twitter wonderin' what ya'll has'ta say."

"Actually..." Jessica smiles big as she slips into Maria's office, "We should do lunch!"

As Jessica approaches Maria's desk, Maria asks, "Polaris?"

Jessica knows Maria knew that long before, "Yup."

"That's the last place we'd ever look."

"Ya, who'd 'uv guessed." Jessica plops down in a side chair, "So, think you can pull this off?"

"If they take the bait. Today was too soon."

"To spread them thin, like you want, you'll probably have to give up way more than you want too. You realize that?"

"I know, but we'll make them pay for every inch of ground they take. I just don't know about Sapphire though. Playing the neutrality card here will be difficult at best."

Jessica looks around while spinning her finger in the air, "This is an embassy, technically speaking." She then leans in, "And what a thorn in their side it will be. Especially with me here."

Maria nods in agreement, "You'd be a thorn in their side and they would not even know it."

Jessica confirms, "So, you plan to use me."

Maria blinks her eyes in disbelief, "Did you have any doubts?"

"Think of the intel I could gather."

Maria is annoyed by Jessica's smug tone of voice. She looks in Jessica's eyes for a second, and then points to her, "Tell me, love, how much have you contributed to what we're planning to do? And, don't bullshit me."

Jessica sits back with a snort, and stares back at Maria for the longest time, "Very little, actually."

Maria gestures to herself, "I'm all ears."

Jessica tries not to answer with, "Let's just say I've been greasing the skids for you."

Maria snaps, "Knock it off!"

"I'm already done."

"I'll bet." And as Maria stands to leave, "We're gonna haf'ta have a talk when I get back."

"Okay."

"I should be chewing your ass out, but that's not going to accomplish anything. So, my dear, if you're gonna continue sticking your nose in our business—"

"Keep you in the loop?" Jessica shrugs, "They were such minor things, Aunt Maria."

"What were you doing?"

"Just tugging on some strings. Ones you wanted tugged."

"du Conde?"

"Obviously."

"Lebedev or Saavedra?"

Jessica sheepishly admits, "Yes."

"Both?" Maria asks, and Jessica nods yes.

"Tugging on some strings..." Maria then shouts, "I want an itemized list!" She then thumps her desk with her fist, "Need I remind you that the *minor* things you do can have major repercussions? From here on out your hand *does not* go into the fuckin' cookie jar without my permission!"

"I understand."

"I'm glad you do."

"Speaking about that hand in the cookie jar thing—"

Maria leans forward and gives a quiet snarl, "what?"

"Kiplinger." Jessica points to Maria, "I can see the wheels turnin' in your head and I can guarantee it ain't gonna be easy..."

Maria plops down in her chair and deflates. She knows she has to listen to Jessie and it kills her to do so. Whatever she and Nikki picked up when they connected to Kiplinger is critical, and it's obvious in that short exchange that Jessica has both intimate details of his situation and a possible solution.

"They got 'im buttoned up pretty tight, but not tight enough."

Maria sighs, "Okay, you got an idea?"

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Maria has been trying to get out of here for the last couple of hours. Jessica has been long gone but the C3 staffers and others have been like an endless parade through her office. It's now 18:50 zulu and Jacob calling in the middle of his dinner party was her chance to boot everyone out, but to hear him say he's planning to turn down Alex's stepmother, when she's obviously coming onto him, blows her away. Then to hear from him that she looks every bit like the late Claudia Willoughby, every student of history's wet-dream, confuses her even more.

Maria laughs big, "She looks just like Madam Fap-Damage? Are you shitting me?"

Jacob confirms, ["No shit. It's like she was cloned or somethin'. A somewhat younger version, but it's uncanny."]

Maria shakes her head, "Dude, what's the big deal? Tell ya what, if you don't perform this little service I will hop on the next *beer run* and come take 'er off your hands!"

Jacob complains, ["I feel like a door prize."]

Maria agrees, "As well you should, and considering what Sasha Demitri has done *for the cause* you really need to put out if this is what she wants."

["You're shit serious! You want me to tear it up."]

"Yes, but don't punish her."

Jacob has abruptly come to an amazing realization about his relationship with Maria, ["So, I'm the monkey with the tin cup and you're the organ grinder."]

"About time you figured that out, chuckle-fuck."

["I guess I got my marchin' orders."]

"Be the monkey!" Maria then changes her mind, "Better yet, for this think of yourself as a Circus Seal! That's more your style. Think you can handle it, slick?"

["Let's see, how's this?"] Over the link Maria hears Jacob slapping his hands and barking like a seal, ["Orrrk! Orrrk!"]

"Now, that's getting into character!"

["You know I don't like 'em so...meaty."]

"You mean pudge..." While they were talking Maria pulled images of Sasha from the ceremony that afternoon, "But that's some mighty nice pudge! Look, if Sasha's anything like Willoughby in the sack then you'll be thanking the heavens you did this. Who knows? She just might end up as a regular on your dance card?"

The irritation in Jacob's voice is more for show, ["I can't believe that I'm about to do a fatty."]

Maria is truly astonished by Jacob's comment. Sasha is not a 'fatty' per se. Historically she wouldn't even be considered full-figured except by today's standards. The perfectly marbled Porterhouse Sasha offers, as compared to the über lean round-steak walking the streets nowadays, is a throwback to a day when plump was in vogue—and Sasha would be considered skinny by comparison.

Maria pleads, "Just do it!"

Jacob caves in, ["Okay! Okay! I'm on it!"]

"Make me proud." And Maria cuts the transmission.

With nobody bothering her Maria makes good her escape, and on the elevator heading down to the lobby of the Spike she feels her jowls tighten and realizes she has a slight ringing in her ears. She wonders if it's stress or anger but after a few seconds she comes upon a disturbing realization—she's jealous.

What a miserable feeling, Maria thinks as she struggles in coming to grips with these alien emotions. She's not at all jealous of Jacob getting a shot at Sasha, that's so not her style. She's jealous of Sasha and that's what's bugging Maria. She can have Jacob on a whim, and he is accommodating, it's just been too long. Years in fact. And it's not like she's not getting laid. The staff in C3 could be her personal harem if she so choose but Maria has avoided tapping that for obvious reasons. To get hers Maria has been sneekin' down to the casino at the Khafre pyramid which has yet to disappoint.

Two or three times a week Maria gets dressed-to-kill and starts her evening at the blackjack, roulette, or craps tables. At the casino she is nobody, just like everybody else, but she's such a laugh riot that hooking up with the hot single lady or couple is effortless for her. Humor is such a powerful tool and, armed with a big personality and a sardonic wit, Maria has no problem getting a little action. When Maria want's intimacy she'll opt to pay Nicole or Jacob a visit, in that order, but Nicole has been occupied as of late and she's been avoiding Jacob for quite some time. The why is something she cannot fathom or put to words until now. And while stepping out onto the airfield, under the roar of a Razorback drop ship performing a rolling take off, the thought dawns on Maria as if it were a punch in the face, *I still have feelings for the stupid sonofabitch!*

"Fuck that!" The Razorback drowns her out as she stamps her foot while screaming, "Uh-uh! No, no fuckin' way! I thought I totally got past his shit!" Maria then throws her head back and shouts out, "God, you asshole, strike me down! Show some mercy, motherfucker! Come on and..." She then bellows as if she were challenging God to stomp her like a bug, "DO IT, YOU FUUUUUUUUU!"

Just then a com-alert flashes in Maria's head from Corporal Vossler in the C3, and Maria amazes herself as she switches from a primal-rage to sing-song pleasantness, "Yes, Corporal. Wazzup?"

["Waddya mean, wazzup? Where are you?"]

"Leaving?"

Even though Vossler is a corporal he's a retread, and what Maria can't shake is that long ago he was a Chief and she was a corporal three levels under him—so privately he can speak his peace,

["The hell you are! Your meetings with Sandoval can wait."]

Maria pleads, "You're having a Murder Board! It's unorthodox for me to be sitting in on a review of my own plan don'cha think?"

Maria can almost hear the growl from Vossler, ["We're fast tracking this one, Ramirez. S.O.P. goes right out the window."]

"Voss, Sandoval has Frankensteined us a few game changers that will impact the plan in a good way."

["You can tell us on the hot-seat."]

Maria shakes her head, "Wait a minute? I'm the boss!"

["Maria Lynn!"] The fatherly-authoritarian tone hits its mark.

Maria stops, grits her teeth, turns about-face and stomps back towards the Spike all the while grumbling intelligible obscenities. Decades before Vossler's voice got results, and it pisses Maria off that it still works on her today.

["So, what's it gonna be?"] Vossler asks, knowing the answer.

"I'm comin', I'm a comin'!"

["Fucken-A, doodlebug! That's what I want to hear!"]

Maria knows he's right but flips the bird towards the top of the Spike out of frustration, "You owe me, Kevin!"

Vossler chuckles, ["I saw that."]

Maria breaks on a dime and leans forward with hands on hips, "Who's fucken' this monkey, hu?"

Put in his place, Vossler fumbles, ["Ah...you are?"]

"That's good to know, Voss." Maria starts again for the Spike. "We're on the same page."

000000011001

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?"

"No, I meant what I said and I think Bob agrees with me on this one." Vossler shakes his head, "Intentionally bending over and offering it up like we plan too is not my idea of a good idea."

Bob finally throws in his two cents, "This is the craziest plan I have ever reviewed on a Murder Board. In fact it's *nucken futs*, but..." He thinks for a few seconds and asks Maria, "How many do they have to take out in the first wave to make this thing work?"

Bob already knows the answer, he just wants to hear Maria go over *the* pain-point of the plan again. He wants to be convinced that Maria is convinced and he wants to hear it in her voice—which is so far too convincing and he can't figure out why.

"If they believe they've pinched us back by about a third then they'll think we won't be able to hold onto shit. We'll prove 'em right."

Bob asks, "That simple?"

Maria stresses, "To make this work they'll have to *believe* and in that situation they *will* believe."

Vossler protests, "By letting 'em in!"

"We have to spread them thin!" Maria's frustration is evident, "Nobody wants to do this, Voss, but you got a better idea? We simply cannot go toe-to-toe against their numbers the way things are. We might as well hang up our spurs now while we can."

Bob acknowledges the evident, "It'll thin 'em out."

Maria drives it home, "What they end up taking from us they won't want to give back. That's their weakness."

"I'm convinced." Bob states, unconvinced. He then shakes his head, realizing that she has stacked the deck somehow, "I've known you for too long, Ramirez. I think you're holding back on us. I'm curious, what's up your sleeve?"

Vossler, thinking the same thing, nods and snorts, "Ya!"

Feeling cornered, Maria asks, "Guys, you really want me to show my hand? I'm tellin' ya, if it's all chips in then it's better you don't know what I'm holding."

"So..." Vossler ponders, "We're gonna motor into this fight, our asses in the air, all the while knowing the why and the how but not any of the back story? *That's* a first."

Bob laughs, "In the ass is not so bad, Voss. You may like it!"

"Oooh!" Vossler shivers with a grin, "Can't wait!"

Maria assures them, "Guys, this is gonna work. You just have to trust me on this one."

With resign, Vossler adds, "If we're gonna be hangin' onto this monkey for ya, Ramirez, I sure hope you know what you're doin'."

Dropping her guard and poker face, Maria gives an almost coy smile, "Well, it helps when you've got buttons to push from all sides and peeps to push 'em for ya."

Maria meant for that to come across one way, but she was startled when Vossler and Bob both blurt out, "Blackstone!"

Maria puts her hands out, "I didn't say that..."

Shortly after the events on Saiph-6B, Maria was matrixed to Wallace-YanZhuGu Industries who, not knowing what to do with her, farmed her out to a Blackstone Services. A Scottish based company, registered in Germany as Schwarzstein Dienst GmbH, Blackstone is a security consulting firm specializing in military operational planning and recruiting—arranging for the occasional off-world mercenary or odd job. It was with Blackstone where Maria found her niche. Operational planning is not for everyone but here is where she made a name for herself by learning how to play the Security Services of the Co-op against the insurgents. At Saiph, Blackstone was working both sides on behalf of the Co-op all to keep the conflict going and to consolidate the Co-op's hold on the territory. In a short time Maria found out who thought it was a good idea to snuff out her platoon, and when that SS Colonel went back to the second moon of Saiph-6 she arranged for her own version of a friendly fire incident. Bagging the Colonel the way she did only endeared her to the Blackstone management who wanted nothing more than to bow out of that loathsome contract before the political shit-rain hit. The firm did bow out and it did hit the fan, and those pesky little civil-conceits such as autonomy, independence, and liberty bubbled to the surface. Maria has been a partnered resource with Blackstone ever since, and that relationship was further solidified when they found out she was SA.

Thinking twice about what she said, Maria leans in between the both of them and quietly snarls, "And it would probably be in our best interest that you forgot that *you* did!"

Vossler smirks, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Maria looks at Bob who shrugs, "What he said!"

"Good to know." Maria huffs, then asks, "And, while we're at it, anything else on your mind? Now *is* the time to ask."

Bob asks the pressing question, "Who's your back up? Who else knows what you know?"

Maria doesn't want to answer that and it shows, "Scarab."

Bob is genuinely shocked, "You're shittin' me!"

Maria lays it on the line, "Bob, she's your go-to person if I step in front of a speeding asteroid."

"I can't put her in charge! It's just not possible!"

Vossler wonders, "She's not in the chain of command? Whoever the fuck this is I don't know if that'll work for us."

Maria leans in, "Hey, numb nuts, both of ya, I'm not saying that! Bring her in as an advisor. But, whatever you two do, you had better listen to her."

Bob protests, "She's a kid!"

Maria gets in Bob's face, "Far from it. And don't make the same dumb-ass mistake I made by treating her like one. She'll hand your ass back to you in the worse possible way!"

Maria turns to Vossler, "Voss, you know about Scarab but you don't know any details like who she is, right?"

"No idea, never met her."

Maria looks at Bob with that asking for permission look, so Bob gestures to Vossler, "Go ahead!"

Maria reveals with a sigh, "Yes, you have. It's, Jessica Burke. Scarab is the daughter of Field Marshal Graves."

Vossler's eyes blink a few times, "Wow, that explains a lot."

"Surprised?"

Vossler had to think about it for a second...

0110010-0110101-01100111-0110010-01100001-0110100

It's been three times in as many months that Maria has asked Vossler to watch little four-year old, Jessica. Maria can't seem to get away from Bob and the job, and on her days off she inevitably gets pulled into C3 for the quick pow-wow. Though he can't stand human beings in what he considers their larval stage, Vossler lets it slide because all Jessica does when she is in the C3 is stand around and watch everyone do their thing without saying a word—making this task a cakewalk. Jessica actually has a reputation of being a precocious little tyke but Vossler has yet to see it, and in his mind it's just as well.

Today is a little different. Every time Vossler looks up little Jessica has moved a few feet in one direction or another, but what he doesn't notice is that each time she does she gets a tad closer to him. Vossler didn't pay any of this much mind until he looks up and sees Jessica standing right beside him. Standing there and staring him down with a predatory gaze that puts a chill down his spine.

Before he could say anything, Jessica asks with a tone way too adult for her size and age, "Chief, may I ask what you're doing?"

Vossler was taken aback but in a good way. Where most kids will droolingly call you *mister* Jessica addressed him as *chief*, and where he would normally deflect the question, or ignore it completely with the air of contempt he usually has for children her age, Vossler's curiosity gets the better of him.

"Ya, sure."

Then, with the flair of a brain-damaged spaz, and the goofiest face she could muster, Jessica guffaws, "What'chya doin'?"

Vossler laughs, "What was that?"

Jessica responds with painful self-realization, "Fulfilling your expectations?"

"Please, don't...do that again."

Jessica spazes again, "Okay, mister, whad'evah ya say!"

Vossler begs, "DON'T do that again!"

Jessica feigns embarrassment, "Oh! Okay."

"You're a funny kid."

Just a little too snarky, Jessica smirks, "And you're easy."

Vossler huffs and picks Jessica up, "Okay, I can do this."

Jessica is put off by him putting her on his knee like she was a little kid, and she looks up at him with a frown, "Seriously."

So, this is Jessica, Vossler thinks as he throws it back at her, "Just fulfilling your expectations."

Jessica crosses her arms and leans back into him and snorts, "I can do this."

Vossler asks, "So what do you want to know?"

Without looking, Jessica points to the blips on the overhead holograph display, "What are those, chief?"

"The bad guys."

For the longest moment she thinks about this and nails him on his answer, "And they think you are?"

Vossler wasn't prepared for that one, "They think we're the bad guys, but I'd like to think not."

"Like you, they're doing a job."

"You could say that."

Jessica pushes his mental envelope, "So, if they're not the bad guys, and you are not the bad guys, then who are the bad guys?"

"It depends on who you ask."

"You, chief, what do you think?"

Vossler realizes that there is no pulling the wool over this kid's eyes, "Their leadership is focused on corporate interest and economic gain. We in the Annex work towards defending things like planetary autonomy, self-determination, personal liberty—"

Jessica interrupts, "Lofty ideals."

Where the hell did you come from, thinks Vossler as he looks down at Jessica, realizing she understood every word he just said, "Yes, they are."

01000100-01100001-01100101-0110101-0110111-01101110

Vossler has had Jessica on his knee more times than he could count, and they developed a close bond when she was a kid, but now he realizes that she never was a kid per se. She was always a busy bee, asking all the right questions back then, but anymore with Vossler and Jessica it's knuckles and a nod.

Vossler looks at Maria, "Surprisingly, no."

Bob offers, "We *could* tap you from the Garden."

Maria shakes her head no, "That's not everyday practical."

Vossler suggests, "With the two droid projects, Sandoval did perfect the new SYLN, right? We could hook you up with one of those if it comes to that ya know."

"Oh, hell no! I can advise from afar on the by and by but I'm not gonna..." Maria wiggles her fingers in the air, "Command from beyond the grave in a fucken' bio-bot. I ain't gonna!"

Thinking about it, Bob says, "You know, it is doable."

With all the love of an ankle-biting chihuahua, Maria snarls, "I'm not gonna set *that* precedent. Not now—not ever! You two know better than to bring it up again."

Vossler then asks, "Can you at least keep an eye on her?"

"That's a given." Maria bodily turns to Vossler, "Voss, do you have any reservations working with Jessie? Tell me now." Maria thumbs at Bob, "He does, but what about you?"

Vossler chuckles, "Watch out for them asteroids."

"Look, Voss..." Bob pats him on the back, "Not as many reservations as Ramirez may think. Fact is, Jessie will never be part of our organization. She will never hold political office and she'll have no professional standing whatsoever. And because she keeps fifty-two in check for us you can say we already work with her, in a sense, but the long and short of it is she needs to stay off the radar."

Maria interjects, "Her true power is her anonymity."

Bob throws this in, "She's recently become our liaison to the Nefer Key, and that wasn't our choice. They asked for her."

Vossler is surprised, "What! How does this happen?"

Bob then sighs, "And, to totally short-stroke your day, you've been promoted to Chief. You're in charge of the C-Three from here on out. When Maria is not around you're the *boss hog*."

Vossler is startled, "I don't want it!"

"We need ya with the program, Voss. When the shooting starts you'll be elevated back up to Command-Chief and take control of the Embassy for the duration."

"Kevin..." Maria shakes her head, "I know you don't want this but everyone here is behind it. I need the same kind of asshole I am runnin' this show."

"Sayin' I'm an asshole? Look in a mirror!"

Maria smiles, "I learned from the best."

Vossler then ponders, "Why Jessie? Why did the Nefers pick Jessie? The only way that would happen is if they had..."

Bob and Maria join in with Vossler, "An agent in our ranks."

Maria then says, "Ya, and you don't have to worry about him."

"Flush 'im out of an air-lock?"

"He's a keeper. An ally. They don't know it but he's been working on our behalf all along and that surprised the shit outta us."

Bob adds, "He's in it for the species. He's helped develop a tactical sim against the Nefer Key in case things get weird, and it's matching up with everything we know about 'em. He's golden."

With wide eyes, Maria interjects, "And it's lookin' like crazy fun! I'm a dyin' to play it."

"So..." Vossler takes a second to put things in perspective, "Is there anything else ya'll want to share or piss me off with? I mean when you two fuckers gang up on me with your issues it's always like a money-shot in the face, so don't hold back on my account."

"No," Maria looks at Bob for a second, "No, we're good!"

Bob shrugs, "That pretty much covers it."

Vossler shakes his head, "I'm hatin' you two somethin' fierce."

Maria feigns confusion, "Where's the love?"

Vossler mumbles loud enough for them to hear, "You'll feel it when I put my boot up your ass."

"Come again?"

Vossler leans towards them, "My boot up your ass!" He then stomps off to what is now *his* new office, "Just one more thing and we're goin' there."

Bob snorts, "I'll try anything once."

Maria calls out to Vossler, "*Muy bueno*, Voss!"

Vossler reaches over his head and flips them off as he enters the most coveted room in the Annex. He slams the door with such force it severely rattles the glass walls.

Bob realizes, "You just lost *the office*, ya know."

Maria nods quietly, "It's his now."

"Today was full of surprises."

"Yup."

"What now?"

"Players are in place, die has been cast..." Maria switches from introspective to perky-positive, "We're in the groove!"

Bob himself nods, "We wait."

"You can wait all ya'll want." Maria looks up at Bob, "I'm headin' out ta get laid."

00000011010

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

if that's a good thing."

"Killer answer, but I need you to be honest with me."

"Honestly, Chief, I'm here to do the job—not to climb a ladder. But, another tidbit of honesty for you..." Zach pauses as he gestures towards Jerry and Scott, "Who wouldn't want to be one of you guys up on high? The shit you see, the things you do, man, that's got to be a kick."

As they step up to the bar, which is in the middle of a didgeridoo competition, Jerry tells the barkeep, "Line 'em up, Raul, my regular poison." He then turns to Zach, "Any job, right?"

The didgeri-duet in play has a dubstep quality to it as Zach gives a nervous smile, "Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut."

Jerry gives him a deadpan look, "Too late."

Scott speaks up, "There has been a handful of vets who have retreaded, and from that we've had a lot of movement in the ranks. Sergeant Gudici is now your platoon leader, and you are going to be his exec. Any questions, Staff Sergeant, Nelson?"

Not exactly a double promotion, which is not unheard of in the Annex, but what is unheard of is rising past two chevrons without at least six-months time-in-grade with three chevrons. Zach would like to have taken a crack at being a squad leader before moving on up but the job they give you is a job they think you are ready for. It's not an offer though. Nearer to the top you can quietly tell them to find someone else, but at the bottom you have no choice but to accept.

Zach shrugs, "No, but I'm gonna go take a piss and give you two time to rethink your choice in me."

Zach walks away, and when he's out of earshot Scott turns to Jerry, "So, Cap, waddya think?"

"Everyone in that room last week was on the same page. The only way the Co-op could've known about those receivers was through him."

Scott threw in, "You leaked it."

Jerry added, "Ya, but that was the conformation. My report following his makes it actionable. By himself makes it meaningless."

"You know that."

"For a fact!" Jerry then says, "Look, the manifests are always coded to hide them in plain sight and we've been shipping those fuckers for decades just to extract the turret bearings. Security Services doesn't have intel for crap so they *had* to have been clued in. There is no other explanation for yesterday. No way."

Scott points out, "The Co-op specifically asked you to confirm. Let's not forget."

Jerry thinks about it for a second, "Ya, and it was obvious they were looking to start some shit but, seriously, who would have expected *that* shit."

"No shit." Scott then ponders as he notices Nelson returning to the bar, "I wish we could have come up with a better game-plan to flush Nelson out instead of the *in your face* option."

"Marshal Ramirez wants this done. We don't have time to win him over the normal way." And with Nelson stepping up Jerry speaks up, "So, Staff Sergeant, you ready for this?"

"You think I am."

Scott hands him and Jerry each a shot and says, "That we do, and we wouldn't be standing here with every intention of drinking ourselves stupid with ya if we didn't."

"A toast!" Jerry raises his shot glass, "Here's to the poor dumb bastards from yesterday whose time we cut short."

Scott adds, "Rest in peace, motherfuckers. For one day we'll get ours."

After shooting back, and slamming their shot glasses down, Nelson pipes up, "I like how you two changed the conversation when I was walking up. Good recovery, I might add."

Scott and Jerry look at each other and Scott says, "Naw, what makes you say that?"

"I'm not that stupid. Well, yet."

Jerry smiles, "No, you're not, and that is why you got promoted, son."

Scott then says, "But, we do have a question for ya."

"Okay, but before you ask yours let me ask mine."

"Your question trumps ours. Go ahead."

Zach gestures to Raul for a refill as he asks, "When you guys chuck me out the air-lock would you be so kind as to put a bullet in my head before you hit the purge button? It's not that unreasonable of a request when you think about it."

Jerry blinks his eyes in surprise before turning to Scott, "I think that's a reasonable request. Don't you?"

Scott frowns, "It's doable, but so avoidable."

"You think so?" Zach laughs, "Everybody knows what Marshall

Ramirez did. It's true, Chief, isn't it?"

Many years ago, a couple years before the end of the last war, Maria uncovered two Co-op moles and was interrogating both in this very bar. Neither was cooperating much so Maria took one, the more timid of the two, out to the elevator landing where she surprised most everyone by pushing that mole into the emergency air-lock then flushing her out into space.

Jerry was at that interrogation, playing the good-cop role, and he was not surprised by the *planned* abruptness of it, "The other mole, the asshole of the two, she started to sing like a canary." Jerry takes the shot that Zach was handing him and says, "Word is that every anecdote, rumor or wishful thinking you may hear on the wet deck is either surprisingly factual or ultimately true given enough time. *That* story is one I can personally bear witness to."

Zach hands Scott a shot and Scott says, "It freaked the fuck outta me and I was nowhere near it."

Jerry's laugh is genuine, "Ya, but you did end up having a kid with that crazy-ass canary. Now, didn't ya?"

"Please, don't remind me."

Jerry asks Zach, "Do we need to toss you out the airlock, son? It's not what I wanna do but it is your choice."

Zach half expected that question, "No, I'll pass on that."

Scott then asks, "Ready to spunk on both sides of the fence?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Yes, you do. Switching loyalties is a given but continuing to 'be the mole' for them is your choice."

Jerry throws in, "You get used to it, trust me."

Zach is surprised, "Hu?"

"What do you think we are? Scott and I have been workin' both sides of the street our entire careers. The Annex has been pimping me for decades and Co-op doesn't even know it. Fact is, they think I'm a retread three levels down in the CIC when I'm actually runnin' the show." Jerry thumbs back at Scott, "Wonderboy here, he's been workin' for a different crew all this time and nobody knew—"

Defensively, Scott pokes Jerry, "If you'z guys were smart enough you would have figured that out on your own. At least my loyalties lie with human beings and not the Daleks."

Jerry looks at Scott trying not to laugh, calling the Nefer Key the Daleks of all things, he then turns to Zach, "Look, son, it's better

to control and manipulate the espionage rather than fall prey to it. It goes like this...we feed you the truth, with our spin on the truth that is, and you push it on through. Obviously they have confidence in you or yesterday wouldn't have happened. Right?"

Zach is more than curious about Scotts comment, but he decides to drop it and ask, "What if they find out I turned-coat?"

"What if they do?" Jerry smiles big as he notices Maria slip up behind Zach, "You don't understand how this works do you? If that were to happen then, through you, we'd feed them the truth-truth, and won't that be egg on their faces when you become the only avenue of that truth!" He shakes his head, "The British have been playin' this game like, forever, and we learned from the best."

Scott reassures the young man, "Zach, it's our responsibility to make sure they have confidence in you. All of the moles we've exposed were planned for because we had a purpose to."

Jerry adds, "Hell, all the spies the Co-op pushed to negotiate a release for are now sending us intel from there."

Zach points out, "If I do this, you know, double-agent thing, I wouldn't want to go back. Ever."

"Duly noted."

Scott then announces, "That's actually good to know because we've got other plans for you..." Scott puts his hand out, "Not just yet, but we think you'll be good with it when time comes."

Maria pipes up, "There's always the airlock option."

As Scott mouths the words *You're an asshole!* to Maria, Nelson slowly turns to her and calmly says, "Options are options. Can I get back to you on that?"

Maria is quietly taken aback because the little fucker...that is the six-foot one, chiseled, stud-muffin, twenty-something kept his cool and didn't jump when *Tiger Bitch* jumped in on the conversation. It goes without saying that this left a good impression on her.

Maria pokes him in the chest, "Yes you may and, until then, I'll have your codex if you don't mind. It is in JPEG, right?"

Zach smiles, "Posted like clockwork!"

After over 300 years JPEG still commands the lion's share in digital photo formats. Common 32 bit JPEG formatted images have a 16,777,216 color pallet where the HTML code (e.g. #000000 for black) translates to 262,144 possible hexadecimal #code options for all of the 26 alpha-characters, 10 numbers, and some 28 symbols. The beauty of JPEG is that the image degrades craptastically with each and every

save, and if someone were to leave a body of text floating in the text tool box, and save the image, then an encryption sequencer, hidden in the photo editor, will take that text and imbed it within the pixels of the image where, when rendered, is flat-out impossible to crack.

On the receiving end a standard 1920x1200 wallpaper quality image of the sender and their buddies boozing it up on a Friday night translates to 2,304,000 pixels. For this example the codex tells the decryption sequencer, also imbedded within the editor, how to decode the character sequencing for the date of that save. Messages usually end up with about one or two coded pixels per line, and in a matrix where all of the colorful squares you see have actual meaning—nothing meaningful can conceivably be extracted out of the pixelated mess of a JPEG save without the codex key.

Post to your social page and *préparez-vous à être surpris!* The most clandestine of drop-offs right out in the open—for all to see.

Maria receives a text from Zach, and after quickly deciphering the letters, numbers and symbols she says, "Al-Masih ad-Dajjal?"

Zach smirks, "Ya, they wanted me to climb a ladder."

"How far did they expect you to go?"

"Aaaaah..." Zach thinks, then, "All the way?"

"Outstanding!" Maria starts passing out shots that Raul just set out for them, "It's great to see that everybody's plans are in lockstep for once."

Zach sips on his shot then says, "You know, Marshal—"

Maria flips her hand out and interrupts, "It's Maria. We're on the wet deck."

Zach nods then continues, "Okay, Maria, what made you kill that girl? Throwing her out the airlock like that?"

"We got results and you can't argue with results." Noticing Jacob and Sandoval entering the deck Maria looks up at Zach, "But, can you keep a secret?"

"We're in the business of keeping secrets."

"We got her repressurized inside six seconds."

"No shit!"

"She's one of our day-traders at the P.X."

Jerry throws in, "And we get a shocking amount of intel from her. Just amazing the goin' ons on the trading floor!"

Scott adds, "All that dirt right in our own back yard."

Maria smiles at Zach as she walks away, "You want to know what else? Tell him, guys!"

Watching Maria walk off, Zach turns back to Jerry with Scott laughing, "It was a holo, mon!" His fingers walk through the air, "She went from one airlock to another. It was all for show!"

Zach is taken aback, "All our boot-troops believe Marshal Ramirez blew her out the airlock!"

Jerry hands him and Scott a shot, "Ya, and the Co-op believes we saved her ass, but you know the truth."

Zach nods in understanding, and after a few seconds Jerry asks, "Did you want to ask why the charade?"

Zach nods no, "Why ask the obvious?"

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Jacob is there to meet Sandoval as she steps off the early evening beer-run out of New York. Stopping at the foot of the Warthog's ramp she faces off with Jacob with a shrug, "Wha'?"

Confronted by Sandoval in a three-piece gray business suit, surprised that the tight skirt and wedge pumps actually look great on her, Jacob feigns a perplexed look while asking, "Eighteen months? What's up with that?"

Sandoval pokes at Jacob's chest, "No choice. We hav'ta have both the Co-op and Security Services totally committed to the 4.54 (i.e. four.fifty-four) ball and 4.58 bolt before we git to upgrade! That also goes for deploying the M2. Ya'll will just haf'ta wait."

Jacob motions for Sandoval to follow him, "I understand that, Beth, I just don't haf'ta like it."

"Sorry, Jake, like it or not, the clock starts when the shit starts." Sandoval shakes her head, "And, let me tell ya, it was a mutherfucker to win that fucken' contract. I can't believe they're settling for the underpowered crap we're offering."

Jacob has a surprised look that says why would that matter, "You're competing against yourself!"

"Another subsidiary of ours, yes, but they were the premium option. We won because we proved to 'em they can upgrade existing systems *and* we negotiated a price lock for five years."

"I take it they still liked the miniballs?"

"Fucken-A, you know it, and Security Services can use 'em too when they want a C.Q.B. munition. The 4.58's are a tad cost

prohibitive for spray-and-pray."

"Ya, but that puts them on par with our 4.75."

"Ya, but for only eighteen months so buck up." As they step on an elevator Sandoval says, "And, before your bitching gets out of hand, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the 4.16 and the 5.77."

Originally the 2.73 millimeter pentagun was designed for an upgrade to the 4.75, and it was also planned that all the existing 4.75 systems be upgraded to a new 6.8 millimeter bolt, but when it came to actually doing the conversions the systems were plagued by jamming. Hence scaled down alternatives to 4.16 and 5.77 were introduced. Using the same capacitors they were getting better results as a result. The 6.8 was so loved that Sandoval's people decided to retool the BR1 and designated it the K-model for hand held weapons.

After a second of thinking, Jacob asks, "What's the M2?"

"Oh ya!" Sandoval looks over at him, "We haven't reported this yet and, quite frankly, I want it to be a surprise to Simmons. So, for the BR1 we wanted to ratchet it up a couple of notches. Remember that thirty-cal we were toying with?"

Jacobs stammers a bit, "Ya, the anti-armor."

"Yes, well, we've been calling this latest build of the BR1 the 'Ma Deuce' of all things. We upped the ante just a tad."

"From what I hear it's gotta kick like a mule!"

"Not so! We swapped out the grenade launcher for a robust counter-recoil assembly." She puts her hands out at shoulder width. "Shootin' this thing feels like a twelve pound sledge hittin' an anvil." Dropping her hands she blinks her eyes, "It's kinda freaky. No kick to speak of and no flip! Just this shock wave and that takes some getting used to. Its got a painfully slow rate of fire but considering what it's throwin' down range—"

Jacob snorts out, "If you know Simmons like I know her, she's gonna piss all over herself if she ever gets her hands on one."

Sandoval chuckles as they step off the elevator to the wet deck, "Funny you should say that because that's exactly what's gonna happen inside the next hour. Told her I was gonna be here."

"Simmons's been expecting the M1 for torture testing."

"Things change. She get's the M2."

Under his breath, Jacob smiles, "Klicks' gonna squirt like a geyser!" As they enter the wet deck he asks, "So, how are you?"

Sandoval is sort of surprised, "Thanks for asking."

"Hu?"

"You've never asked me before."

"This is the first time I didn't know how you're doing so, how are you?" Reaching the bar, Jacob motions for the barkeep, "I know this assignment was...unusual. It was a lot for you to take on."

"Ya think!"

To the barkeep, one Sergeant Zazueta, on rotation from the Maiden, Jacob points between Sandoval and himself, "Hey ya, Zaz! Rye, neat."

It's been years since Zazueta has served Jacob, but a good bartender always remembers his customers. He stabs the air towards Jacob with a cheesy smile, "Overholt! You got it Doc."

"I'm proud of you for doing a fabulous job." Jacob, realizing the understatement, turns to her and elaborates, "You may not think so but what you did for us was very important. Everybody here appreciate your efforts."

Sandoval brushes the compliment off, "Ya, okay."

"Don't dismiss this." Jacob thumbs behind him, "These people won't. To them you're a modern day Ng Mui, but with a clip board and gray tweed. You're a hero in their eyes!"

Sandoval is taken aback, "Mui who?"

Just then, Maria bumps into Jacob and pries herself between him and Sandoval, "Welcome back, Sandy!" Then to Jacob, "Muas!" Then back to Sandoval, "We really appreciate everything you have done. Playing a C.T.O. minge to the hilt and all."

"I appreciate your appreciation, but three years of this Mickey Mouse bullshit is enough. I want my company back."

Maria huffs, "It's not your company anymore, Beth."

"Then bust me back to platoon leader, or squad leader for that matter. I'd prefer that."

"You get what we give you." Maria smiles as she moves to the other side of her, "How about Bill's old regiment? He's comin' to work for me and they're looking for someone."

Sandoval's shoulders sag, "Ah, fu', come on!"

Jacob weighs in, "For a job well done it's where we need you."

Sandoval's head snaps around, "An SDM! I consider that a penance."

"You need to bitch-slap that attitude. A lot of people are

gonna make it through the next duration because of you."

Maria puts her arm around Sandoval's shoulders, "Time to tender your resignation and git your ass back ASAP."

Shaking her head, Sandoval thinks, "We've shipped so how about six weeks? Will that do?"

"That'll do." Maria squeezes her for a second, let's go, steps back and calls out, "Wet-Deck, break decorum!"

Just then, Zazueta steps out from behind Maria to shout, "*More majorum!*" And then with a D.I. bark, "Atten-hut!"

Suddenly, all personnel on the wet deck rise and jump to attention facing Sandoval's direction. Maria snaps a salute with everyone else following suit a full second later.

The Annex has no medals to speak of. Here you get citations and commendations and when you open one's profile you can pull down their service history as well as a list of brownie points for all their good deeds. The only physical award per se is becoming polished. This is where your badge of rank is converted from brass stripes or silver stars to gold or platinum and is the Annex's top recognition for gallantry or altruistic valor. For one to become polished they have to do something exceedingly heroic or save a lot of lives and Jacob has been the only trooper to have been polished more than twice in their career. He's been awarded this honor five times over and all because he was pivotal in turning the tide of battle or he overcame incredible odds. Then again, one could say he was simply being creatively murderous and it really depends on your personal perspective whether polishing was warranted or not, *id est*, the firefight at Saiph-6B being swept under the carpet like it was.

To be saluted when becoming polished requires you to have saved lives. Maria is one of those rare individuals to have received this honor and she earned it for her efforts getting the Phoenix-Marauder through the duration of the last war. She personally saved their asses over, and over, and over and she remembers the constant irritation of being saluted everywhere she turned for the next 24 hours while on the Carrie Nation. Maria will never forget how troopers, like Sandoval, upped the annoyance level by setting themselves up to salute her three or four times over. Maria swore she would get back at someone for that and takes great delight in having stacked Sandoval's following day on the Carrie Nation with meetings, meetings and more meetings.

As Sandoval returns the salute, Maria taps into her head through the tacnet and says, <"Payback's a bitch, ain't it.">

<"That you are."> Replies Sandoval as Maria and the rest of the troopers on the wet deck break off their salute.

Sometimes people forget that the Steel Annex is in fact a police organization. The heavy emphases on military interdiction in support of the frontier makes for an interesting juggling act between functioning as a constable one day and commando the next. It's as if the Texas Rangers were issued a magical bottomless checkbook—each district commanding a whole division of *Jagdkommando* with their own aircraft carrier. Since the Annex is tasked patrolling tens of thousands of cubic light-years that comparison kind of makes sense.

Jacob thrusts a polished badge of a Senior Deputy Marshal, a Regimental Commander, into Sandoval's hand then pins a miniature version of it to her lapel while saying quietly, "Let's knock back a few before Simmons gets here. She's on her way."

Sandoval graciously says, "Thank you, everyone." Followed by another personal transmission to Maria and Jacob, "<But, fist you two just the same.>"

"She's definitely one of us now!" Maria laughs while handing her a shot, "Did ya tell 'im about the Ma Deuce?"

Jacob adds, "Ya, 7.62, I can't wait to try it myself."

Maria smiles, "Oh no, Sparky, it gets better!"

Sandoval tells him the rest, "We didn't settle on the thirty cal. We kicked it up to the 8.80 from the bisE upgrade, but my people are calling the round the eighty-eight." Jacob's eyes bug out. "We've beefed up the BR1 to the max and it'll only do a quarter-million before it starts ta shake apart but, we think that's a good trade off."

Jacob taps her shot glass with his and they all slam it back, and he then coughs, "Homer is not gonna like it."

Sandoval then adds, "They will come back at ya with a crew served option. It's already in the works as we speak..."

She takes a few minutes explaining that the bolt they will build for the Co-op will also be an 8.80 but with differences. It will require three people to set up the weapon and operate it. The bolt will be underpowered by comparison but their weapon will last for millions of rounds. The SA will be able to use Co-op rounds and magazines in a pinch, but they can only use SA rounds after transferring them to their own magazines which is a labor intensive proposition. If Homer tries to push the SA rounds to full power it will burn out their receiver after only a thousand rounds or so, and considering the exorbitant cost of this weapon that will be a firefight *faux pas* for sure.

Over the next couple of shots Sandoval rattles on about a mock twenty-four month development cycle which has been mapped out for a weapon system that is already designed, built, tested, and

ready for production and shipment.

Boring stuff for the ballistics non-aficionado, but for those in the SA it's the *best news ever* as Sandoval asks, "So, waddya think?"

Everyone is a little buzzed, so Jacob grabs Sandoval by the face and gives her a quick kiss, "You are like, awesome!"

While Jacob wanders off to take a piss, Sandoval asks, "Wow, he's openly affectionate. What gives?"

"You bring good tidings. You've managed to nerf 'em down!" Maria laughs, and then with a country drawl, "Hell, I'm about to drop to my knees for ya'll!"

"Ya." Sandoval snorts, "So, boss lady, it's been a long time since we've talked. Still pissed off at Jackson dumping this shit on you?"

"Thought I'd never forgive 'im but his new job sucks so much I kinda feel sorry for him. This is easy-street by comparison."

"Not for long."

Maria thinks about it for a second, "We've got good people, and I have to remind myself constantly that the greatest burden of command here in the Annex is letting go."

"You? Let go!"

"I'm getting better at it!" Maria shakes her head, "Still, I feel like I'm handholding everyone by their dicks. Now I know why Jackson was crabby all the time..." As she raises the shot glass to her mouth she quietly says, "He had to deal with my fucken' issues."

Sandoval laughs, "All God's children got issues."

Maria asks, "Where have I heard that before?"

"From you! Ninety-nine percent of the funny shit I say comes from you. I want to thank ya for my repertoire."

"Do I get royalties?"

"Sue me."

"What would you offer in compromise?"

"Really?" Sandoval laughs, "How many pounds to you expect to exact from my dainty ass?"

"Tell ya what." Maria smiles, "You start slackin' and I swear I'll put the screws to ya. No quarter given they say."

"Where does it end with you?"

"You really want to know?" Sandoval motions for her to give

it up so Maria sheepishly adds, "Scott's gonna retread early."

"Why does he get to..." Then it sinks in, "You fucking piece of shit! I cannot believe you're setting me up like this."

Maria notices that Angela, Cricket and Bill have entered the Wet Deck, "I need ya Beth. Rutledge has some important shit to do for us and has to step down from his current duties. You've proven yourself and you also work well with Jacob."

"He's dangerous." Sandoval leans in and snarls, "He's fucking dangerous! Nobody's that lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it, but that's not a discussion point at this point. Get me? I'll brief you when it's time. You just have to trust me because..." Maria points to the troopers on the wet deck, "Fuck me! These people need you."

Sandoval shakes her head, "I need a break."

"How 'bout a vacation when you get back, hu? I'll give ya two months! Anywhere you want to go, girl. We need you one-hundred percent for the up and coming slug-fest."

"It's gonna be that bad..." That wasn't posed as a question but Sandoval had to ask, "Seriously?"

Maria snorts, "If you knew what I'm cookin' up for us you'd think I were crazy, dangerous and nuttier than a fruit cake."

It was just then Sandoval hears a throat being cleared behind her. She turns around and is confronted by Angela, Cricket and Bill snapping a salute. All three are trying to keep a straight face which annoys her to no end.

Sandoval responds with a middle-finger to her forehead and a quick, "Don't you fuckers start in."

Cricket smiles, "What are friends for, hu?"

Sandoval looks up at Angela, "I suppose you can't wait until tomorrow to get some trigger-time in."

"Ah, d'uh!" Angela hands her a capsule of BuzzKill, "We bust some caps tonight and I'll blow your brains out for the privilege."

Sandoval was starting to feel the shots and wasn't quite ready for BuzzKill just yet. Chomping down onto a tab of BuzzKill is an experience very much like biting into a capsule of amyl-nitrate; however, the euphoric torpedo like rush that follows is short lived as the alcohol is cooked out of the system and cognizant reality blows back in with a vengeance. That means if you were being a stupid drunk then a dose of BuzzKill brings your uncouth, slovenly and/or drooling behavior to light like a slap in the face. Yet, considering how

Angela is going to react when she gets her hands on the M2 then the offer she's now making may not exactly be in jest—especially after they crack open the case of Shiraz that Sandoval has in her luggage.

Sandoval pops it in her mouth and says, "Let's go!"

Jacob steps up as Sandoval and Angela race out of the Wet Deck, "They're off in a hurry."

As he hands Maria and Bill jello shots, Maria observes, "So, you're a social butterfly when you're off taking a piss."

"Everyone wants to chat." Jacob shouldn't be bowled over when he sees Cricket in one of her cocktail dresses that's basically just a whisper of fabric that barely covers anything. He sees her in nothing at all more than he can count but there's something about these dresses on her. He hands Cricket a shot and quietly goes, "Damn!"

Cricket beams from Jacobs comment but her shoulders droop when Maria pipes up, "Guys, I hate to call it in early like this, but I got a lot on my plate and I gotta go talk shop with Chuckle-Fuck here."

Cricket stares at the floor as Bill hurries them on, "No, go-go!"

As Jacob and Maria slip out of the Wet Deck Jacob asks, "This couldn't wait?"

"If you wouldn't mind..." Maria's drags him into an elevator, "You got an organ to grind, monkey."

Back at the bar Cricket slides onto a barstool and, getting Zazueta's attention, she points to the cocktail napkin she just placed in front of her. Bill leans on the bar beside her and looks around as if nothing happened. Bill is trying to get her attention as she nibbles on a couple of cherries she swiped from the bar kit.

As Bill is about to speak Cricket cuts him off, "Keep it to yourself, TexMex, before I pop ya one."

Bill just shrugs, at the exact moment Zazueta puts a double martini in front of Cricket and says, "I told you before. You need to fuck around and stop waiting on that. He's not worth it."

Bill throws his hands up in agreement, "Thank you! I've been saying the same thing for years. Will she listen?"

Zazueta urges to her as he walks away. "Go get laid! It doesn't matter who, just do it!"

Over the next three martinis Bill simply nods or grunts in agreement as he overhears Cricket repeatedly to mutter to herself things like, "Go get laid? Why not! Horny as hell and I keep waiting on that jackass. Fuck 'im!"

It can be said that everyone has some mighty virtue or keen ability and Bill is one of those exceedingly rare individuals who can spot an opportunity. To get results he uses his non-threatening good ol' boy charm, sometimes purposely clumsy or self-deprecating, to bait his quarry and cinch the deal. He remembers his uncle, who sold used cars telling him, 'Whatever ya'll do don't sell! Get yur mark ta sell demselves and don't steal thur face...which ya are.'

Words to live by, as they say. Bill's ability to 'size up the kill' extends beyond combat or business and at times rears its ugly head when it comes to casual amusements. Cricket is vulnerable, and malleable, and this is an opportunity he wonders if he should pass on or not. With the best of intentions he has spent the better part of four years becoming her confidant, and too many times she has cried on his shoulder and he turned down her advances in moments of abject weakness. Not because it wasn't the right thing to do, it's just that it wasn't the right time, and today is different because Cricket is finally past feeling sorry and is now angry with herself.

Bill already has his arm around Cricket's shoulders as she urges him on, "And, Bill, by the way, I'm done being coddled. I will follow your lead but I don't want talk. I want action."

"Sure about that?"

"You've got this bad-ass rep of bein' a man of action. So, act, you squint-eyed peckerwood! Mutherfucken' act!"

Cricket has always thought of Bill as 'safe' and she couldn't be more wrong. Bill has already scoped out the area and it's dark. So dark you can't see under the bar-countertop, so Bill thinks *why not* as he ducks below.

Cricket was not expecting this, and before she could voice an objection she hears Bill say, "Follow my lead!"

At first she didn't know what to do but within a few seconds Cricket decides to cooperate and slides back in the seat. With her lips parted and eyes glazing over she is surprised that she's getting into this so quick, but then realizes the martinis are helping a tad.

Just then she hears Zazueta ask her, "Want another?"

With her hands pressing on the edge of the bar, Cricket opens her eyes and nods yes. Zazueta realizes that something is up and he gives a funny look while feigning a glance over the bar.

Cricket puts one hand out and laughs, "I'm taking your advice to heart, Zaz. Okay!"

Zazueta chuckles, "Carry on, soldier."

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For once Maria has snuggled up to Jacob. With her head on his shoulder she notices his slightly sagging jowls. Jacob is over sixty and it's catching up to him. Maria cannot resist being Maria, and pokes repeatedly at the little sag on his cheek by his ear.

"What's this?"

"Gravity?"

Maria lifts her head and loudly asks, "On what planet?"

Jacob just rolls his eyes because that was expected. These rendezvous are becoming infrequent, years apart even, and Maria's humor and sarcasm are her defensive tools to reestablish her sense of dominance after these encounters.

Jacob looks at her and wonders, "You really know how to put the fuck to the moment."

"Why, thank you! Don't want to disappoint." Maria then clears her throat, "And don't expect me to play bumble-bee like Cricket. Doesn't her giggling like a school girl get old?"

Jacob raises his hand and hovers his finger over Maria's navel, and as he starts to twirl it around Maria points to him with a threat, "Do that and you'll pull back a stump!"

He smiles, gives her a quick kiss and sits up, "I forget how fun you are afterwards."

Jacob starts to pour them both a glass of wine as Maria sits up, "Speaking of Cricket, what are you gonna do about her?"

"Am I supposed to do anything with her?"

"You are such a guy." Maria shakes her head. "She's in love with you ya know."

"What make you think that?" As he hands her a glass.

"I can sense these things. I hated seeing her face when you bugged out with me. You can't sit on the fence anymore with this one. Commit to her or cut it off. You could do worse! The kids love her and you know that she'd make a great step mom."

Jacob recoils slightly, "I don't think I'll go that far."

Maria verbally pokes him, "Then do something!"

"Maybe I will?" Which in Jacob speak means no he won't. Jacob then changes the subject, "Got the preliminary report from the Murder Board. You curious?"

Maria already knows what they think and honestly responds, "No, not exactly."

"They're asking me what I thought and I wanted to run it by you before I said anything."

"Okay, spit it out?"

"Drops." Maria is obviously curious so Jacob elaborates, "Coordinated practice drops. About every third or fourth orbital insertion have everybody drop at exactly the same time. Get 'em used to seeing that so they won't be surprised when they do launch."

Maria ponders that for a few seconds and is genuinely surprised, "I like that!"

"You can cut all the sleight of hand crap from the plan."

Maria urges him, "Please, write it up!"

"I'll get on it." Jacob thinks for a second, "I was gonna tell ya that this plan is very Sun Tzu of you, but—"

Maria quickly throws out, "I wouldn't know. Never read the little fucker."

"Ya, I know, but the more I think about it...what you're proposing has Cannae written all over it 'cept that you'll be more like channeling Fabius for the most part and *then* throw a Hannibal in as a third act."

Maria chuckles, "I always find it tiresome that we military planning dweebs have this tendency to compare our wishful thinking to the outcomes of the past. Honestly, it gets old. Now, upon reflection, I'd like to think I was drawing inspiration from Cowpens, but who the fuck am I to suggest what I was thinking?"

Jacob is an astute military historian and the plan Maria is proposing is probably the most audacious strategic withdrawal he has ever seen. Comparing elements of it to the battle of Cowpens makes sense now that Maria has pointed it out to him, but the fact is it doesn't really compare to anything. He realizes that if they pull this off it's going to be puzzled over and puzzled over forever.

Jacob nods in agreement then then he perks up, "Kiplinger! Jessica told me about a framework of an idea she proposed to you and I think I have the answer on how to get in."

Maria really wants to know, "She said you would. Do tell."

"Well, it involves swimming."

Maria knows exactly what he's suggesting and counterpoints with, "They can't swim."

"They've never been taught." Jacob smiles, "I was running a sim this afternoon and I think I got it all worked out."

"No shit!"

"Think Snoopy will go for it?"

"Oh, ya! That little feathered bastard would in a heartbeat! Question is will Jackson go for it?"

Jacob sighs, "One wonders."

After a few seconds of them wondering if Bob is going to approve or not, Maria perks up, "A toast!"

Jacob smiles and raises his glass to hers.

Maria's face beams with a twinge of self-mockery as she recites, "Here's to you and here's to me, I hope we never disagree, but if we do – fuck you – and here's to me!"

With a quick laugh Jacob and Maria taps glasses. Jacob will always remember that one. This toast was one of the first things she did with him decades ago when he joined her platoon.

After they sip, Maria quietly digs, "And don't you be expecting a sympathy fuck from me when Cricket kicks you to the curb. Got that, *Pandejo*? Get out and expand your horizons for once."

With a wry grin, Jacob snorts, "I feel the love!"

"You should! All I have for you is love..." Then with an over the top accent of a Filipino hooker, "At five dollar, you pay!"

On that, Jacob reaches for his pants on the chair and pulls a five *Au* note from a wad of money. He tosses it to Maria who catches it. She really wasn't expecting that and while scrutinizing the note she bites onto the corner as if it were a gold coin.

With a nod of approval, Maria flips the note onto the night stand. Putting her glass of wine down on top of it she, with a sly grin, slides back into bed for round two.

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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

a pride, crows are a murder, and in the mind of the troopers these things are most definitely a rape while on the hunt. Bob was determined to rethink that but in view of the speed and nightmarish violence of the Xhemal, in a coordinated attack, silently pouncing on and disemboweling a large prey animal inside what seemed like a few quick seconds, Bob now thinks, *rape, rape is good!*

What catches Bob's attention is the sounds coming from the leader, called Caesar, who seized the prey animal's head and subdued it while the others set to work tending to their predator duties. Instead of the normal raptor vocalizations they've become accustomed to Caesar is mimicking the reassuring warble of a mother-cow of that species. The terrified animal is soothed by this and its panicked cry quickly subsides to a comforted bleating as it breaths its last.

The whole time this was going on the older and larger raptors were instructing one half their size, known as Snoopy, to slash open the belly of their dinner then reach in with the same hind foot to flick open the arteries to hasten death. What's amazing to everybody watching is that most of their communication in the field has been by hand signals, or claw signals to be exact. Bob simply cannot believe his eyes but what else can he do?

Before any A.I. analysis could be initiated, Bob has been sifting through the compiled information and reports, and if it wasn't for the fact that he is here and witness to it all now he would still be in the mindset that the data, reports and video he has pored over the last week was the worst possible self-gratifying science-fantasy jizum. No one in their right mind would believe any of this crap at face value.

He realizes that to believe you'd have to see it for yourself.

To begin with the Sierra Hotel complex is an ungodly mess of orbital chaos. The primary K2 class star, Mithra, has a red dwarf companion at 110au, Sriracha-Ankh, that has a blue-green-purple gas giant, aptly named Melek Taus, that sports a handful of moons with the largest one being a habitable jungle-biosphere of unparalleled variety and beauty. With oxygen levels tipping 34% this world is currently deep in the middle of what would be best described as a dinosaur-fauna Jurassic phase very much like what planet Earth went through tens of millions of years before.

Prophetically named Chermera, by the 38 member team who originally surveyed the Hyades, when they set off in this direction back in 2129 they were never heard from again. Lost in space for over a century the SA stumbled onto their wreckage here and recovered most of the data they compiled. The mystery of what happened to the crew was solved when golf-ball sized lumps of calcium, discovered in and around the wrecked ship, were found to have traces of human DNA.

In a scant four years *Second Hand*, the mission name for Sierra Hotel, has been used by the Annex to specifically reference this world and the name Chermera has since been relegated to a mountain range.

Every possible life form you can imagine—every size, make or model, from insects to the yummiest of sauropods, are running around either murdering or trying to avoid being murdered. It's as if the food-chain has gone spiraling out of control. Life feeds on life, yes, but this planet is not for the faint of heart or eyes of a vegan for that matter.

One of the largest land predators they've found is currently being called a T-Rex, because your average grunt wouldn't know any better, but when properly evaluated they're more like an oversized Allosaurus by comparison. Now, one would think this beast would be the dominate meat eater around these parts but truth be told it's the Xhemals that rule this roost and for good reason.

The Xhemals are a raptor like predator that are about half the size of the long extinct Utahraptor. They are covered in feathers that give them parrot-like bursts of color that allow them to blend into the forest and hide in plain sight while sneaking around. The feathers are tough and, like *lorica-segmentata*, protect them from slashing blows from prey and contender alike. The encephalization quotient is only 4.85 for the brain to body ratio but cortical neuron connections appear to hover around 10.9 billion which does put them in league with human capacity. So far the SA has been deciphering their language which is comprised of some eighty-three unique chirps, clicks and whistles; and even though an ever so growing dictionary of words are being put together it is transitional verbs and sentence structure that seems to be baffling the translator programs. What flips everyone's lid is that the Xhemal are calling the tracking teams 'sky shadows' which means they already know they're being followed. Worse yet is that they can identify individual members of the three-man fire teams and as cool as that sounds the ramifications make it sound not so cool. The nano-chips have not completely mapped their eye structure and visual cortex just yet so maybe the answer lies there?

The decision makers with Ground Round, *id est* Golf Romeo, the SA corps that deals with stationary assets from bases to mining operations, were surveying remote locations for, what they've been calling, a luxury hotel and convention center apart from the Kilosphere which has proven to be rather old-hat and boring. It was thought that an untouched dinosaur planet would be the ideal location because of the perceived entertainment value, and if it were a world full of dumb animals they would have been right. After having cleared primeval forest, laid out the foundation and airfield, and started throwing up the structural framework for five skyscrapers did they finally realize that maybe they should have scouted the location in detail first.

Confirmed intelligence presents a quirky little problem. So far these creatures are using tools, weapons, fermenting fruit into beer, telling stories and making astronomical observations for God knows what? Us humans did, and these guys are, and if that were known beforehand then the Annex would not have razed some twenty square kilometers of jungle just for the kick-ass R&R theme park of all time. At this point in the project there is no going back, and you would think that the 'little gray shits' would have given some heads up on what they just may find in the one-thousand light-year "Fuck around Zone" (i.e. Fox Zebra) but you can bet this little oversight is going to be a not so minor point of discussion the next time they meet.

So, what to do?

Whatever damage has been done is done as they say, so the general consensus has been to learn as much as they can about these creatures and try to keep their distance as best they can going forward. And if just one of these decision makers had a brain amongst them, as smart as they all are, you'd think they'd know instinctively that direct contact would be inevitable.

Bob's open mouth astonishment, trying to absorb all this, is cut short as the sergeant of the fire team nudges him with an elbow and radios, ["Told ya, Bob. Brutal fuckers, aren't they."]

Bob is watching them use stone hand-axes to speed up the dissection process and asks, "What's with the spears? Don't they use 'em to hunt with?"

["Nope! They use those for skewering the big dumb raptors who are only dolphin smart. I've seen it! Appears to be a culling of the competition if you ask me, but their planet—their prerogative."] After a few seconds the sergeant says, [Four o'clock. He's here!]

Bob turns to look and it takes some time for him to zero in on the face of Fido peeking around the foliage at the second story level, but this is what he really wanted to see today. Now, any spark of intelligence or cerebral imprintation on most animals here would tell them to steer clear of the Xhemal out of simple self-preservation. The average Allosaurus will bushwhack raptors all day long but they keep a healthy distance from the Xhemal, yet this one had the nuts to ignore convention and became a camp follower of sorts. More like a pet than a symbiotic ballast, and one they can't turn their back on.

["Hey, Bob, here's Snoopy!"] Radios the sergeant, and from the corner of his eye Bob notices the little raptor approaching Fido while carrying the heart from the kill.

In the wild *time is of the essence* so predators will gulp down the parts of their prey that take the least amount of time but have the

greatest nutritional value. Vittles, organ tissue, fills that bill and it's usually the liver and lungs to go first. Meat, that is articulating muscle, takes quite a lot of time to chow down and the heart is the toughest piece of all. The Xhemal know that they have all the time in the world because nobody is going to try to muscle in on their kill. What's odd to watch is that they only take what they need and, yes, it is the choice parts; but to them if they perform a civic service and feed others, like Fido, then those beasts won't be rampaging through the thicket with hunger pangs, and another critter gets to live through the night.

That is for the Xhemal to hunt tomorrow.

Fido steps out from behind the trees and, getting a little too excited because Snoopy is bringing him a treat, he takes two closing steps too many into the little raptor's bubble.

With a nasty hiss Snoopy flairs his feathers out in a threat display that is not lost on Fido. He's not afraid of Snoopy, but he is afraid of the others, so he backs off and drops his head—turning it to the side in a submissive posture.

Bob has to remember that he needs to be objective and not project his own bias, feelings and sense of wonder on what he sees. His observations need to be clear and concise but there is no mistaking the smugness of this little sprite of a raptor having an Allosaurus like monster forty times his size kowtow to him.

Snoopy tosses the heart towards Fido who catches it in mid-air, and as Fido chews on his snack Snoopy turns and looks in the direction of Bob and the Sergeant who are up in the trees. After a few seconds Snoopy chirps and gestures for them to come down.

While Bob watches with wide-eyed amazement the sergeant radios him, ["You're new, Bob. Maybe you'll go down and play."]

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The fire team follows the hunting party back to their camp, and after the raptors drop off the goods they head towards the river for a quick scrub down. Bob is curious as to why these creatures bathe before they leave camp, bathe when they get back, and bathe all the time. It appears that they want to eradicate any trace of sent for a more successful hunt, and to get all the blood off when they return, d'uh, but then Bob wonders if they could be bathing for both practical and esthetic reasons? Maybe they just like to be clean?

The camp maintains an artificial cove on the edge of the river for this purpose. It's intelligently designed with stakes hammered into the riverbed as an outside partition to guard against members slipping

out into the fast flowing current. As a passing thought Bob notices that its location is downstream just past a sharp bend. Anyone who knows anything about pipes and pressure know that this kind of locale is a troublesome spot. He has already noticed the tell-tail sign of an eddy forming along the posts but then maybe these issues don't apply to fluid dynamics?

The members of the hunting party slip out of the water and start to shake and preen their feathers, but before Snoopy can make a clean getaway Caesar pulls him close and does an 'ear inspection' on the little guy. Obviously disappointed he squawks loud and points back to the cove so, in a huff, Snoopy trudges back into the water. While splashing and twisting about, trying to get all the blood out of his plumage, he bumps into the stakes and they suddenly give way.

With a shriek Snoopy is yanked into the river by a rip current and starts to fight a losing battle keeping his head above water. In a flash all the members of the hunting party grab one of the many tied bundles of reeds that are lying around and race along the shoreline in an attempt to rescue the little one.

As the fire team follows them, Bob radios to the sergeant, "Life preservers! They're makin' life preservers for Christ's sake!"

Sheepishly the sergeant radios back, ["I was wonderin' what those were for? Guess we know now!"]

After a hundred meters of frantic splashing Snoopy is spent and as the exhausted little beast approaches a whitewater ravine he slips under for the last time. In a flurry Caesar launches himself out into the river and lands right where snoopy went down. After a few frantic seconds trying to find him he hits the rocks at the top of the ravine and, while tightly gripping the preserver, he himself shoots down the rapids.

Bob realizes that if they don't do something and soon Snoopy is going to die. He's aware that their standing orders are to avoid direct contact but his conscience will not allow him to do nothing.

["Shit, Bob, what are you doing?"] Realizing that Bob has already flown off to rescue Snoopy the sergeant shouts over the radio, ["Stand down, dude, we have our orders!"]

From overhead Bob has identified the thermal signature of Snoopy in the water, so as he dives into the rapids he radios back, "Fuck that!"

Caesar did not notice Bob dropping into the water but the Xhemal leader definitely got an eyeful when he breaks the surface with Snoopy in hand. The holo-cloak of the JACC fighting suit never works well with water and the polygon razzle-dazzle scattering is neutralized

when the cloak shuts off. Drifting down the river like a cork Caesar fights the rapids for the shore while watching Bob, as some wingless black mass, fly Snoopy over to a small clearing.

Bob sets down in the middle of a grassy depression along the shoreline. The whole time in transit he was holding Snoopy's head down trying to shake the water out. Laying him on the grass, belly down, Bob realizes that the little guy isn't breathing so, thinking quick, he decides to try something and pops the canopy of his JACC.

Bob mutters to himself as he closes one of the animal's nostrils with the palm of his hand, "I am like sooo dead."

It takes three blows for Snoopy to start breathing again. Bob sits up as the little guy starts coughing violently. Startled by Bob hovering over him he rolls away from what he sees as a black tree trunk with a strange fleshy face.

The beauty of this moment is short lived as Bob hears the humorless voice of their company commander taking a less than crappy stab at humor, "Ya know, Jackson. I've enjoyed having you here. Really, I have! So much so I decided to take a break from my normal boring shit and come down here after your little outing to bond with you guys! Ya know, rub elbows with my peeps for a change!"

Snoopy has already scrambled away so Bob stands and turns to receive his dressing down.

As the commander continues his rant gets louder and louder, "But do I get to see the indigenous fauna rejoice in their bounty and sing the songs of their people? Oh, hell no! This is choice shit! I git to see your dumb ass fishing this one out of the water and, if that wasn't bad enough, I catch you givin' 'im the kiss of fucken' life! I'm talkin' about the very definition of *in flagrante delicto*, motherfucker! How do I report on that one, hu? You got any ideas, numb nuts? If you do you'd better share because I'M ALL OUT! This fuck up is goin' all the way to the top and I really-really don't know how to save your swinging dick from this door jamb!"

Just then the head of Caesar slips slowly and quietly between the Deputy Marshal and Bob at eye level. As startling as this would be to the average human being these two are from the Annex and they tend not to startle. The creature is impressed that neither of them freak out or jump back. Anything from his planet would—but these two beings are not from his planet are they.

Caesar turns his head slowly towards Bob and with a snort he nods his head up and down with obvious approval. He then turns towards the company commander and shakes his head with a disapproving scowl. The sergeant did report that both those gestures

are the same for the Xhemal and it's kinda creepy for the commander and Bob to see Caesar doing it this up close and personal.

The Xhemal leader knows instinctively that this happens to be Bob's leader and for whatever reason he thinks what Bob did was bad. To Caesar what Bob did was good and in his mind Bob's commander can back off or answer to him.

Wanting to extricate himself from this unexpected encounter the company commander asks, "You got this. Right, Bob?"

Noticing Snoopy boldly slithering up between him and Caesar, Bob nods, "Ya, we're good. I got this."

With that Caesar looks at Bob then turns back to the company commander and says in letter perfect English, "Ya, we're good."

Caesar did not have a clue what those sounds meant but it got the results he was looking for.

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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 *iFamilia 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?

The one thing that has held true through the centuries is that *Puesta del Sol* continues to live up to its name and the sunset over Jacob's left shoulder is catch-your-heart-with-your-teeth staggeringly beautiful, and much to his delight Maria has finally come to share it with him. As she steps up he notices she's changed her shirt to a red tank-top with some big-eyed, fedora-sportin' Toon on it.

Jacob asks, "Super Pachanga, what-b-that?"

Maria laughs, "You didn't settle the bill, *a chinga* you nuked it! The manager is running around giving everybody t-shirts."

"Well, whatever it is, the shirt frames your tits quite nicely!"

As Maria plops into the lounge beside him, she takes his hand and smiles, "Why, thanks for noticing!"

Just then Maria gets a tacnet uplink in from Bob, <"We're almost there. Maybe ten minutes out.">

Maria looks up and of the hand full of flights zipping along the Straits of Florida at simple Mach speed, one far off blip in the direction of the Keys is dropping from space and decelerating, <"I see ya, Bob. I got you clearance to land here on the beach. Just confirm with Havana on approach.">

<"Thanks, Tiger.">

Maria then squeezes Jacob's hand, "After all this time I think my mother is starting to warm up to you."

Maria's mother hated Jacob when she first met him, she hated him when the two got married, and she hated him even more when they divorced because how dare you divorce her daughter; but today was a unique day for Ophelia Herrero de Ramirez because Jacob made her look good...for being a *Bolillo* that is. He and Maria are big-shots where they come from but the family here doesn't know why? They know he's been throwing money around but they don't see it because he respectfully kept it on the down-low. Then to top it all off he's her son-in-law and in a world where matrimony anymore is long passé, a quaint notion at best, even being the ex-son-in-law does count for something here—and it counts big.

Then to top that, and this makes Jacob laugh inside, there she is on a bench thirty feet in front of them small-talking away with the notorious Monique Ribot. What a surreal sight—Monique with his son, Seth, and his granddaughter, little-Monique, both obviously nomin' on fries while watching Diego, as the catcher, coach his granddaughter, Connie, on how to strike out the batter—one of the many cousins from the island. All the while the family strains-their-brains trying to figure out how Monique factors in? None of them will be so uncultivated and

boorish as to ask because obviously it has to come from Jacob's side of the fence, but what does rattle their lifters is that Ophelia is going to be caring for Diego post-surgery and now they just caught wind that Diego's care will be at Monique's chateau of all places.

For Ophelia it's total and complete radon-feather in your cap bragging-rights, and her efforts trying to keep it on the Q.T. has made it only bigger than life and in their face.

Jacob retorts, "Warm up? Not hardly."

Maria shakes her head, "In spite of your fierce reputation you are the kindest, most loving, and giving man I know but, understand this, Astro Boy. It's my job to bitch about you. It's Ophelia's job—hey it's everybody's job to bitch about you! It keeps ya honest."

"Well, don't do me any favors, okay?" Jacob then switches gears, "I've been wanting to ask you, now that we have a minute alone, you know that Paula there was Pablo and Lucia was Luis, right? They all, even Adolfinia, made the change by puberty right?"

"Eeeh, not Hector, but I never really kept up with 'em."

"This runs in your family, ya know."

Maria looks at him, "Don't ruin the moment, motherfucker."

"No! No-no-no-no! It's just that Diego makes sense now."

Maria looks back out to the sunset, "I'm glad Diego's choice makes sense to you now. It was obvious to everyone else."

Just then a tennis ball comes flying in and Jacob catches it with one-hand. Diego races in after it and slams into Jacob, hugs him big, kisses him on the cheek, snatches the ball from his hand and shouts back while running off, "Thank you, Pop!"

Jacob can deal with the long hair and pony tail but it's the make-up, no matter how faint and unobtrusive, that he has a hard time with so, with a sigh, "My son...the daughter I always wanted."

With piercing eyes, Maria looks over at Jacob and tries to bait him with a snarl, "Wait until he sucks cock."

"Waddya mean?" Replies Jacob with a look on his face that says, *doesn't he already? Everyone else does!*

To Maria a good fight has gone to waste because Jacob didn't bite, "You really haven't been keeping up on things. He likes girls!"

While Jacob blinks, Maria gives it a second to let that sink in, "But, I'll admit I'm jealous. As much as Diego has been a cuddle-bear with me all these years, and in spite of his affinity for girls he's always had a crush on his daddy. Like all good daughters should."

"You're suggesting I should spend more time with...her."

"Ya think?"

As the drop ship slides up to the shore, Jacob smirks to himself just loud enough for Maria to overhear, "My son, the lesbian!"

"Do I catch a whiff of envy?" Maria sits up and turns to him cackling like a witch, "That's not a Freudian slip! Uh-uh, in my book that's a Freudian wardrobe! And, it goes without saying—"

With a stern finger, Jacob cuts her off, "Then don't say it."

Maria purses her lips together with a smile and struggles not to blurt out all the comments and digs she has saved up for this very moment—and now this. As the ship spins around, drifting backwards over the sand, she agrees that this is not the time to verbally pulverize him for being inattentive to those closest to him, or opening himself up to her ridicule just because he's being stupid-easy.

Jokingly she gives a stern finger back, "Tomorrow then!"

In a fit of juvenile silliness both their fingers start poking and parrying at each other as if they were in a rapier duel.

Just then they hear Jessica clear her throat, "Get out much?"

With the ramp of the ship opening both Jacob and Maria hop up, while Maria complements Jessica, "Nice shirt!"

Jessica, facing off with Maria, is flanked by her boyfriend Josav, the Herrero family anchor and business GM, Lucia, the dark and brooding 'Michelangelo of the mill-printer', Paula, and the family matriarchal comedy-relief, Adolfina. Staring at Maria's b-cup, Jessica glances down at her own tank top where the cartoon characters eyes are exploding from her double-d's, then with a glance back up at Maria's she gives herself a self-approving chirp.

Maria mocks flipping out, "Bitch! If you weren't seventeen—"

Just then seventy-two year old Adolfina, like all the family girls, a chiquita-hot callipygian meaty-bone with a trim waist, big hair, getto hoops, daisy-dukes with a halter two sizes too small, throws her hand out and says, "Maria, *creo que no!* You may be *familia* but this is my girl now! Don' make me hurt you!"

Jacob adds with a laugh, "You and what army?"

Lucia, Maria's cousin and Adolfina's niece, asks with knowing clarity about the ship on the beach, "*No jodas! A Razorback?*"

"*Qué?*" Adolfina, seeing the ship and all of a sudden realizing the Annex connection, taps Lucia in the face and wags her hand at her, "*Por favour, de nada! No importa! Si?*"

Watching the ship hovering in place, Lucia says, "Ya-ya, *si!*"

With Bob and Michal stepping down the ramp nobody knows who Bob is—but every one of them who made the change suddenly recognize Michal Pitney. Michal is the ex-secretary-general to the United Nations and hero to each and every transsexual that walks the Earth and beyond. Still a politically weak and prejudiced community to this day, Maria's Cuban family, drama queens the lot of them, are high profile because they are the Latin American 'reality show' hit of the decade. Transsexual mechanics and metal smiths all, whose family owned business (*Herrero Custom Auto Works - Milling and Printing*) just so happens to be the largest custom classic-car garage and machine shop for the whole of the western-hemisphere.

Every male born of the family, save for one lone nephew, have either made the change or are in the process of making that change. It makes for great television but they are off-season now and Adolfina is a little miffed that the cameras crews are not around for Michal showing up like this.

Then the question dawns on her, *who are Maria and Jacob to know people the likes of Monique Ribot and Michal Pitney?*

Diego breaks away from the game and trots over to see Michal who is obviously there to support him (becoming a her) and where Adolfina's crew gave Monique a respectful distance and a bow of the head—with Michal the whole lot of them flock to her as if she were a rock-star or the Pope even. All but Paula, that is.

With them gone Paula asks, "S.A...so, what do you do?"

"Doesn't matter what I do, but I know what you're thinking." Maria gets in her face and thumbs back at the family mobbing Michel, "You clear it with them first because I'm not gonna deal with the fucken' blow back if you get dead! I can't watch over you."

Paula closes the gap between them, "I'm twenty-three. I don't need no watchin' over. I can handle anything you people dish out."

"Yes, you can, you're just like Adolfina through and through, but you got a good thing going here. Why piss that away?"

"Good thing? What makes you think that? We were already swimming in money before this *Cubanaza* bullshit! It's expanded into all markets and now there is no getting away from it! My life is my own and there is more to life than this farce. *Entiende?*"

"*Si, estoy aprendiendo.*" Maria softens ever so slightly, "It's a come as you are so just bring what ya got on. If you're standing by that drop ship when we leave you're in, but..." Again, Maria nods towards the family, "You run that gauntlet first. *Arranca!*"

Paula passes Bob, who has pulled himself away from the mob, and as he steps up he asks, "Are they who I think they are?"

Jacob nods yes so Bob adds, "I'd love to see their shop!"

"The mill-printer?" Jacob asks.

Bob nods yes, "Most definitely."

Maria inquires, "So, Alpha-poo, have you seen the plan?"

Bob cringes, "I've been so avoiding you, Ramirez."

"I need your feedback, Bob."

"No, I'm not commenting. It's your call."

"I take it you don't like it?"

Bob is astonished, "What clued you in exactly? I don't know if Kiplinger is worth this much risk but, if they want to do it and you think you can pull it off, then by Christ's shit-stain have at it!"

"They like the idea of calling their own shots, Bob."

"Really!" Bob leans in, "Least we forget that *they*, whoever *they* are, decided all on their own to announce that *they* were gonna expand their product line! Did *they* think ahead and consider the possibility that somebody *may* push back? Anybody?"

RRI (i.e. Rapture Red Industries) ale is bottled on Sapphire, yes, but nobody knows where the source beverage comes from. With RRI announcing they were releasing a line of Wine, Vodka and Rakija the FDA out of North America decided that they wanted to follow up on their original request, from forever ago, to inspect the brewing and distilling operation because checking out the bottling plant just doesn't cut it. The proteins and carbohydrates in the ale don't jive with other off-world products that have a proven terrene-flora origin and this has piqued everybody's curiosity. Twenty years of micro-brew distribution in North American has come to a screeching halt until this query can be resolved, so the U.S. Ambassador to the FIS petitioned to seek jurisdiction to compel RRI to open their books. And then, when things weren't surreal enough, the World Health Organization filed a brief in support of that petition and the United Nations blew a gasket over that because they don't know how to legally quash the WHO brief without further recognition of the FIS no matter how indirect it may be.

So, this has been Bob's headache of late.

Bob smiles at Maria with what comes out of his mouth next, "And, since *they* don't want to quit distribution, you're gonna just dig the solution we all came up with! You guys get to run a taxi service twice a day out of the Church Key! How's that for starters?"

Maria's throws her head back, "Oh, fuck. You're kidding!"

"Tower Two becomes lodging and research for the fuck-ton of paleo and anthro and zoological motherfuckers that will be bangin' at your door! Four and Five stay as detention and overflow, but I wanna move that op to the other side of the delta. A five-klick buffer to the main campus ain't enough with civis running 'round."

"I'll get on that. Eighteen...twenty-four months tops."

"Good!" Bob then asks, "And, since I'm adding to your plate, would you like to be at Second Hand next week for the big-reveal?"

"That quick hu?" She thinks for a second, "Watching all those jaws drop would be priceless but, no, I've got shit to do."

"Caesar's hosting a barbecue!" Bob then throws his hands out, "Cow! It's cow, and we're supplying that."

Josav lets out a resounding, "Sounds like a blast!"

Bob knew Jessica was there, and she's safe, but he gestures towards Josav as if he were a carnival curiosity, "Whooo's that?"

Jacob says, "My grandson, Josav, and he is okay."

Rubbing his eyes, Bob blurts out, "Okay! What the fuck?" He looks up at Jessica and Josav and offers, "Would you two like to go next week? You can come as my guests! Michal will be there."

Jessica looks back at Josav who is nodding yes, so she gives Bob a quick, "Ya, if father doesn't have a problem with it."

Jacob replies as Adolfina, Luica and Paula return after ganging up on Michal, "No, we'll have fun!"

Jessica then adds, "Speaking of having fun, everyone wants to stay a little longer. The family here is awesome!"

"We're hitchin' a ride with Bob so if he's got the time."

Bob shrugs, "Not a problem!"

"Then you and Josav go get Monique's limo from her hotel and load it up. Okay? Let's get that out of the way."

Adolfina volunteers, "Paula, ride 'em over in the fifty-nine."

Paula asks, "Take the scenic route?"

Adolfina snits at her, "*Oiga, por favor!* Are you collecting a fare? *Arranca el carro!*"

"Chao!" Paula takes Josav by the arm and looks at Jessica, "You know, if you weren't family I'd throw down on you just so I can have a bite of this!"

As Paula pulls Josav away Jessica looks at Jacob who says quietly to her, "Bruised egos are okay..."

"Broken bones are not!" Chimes Jessica along with Jacob. Following Paula and Josav she asks, "Body bag is in the trunk, right?"

Bob takes his queue and saunters off to chat with Monique as Adolfina and Lucia square off with Maria and Jacob. Maria can see worlds of attitude in Adolfina because in her prime she was an ultimate bad-ass. When Maria was little she was impressed by the stories and finds it odd that now she is here more than Adolfina's equal.

Then, with zero accent, Adolfina fires her salvo, "Do you know how many Maria Ramirez's there are? A bazillion or so? But, just now, I remember that your middle name is Lynn and that kinda narrows the field down—and *YOU* jump to the top of the search like fireworks! Look at you! Big-cheese of spooky-town. I'm impressed!"

Maria protests, "I can't stop her."

"Nobody can! I just got one question. Is it safe?"

"No." Maria shakes her head, "Think *opposite of safe* and you'll kinda get the idea. There are no seat belts on this ride."

"Didn't think so."

Maria pleads, "Talk to her."

Lucia sighs with defeat, "Her mind was made up long ago."

"I promise you this. In six months-time Paula will be given an opportunity to back out. I'll make sure she comes here for a day before making that decision. Now, if she chooses to life-up then her training company goes to..." Maria nods towards Jacob, "This guy. He's due for one, so will that work for you? Best I can do."

Adolfina looks at Jacob, "Papa-J...it's amazing what you can learn in a nanosecond or two. The press was calling you Chernabog?"

Jacob laughs, "Ya, I liked that one! Didn't stick though."

"What did you do to be so hated?"

"Nothing to be proud of, but..." Jacob nods her way, "You! Marine, Afghanistan in sixty-two, purple heart *and* bronze star! I hear it's the most coveted bronze star in the history of the corps."

"Busted back to corporal and booted out with an honorable!"

"I'm dyin' to hear this one!"

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

need for malolactic fermentation because of the thirty odd varieties of the berry they harvest have many characteristics more akin to Earth's cherries than grapes.

To close out the afternoon, at the distillery the focus was on tertiary fermentation of wine with bleached sugar for distilling vodka, and raw sugar for refining the Rakija. Snoopy's claim that the sugar they source from United States producers have the quality and product consistency they needed but the State Department rep already knew better and kept that tidbit of truth to himself. Prying open a direct export pathway to the Pleiades has been their primary concern and this nailed it for them.

There is big mischief afoot—forces that he is indirectly mindful of who want to see this deal done and are putting the screws to his superiors towards that end. This is not exactly a simple thing being proposed here but both a precedent setting and human altering event. The public knows that there are whole planets of alien life out there but this would be the official "first contact" with an intelligent alien species that the public will be made aware of. A species that can be spoken to in English, is conversational for being a predatory dinosaur of all things, non-space faring as well as technologically unthreatening, and the owners of RRI Bottling, out of Sapphire, who gainfully employs over two hundred human beings and distributes an ale that they've been brewing on their home planet that many in the general public have been happily schnockering back for what is now going on twenty some-odd years. News at five!

What does give the State Department rep a sense of relief is that the Xhemal pass the FDA inspection with flying colors without his intervention but, on the jaunt to the wine tasting event, the questions come up about how to publish said findings and how exactly is the press is going to cover this reveal?

So, it's off to see the Caesar.

"Ah, what to do?" Says Caesar as he pokes at the slabs of brisket on the barbeque with metal tongs—everyone there hanging on his every word because...look at him!

Scratching his nostril with his wrist, and adjusting his apron that says 'Kiss the Cook' on it, Caesar mentally whips out the scripted responses that he, Michal and Bob were already ready for, "Maybe you should consider reporting this as you would anything else you would report on? From what Michal Pitney told me your people are going to have an incredible range of reactions from flat-out denial and it'll go right up the scale from there! There's no kit-glove treatment that I can think of that's going to help this one. Just be as matter of fact as you can."

One of the three reporters asks, "Just like that?"

"Ya!" Caesar then wags his tongue at him, "If I may suggest, how about you and your cameramen, all of you in fact, stay for the next two or three days and we give you a tour of the off-shore farming operations, you can see that, and we can also take you on a photo-op and get some shots of the local...what you call dinosaurs."

Another reporter asks, "What do you call them?"

"Food?" Caesar snorts a big laugh and gestures to himself, "What do you think we are?" He then points to the barbeque in almost a wide-eyed panic, "This is cow! Just so you know it's beef brisket and I love beef. It's like candy to us. In fact we barbeque pretty much everything we hunt now. It's sooo much tastier!"

He closes the barbeque and motions them to follow him and Snoopy to the wine tasting tables, "So, you have Michal here, why don't you ask her to host a documentary? I'm sure she'll do it! Get all your footage together and cut a show from it. Post it a few days after the initial news report goes out. I'm sure you can throw a script together pretty quick. You're reporters! This is what you do."

Already at the wine tasting venue, with a table for each of the four wines, two beers, vodka and Rakija, each presentation clean and pleasant with bushels of the berries and stat sheets for show. Caesar picks up a glass of what would be best described as a Malbec. He sniffs the bouquet with the reverence of a maître d' spiriting away the last bite of a masterpiece.

"Sorry that this flight is strictly vertical, but I think we can improve on that in the future." Swirling the wine in the glass he adds, "This is my favorite. We've brought in and sampled many of the wines you enjoy and I always come back to this one. As much as I'd like to secretly think of myself as a Sommelier I realize that I can never be. I'm prejudiced by our output. But, hold off on this till the end because it goes best with the brisket."

With that, Caesar spreads his arms out towards the other tables and smiles, "Sample, sample, sample!"

Most everyone wanders off to the other tables save for one reporter and her cameraman who decide to do some reporting, "Caesar, I hate to bring this up but there will be those out there who believe that you should have been allowed to stay in your natural state. What are your thoughts? What would you say to them if you were given a chance?"

"What a quaint notion!" Caesar hands her the wine he held and adjusts his eyeglasses, "I hear that they'll be, I think the words used were...indignant, arrogant assholes. However, the adjective I

like is ludicrous—and all that it implies. At least I'll be the one having to deal with all those tree-hugging environmentalist idiots."

"Because you're the leader."

"No, I'm an elder, Snoopy is the leader."

Snoopy pipes up, "Until tomorrow! Chell, the pretty one over there by the Rakija table, she's the new Xhemal leader."

As they look over at the table they notice the one female standing amongst the others which is noticeable because she is slightly smaller and has flowers in her two-tone plumage."

Snoopy puts his old beaten up fibre-weave hard hat on the FDA inspector's head, "I've already introduced you all to the new brewery, wine and distillery masters. After today, both Caesar and I will be off on new adventures."

As Snoopy ambles off towards Jacob, Bob and Jessica across the flight, the reporter turns back to Caesar asking, "New adventures?"

"Yes, might as well come clean." Caesar sips on a wine glass he just picked up and clears his throat, "We'll be joining the FIS as a full member. The vote will be next week. The following week my Sheila and I will be going to the United Nations in New York and petition for an observer mission status for Second Hand."

"Second Hand?"

"Ah, yes, the Annex refers to it by the code name for, Sierra Hotel, but we did toy with the idea of maybe renaming our planet. And then, after we've given it a lot of thought, everybody has been calling it Second Hand for so long it's kinda grown on us."

"Why Second Hand?"

Caesar nods towards the jungle perimeter, "For you humans, out there, if you were not properly trained and outfitted your life would be measured in seconds. That's not an exaggeration."

"It's that dangerous?"

"Oh ya, very much so!" Caesar then asks, "On that note, can I elaborate on environmentalists and what they think about the natural state? I really want to nip this one in the bud."

"Please do. We got time!"

As the camera pulls onto him, Caesar lays into it, "I want to talk about this...belief that many of your people have thinking there is a natural order or balance in nature. I hate to break it to 'em but this idea is, basically, a preposterous idea. The truth about the natural order is that it's always changing or in transition. The natural world is

pure unmitigated chaos with no balance in sight. Anyone who wants balance can take a snapshot, and that's the best they can do. Thinking you can strike a balance in nature is inane ecological hubris."

"That's a harsh indictment of the environmentalist cause."

"No, the phony environmentalists who think they have a right to have an opinion when they don't know what they're talking about indictment! This is a very specific group. Look, most of your people will step outside on any given day and say 'what a beautiful ladybug' and they are totally oblivious to the horrors upon horrors that thing wreaks on the world around them. Take it from me, an apex-predator in the natural order of things, the undisputed master of this-here planet, as a participant there is nothing balanced, orderly or beautiful about the natural world. And, in all honesty, the harshest indictment of all is when I lose sight of that...I become you."

"Wow." She then changes direction, "What is it that you like about having humans and technology around?"

"Oh, gawd, where to start?" Caesar thinks for a moment, "Pull a lever and water comes out—thirst is quenched! Push a button and *whoosh*—poop is gone! Plumbing, now that I have it I don't know how I ever lived without it? I could go on and on about conveniences but why? They're so obvious. Steam, okay, every one of us has their own Steam account! I love FPS!" Caesar points to himself then Chell, "You know, I just finished my Masters in political science through Georgetown University's on-line program, and Chell over there just got her MBA through UC of San Diego. My social page, yes, I have a social page, it has over a-hundred and thirty friends listed, and won't that be a double-take for them when I finally fess up to who I really am! Which will be in about a week or two."

The reporter laughs as Caesar then offers up a more poignant statement, "What troubles me when I think about it is that if you didn't come along when you did then we were destined for extinction. You people pushed a couple of rocks out of the way that were threatening this planet. Without that intervention then we'd have simply vanished as if we were never here. Not a memory, not a trace." As the reporter nods Caesar closes the deal, "Now we own a thriving business and want to make good on our own. Rub elbows with your species if you would allow us too."

The reporter now asks the obvious, "Don't you think that people might be scared of you? Being a predator and all?"

"Why?" Caesar shakes his head in amazement, "We hunt to feed. We don't kill just 'cause. Let's say we don't kill out of instinct. We're not animals. We operate with our higher brain functions and kill towards a purpose which is to acquire nourishment. We don't murder

if that's what anybody is worried about." Caesar points to the reporter, "I've read your histories and I'm curious as to what your species kills for exactly? You excel at it! In our eyes, you, you people are the scary ones by comparison. At least we give thanks for the victims we take."

"Is that for religious reasons?"

"No, it's the polite thing to do!" Caesar puts his hands out, "We don't have gods, or wood sprites, magical vestments, nor mysteries of faith. These are alien concepts to us. We have always been utilitarian and philosophically pragmatic in how we approach things like...astronomy for instance! We have always been able to see that our planet is an orb, orbiting a larger orb, orbiting a star that orbits a larger and more distant star. We used to theorize that air was a type of fluid, like water but only thinner. That is, until one of us demonstrated that water evaporates in air. It was at that point we did not know what to make of it. We couldn't imagine the concept of a gas, but we did know that there was a component in air that fueled our internal fire. That was oxygen. We knew it was there because in a closed space you would use it up and your internal fire would go out and die just like a real fire would go out and die in the same space. Observations that are all very logical."

Caesar points at the reporter, "You people brought us many answers but, the fact is, in the end you brought us many more answers than we had questions for and that surprised us! At least I know that, going forward, we both have the same questions ahead of us. Questions we can share and noodle over together."

Caesar takes her hands and looks her in the eyes, "I want to thank you for coming when you did." He pulls her in and hugs her big, "We have a bright future ahead of us because of you." Pulling back he gives her a peck on the cheek and says, "We can pick this discussion back up later. Let's mingle!"

Caesar pulls away and approaches Michal at the Vodka table, "Michal, baby, you ready for this?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. You stick with the script?"

Picking up a frozen syrupy-thick vodka shot, Caesar nods, "Pretty much. Had to ad lib here and there but I got out what we wanted me to get out. Hope they don't sound-bite it to death."

"Mention the ladybugs?"

"Not really. Makes sense to wait until we lay the rules out regarding security and invasive species." Caesar slams his shot back and adds, "Damn, those fuckers were a nightmare."

Early on a lady bug got through on a supply shipment. In the high oxygen atmosphere of Second Hand it exploded onto the scene and within a handful of years and successive generations it's progeny grew to the size of a tea cup and was killing everything in sight. Any creature smaller than a chihuahua was fair game, and it took fifteen years to wipe that evil thing out. Just a few examples still exist in the lab and when this tour is over, and the press gets an eyeful of what can happen to an innocent little bug let loose on this planet, the lab techs will kill those off once and for all.

Destined for the pin board golgatha, and making light of all the destruction they caused, some now suggest that a wooden stake soaked in garlic oil would be in order—after drowning in holy water with a silver bullet chaser.

Just then a wadded up stat sheet bounces off Caesar's head with Snoopy asking from the ale table beside them, "Ready for next week, grandpa?"

Caesar and Michal turn towards Snoopy and the others, and with a laugh Caesar asks, "Are you ready for your little adventure?"

Snoopy laughs, "Where you're going is fucken' dangerous."

Caesar smiles, "Let's not go there, Snoop."

Bob assures Snoopy, "Don't worry about him. We'll keep our eyes peeled for all the crazies."

Caesar insists, "You know I can take care of myself."

"No, you can't." Bob is slightly miffed by Caesar being flip, "You will be a walking target everywhere you go. We're not gonna have this discussion again. You just can't up and go do whatever you fuck well please."

Jacob chimes in, "He's right, Caesar. Snoopy is going to be much safer than where you're going to be."

Caesar points out, "If he gets through next week then you'll probably be right about that."

Snoopy tries to assure him, "I'll be okay."

Bob cuts this short, "Pull my focus and I'll bag your ass and throw you on the first trash-run outta there."

Caesar laughs to himself, "This is gonna be fun."

"I'm not joking."

"I know. I just think it's funny that he's going off to do some wet-work and I'm going to be in New York—and I'll be in the danger zone!" Caesar shakes his head, "Can any of you see how bizarre and

counterintuitive this sounds? Anybody?"

Jacob drives home a point, "Earth is a beautiful place and the people are wonderful, but on Earth they can't lock up the crazy ones! Now, off-world if they can't fix or manage those with mental problems they send 'em back to Earth where they are stuck with that problem. Some nutcases are obvious and you can steer clear of them, but most are walking around looking quite normal."

Bob adds, "It's true, Caesar. We have to treat everyone who may approach you as if they're going to shoot you."

Caesar shrugs, "It's hard to believe."

Michal speaks up, "Well, believe it. I know."

Bob throws this out, "Michal had three assassination attempts on her while she was the Secretary General. One was a professional and two were psychotics."

Caesar gives an almost startled look as Michal says, "I have to have a security detail everywhere I go on Earth. Maybe even for the rest of my life."

Jacob pats Caesar on the back, "Remember the environmental nutcases we warned you about? There are more nutcase-nutcases running around on Earth."

"Hu?" Caesar, in an attempt to deflect the conversation, looks at Jacob then down at Jacob's hand, then back up and suddenly he recoils from Jacob with a feigned indignation, "Get your hands off of me you damned dirty ape!"

All but Bob and Jacob are slightly surprised by that until Caesar points to himself with a big grin, "Caesar! Hu? Hu? Get it?"

Bob now pats him on the back, "It's 'get your stinking paws off of me' and I'm the only one here whose gonna get that."

Michal snorts, "Cultural references should be timely, Caesar."

Caesar comically rolls his eyes, "Well, I never!"

Bob laughs, "And you shouldn't!"

Just then Caesar's mate, named Sheila, steps up and says, "Hon, let's pull the beef and get it ready for serving."

As Caesar steps off he nods towards Snoopy, "You just come back in one piece, but I'm not going to blame anyone here if you don't. This is your choice so I'll blame you."

As Snoopy pulls his beer up to take a swig he says, "Gee, 'bout time you figured it out."

Just then Jacob pokes at Jessica, "Maybe you want to look into that?"

Two tables down Paula is walking arm in arm with Josav but she's trying to get Jessica's attention. They didn't know what to do with Paula until the next training cycle started after the first of the year, so she's been given to Jessica, and even though their bond is not by direct blood kinship they're becoming very much cousins.

Jessica was there for a purpose. Maria wanted Jessica to make sure all the puzzle pieces fell into place the way they wanted, and if she needed to pull any strings Paula has been keeping Josav conveniently occupied.

Jessica asks Jacob, "You good?"

"Ya, we're ducky here. You did good."

Jessica steps over towards Paula and Josav, and as she approaches Paula let's go of Josav's arm and does a slight and urgent hop, "I gotta go pee!"

And as Jessica faces Josav she notices in the corner of her eye Paula mouthing the words '*Tell her!*' at Josav. From the other corner of her eye she sees Josav shrug, so Paula then stamps her foot and gestures for him to *get on with it*, whatever it may be.

Jessica flat out asks Josav, "Ready for some buzzkill?"

Josav lifts his glass of wine, "Not yet, but soon."

"So, what's going on?"

"Not much."

"Paula sure was anxious to get away."

"She had to pee."

"Right."

Josav pipes up as he sits at a bench, "How are you involved with what's going on around here? Just curious."

"Ah, beating around the bush are we. Okay..." And she takes a sip from her wine, "I'll play. What makes you think that?"

"Just a hunch." Josav points to the glass of wine in her hand, "For starters you're still nursing that one and that's not your style."

"Sayin' I'm a lush?"

Josav smiles, "Can be?"

"My aren't we observant?" As Jessica sits beside him she rests her hand on his knee all the while noticing a Razorback dropping

in for a landing at the airfield, "What else do you have on your mind? Not to say I'm busy but instead of dragging your feet how about you spit it out before I beat it out of ya."

Josav starts laughing big, "That sounds so..."

Jessica joins in, "Aunt Maria! I know. I know. I think she's starting to rub off on me."

Josav corrects her, "No, she's done rubbed off on you."

"And...that's bad?"

Josav laughs, "I watch her interact with Jacob and I get to see what's in store for me as time marches on."

"And that's...bad?"

Josav whips his head back and guffaws, "I'm so fucked!"

Jessica prods him, "So you had a question?"

Josav nods yes with a shrug, so Jessica decides to goad him on, "You know you're way behind on fulfilling your quota of stupid questions, having a Y-Chromosome and all, but dragging a stupid question along only makes it even more stupid. With these questions ya kinda just blurt 'em outright! *In vino veritas*, feel me?"

"Hu?"

"There'd be truth in wine."

As Josav laughs, Jessica makes exaggerated hand from mouth motions showing him to puke it out.

Josav looks around, pursing his lips, thinking better of it, but then he finds the stones to ask the question he's been avoiding for quite some time, "How do you tell someone you love them?"

Talk about being blind-sided.

Jessica was not expecting this one. With her abilities she can know everything that everybody is thinking, like she has been at the wine tasting flight, but in her day-in and day-out activities and her personal life she refrains from doing that because she thinks life should have some mystery to it. Jessica also has the ability to manipulate what people think and physically do, like she was with the reporter talking to Caesar just minutes ago. With the power to know, fold and spindle people's thought and behavior like she can you'd think she'd be able to sidestep issues and avoid complications like what Josav just laid on her, but in Jessica's mind that would make life so uninteresting. Jessica has suddenly come to the kooky realization that the scenic route she chose to take, just a few years ago, has reached a rather provocative fork in the road—and the gore point is sharp.

Jessica looks out over the wine tasting event with her brow scrunching up here and there, and this went on for the longest count of seconds before she turns her glance over at Josav and says with the clearest and matter of fact voice she could muster, "I love you."

Josav was surprised by that one because what she said was a statement of fact and not an answer per se, "Really?"

Jessica couldn't resist sarcasm, "Don't let it go to your head."

Josav laughs big, "So, what do we do?"

"Does this change anything?"

"No." Josav then volunteers some information he looked up, "But, as half-aunt and half-nephew our status is genetically the same as first cozens, and in California and most jurisdictions we would be legal. Off-world it's a total non-issue."

Mentally scratching her head Jessica asks, "I thought the key point in the phrase 'it doesn't change anything' means that 'it doesn't change anything' (now spinning her fingers in the air) means 'it doesn't change anything?' Or, am I missing something here?"

Josav thinks about it, "It doesn't?"

"Good answer!"

After some silence Josav asks, "So what do we do?"

"What we're doing."

"Which is nothing."

"If it doesn't change anything then why would it matter?"

After about a half a minute of silence Jessica comes to the realization that, "It changes everything doesn't it."

"Yup." Josav states matter of fact.

"I have to let this soak in so I can't fawn all over you now." Jessica looks over at him with a lust in her eyes that cuts through the sterile façade, "You'll have to wait until I get you alone."

Josav thinks about it for just a second and coyly suggests, "We can turn in now if you want? We have our rooms already."

"Remember the old saying that good things come to those who wait? Ever hear that one?" Josav nods his head yes, so Jessica urges him to, "Wait!"

"Ah, sweetheart, twelve o'clock." Josav points up towards Bob, Michal, Snoopy and Paula. With them is Maria who just happened to have shown up out of the blue.

With Maria joyfully hugging Snoopy, Paula and then Jacob, Jessica wonders why she is here, but with her breaking away from them and heading directly towards her and Josav, Jessica realizes something is amiss and says to herself, "What's this about?"

Maria stops and with a big smile, "Hey Josav! You two having fun? I hear that the food is going to be great. Damn, it smells great! I wish I could stay!"

Jessica, with big wide-eyed surprise, "Hi, Maria!"

"You got a minute?" Maria turns to Josav, "Just a couple of minutes. We won't be long."

Jessica asks, already knowing the answer, "It can't wait?"

Maria snarks, "Unless you're having the most mind-blowing romantic moment in your life then...no, it can't."

Jessica doesn't have the heart to tell Maria that, yes, this is the most mind-blowing romantic moment in her life. The conveyance of love by Josav and herself, genuine and sincere, sitting on this bench, means more to her than all the heated, sweaty and screaming orgasms she could ever experience in a thousand lifetimes. In spite of the awkwardness of the moment it's something they really wanted to drink in and treasure.

On that note, considering the intrigues Jessica is part of on behalf of the SA she motions for Paula, who has been watching them doggedly from afar, to come and keep Josav company while she and Maria break away for a chat.

They meander off to the far end of the clearing where Jessica opens the floor, "Okay, what got so FUBAR to bring you out here?"

Maria says with concern, "I don't know where to begin?"

Jessica asks, "Am I in trouble?"

Maria replies, "No! Not at all, but you're involved! How about we play the question and answer game! Short and sweet answers."

"Okay."

"Good! You got the idea." Maria thinks about it and throws this out, "Does Red know they are you?"

"We're talking about the Omegas, right?"

"What the fuck do you think?"

"Then my answer is, no."

"Do they know they are you?"

"Yes."

"Is Fifty-Two in communication with them?"

"Yes." And Jessie puts her fingers up signifying a little-bit.

"Elaborate." And Maria does the same with her fingers.

"Girl talk, mostly."

"Nothing important, right?"

"Nope."

"Is red encouraging the contact?"

"Yup."

Maria frowns at that one but Jessica puts her hands out trying to calm her down, "It's okay! Remember it's me they're dealing with. Not my mom."

Maria asks, "Are you encouraging them to...excel?"

"No." Jessica puts up a finger and mouths the word *but*.

Maria says it, "Buuuut?"

"I haven't been holding them back."

"Maybe you should?"

"They need guidance more than having their chain yanked. I'll see what I can do." Jessica then adds, "Spooky, aren't they?"

"No, they're unnerving. The boys are spooky."

"But we're not here to talk about the Omegas, are we?"

Maria goes, "Ding-ding-ding! How'd you guess?"

"Intuition."

"Or maybe just a good guess?"

"I knew the moment I saw you walking up towards me."

"You knew about the meeting today?"

"That was why you weren't gonna be here in the first place! Remember?"

Maria chews on that one for a second, then she flat out asks, "Is Seth connected to them?"

"Wow!" Jessica whispers and nods her head yes.

"In what way?"

"Directly."

"A little more, please?"

"He's one of them."

"Did you see that coming?"

"No."

"Is it bad that he's connected? Will there be negative fallout with Seth as a result?"

"No."

Maria gestures for more so Jessica adds, "You just have to trust me on that. Any attempt to disconnect them now will blow back in your face."

"Okay, is Jacob connected to the Alphas?"

"Not exactly."

"What does 'not exactly' mean exactly? And I need you to elaborate on that one. Let's detour from the rules shall we?"

"His attitude is spilling off on them."

Maria growls, "Then I gotta fix that."

"No! No you don't, and what's more you can't. They have established a critical foothold with him and you can't dick with that or you'll get the worse possible spoilage."

"The center has had them for four weeks now and they are impossible for the staff to work with. They don't cooperate for shit, but *surprise* they sure *can* talk! I don't know what to do from this point because I have hundreds of them placed and ninety more in queue. I can't start over!"

"You're not hearing me." Jessica stabs her finger in Jacob's direction, "Do you want that?"

"That's the whole point!"

"I met his mother two summers ago when we went to his aunt's funeral." Maria is about to blow a gasket and Jessica puts her hand out, "Let me finish, okay? I pulled her memories and what you see at the center is exactly what Jacob was as a child. You have to let those little guys be who they are or all you're going to have is a fight on your hands."

"How am I going to mold those things into soldiers!"

"You can't."

"Then how can I get Jacob on board?"

"You don't get it. Father will come around when he's ready, but that won't matter because the Alphas are already learning from

him through osmosis."

"Hu? What?"

Jessica laughs, "I couldn't think of a better word."

"This is giving me no comfort."

"They're learning at an exponential rate and there is nothing you can teach them where they are not already ten steps ahead of you. It's like the Omegas, the girls are giving you the impression they are being cooperative and learning but, reality check here, they aren't learning a fucking thing from that staff or anybody for that matter."

"Then what do I do?"

"Stop thinking that you've got putty in your hands or a diamond in the rough. That's not what you have in either of them."

"What do I have then?"

"Plutonium, maybe?" Jessica shrugs big, "Look, when the Omegas and Alphas start mingling and interacting you are going to get some serious competition outta that mix." Jessica again points towards her father, "You'll end up with that but with a little gung-ho for added flavor. Just put off any mixing till they're in their teens."

"Shit serious?"

"You have to trust me."

Maria snarls slightly, and after a few awkward seconds Jessica dares to ask, "What did they say to you?"

"They?"

"The boys."

Maria had to check that she wanted to say and fell back on an evasive response, "Let's just say it spooked the shit outta me."

After a few seconds of nodding Jessica asks, "You stayin' now that you're here? The food is gonna kick ass! Love to have ya!"

Maria shakes her head, "I really need to get back."

"No, you don't."

"What the fuck to you know?" Jessica just looks at her so Maria corrects herself, "Oh, ya, that's right."

Just then Maria decides to probe about something that has been nagging at her for quite some time, "Fifty-Two seems to give you wide berth, like you got one-up on her. So much so it makes me wonder if you're a puppet-master or not."

Jessica dead-pans, "That a question?"

Maria just shrugs, "No."

Jessica stands her ground mute, and with no denial offered or forthcoming both know that silence is affirmation without admission. Jessica is careful to not respond so Maria takes care not to pursue it further, but this game changer does speak volumes to both.

Jessica throws a teaser out, "They found a Cankersaurus on the South Peaks. We're doin' a fly by tomorrow!"

"No shit!" Maria ponders her calendar and thinks, "Maybe I don't have to go back just yet?"

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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

sport and subcompact models, but *Cessna* has recently come into vogue for the low-end versions of those vehicle types.

The long stretch of airborne freeway up the peninsula to the city is the only time Maria can get away with piloting her glider by hand. With the HUD taking the entire windscreen, manual flight is pretty much like an archaic video game where the goal is to stay within the parameters of the segmented tunnel on display that has the feel of an old school vector graphic...because it is.

The autopilot display has the pretty graphical interface. The sole purpose of the different projections is to dissuade operators from actually operating. Both give you the exact same information and capability but the cludgy array in manual mode offers little by way of confidence to the user and many 'oh shit' feelings to the passengers.

Maria loves piloting her glider by hand whenever she can but she finds off-ramping to be problematic because she almost always misses her exit. At the last second she switches over to autopilot and the glider suddenly jinks down hard and 'jake-brakes' all along the off-ramp pathway giving Maria the delightful satisfaction of over-taxing the automated systems of the glider by bringing it to a shuddering stop at the foot of the ramp—and the rewarding *ding* of a citation dropping into the vehicle's in-box that will add itself to the hundred and fifty or so she has accumulated on her logon.

It was just a quick turn and two kilometers to the daycare center where they have been evaluating the first batch of clones over the last month. The panicked email from the director of the program from last week resulted in their meeting about the test results of the evaluations being pushed up by eight weeks.

After Maria signs in and starts for the back conference room the director and his staff catch her in the hallway. From the look on his face they're not even going to get back to that room with the comfortable chairs and oodles of coffee and danish she had delivered for this meeting. From right here they're gonna jump right in.

Maria asks the director with a way too personable and pleasant voice, "Hey, Sergeant Billingsley, how's it shakin'?"

"Thank you for coming, Marshal." He says with a panic.

Maria looks over the three staffers he has with him and sees the worried look on their faces, "It's okay, Sergeant, let's see what we have to work with."

Billingsley shakes his head, "I don't know about that. After you hear what we gotta say you may either want to gas me and the staff, or the product and start over."

Maria puts her hands out with some reassuring calmness, "Let's start with what's going right, shall we?"

Billingsley huffs, trying to clear his head, all the while pointing to his left towards the Omega clones and saying, "Okay, they are."

Just then Nicole steps up behind Maria and asks, "Where are we now? What'd I miss?"

Maria glances at Nicole then then back at the director, "Hey Chief! Now, Sergeant, tell me something good."

Billingsley puts his hand out to shake Nicole's, "You're the donor! Wow, it's a pleasure to meet you! These little girls are coming around and they are awesome! You should be proud."

Maria urges him on, "Let's hear it?"

"Aside from the foster parent reports, which are all positive, I have never worked with such advanced children in all my life. They are like, testing off the scale!"

"An example?"

"They're three, right? We're already testing them with word problems that would stump your average seven year old. The way we're goin' we're gonna to run out of material in a couple of weeks because we did not plan for this."

Nicole smiles with an almost conceited air, "They're my girls!"

Billingsley frowns with his brow, "This is beyond smart. There is something else going on around here. If one of them masters something they ALL have it down pat. It's surreal." He then gestures to himself, "It's like WE are the test subjects! Not them."

Maria and Nicole look into the room and see the first batch of twelve little red-head girls, all identical except for their hair and mode of dress, all playing and chatting together as if they were of one mind.

"They even throw the problems back in the staffers face. The very first word problem we gave was...if Johnny had a five liter bucket and a two liter bucket, and his mom wanted three liters, what would Johnny do?" Billingsley then points to the one with huge golden locks, "And you know what that one said? She told my staff that Johnny should tell his mother to get her own damn water!"

Maria and Nicole look at him and laugh, with Nicole saying, "Seriously!"

"Oh ya, and it get's better! She asks if Johnny's mother is an invalid, so the staffer says yes. Then she asks if she needs it for something like dialysis? The staffer says, okay, yes." Billingsley then asks Maria and Nicole, "Did you know they still do dialysis?"

Both shake their head *no*.

Billingsley goes, "Neither did I, but I found out they do when waiting for a kidney replacement. Anyway, she then asks if Johnny likes his mother so the staffer asks why would that matter? And, you know what she said! If Johnny didn't like his mother then he could come back with two or one or no liters! What's she gonna do about it? She's an invalid!"

Both burst out laughing with Maria saying, "You're kidding!"

Billingsley shakes his head, "No! Now every question has a given parameter of conditions including Johnny's mother is an invalid who needs these exacting formulas resolved for medical reasons. The pivotal condition is that Johnny likes her for formula resolution."

Nicole now comments, "Oh, my God, I didn't know."

"Well, now ya know! This is what we've been dealing with, and it gets worse! Need three liters, right? Well she says that she'll take two liters to the mom first, then go back and pour two off twice and take one liter back for a second trip."

Maria says, "That doesn't make sense."

Billingsley says, "It's an answer isn't it?"

Maria says, "That'll take two trips."

"We didn't ask for most efficient, or least amount of trips. That was as much an acceptable answer as any other. She said we're expecting her to project herself onto Johnny so to take it easy on Johnny's three year old body she would carry them in two batches. You see the problem here? We are now forced to clarify the conditions so that we only get the answer we want which is basically resolution by elimination. It's infuriating! I feel like Waldo, the village idiot."

Both laugh and Maria asks, "What do you want us to do?"

Billingsley shrugs, "I dunno...how about you pack 'em off to collage! Let them fuck with academia and leaves us alone."

Maria asks, "But we didn't move the meeting up because of the Omegas, now did we?"

Billingsley laughs, "Ya, but ya did get an earful about them!" He points to Nicole, "You, you are an overachiever and you're an asshole about it, aren't you!"

Nicole puts her hands on her hips, "And what if I am?"

"It would explain a lot, but it doesn't fix my problem."

Maria assures him, "We'll sit down and figure something out." She points to the other room, "What about them?"

"Honestly? I don't know what to do with those things!"

"What do the placement families think?"

"Oh, well, they think they're sweet little boys. Caring and sympathetic and all, but their chief complaint is that they don't talk or cooperate for shit. Most of them have repeatedly cracked the parental guidance blocks to the web and that's a constant source of irritation for the families. They're like...the Aspergers poster boys from hell!"

Maria and Nicole look in on the twelve little boys chaotically playing in the room across from the Omega clones who are polar opposites. Most of the boys are doing their own thing and appear to rarely interact with each other.

Billingsley continues, "From our perspective they are the very definition of herding cats! They're slippery little fuckers, and refuse to look you in the eye or participate in testing like..." He throws his hands around thinking of an example and says, "Tic-tac-toe!"

Maria and Nicole go, "Hu?"

"We gave the placement parents a list of activities *not* to do with them and tic-tac-toe was at the top of the list." He emphasizes the following statement, "Tic-tac-toe is a zero sum game. That means that once you master it you will never lose, and once both parties master it NOBODY can ever win! Little kids at that age require a lot of tries at it before they stop focusing on what they're doing and start watching what the opponent does to block for the win or draw."

Billingsley then thumbs back at the girl from before, "You know, goldilocks there? She lost the first round and after thinking about it for almost a minute—she never lost another. And, let me tell ya, that doesn't happen. Ever!"

He then points to the room with the Alphas in it, "Those things, the first tic-tac-toe game we tried the creature took the pen and scribbled all over it and ran off laughing '*meega nala kweesta*' whatever the fuck that means! When they get going they sound like a pack of hyenas!"

Maria and Nicole look at each other and both say, "Seth?"

Billingsley, oblivious to what they just said, continues, "That's all they say! That and 'no!' And, they say that over and over!"

Nicole asks, "You know what that means?"

"No, clue me in!"

Maria takes this one, "It's like a duel-wielded fuck you with a cherry on top! A cartoon character said it on a movie once but nobody knows what it means. It's a kid thang."

"Well, whatever it is, I half expect any day now to walk in and see them throwing their shit everywhere like a troupe of chimpanzees. Hell, they might as well be. At this point it would be logical!"

Maria notices that all of the little boys have stopped dead in their tracks. One of them is now standing at the one way mirror and appears to be looking at his own reflection. Suddenly, his gaze slowly turns towards Maria and he locks his eyes on hers.

Nicole thinks about this and, "That...is a little spooky."

Maria replies, "Ya think?"

Maria steps six feet to one side and after a few seconds the child's gaze slowly turns to where she is now standing—and again with the eye lock. Maria then steps up and squats close to the glass and seconds later the child's eyes lower and stares directly into hers.

Billingsley quietly says, "That's impossible."

Maria looks back at Billingsley and says, "I'd have to agree with you, but here we are."

Nicole urges, "Why not go in and see what he wants?"

Billingsley motions to the door, "Be my guest!"

Maria slips through the door and all of the Alphas remain where they are except the one at the mirror. He turns towards her and they meet half way.

Looking at her tummy he takes his finger and spins it around where her naval would be while saying, "Yes, I can."

With that finger he pokes her tummy ever so slightly and pulls his hand back. He then looks at his hand and slowly counts his fingers to make sure they are all there.

Maria thinks that there is no way that this child can know what that means so she asks, "What are you doing?"

The child continues to examine his hand and says, "Pinsetting. It ain't belly flops in the clouds if that's what you're asking."

Maria's eyes squint wondering where she heard that before. She squats down and the little boy looks up and he starts to examine Maria's eyes with a soft intensity.

Maria asks with trepidation, "Do you have something for me? Is there something you want to say."

The child smiles, "Haven't I said enough?"

"Maybe not?"

And with a bigger smile, "A toast!"

Drawing her in close he wraps his arms around her neck, and at the same time the other eleven little boys have pulled in for a group hug. They surround and envelop Maria from the shoulders down, like a huddle, but with a gentle and almost sad reverence.

The child then whispers in her ear, "And here's to me!"

After a few poignant seconds the others peel off, leaving the first child, who whispered in her ear, caressing her face and looking in her eyes with a knowing and radiant gleam in his. He then reaches up and kisses her lips ever so lightly.

Now, as he slowly turns and pulls away, Maria could swear she heard him say under his breath, "Love you."

Maria can't breathe.

Of all of the impossible scenarios she could have imagined stepping into this room with these children—this wasn't it.

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Maria does not know how she got back into the hallway.

From Maria's point of view it looks like Nicole and Billingsley are yelling at her but after a few gulps of air her hearing comes back to life and she realizes they weren't yelling at all. They were, however, repeatedly asking her if she were okay or not pretty damned loud.

Maria did not know how to respond. In almost a panic she looks over the boys—then back at Nicole and Billingsley—then back at the boys in the room. This is not okay but...maybe it is?

With some urgency, Nicole's voice cuts through the confusion, "Maria! Maria, what happened in there?"

Maria's eyes look crazy as hell but her voice is calm and focused as she turns to Sergeant Billingsley, "No more testing."

"Hu?" Billingsley is confused, "What do we do then?"

"I dunno! Bring them toys, games, sports, give them on-line access even, but don't test them. Don't push their buttons." Maria looks at the boys in the room wondering where to go from here. "They've been playing you."

"I don't get it?"

"Have they been driving you crazy?"

"Ya, and?"

Maria looks at Billingsley as if he were the village idiot, "Then they win! Don't play their game!"

Nicole asks, "What's going on here?"

Maria looks at the boys then back at Nicole, "I'm gonna find out! That's what I'm gonna do."

Maria suddenly races down the hall but before she blows through the door she shouts back, "Record everything! Everything!"

She hops in her glider and pulls onto the street with a bump, and after recovering from a slight drift a *ding* hits the in-box.

While speeding away from the freeway, towards the coast, Maria connects to the spike, "Vossler! You there?"

From the spike Vossler radios back, ["Got ya five-by-five, Ramirez. What's your hurry?"]

"What makes you think I'm in a hurry?"

["Let's say I got a feeling. Oh, no, make it a hunch!"]

"Waddya got hot on short notice?"

Maria can hear the sarcasm in his sing-song voice, ["Well, we have the lorry at the dock if that's what you're looking for."]

Maria snarls, "Something with a little more zoom to it."

["I got a Razor standing by for a mail-run. You can take that and I can queue another up to replace it. Will that do?"]

Maria's glider boosts for altitude as it leaps over oncoming traffic and hurtles itself over the coast. As it 'machs-up' going feet-wet she can hear the now annoying *ding-ding-ding* hit the in-box.

"Have the pit crew drop my JACC in it. I'm comin' in hot."

["I can see that. Need a shot-gun for this run?"]

"No, I'm good solo. Fill ya in when I get back."

["Now I know the rest of the story kinda fill in?"]

"Ooooh ya! Get ready for an ear-full, Voss."

["Ooooh no. Maybe you should keep it to yourself."]

"Too late, *mon chérie!*"

00000011111

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.

Prypiat is a biosphere of noteworthy pleasantness and quickly became the primary off-world destination for anyone looking to start fresh and anew. Facing uncontrolled growth New Brisbane has pretty much annexed the entire island to the point that nobody remembers the islands original name, but everybody knows the Bribie Stumps which is a series of gorgeous atolls and islands that run the entire length of the southern and western coasts of New Brisbane at a point furthest from Queensland.

The Stumps is where the beautiful people live.

Unlike Second Hand, which enjoys 7.3 axial spins (i.e. days) per orbital period, Prypiat follows the norm and, like Earth's moon, is tidally locked to Chernobyl making only one spin per orbital period. Where the Second Hand system has a second distant star making its light-dusk-light-dark cycles a psychotic mess, Prypiat has hemisphere opposing day-night versus day-dark-day-night cycles which are simply askew by comparison. New Brisbane faces Chernobyl all the time and has two light-dark cycles as compared to the outback which has a full on and traditional day-night cycle. Because of this New Brisbane has enjoyed lovely temperate weather where in the outback, on the other side of the planet, things can get a wee bit toasty at high-noon when no clouds are overhead—which is kind of rare because it's frequently cloudy and raining around here.

Time and days are a bit of a mess when not on Earth's time or calendar. Interspace commerce and the military run specifically on standard Zulu time but given enough time the locals adapt to their own orbits and rotational cycles. Where Sapphire has a 32.4 Earth hour day, and Second Hand has a 17.53 hour day, Prypiat has all of eleven wake-sleep cycles of 26.2 hours per lunar orbital period.

When it's high-noon in the outback it's 'high-moon' in New Brisbane where what little light you do get is reflected off the gas giant giving you the equivalent of fifty-five full-moons on Earth. High-moon in New Brisbane is the dead-center of the day-six cycle and right now everybody is out having lunch.

One of the stumps, known as Orpheus Eyot, is right off the main island and at one point they are separated by only one-hundred and thirty meters of a deep naturally formed channel. That's when the tides are high, when the tides are low you have maybe sixty meters of very fast and treacherous channel wash that's not at all navigable by man nor beast.

Like opposites-day midnight and high-moon is when the tides are at their highest in New Brisbane. Midnight is way beyond dark but at high-moon it's like twilight-360 and easy to get around.

Perfect for today's little enterprise.

Orpheus Eyot is used exclusively for the mansion complex where Chancellor Kiplinger and his family currently reside or, more accurately put, are currently held prisoner. This cage, no matter how gilded or blasé in its opulence, is a mélange of rescue preventing technologies (e.g. microwave, radio, photon-scattering, metal, motion, micro-air pressure, thermal and cavity detectors to name a few.) None of the up-to-date-fighting suits, no matter how stealthy or cloaked they may be, like the JACC, stand the remotest chance of breaching this phenomenal array of sensors without notice. A heroic effort was put in keeping the uninvited, including the Annex, out.

The two failings to this elaborate system, the Achilles heel for what it's worth, is that the breach-to-kill decision making process is not exactly full-proof. The decision making itself is in the hands of a single politico and, as luck would have it, that person is everywhere else but on site. That person is also not in the chain of command and as a result this makes it problematic for the person of authority by deferring that order while waiting for the decision maker to make said decision. This messy process takes time and the more seconds you can shave off in your favor through surprise, shock and manslaughter then the greater your chance of success in stalling that decision from being carried out or possibly neutralize the decision altogether.

The second failing is that the indigenous fauna is allowed to come and go on the island, without challenge, and that is usually during high-tide. On just the last high-moon a raunches rich-kid party, as is common in these parts, resulted in a handful of naked revelers skinny dipping their way to Orpheus Eyot. Bio-without-tech does not raise the alarms around here and the resulting mixed daisy-chain on a soft grassy patch by the shore was great entertainment for the security staff. People on a torpedo and alcohol mix hump and kick like rabbits and it took almost an act of god to get the guards to run them off.

One thing that was problematic with the outgrowth of New Brisbane was that all of the predator species that were dangerous to humans had to be wiped off the island. The large herbivorous were mild mannered and stupid and were allowed to stick around because they were practically harmless. The most common one is kind of like a furry bactrosaurus with eye stalks on top of the head. They were originally called *bumbles* by the founding residents that came from Brisbane on Earth, but for the longest time they've been referred to as *jar-jars* and nobody know why that is?

Dogs have been forever banned along the Stumps because they will spook the jar-jars with a hop and a bark. Their walnut sized brains have the imprintation that predators are all quadrupedal so anything bipedal can mingle with these plodding beasts with absolute impunity. Humans can locomote on-two legs with a cricket bat in hand

and whack them over the head all day long and the jar-jars will just look back at them with a gormless stare, but if that human happens to drop down on all fours and give a quick howl the jar-jars will stampede off in all directions. Here that's a class-b misdemeanor.

One reason they've been allowed to roam at will is that they have provided a free lawn care service by chomping away at the grass with a perfect two centimeter cut because of the limitation of their teeth. They also pinch back the low growth on the trees and bushes giving the woodland regions a professionally groomed park-like feel to them. Another reason is that they provide a high-quality and cheap source of barbeque fodder for the local pits. It's hard to imagine something that smells like ass on the outside, especially when wet, would be good eats on the inside. Then again, that's the way it is with most tasty animals.

For this mission the SA snuck in four of the small HWG99 Razorbacks with two slicks and two Warthog gunships. Normally the SA would just drop in all stealthy like, but they were taking no chances on this one so earlier this morning they drifted down from orbit behind commercial traffic that's constantly coming in and out.

Slipping in over the northern coast the four ships drift down along the thirty kilometer zone of grazed-over parkland and estates between the edge of the city and the Stumps. At these extremely low altitudes, low speeds and low light the drop ships are practically invisible in this no-fly zone that is reserved for the locals only if they have the proper permits.

A beautiful people perk.

Two ships, one slick and one guns, wheel off and float inland towards town, here some fifty kilometers away, as the other two set down in a clearing three kilometers from Orpheus Eyot.

As soon as the ships touch down their ramps open with only a light blue glow emitting from deep inside the holds. The second the ramps drop six troopers from each one fly out to take guard positions around the clearing and three troopers, also in JACCs, escort two naked teens from the edge of the clearing and up the ramp of the Warthog gunship. Before they get to the top of the ramp it raises and silently snaps shut.

Inside the hold of the Warthog the normal lights switch on blinding the two teens. As two troopers escort the teens towards the back of the hold, in towards the font of the ship, Deputy Marshal, Kacper Cyzk stops to chat with Jacob and Staff-Sergeant, Michele Kiel, the Warthog pilot who goes by the handle Gun Crazy.

Cyzk is not a happy camper. Last high-moon these two teens

were from the group that were run off of Orpheus Eyot and here they are back for another torpedo and booze induced throw about. This is Cyzk's last mission as a company commander. The last hot mission he was on was at Riker's Island and his company had to sit it out on stand-by. He's been avoiding the inevitable but next week he's being forced into a Battalion commanders slot and this mission would have been his last hurrah commanding a wet-op.

If it wasn't for these two love birds Cyzk would have been in town with his team shadowing Kiplinger's wife and fourteen-year-old daughter. That was going to be a classic 'grab-n-bag' and one of the scenarios he's been training his people on for months. As it is he's forced to send his XO in his place as he babysits these two. Keeping radio silence until the hold closes, Jacob and Cyzk finally get to chat.

Jacob asks outright, "Who's they?"

Cyzk says, "Well, he's Clint Wanganui."

Over the centuries families and races interbreed and the Wanganui family from Prypiat is no exception. Clint's grandfather is half New Zealand patrician and half Aussie Aboriginal. With his family political and business connections he becomes the front-end political power-player for 83-Tau. His son had a child with a blond starlet creating Clint who, like most children of means, has everything they could ever possibly want and is bored to tears with it all.

Kiel comments, "What a gorgeous young man!"

Jacob looks at her, "Slut!"

Cyzk points out, "He's eighteen, ya slut."

Kiel shrugs, "Ya, legal, so? Who's the bimbo?"

"You'll love this, that's Sheron Pilliod if you can believe that!"

Kiel double-takes, "The granddaughter?"

Cyzk laughs, "Ya, the one and only! Twenty-three-thirteens social column misfit of the year by all accounts."

Jacob shakes his head confused so Kiel points to the girl, "That nineteen year old, that's Hartcourt's granddaughter!"

Jacob is wowed, "No fucken' way!"

Kiel contemplates, "Well, we can't shoot 'em now."

It's not like they were going to in the first place but Cyzk had to ask, "Do I get a vote?"

"No, Kacper, we have to be nice." Jacob shakes his head as he steps towards the two naked teens who are now sitting on the deck with the two troopers standing guard across from them.

Jacob squats in front of them and smiles. Sheron looks out of it, pinching her own nipples rather hard—emotionally succumbing to the delirious effects the drug/alcohol combination which is not healthy, but not lethal. On the other hand, Clint's pupils are blown to hell too and yet he seems to have it together better than she does. If Jacob doesn't get a word in and soon they'll start pawing at each other and going at it hard no matter who's watching.

Jacob breaks the ice, "So, you're that bored? How many shots of vodka did you take with the torpedo, son?"

Clint tries to focus on Jacob's face, "You don't know what this shit does for ya, man!"

"Oh, no, I do! I don't think anybody around here wants their ass and eye-sockets violated by the likes of me on that shit."

"You're a fossil, what do you know?"

"A lot more than you think, Biff."

"It's Clint, motherfucker."

"Ya, well, whatever you say, Biff." Jacob stands and thumbs over towards Kiel, "I tell ya what. See that lady over there? She's gonna bring you both a capsule of buzzkill that you and this lovely Shar here are gonna take. If you refuse she has my permission to slap your shit around until you do. Got that, Biff?"

"Ya, well, whatever you say, motherfucker."

Jacob smiles, "Awesome! We are communicating!"

Jacob steps over to Cyzk and Kiel and huffs big, then looking at Kiel he broaches the subject, "You're a Kiel, right?"

Kiel scrunches her face, "Ya, I'm from here. Why?"

"The missing Kiel, the genuine article, right?"

"What about it?"

The light-bulb goes off in Jacob's head.

"You're one of them! Interested in hooking some little fishies? Say whatever it takes. They can't record any of this in here. Give them some buzzkill and tell 'em your story!"

Kiel thinks about it for a second, "I can do that, but if they talk won't that stir the rumor pot, ya think?"

"Fuck ya!" With excitement, Jacob stabs at the air with his finger, "Let's stir it for real! This is gonna be great!"

Kiel kind of shies away from that, "How's that...great?"

Jacob tries to chill as he lays it out, "Give them buzzkill. Now, talk to them when their heads clear. You're from their world so they'll listen. Tell them how you just walked away from it all, all the bullshit and all the...you know what to say. Basically, you signed up with us and now you have meaning to your life!"

"What makes you think I have meaning to my life?"

"Well, don't you?"

"Ah, ya."

"Well then, there ya go!" Jacob then urges her on, "When the shooting starts, like in about forty-five minutes..." Jacob dances his fingers towards the cockpit, "You dramatically scamper into the cock pit and run the mission! It'll impress the fuck outta 'em!"

"I dunno, what if this hits the press?"

"One minute to convince you..." Jacob had to rattle off for Kiel everything that was in his head at break-neck speed, "If your family comes after you—you're an adult, d'uh! If the Co-op tries to revoke your citizenship you're only a resident in the Pleiades and that would not fly under their law because if they do revoke citizenship, and you fall heir to the family fortune, they'd have to compensate you for all non-transferrable wealth at fair market value!"

"Where's the plus?"

"That would bankrupt this fuckin' planet!" Jacob drives the point home, "If you do take control of the family business then they'd be forced to allow you at-will come-and-go privileges because your family would insist! Remember the golden rule? *He who has the gold makes the rules*, and your family swings the biggest balls, right! You and your daughter would be safe because in your will you'd name my Jessica as the executor and give her the controlling vote on the board and, let me tell you, she'll-scare-the-fuck outta them! But, on that I'll have to explain later. No time now. Then, to top it off, your open door access would be puttin' the fuck-you screws to them—"

Kiel throws her hands out, "Okay, I'll do it! Just shut up!"

Jacob is surprised, "You will?"

"Shut up!" The lights in the hold switch from normal light to a deep blue as the ramp opens and Kiel, who is now throwing her hands out towards the ramp, urges, "Mission! Go! I'll do it!"

Jacob is amazed, "You will?"

"Get-the-fuck-out! I'll handle this."

Jacob shrugs, "Okay!"

As he and Cyzk step off the ramp Kiel asks, "Jessica?"

Jacob hurries as the ramp snaps shut, "I'll explain later!"

Kiel pulls the buzzkill and approaches the two teens who are just starting to grab at each other, "Here, you two, bite on this."

Kiel has that motherly *don't fuck with me* voice and they both clumsily bite into the buzzkill capsules with a little apprehension.

Within seconds their eyes start blinking, getting their focus back, with Sheron saying as her head clears, "Wow, this is real!"

"Wow, no shit!" Kiel squats in front of them, "You know, there is more to life than ruining your life, but you entitled *stumpy bludgers* don't get that, do you?"

Clint is defensive, "What do you know?"

Kiel reverts to her old 83-Tau accent, "Ow'r the Kiel's? You know, on Elcho Eyot? They own everythin' yet?"

Clint looks around trying to get his bearings, "About half of everything. It's been hard times for them krauts."

Sheron asks, "Why ask about them tall poppies?"

"Just curious I guess?" Kiel wiggles her eye brows, "I've been troppo for so long I'd just be wonderin'."

Kiel has a very distinct face, and after over twenty years being *the unsolved mystery* in these parts Sheron suddenly realizes who she is, "Well, I be *gobsmaked*, you're the missing Kiel!"

Clint's eyes bug out, "Tha cooee heiress?"

Kiel nods, "Matter of fact, fair dinkum."

Sheron adds, "Said you *gone walkabout* before I was born!"

"Bonzer of a walkabout!" Kiel is surprised because that didn't take long once they got their brains back, "But, I tell ya what I learned being away from the Kiel's, a dust kicker in tha bush is jolly off better than Pom Sunday in the Stumps."

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Snoopy's breaching crew, consisting of fellow Xhemal sapiens named Jinx, Gwascious and Mooch, still need time for their eyes to adjust to the odd lighting conditions. They have only three kilometers of parkland to traverse, 130 meters of water to swim, and two kilometers of orchards, meadows and topiary to sneak through just to get to their jumping-off point. On the sims that's thirty-five minutes on average and forty-five minutes max. They are taking a big chance

that the jar-jars won't react to them, but if they do they'll have to come up with a work around and that'll add to the clock.

Not scrub the mission per se.

Hopping off the slick, five minutes before they launch, some jar-jars enter the clearing, so Snoopy tells Jinx, "Babe, run 'em around and let's see if we spook 'em or not?"

With Jinx racing off to harass the jar-jars, and getting no reaction from them but polite glances, Snoopy asks Cyzk who has just stepped up to them, "You got the sticks?"

"Ya know?" Says Cyzk taking a bundle of weapons from one of the troopers beside him, "Making the escrima sticks was easy enough, but the bō staffs with one end sharpened was a pitched bitch!"

Snoopy apologizes, "Sorry 'bout that."

Cyzk continues, "To knap those tips with a god-damned laser without charring them was a cock-sucker!"

Snoopy jokes, "And I thought all of you liked sucking cock."

Cyzk grins, "Ever I get desperate maybe I'll consider it."

"Ah, a straight man!" Snoopy shoots a finger-gun in Cyzk's direction and gives a double-click with his tongue in cheek.

That was so stupidly cliché that Cyzk almost pissed himself as he hands the bundle over to Snoopy, "I made three spears and three sets of escrima, just in case. Knowing you, Snoop, I figured you would want both going into this."

Just then Jinx runs up and says, "Those are some dumb fuckers aren't they! If I were hungry we'd be barbecuing."

Snoopy is examining the quality of the bō staff-spears and he says to Cyzk, "Thank you, Kacper. These are really-really nice!"

"Thanks, Snoop."

Snoopy assures him, "I will hit my mark."

Jacob asks, "You guys ready?"

Snoopy thinks about it and wonders, "Remember the tacnet you ran for me where your 'Ten-Klicks' asks a 'Sergeant-Sargent' if he was 'ready-Freddy?' To this day I still wonder how your people made it out of that mess alive?"

Jacob asks, "Cold feet?"

Snoopy assures him, "No! It's just that I realize that anything that goes down here can't compare to that."

Jacob points to the escrima sticks and the bō staff/spears and says, "And if Ten-Klicks were here she would look at what you're doing with these sticks and say the exact same thing."

"No shit?"

"No shit!" Jacob points to the coast, "Ready Freddy?"

"Just get your ass in there when the shooting starts!"

With that the four Xhemal race off for Orpheus Eyot.

The jar-jars are constantly walking around with branches in hand because after they strip the leaves off they almost always forget to drop them. They're that stupid, and to take advantage of that level of stupid the Xhemal get to enjoy attacking with some of the nastiest non-shooting and non-metallic weapons in history's arsenal. Snoopy and crew were already masters at throwing spears on Second Hand but over the last few months they've become rather proficient with the bō staff and escrima techniques.

They would have considered an old school long-bow for standoff attacks but arrows, no matter how effective they can be, are not instant kill weapons by any means. A bow would also be a dead giveaway to any observer so the sight of a few simple sticks in their claws should leave doubt in the guards mind as to what their purpose would be, and hopefully enough doubt until it's too late.

The first two kilometers they take in a flat out run that eats up only three minutes of the mission clock and that was expected. They quickly reach the observation-post where a six-man squad of SA troopers have been standing by for them.

They communicate with hand signals only where the sergeant holds her fist up indicating for them to stop. When they do she holds up two fingers signifying two-hundred meters, and points her hand to her right. She then holds up her fist then points towards the coast.

Snoopy repeats the hand signals and when done the sergeant gives a thumbs up followed out by the move out signal.

Snoopy and crew slow trot towards the east and just short of two hundred meters they run into a whole herd of jar-jars that are strung out towards the coast. This is way better than they expected because the little jar-jars run around the big ones in play so this allows them to dart from beast to beast all the way to the channel. While doing that they shave six minutes off the mission clock.

The large jar-jars are four times the size of a Xhemal so when a big one drops into the channel with a huge splash Snoopy and the rest of his team dive head first into the water like torpedoes.

Here's where the training rubber meets the road.

The Xhemal couldn't swim until Jacob got a hold of them. Like a greyhound, if you don't teach them right they'll drown, and the Xhemal who have tried swimming in the past thought 'fish' and promptly sank. Fish swim by twisting their body side to side to propel themselves through the water which doesn't work for everybody. As an alternative Jacob has them think 'porpoise' and *voilà!*

They learned to keep moving and constantly blow bubbles out their nostrils so water wouldn't get in. Like a school of dolphins they repeatedly breach the surface to breath as they negotiate the channel, and inside seventy seconds they slip out of the water on Orpheus Eyot. Under the cover of a dozen jar-jar who are shaking the water out of their fur after their own leisurely crossing, Snoopy thinks to himself, *that was too easy*. The way that the other three are looking at him Snoopy believes that maybe they are thinking the same.

The Xhemal blend in well with the local foliage which is mostly dark greens, browns and black to begin with. The orchards, however, are not so obliging. The orange and grapefruit trees, transplanted from Earth, all have trunks painted white and here that's more out of tradition than practical need. The jar-jars love the fruit and the leaves so they come on a regular basis looking for anything that has dropped below three meters which is the limit of their reach.

The number of these beasts pacing around the orchard is a blessing because in this darkness the Xhemal look like juveniles of that species. They get through this area and have shaved another couple of minutes off the clock. The problem now is they are significantly ahead of schedule and there is no way to communicate back to anyone where they are. If they transmit anything via the tacnet they'd be found out with the sensors that are around them.

The *get our asses outta here* signal is when someone starts shooting and the goal is to put that off as long as possible—or when they secure both Kiplinger and his son then open a com-channel.

They have two meadows and a topiary garden to negotiate to reach the jumping off point next to the living section of the complex. With that Snoopy uses Xhemal hand signals to ask the others if they should press on or hold back to eat up the clock?

All of them elect to go, so go it is.

They cut right through the first meadow and skirt around the edge of the second one to reach the topiary garden. With the topiary sculptures one would think they would fence this off to keep the animals away, but these are made from non-indigenous thorn bushes and not at all agreeable to the jar-jar's diet.

They are now eight minutes ahead of schedule. Not exactly what they expected but they can't hold back with only one-hundred meters to go. Snoopy and Jinx both ready a bō staff to be used as a spear and they step lightly towards the building. Snoopy notices that there is one guard on the roof, three stories up with a rail gun configured for sniping, and another guard is on the walkway by the entrance with an old style shotgun carbine.

Snoopy knows that there are four of the guards with the wife and daughter so there are either seven or eight on duty here. Snoopy gives the hand signal for Mooch and Gwascious to hold as planned while he and Jinx slither up undetected below the walkway.

Now in place Mooch and Gwascious step out in plain view just twenty meters away from the two guards and chirp quietly to get their attention but not obviously so. Both guards are curious about these strange creatures and are not sure about what they're seeing.

The door guard touches the mic hanging on his ear, "Hey ya ratbag, get out here and take a squizz at this."

A few seconds later another guard steps out and asks, "Better be good you pommy bastard, I'm at me-eats."

"Look, mate, that-thar a boomer?"

He looks out at the two Xhemal, and not knowing what to make of them he says, "Well, thay ain't bander, ya poofter!"

The guards are leaning against the rail so Snoopy gives Jinx a nod. She hops up and swings the flat end of the bō staff down on the head of the door guard with a dull thwack. Then, in one smooth swing around her body, she whirls the sharp end around and thrusts it into the other guard's throat and drives it through his spine.

At the same time Jinx was spearing the second guard Snoopy steps out and, with his middle claw hooked onto the flat end of the bō staff, he throws it towards the guard three stories up. Using his finger like an atlatl, which boosts the speed and power, the spear point hits the guard under the chin and it drives itself through the top of his head which kills him instantly.

Before the two guards Jinx nailed could hit the ground both Mooch and Gwascious, with lightning speed, leap up over the rail and each kick a hind foot out and into a guards chest. They drive their huge claw down a through the ribs and belly which spills their guts on the deck. All the while Mooch and Gwascious are disemboweling the two guards Snoopy catches the rail gun dropped from above.

Snoopy hops up over the rail while slinging the weapon over his neck and shoulder. He grabs the head of the door guard and bodily

lifts him one-handed and thrusts his face towards the rental scanner by the door. Between the scan and the RFID read of the chip on the guards person, the magnetic lock opens with a quiet snap.

They made it in without shots fired or the alarm raised.

With the escrima sticks up and ready, Snoopy takes point with Jinx and Mooch in flanking positions and Gwascious pulling anchor with the shotgun.

The first room they come to is the guards ready room so Jinx and Mooch race in. They find two guards having lunch and, as if on cue, they both double-twirl their escrima into the guard's heads and clavicles. Then, to be sure, out come the claws and the two bodies are eviscerated in seconds. Jinx slings a machine gun and Mooch a shot gun and the both slide back into the hallway with sticks ready.

That's five down and suddenly another guard steps into the hallway right in front of Snoopy who swats his weapon away and slams a foot into the guard pinning him to the door jam.

The guard yelps with the air being kicked out of his chest, to where Snoopy swipes his clawed foot down—filleting this one just like the others.

Snoopy realizes that there are at least one or maybe two left, so he drops his escrima sticks and pulls up the rail gun. Jinx and Mooch do the same, and after making sure they're weapons are hot Snoopy points for Mooch to follow him and Gwascious to follow Jinx. Snoopy gives a single finger sign that he's going after Kiplinger.

The Xhemal have only three digits on each hand. Though they look like they have three fingers one of them actually pivots around and functions like a thumb. The heel of the hand has an interesting curve and bumps to it, giving these appendages incredible gripping abilities although giving signs with numbers over three make it problematic at best.

Snoopy gives the two sign twice over and points to Jinx who understands that she is going after the son. Guns now at the ready they break with Jinx and Gwascious heading down one hallway to the boys room as Snoopy and Mooch race towards Kiplinger's office.

Snoopy and Mooch turn the corner and outside the office is a guard with a holstered side arm. Snoopy swipes the butt of the rail gun against his face and kicks him through the door into the office. Just then they hear a machine gun and shot gun going off from far away so they open up on the guard who just slammed into a conference room table. The shotgun blast kills him instantly, yes, but the rail gun round has an explosive tip and that blows him to pieces from the waist up. As body parts spray across the conference nook

Snoopy and Mooch burst through the door with guns ready.

Sweeping the room, and seeing only Kiplinger sitting at his desk, Snoopy calls out to Jinx over the tacnet radio which just opened up, "You got the boy? Tell me you got the boy!"

Over the radio Snoopy hears Jinx say, ["K-Four secure."]

Snoopy could kick himself for forgetting protocol and the code for Kiplinger, so he transmits, "K-One secure!"

Ranch Kiplinger, transplant from the wilds of Gamma-Taurus and current Chancellor of the Hyades, suddenly faced with a pair of talking five-hundred pound raptorial monsters, with guns, who just kicked in his door and blew away his guard, asks with infinite calm, coolness and magical tanuki sized balls, "Smashing entrance, gents, but I don't see you on me queue for today."

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Lunch for Kiplinger's wife, Hannah, and their daughter, Maya, would be nice if it wasn't for all the guards everywhere. There used to be only one or two but over the last six months there are now always four or more making a mess of their mother-daughter outings.

Hannah knows something is up but Kip is being tight lipped about it. She knows it's because of his job, and it's an important job, but in hers and Maya's minds it's time for a change.

Coming here to New Brisbane was a kick...at first. Now they both long for home because it's real and sincere unlike Prypiat. The class divisions around this place are just despicable and, depending on where you live in the metropolitan area, you're either a *stumpy*, a suburban middle-class *brisber*, or an inner city low-rent *garbo*.

The continents, away from New Brisbane, have a more down home culture that they can relate too, but they're not allowed to venture out there. On the continents everybody is armed to the teeth because of the sheer variety of predators running amok in the outback with the bander, a smilodon/hyena hybrid, topping that list.

This little outdoor café is the one Hannah and Maya frequent during high-moon shopping expeditions because the food is Thai and on the dark patio side they can lunch without being gawked at.

Maya sips on her tea, "Primus fucken' Hyadum...I can't believe I miss that place. Two years of the Stumps is enough." She looks up at Chernobyl, "Oh, to have real daylight for a change."

Hannah is supportive of Kip, and yet she surprises herself by vocally conceding to her fourteen-year-old daughter's point of view,

"All the poshness gets wearisome, yes. I'd have to agree for once."

Maya looks at her mother with a flat stare, "Poshness? I'd have to say pretentiousness! Gawd, that Pilliod lady is a toss-up if you ask me, but her daughter Sheron is down right trampie!"

Hannah laughs because she knows what she's about to say will push Maya's buttons, "My lil' didgeri, most everyone is a trampie nowadays. Where 'ave you been?"

Maya throws her 'talk to the' hand out, "Uh, uh! I'm planin' for a future, mum, not a ho-rep!"

Hannah smiles big, thinking, *'that's my girl'* as she notices a faint shadow passing over her table.

Usually a reconnaissance team will man the Observation Post, track the targets and constantly feed information back to the mission controllers. Ultimately their job is to ally-ooop the incoming wet-teams towards nailing the mission objective. This is a highly disciplined and critical job that usually results in a big-win cheer by proxy. When all is said and done they pack up and slither off all quiet like...like they were never there. Recon has always had the greatest impact on mission success, but for all the kudos and stroke that comes with the function it provides the most unsatisfying 'sitting on the sidelines' post-mission downer for all the obvious reasons.

Cyzk's people have spent weeks running around the stumps shadowing the Kiplingers yet today, by virtue of where they are following the wife and daughter, they get to grab-and-bag on this one. The wet-team has to support recon for a change.

Because of the shadow Hannah looks up, and then over at the guards who instantly are abuzz touching their ear mics—then suddenly she hears a series of muffled 'poooft-snick' sounds around them. All of the guards drop like sacks of potatoes with a little spritz of mist hanging in the air where their heads were residing.

Hannah feels the hand of a cloaked trooper touch her arm so she pulls back while saying, "Oi now, rack off!"

With a little hiss Hannah and her daughter suddenly collapse in their seats. Two of the squad members throw a cloaking mesh over each one and scoop them up gently and without a sound. Within five seconds they have slipped them over the rail of the café and fly off into the trees of the neighboring park unseen.

Most of those taking lunch on the dark patio did not notice the commotion in this light, and if they did there is always movement somewhere or other to ignore. It took almost a minute before anyone noticed the bodies lying around, and that was caused by a waiter who

found out that blood can be slippery when it pools up.

In the hold of the slick they strap Hannah and Maya in. Now uncloaked one of the troopers touch each of them on the arm with a short cylindrical pressure-syringe. With a hiss they start to come too.

As they blink, trying to focus, the XO radios while the ship starts to lift off, "K-Two and K-Three secure and in transit."

Two other troopers put oxygen type masks over their mouth and nose, where Hannah promptly brushes hers off and yells with crazy eyes and a surprisingly vicious snarl, "Fucken' hell!"

Cyzk's XO holds the syringe for Hannah to see, "You put that on your face and breath deep until I say your done or I'm gonna put you out and shove it up your ass! Got me, sis? It's your choice."

Hannah, looking at what she sees as the bitch XO in the eye, yanks on the locked five-point straps. The XO holds out the syringe as a threat so Hannah takes the mask and puts it on.

When Hannah takes a deep breath the XO smiles, "Yo, sister, that's better! Now if we can fix that attitude of yours."

Maya is much more like her father and makes an obvious observation, "Ah, we're being abducted, hello?"

The XO wags the syringe at her, "*Au contraire*, you are being rescued is what. So, shut up and breathe."

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Kiplinger and his son, Dylan, are strapped in and just finished breathing the vapor in the masks which is quickly destroying all the neuronet and Co-op nanoids in their bodies and replacing them with chipsets from the Annex. With this they are truly safe now.

As a trooper takes the masks, Jacob steps up and says, "Okay, Kip, the ship with your wife and daughter has just jumped. We're about fifteen minutes behind 'em."

Kiplinger nods, "I wanna thank ya, mate."

Jacob thumbs towards the Xhemal holding onto the racking surrounding them, "Don't thank me, thank them."

Kiplinger, one of the toughest and hardest blokes in the Hyades, is teary-eyes as he calls out, "I wanna thank you all. All-ya'll are me boomer-mates for life."

With that Jinx speaks up, "What about us girls?"

"Sheilas!" Kiplinger smiles, "You be me roo-mates!"

Jacob laughs, "On that, the report from the other ship says that your Hannah is a little on the feisty side. A bit of a spitfire."

"Blimey! Ya think?"

"From what I hear she reminds me of my ex."

"They're all superfund in the head!" Kiplinger then covers the side of his mouth to deflect what he's about to say from Dylan's ears, "She was a kangy at me mates buck-night. Couldn't pass on that one, now could I? Stuck with 'er ever since."

"At least you don't work for yours." Kiplinger gives him a curious look so Jacob adds, "Ramirez! She's my ex!"

Kiplinger is genuinely surprised, "Bloody hell!"

Cyzk steps up and says, "Okay, Marshal, here's the feed..."

With Cyzk starting to broadcast Jacob puts his hands up and nods to indicate he is stepping away.

Jacob maneuvers around the racking and finds Snoopy sitting on the deck by himself, towards the front of the hold, in deep thought. Normally one would not bother someone like this in post-mission reflection mode, but this was the Xhemal's first time out.

Jacob leans against the wall and then slides down beside him, while keeping respectfully quiet.

Snoopy clears his throat, "You ran the file didn't you."

Jacob just says, "Yep."

"So, waddya think? How'd we do?"

Jacob sighs, "You did good, Snoop. Did good."

"No, really, I need you to be honest."

"No sugar coating?"

Snoopy nods, "I can take it."

"Honestly?" Jacob takes a few seconds to measure what he should say, then thinks, fuck it, "It was a god damned gib fest, Snoop! I have never seen anything like it before. Your team was spot on target! You guys are naturals."

Snoopy asks, "Like you?"

Jacob realizes there was something dark in Snoopy's question, "You didn't care much for it."

Snoopy declares, "I'm not you."

Jacob offers some insight, "I don't care much for it ether."

"Then why do you do it?"

"It has to be done."

"Does it get easier with time?"

"Nope." Jacob shakes his head, "It never does."

Snoopy thinks about it, "Is Kiplinger worth the lives we took?"

"Thousands more, but most people we kill are innocent so that makes it problematic at best."

Snoopy is a little puzzled, "Are you suggesting those guards were innocent? Confuse the fuck outta me!"

"Ya, they were!" Jacob looks over at Snoopy, "They were doing a job, like you were doing your job. Like most everyone who dies in this line of work are just doing a job, and that's fucked up when you think about it. Looking at them as guilty is the lie we tell ourselves to make this job easier to do. Live with the lie...or be honest with yourself."

When Snoopy looks up, Jacob gives him a sobering piece of self-realization, "Innocence? I've done lost that privilege long ago."

Snoopy quietly says, "Sorry."

"Don't be." After some thought Jacob adds, "This ain't hunting, Snoop. The killing you guys do to survive on Second Hand is a noble effort where this is...not so noble."

"You mean necessary."

"Sometimes I wonder but...I continue to do it."

"Because it's necessary."

"Yup."

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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!"

Harcourt, 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 tases Hartcourt where he stood. They strap his limp body to the gurney and off they go.

The beer-run out of One-Klick New York feigned a diplomatic pick up at the hotel, which is not uncommon, and when the clearance was granted the Razorback shot up into the sky for Electra-4.

Now after 437.1 light years, 1 hour, 5 minutes and just a few unaccounted for seconds later it is now 9:03 pm New York time, but 33:40 mst local time here on Sapphire as Peter and Shane roll the gurney with Hartcourt on it into *the office* at the top of the spike.

Harcourt, still strapped to the gurney, is sitting there with his arms crossed and fuming mad as hell. Where Kiplinger has an honest tough exterior, Hartcourt's iron-clad toughness is internalized and well hidden from view. Where Kiplinger embraces and nurtures his outback roots, Hartcourt has eliminated most traces of his accent from an upbringing which he has always thought of as rural, and speaks with a slight American English enunciation – East Coast style.

After over sixty years in public life, Hartcourt has held pretty much every office and ambassadorship that meant anything except holding the reins of power as Chancellor itself—which he views as a dead-stick career ending job. Over the decades he's been able to bounce from administration to administration making himself the nebulous seat of power behind the façade of power which has been pretty much a revolving door for the last eighteen years.

Too many peace lovers had to be reeducated or expunged. Too many, like Kip, have lost sight of the prize and have overstepped their bounds. Now, as Privy Council, he can slap the wonks around and pull the strings he wants pulled and right out in the open while doing so, and with Security Services in his pocket who's got the brass in their shorts to cock-block him? Those who don't know Boxter and see him scurrying around the halls of power view him with rose-tinted disdain. Those who know him, truly know him, believe he's a son of perdition and some would claim he is the very embodiment of Satan himself. That being said what's strange to those people is that his family genuinely loves him for what they see as a good man.

Right now Hartcourt is hopping mad but you can't read it in his face. He may be in the midst of a rage-fit but you won't hear his voice rise a smidge in volume or octave. It's his eyes that give away what he's feeling and if those eyes were lasers then Maria, sitting at the desk in *the office*, would be sliced and diced into quivering, bloody and smoldering chunks.

Maria laughs, "Hey, Palpatine, glad you could make it!"

Harcourt dead pans, "You had your fun."

Maria thinks for a second, "No, not yet, but I will."

Peter asks, "Let him up?"

Maria gestures towards them, "Simon says!"

Hartcourt replies, "Thank you."

As McElroy unbuckles him Maria smiles, "Hone-Onna, my god, Box, that's gotta set you back a fuck-ton of scratch for her and her mini-me. You know, if you've been a bad-boy, hell, drop me a line and I can come stomp your shit for free!"

Hartcourt was getting off the gurney and stops for a second thinking about what Maria just proposed in jest, and she is a right beautiful sprite of a woman to drink in, so he jests back with a little smirk, "Something to think about."

Maria wags a finger at him, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth I always say."

He looks around and the windows to the CIC are blacked out, so he adds, "I'll put you on my speed dial." He then sits on the side chair in front of Maria and asks, "So, what are we doing here?"

"Right now, we're waiting."

"Will it take long?"

"No! Just a few, and we'll get ya back to your shinju-taka-ushiro thang! Leave it to the Japs to make an art out of misery."

"Small talk then." Hartcourt shrugs, "How's Bob?"

"About as good as can be expected. His new job sucks."

"I hear the FIS is a bit of a cluster-fuck."

"Ya, but it's coming together."

"And if it wasn't for Bob?"

Maria's snorts with wide eyes, "You're right about that!"

"Haven't seen you since the funeral. How are you?"

"Good. You know, Box, I really dug the eulogy you gave for Chancellor Caffyn. It was genuinely beautiful I might add. You need to come say words over my dumb-ass when I take a dirt nap."

Hartcourt smiles at that thought, "Looking forward to it."

"I bet you are." Maria then gives a little laugh, "How many memorials for chancellors have you officiated, four? Five?"

Hartcourt puts up seven fingers so Maria gives a low whistle and says, "You know, sitting in the crowd for Caffyn and I could feel the love the people had for you. It was amazing."

"Really."

"One comment stood out amongst all the others because it got the most laughs. *Skeerd* laughs, but laughs."

"Now I'm curious."

"They said, oh, you're gonna love this." Maria clears her throat for comic timing and continues, "They nodded in your general direction and said with a (sigh) always a pall bearer never a corpse."

"Ya don't say." Hartcourt is amused by that, but he has to hide it, "So, who had the stones to express themselves?"

"Ah, it was..." Maria taps her chin in mock contemplation, then jabs that finger towards him, "Oh ya, it was Tillsdale!"

"So, the rat bastard has a backbone after all."

"Ya know, five years ago I tried so hard to connect all you'z guys to that geisha hut thing and I couldn't make any of it stick to him or you, and ya know what I found out about you?"

"Those pervs? They deserved what they got!"

"That's the point! I couldn't find the dots! You have a streak of morality and that surprised the fuck outta me. Box, you are all about murder and mayhem, and wanton destruction, and more murder on top of motherfucken' murder! Christ, dude, you're a God-damned Xiaolin master at evil shit, but you know where to draw the line and I can respect that!" Maria gestures to both her and Hartcourt, "If we weren't on opposite sides of this equation I'd take to my knee and beg to be your apprentice, honest-injun! But, as it is, I'm here in this capacity to put the fuck to your day."

"If I'm such a bother why not just kill me?"

"Why?" Maria feigns confusion for effect, "Why in the hell would I off you when you're so predictable!"

Harcourt is confused for real, "That's odd, I've spent my entire career *not* being predictable!"

Maria, with perfect comic timing, thrusts a finger at Hartcourt and cries out, "Exactly!" Hartcourt's eyes almost bug out when she says that, but his cold exterior does well retaining them as Maria elaborates, "You are a web of possibilities! You're not a channel of regimentation like most politicians are. When your people jumped the gun six months ago...wow! I did *not* expect that!"

Maria knew it was him and pinning it on his underlings, the reaction deferring the stupid choice he made to them, didn't show on his face, or his eyes, but the redirection did throw him off and that showed up in Aussie speak, "That was a bit of a flop about, screwing the roo and all but, understand, I am coming after you."

"I expect no less! In fact, I challenge you to t-bone me."

Hartcourt states, "You're throwing the gauntlet down."

"Box, baby, I don't got all day!" Maria notices that the link up she was waiting for was in the queue so she grins, "Get your lil' sith brain cookin' up a plan and lets do this."

Hartcourt nods, "Challenge accepted."

"Awesome!" Maria then hits a button and calls out, "Deputy Marshal, Cyzk, I have Boxtter Hartcourt here with me. What's the story?"

["Marshal Ramirez, the mission went off without a hitch. We have closed the area of operation and are Echo-Three lite."]

"That's great to hear." There was genuine relief in Maria but she continues to show the infinite confidence necessary for the moment, "Would you be so kind as to inform Mr Hartcourt who you have with you?"

["With us is one, Ranch Kiplinger and his son Dylan."]

Without flinching, Hartcourt states, "That's impossible."

Maria looks at him, "Sure about that?"

Hartcourt's eyes stab at Maria, "Positively."

Maria asks Cyzk, "Hannah and Maya, how are they?"

["They are on another ship and we'll meet up with them at the rendezvous in about an hour."]

"How's Mrs. Kiplinger taking all this?"

["The report is that she's got colorful language skills."]

Maria gives an amused smile, "That's to be expected."

Hartcourt clears his throat, "Yabbering on a radio is not evidence of a successful mission, Ramirez."

Maria agrees, "You're right!" Then to Cyzk, "Deputy Marshal, can you give us some video of Ranch and Dylan?"

["Give me a second, Marshal."] After a not so pregnant pause the screen beside Maria's desk comes alive with the video of the interior of the drop ship, ["Okay, Marshal, here's the feed."]

With the video fuzzing out and popping back into focus every ten seconds or so Hartcourt and Maria see Ranch Kiplinger and Dylan strapped in the racking and each with a bottled water in hand.

Kiplinger gives a cheer towards the camera on Cyzk's helmet, ["Hey ho, Boxy! Bet you're mad as a cut snake!"]

Maria cuts the audio and in silence they see Kiplinger continue to talk and laugh and tussle the hair of his son.

After a few long seconds of watching the feed Hartcourt asks a single word question, "How?"

Maria opens up the audio and asks, "Cyzk, pan around so we can see the breach team."

The camera pans onto three of the Xhemal who are clinging to the racking. With happy chirps and whistles they wave to the camera then Maria cuts the audio off again.

A hurricane of rippin-pissed rages around Hartcourt, but like the eye of the storm you don't see it in him except for the little flair of his nose and barely audible deep breath he takes. The superbly executed one-upmanship demonstrated by Marshal, Maria Ramirez and her people was so wonderfully played that, in spite of the anger he fights to control, in Hartcourt's mind it was worth the humiliation of being abducted and dragged out here like this.

Hartcourt's hands rise and he gives a lite round of applause, "I have to hand it to you, Marshal. Bravo! I've done this very thing to so many people that to have it pulled on me like this is...humbling. My congratulations are in order."

"Well, Box, I don't expect it to make you feel normal or human. You're way past that."

"You mean, past redemption?"

Maria thinks about that with a grunt, then, "We weren't going to let you kill this one. Kip is a good man but, Jesus, dude, you were planning to whack his entire family too!" Maria then laughs, "Now, I can understand Hannah! As hot as she is she's a psycho when she is on a tear, but the kids?"

"Little pawns." Hartcourt shrugs with a descending register in his voice, then nods towards Maria, "We *will* find them you know."

"Oh, really?" Maria thumbs at the screen, "We go through all this just to have your minions hunt him down, just like that?" Maria leans forward slightly, "Never in a million years will you be able to find them where I'm gonna put 'em."

"That another challenge? If so I am up for it."

"Thought you would be, and then I asked myself what would Boxxy do? If you were gonna play me how would you go about it? And like a light bulb *popped* over my head, there it was!"

Maria tosses a file across to Hartcourt who opens it up and after a few seconds of scrutinizing it he looks up, "What's this?"

Maria points to the file, "That's what you'll be looking for. That's Kip's future address on Sapphire, across the street from me I might add, his new name, job...hell, everything!"

Hartcourt eyes scowl with confusion, "I don't get it."

"Before you got here Kip had a choice, we either put him and his family on ice, or we do this! We laid it out and he chose this!"

"This makes no sense?"

"No? Well, ya, let me 'splain!" Maria sits back, "On every one of the planets in the Hyades we have an assortment of drones hidden, hundreds of them, standing by to do our bidding which we have never really used because we've had no use for them. It's more like one of those just in case if we ever needed them it's better to have them there than not have them kinda thing, ya know?"

"Get to the point."

"You're gonna love this because it's so you..." Maria sits up and drives the point home, "You know how we have Fifty-Two all buttoned up here? Well, it goes both ways. Your family, your whole family. Let's review, your children, your grandchildren, your great grandchildren, their uncles, aunts, your dog—everyone!" Maria jabs her finger into the table, "They're all being tracked by time-stamp every minute of every day and those combat drones are keeping tabs on all one-hundred and eighty-three of them." Maria sits back, "If Kip gets a hang-nail, if Hannah gets so much as a split end even, those fuckin' machines are going to launch."

"That's not your style."

"No, you're right. It's not, but it is what Kip chose to do to protect his family because you were playing that game with him. So in like, your family gets the Sword of Damocles treatment and, you know what the really big relief I feel is? It's outta my hands now!"

"You're not in the loop."

Maria notices the red light flashing for her so she adds, "Nope, an' don't you forget that, *pandejo!*" She hits the button and asks Cyzk, "You guys ready for the shot?"

["Affirmative, Marshal. Twenty seconds."]

The screen switches from inside the drop ship interior to the outside of the ship. About a kilometer away from them, and trailing at five o'clock, is the Chancellor's space plane. Over the speaker they hear Kiplinger radio to the Flight Director Operations center.

["FIDO, this is Kiplinger, on H-One, we're initializing orbital insertion A.G.P. in fifteen seconds."]

["We copy. Go for A.G.P., H-One"]

On the screen they see the orbiter start to use the directional gravity fields to maneuver the space plane towards a correct orbital path. As it begins to drift away the plasma cannon on the side of the Warthog flips open and a plasma node, without the plasma, is fired into the space plane smashing into the latter half thus shattering the cargo bay and ripping a wing off.

Kiplinger's voice is a bit frantic, ["Mayday! Mayday! H-One has been hit by space debris. Aft section is blown to...ah, fuck all!"]

The cabin blows out throwing the wreckage into a crazy twirl, and with that Maria gives a mock fright, "Oh, the humanity!"

The craft was still in a suborbital trajectory and immediately starts back towards the planet in a death spiral. It would take over thirty minutes for a rescue mission to reach them but, as it is, the ship will hit the atmosphere and start burning up inside twelve minutes.

The FIDO continues to call out to H1 with no response.

"Thank you, Cyzk. We're done here."

["Over and out, Marshal."]

The video and audio transmissions are cut and Hartcourt just sits there as Maria advises him, "So, with that telemetry you had your little accident after all. Ah, well, another memorial service."

Harcourt has been t-boned yet again by Maria, "You're gonna keep them on ice indefinitely I take it."

"On the down-low. In plain sight. I got a million of 'em!"

"We *won't* be hearing from them...right?"

"You just saw them die! That isn't enough?" Maria thinks about it for a sec, "Ya know, Box, in this job I had to learn how to let go, but this is where you gotta take it from me and let it go. Let it slide. Let it be! With that shit burning up you are not even going to find a scorched chromosome out of the debris."

Harcourt again gives another lite round of courtesy applause, "Touché, Ramirez, touché."

Maria smiles, "Does this mean Bob and I are *not* going to get an invite to this funeral?"

"Try holding your breath. Blue would suit you well."

Maria motions for Peter and McElroy to take him back, "Well, it's been great and all but these two gentlemen need to get ya back to New York. I have another pressing engagement. Busy-busy!"

Peter says, "Sir, we can have you there by ten-twenty."

As Hartcourt stands Maria laughs, "Oh ya! Speaking of black and blue, we paid Hone off and tipped her very well, so if you're still in the mood I'm sure she'll give you our money's worth. Said she'd be waiting to hear from you. Don't try to top her or you'll be in deep yoghurt, dude."

Hartcourt asks, "That sage advice?"

Maria ponders while she stands, "Academically, if I were into that sort of thing? I'd have to say I'd be a frog-tied kinda babe."

Hartcourt thinks about it and nods, "One never knows."

Maria steps past him and at the door to the CIC she turns to offer one last dig just for giggles, "You know what I saw in your face tonight, now that we've had our little fun?"

Hartcourt shakes his head *no* wondering what's going to puke out of Maria's mouth next, so she says, "Outta you I see Bugs Bunny shaking his fist and declare: *of course you realize this means war!* Now, doesn't that provide clarity to these proceedings or what?"

Insult upon injury galore but this one was priceless, so much so that Hartcourt actually laughs, "That it does."

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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

serious case of red-eye fatigue, and the jogging in place and hopping up and down is not helping one bit. She has nanoids in her that have never been used that can give her a 'snap out of it' jolt but she has always taken the old school coffee or energy drink path. Those have negative consequences impacting her ability to sleep later so, for the first time ever, she flips the mental *jolt switch* and boom! Like chomping into a capsule of buzzkill a tsunami races from the chest outwards and her fatigue is washed away—just like that.

Maria blinks her eyes wondering how she's going to pay for that little miracle later. There is a sleep aid, called the *K.O. switch*, that she's going to have a go with later. Now she has no choice because things are coming to a head and her personal techno phobias will have to take a back seat for once.

At the quarters set up for Kiplinger and his family Maya opens the door and says, "I have no idea who you are, lady, but you seem bloody important. Come on in!"

Maya walks over to the other side of the room and leans through the doorway, "Oi, poppers, someone here for ya."

Kiplinger and Hannah step out from behind Maya and he grins big, "Hannah and Maya, I would like you to meet my arch enemy, nemesis and all around pain in my arse, Marshal, Maria Ramirez."

Hannah is still trying to wrap her brain around what's going on, "Thank you? I don't know what else to say, Marshal."

Maria laughs, "Good enough for me, but you sure knew what to say to my people earlier."

Sheepishly, Hannah apologizes, "Sorry 'bout that."

Maria takes Hannah's hand and gives it a shake, "No biggie! That was expected. I understand Marshal Graves told you that we already have you set up with a home, in my neighborhood in fact, and reserve funds with more than enough to pick out your own furnishings and transportation. You'll have everything you need on New Sydney. The schools are topper than notch, as you Aussies say, and, Kip, you can start your new job in about...how about March?"

Hannah is a little amazed, "Thank you, I guess, but why?"

"Why not?" Maria shrugs, "We got tired of them knocking off good people. Especially those tryin' to make a difference."

Kiplinger says, "We really appreciate all this, Marshal."

"Do what you can to help Bob un-fuck the FIS. That's all I ask. Also, from now on, since we're gonna be neighbors it's Ramirez or maybe Maria? *Hey you* works for me too!" Maria puts her hand out

to shake his, "That about makes us even-Steven, 'kay Ranch!"

"Fuck that, come here you!" Kiplinger swats Maria's hand out of the way and he yanks her in to give her a big hug.

As Kiplinger pulls back, with watery eyes, Hannah, with tears pouring down her face, pulls in to Hug Maria while saying, "Thank you. For my family, thank you."

From the doorway Maya frowns and asks, "Hartcourt, he was really gonna ghost us? All of us!"

Kiplinger says, "That he was, dearie."

"Well that seppo-speakin' wanker!"

Maria looks at her, "Maya, if you only knew."

Kiplinger says, "You'll have to tell me what transpired. To have been a fly on that wall, aye!"

"Okay guys, we're gonna have a barbeque tomorrow in the late afternoon with the breach and recon teams and everyone at a planet called Second Hand. Bob and Michal Pitney will be there."

"Is that that prison planet of yours?"

"Not exactly, yes, but when you see it you'll love it." Maria then says, "Okay, you're all stocked up and buttoned up here so let me run and we'll touch base 'round noonish. Sound like a plan?"

All nod heads so Kiplinger walks Maria to the door and asks, "What is this place? Didn't see it from the outside but I believe that it's bigger than your capital ships."

"We still enemies?"

"As of 12:37 today, my time, I'd have to say we're now the most chummiest of chums. Hell, I can trust you with me life!"

"Which means I can now trust you with mine."

"Like a shag on the rocks!"

Maria believes him, "Remember the Death Star?"

"Which one, from the original or the reboot?"

Maria thinks about it, "Oh, well, I do like 'em both but the reboot was the one I was going after."

"I love them flying the trench in that one. It was a ripper how they flew sideways to shoot the vent hole under that awning being in space and all. Bloody good entertainment."

"Ya, and Luke and Anikan were not whiny pussies."

Kiplinger laughs, "Daresay you be right!"

Maria nods, "Well, ours are dinky by comparison. Just under seven kilometers wide and split in the middle. To to give you an idea what they look like they've been called Jehovah's Yo-yo."

"Still, that's bonkers!" Kiplinger thinks about it and it sinks in, "They, plural?"

"That's for the first two. The other three are ten clicks wide."

"We never knew about 'em!"

Maria corrects him, "Ah, no, you did. Well, your Command and Control kept it to themselves, and your moles were instructed never to report on them except as stationary assets. They didn't want an arms race over shit that would break the bank and they couldn't use." Before Ranch could ask Maria adds, "See, for weapons delivery they're a little on the excessive side, way-way overpowered, but as a base of operations they are fantastic being all mobile and shit."

"Which is why we never could find them." Maria nods yes so, Ranch asks somewhat excited, "Planet killing lasers!?"

"You know the flail guns, the plasma pulse cannons some of our troopers have? Well, for the two littler ones that's what they got except that they're huge!" Maria wags a finger up for emphases, "And I have to say those cannons could very well be situationally useful, but for the other three I'm not so sure about."

"Don't hold back now. I'm all a twitter!"

"Gamma lasers like, über gamma-ray-burst gamma lasers!" His eyes bug out and Maria adds, "We use M type stars and larger as a backstop when we do a test shot. First time out we hit a brown dwarf and that was dumb! Apparently it did a fusion pulse and puffed up quite a bit. Hours later it belched a solar flare—on a fucken' brown dwarf! Seven months after that it had a convection flash over event that lasted a week, so..." Maria's eyes roll in feigned embarrassment, "We'll not be doing that again!"

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Deep in the bowls of the Carrie Nation everyone has been waiting for Maria to show. The wet and recon teams were tuckered out so they took off early after only one beer leaving Jacob, Cyzk, Kiel and the four Xhemal sitting around nursing their second can.

The cargo holds at these levels of a battle station are rarely frequented by active combat troops. Only robots and retreads in the geezer brigade ever come down here so why they are is a mystery to

all except for Jacob—and he's not talking just yet. The ambiance of this place is like a major industrial distribution center that is currently off-hours with the lorries, loaders and heavy lifters battened down tight. It's kind of spooky with all the dim lighting and the faint but lingering aromas of oils, solvents and the burnt-metal smell of space setting the tone. Eerie and cool all in the same breath.

Nobody is supposed to have open containers of alcohol anywhere on the ship except for the wet deck or the living quarters, but Jacob is at a high enough level that, with the right clearances, he's been able to do pretty much anything he pleases. This was a special occasion so Marshal Yoon, the current commander of the Carrie Nation, gave her blessing to Jacob's rather odd request because she'll be comin' around with Maria when she comes.

Marshal, Nancy Yoon, the field marshal from the Iron Man (SA14) who took over for Maria when she took over for Bob, is usually agreeable to whatever Jacob wants. In fact one of the conditions of her assuming command of the Carrie Nation and the platforms under it was that Jacob and the Iron Maiden (SA36) were to continue to answer directly to Maria thereby taking Yoon out of that loop. Yoon didn't want the headache dealing with Jacob. The Iron Maiden continues to supply, refit and chill out at Hippo-1 but that's about it. Unorthodox, yes, but it was the best commander Maria could finagle into the job and in turn that was Yoon splitting her hand against Maria's soft-17. In Maria's mind it's just as well because it's better to deal with Jacob's shit directly than having to endlessly channel back and forth through Yoon. Every one of the battle platform commanders, including Yoon, wanted Jacob to take over for Maria but she needs him where he is for what's comin' over the horizon when it comes.

While waiting for Maria, Jacob has spent the better part of a can of beer telling the Xhemal the story of *The Little Cartel That Could*.

Where to begin?

Jacob glanced over how the Hyades was originally set up as a series of cooperatives because by the end of the 21st Century the general sentiment around town was that corporations were inherently evil, and that the 'bigger the badder' truism was a tightly held belief by most lil'folk. Looking back at what happened in the Hyades, and its many disperit cooperatives, the age-old adage 'nature finds a way' has since become a universal axiom and social network meme—just swap out the first word in that line with your noun or trending irony.

The corporations discovered various loopholes and used their body of shareholders to buy out claims and stake-holdings through brokers or proxy agents. Those shareholders then contracted out the management of said claims and stake-holdings back to an affiliate of

the parent corporation indefinitely. Near the end of the 22nd Century the very people everybody wanted to keep out of the Hyades ended up controlling every bit of it—lock, stock and barrel. By then the now consolidated Steel Chain Cooperative had such immense power that the remaining private claims and stakes were misappropriated through very obscure ‘salvage and recovery’ clauses that were buried in the fine print of the original Co-op agreements, or they were outright hijacked through eminent domain. Now that the SCC owns and/or manages everything in the Hyades, and with the finest of accounting juggling-acts (i.e. corporate chicanery as is the norm) they end up sitting on record holdings while showing little to no profit, and paying virtually next to nothing in dividends to the original shareholders and what few average-Joe claimholders that remain.

Jacob then brushed over the thirty odd years of insurrection, violence and United Nations compulsory recognition of the all-volunteer Military Alliance Deputation which intervened in the Hyades as the standing representative of the UN-DPKO to enforce the resolutions voted in on behalf of the local jurisdictions who are in fact slave to the SCC itself. (breathe) In short, the United Nations was now mandated to support the very entities it once fought to deny.

Obviously, for this story, those cans they were nipping away at were the Rapture Red Ale tall-boys.

Jacob notices Maria and Yoon stepping up from the shadows so he finishes with, “Ya know, guys, out here they saw the shit going on in the Hyades and they knew what was comin’. Marshal Ramirez can expand on the details, but the short story is they brokered a deal that revoked mining patents that were mothballed, so when the Co-op found out all their claims outside of the Hyades were now void they about had the shittiest-hemorrhage on record!”

Jinx concludes, “So, that’s what started the fight.”

Maria picks this up, “There’s more to it. The rallying cry for the Pleiades was *you claim it you work it*. The U.N. deal also blocked any future proxy acquisitions, co-op mergers, and all third party management. Basically, the way it was supposed to be in the first place. The best an investor could do now is throw money at a claim and hope for the best. Anymore, nobody outside the local co-op is allowed to control shit, so that shit went tits-up from there.”

Snoopy shakes his head, “This is all about money?”

Jacob puts his hands out like a scales, “No, it’s about the Hyades with wealth-subjugation versus the wealth-participation of the Pleiades. Over there is the worst form of corporatization where the many produce wealth for the few. Here, they have a labor and capital participation model where all involved are enriched.”

Snoopy laughs, "Then it's about the money!"

Maria laughs too, "I wish it were that simple, Snoop. There is a lot of reasons why and money is least of it."

As Snoopy nods, Jinx asks, "Weren't we part of that M.A.D. group at one time?"

Jacob nods, "Ya, originally, but we were put out here with a mandate to protect the frontier...so we did just that."

Cyzk laughs as he hands both Maria and Yoon a beer he opened for them, "You bet, we took the side they did not expect!"

Kiel adds, "My, weren't they surprised."

Maria takes a swig of her beer and says, "I want to thank you Mooch, Gwascious, Jinx, Snoop...you guys did a fantastic job." She then gestures to Cyzk and Kiel, "Kacper and Michelle, you and your people were spot-on as always."

She then looks at Jacob, "And, I got to hand it to you, Jake, you were right. Hartcourt is not evil per se but driven, and so much so I think he actually got a stiffy being played like that."

Jacob laughs then asks, "Told ya he would. Did he believe you about the drones?"

"Yes, he did."

"Have they been released to Kip?"

"Last chance to call this off. All I have to do now is to throw the switch and it'll be hot."

"Go ahead and throw it, Tiger."

There was a short silence where, without fanfare, the drones in the Hyades are switched over to the biometric N2 readings from Ranch Kiplinger's family. The failsafe is slave to Jessica, and that is the logical choice, but this choice still makes Maria uneasy because Jessica is still a bit on the young side. Maria has more to add to her plate but this thing is a one shot deal that should never arise.

Maria asks Kiel, "How long did it take to chill Hannah?"

Kiel shakes her head, "It took Chancellor Kiplinger about five or six minutes to calm her down before they could unstrap her."

Cyzk adds, "She still lunged at 'im when they let her go. I thought she was going to snatch Kiplinger's face from his skull."

Maria grunts, "Ya, I'll bet."

After a few seconds of awkward silence Jacob asks, "You guys wanna know why we're sitting down here?"

Kiel volunteers, "It goes without saying that everybody has been wondering about that."

Yoon speaks up, "I'm curious."

Jacob starts gesturing to everyone he mentions in sequence, "Why we're here, okay, Nancy, this is your ship. Kasper, you know physics and studied the outcomes at Nu Ara at length. Michelle, you know everything there is to know about Razorbacks. Slicks, guns, large or small you know it all."

Maria looks over at Yoon, "Curiouser and curiouser."

Jacob asks, "Kasper, what happened to Nu Ara after the shot. Can you give our feathered brothers and sisters here the four-one-one after that total fuck up of mine."

All four of the Xhemal look at each other and Gwascious speaks up, "That was you?"

"Ya, that was my-bad."

Cyzk looks over at the four Xhemal, "What happened? Science fuckin' fiction is what happened. Nu Ara is what Mars used to be. It also lost its magnetic field and was quickly losing both water and atmosphere. The crust and mantle were thick and cold, so when the spider hit it burned fifteen percent of the surface and burrowed all the way to the core which popped out three weeks after the shot. Right now it's a floating shell of what used to be a planet and they're already starting to mine the core."

Jacob asks, "For argument's sake, what would have been necessary to totally destroy it?"

Cyzk shrugs, "Three, maybe four times the mass of a spider which is a half-ton at one-gravity. Say about four times that mass would have melted the crust and turned the planet inside out."

Jacob then asks, "How about if twice that mass hit?"

Cyzk, not expecting that question, blinks his eyes, "Well, four tons, that would result in...a massive spray of planetary material, specifically the core, ejecting out the other side. It goes without saying that the rest of the planet would be blown out like a concentric ring. It would be pretty damned spectacular I might add. Hell, I'd want front row seats!"

Kiel asks, "So, I'm supposed to take a Razor and punch it into a planet on a forced jump? Any chimp can do that! And that's a whole lot more tonnage than a couple of spiders."

Jacob's head sags and he says, "Ya, I know. What I'm thinking about is gonna require two ninety-eights synched together."

Yoon pipes up, "That's a lot of mass. What do you propose we hit with that?"

Cyzk has been thinking about it, "If you're considering a gas giant or a brown dwarf then you'd be right on the money."

Jacob shakes his head, "Still, not enough mass."

Everybody looks at each other wondering if what they heard was right, with Kiel asking, "Okay, then what is it you want to hit exactly?"

Jacob asks Yoon, and she knows perfectly well what he is asking about, "We still don't have a use for it, right?"

Yoon smiles, "No, it's all yours, Jacob. Put it to good use!"

Confused, Kiel asks, "Put what to good use?"

Jacob's hands spin in the air and he thrusts them towards a dark shadowed area by the elevators. Just then that dark area lights up showing a gigantic black rock, a diamond the size of a house, cradled in that space with clamps coming from all directions.

Maria takes a step forward and whistles real low, while Kiel asks, "Barn Diamond? You want to weaponize Barn Diamond?"

Jacob says, "A little spit and duct tape, string a few coat hangers between two ninety-eights and there ya have it!"

Cyzk asks, "Isn't this a wee bit overkill?"

Jacob replies, "Depends on what you're hitting."

Maria looks at the rock, "This isn't the weapon is it?"

"That's right. What you're hitting is the weapon."

Maria has stepped up to the diamond suspended in huge cradles from floor and ceiling and reaches up to touch it, "This is very troglodyte of you, Jacob."

"Why, thank you!"

While stroking the rock, Maria looks back at Jacob, "Polaris, Abbie-Baby, right?"

He touches his nose with a smile.

Maria asks, "The nova flash will hit them in how long?"

"A little over thirteen and a half days. The ejecta will be moving at a pretty good clip and that will take another nine weeks."

Maria looks back at the rock, "This is so nukin futs."

Snoopy asks, "How many is this thing supposed to kill?"

Jacob thinks about it for a few seconds and goes *pop* with his mouth while putting out his hand showing zero, followed by him asking Snoopy, "Want to manage this one?"

Snoopy nods his head big, "Ya, I want!"

Maria glances over at Snoopy, "Then this is your project. Continue to make us proud, Snoop."

Jacob adds, "Work with Kacper and Michelle on this. If you can I'd like the mission profile, preliminary design and early sim model in about four months. Can do?"

Snoopy goes, "Fuck ya!"

Maria adds, "We have eight more of these rocks on the other stations. I'd like to have plans and sims for them added to that?"

Jacob corrects his time line, "Make that six months."

Snoopy responds with bright-eyed gung-ho, "Can do!"

"We'll just build this one, though." Maria pats Barn Diamond, "And from here on out we'll call it, Terrence."

Jacob looks at Kiel, "Michelle, I hear Jinx and Gwascious both would like to fly guns. Wanna take them under your wing?"

Kiel smiles, "Never thought you'd ask." She looks at Jinx and Gwascious, "Okay, girls, ready to blow shit up?"

The two nod yes while they chirp and whistle with joy.

Maria looks at Mooch and goes, "And while we're at it, Mooch, my little brainiac. Have I got a job for you."

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LCTN: SOL-3, MANHATTAN, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.997au from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-11-THURSDAY
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.

It was supposed to be a set-piece stand-off where they just sat around waiting for nobody to do anything stupid, but stupid prevailed just the same. The Annex won that round but that was a victory everyone could have done without. Griego got this assignment because he was born and raised in New York so he and Shane McElroy get the cushy burden of spending the next couple of months wining and dining the Xhemal as they settle in while local thugs, all ex NYPD, are hired to take over for the squads rotating in and out from Griego's company.

At Regan National they are met by Yaqub Ahmed Mofid, the US Ambassador to the UN, and an entourage of Secret Service agents from the White House. It was Caesar's request that they dispense with the color guard formalities that usually come with greeting senior dignitaries and heads of state because he is there specifically to address the UN General Assembly and yet, in a strange way, he's become the de facto representative leader of the Xhemal as well as ambassador to the US government—or any government who so asks.

Oh-so many rolls to play and Caesar's digging every bit of it!

When it comes to security details any impromptu stops or side quests by the client(s) create a whole slew of security problems. There are many negatives to sudden breaks from the itinerary, but on the positive side, since it is unplanned, there is a nonexistent chance of anyone lying in wait. That just leaves random crazies to worry about.

While driving to the White House Caesar asks to stop when he sees the Lincoln memorial. Of all the Earth's leaders from the past he admires this one over all. With Caesar and Sheila standing in front of the statue of the seated president he silently contemplates the rotten job he had to do and how he was hated for doing it. Video of this poignant moment, them coming to pay their respects while surrounded by a dozen guards, hit the neuronet and went viral within hours.

He talked to Sheila about what the words meant on the wall to the left of the statute, and how it led this nation towards a new but very rocky future. He then mentioned the now obscure Copper Union Address, something almost nobody remembers anymore, and how it framed the future Lincoln faced with an almost eerie prescience.

On the way back to the limo Caesar looks out across the Potomac and sees the twenty-meter tall statute to the long revered President, Claudia Willoughby. As if in tribute to Themis, only hotter, she has her arms outstretched while looking towards the heavens. Caesar admired her power to forge peace out of the chaos of her day, and then thinks to himself while shaking his head, *if they only knew*.

It wasn't a formal state dinner at the White House because the Xhemal and Second Hand doesn't have a formal government. It's a little bit of a sticking point that the state department thinks needs to

be addressed, but if the United Nations doesn't care then it was agreed that the United States would play along. Caesar makes the point that they may be violent and bloodthirsty, yes, but amongst themselves they are very amiable and peace loving. There has never been a desire to create such institutions when there has never been a pressing need for them, but he makes it clear that if the UN and the US insist on the formalities of state then the Xhemal have already discussed this and have taken the extra steps to go through those motions thus giving the US the diplomatic crowbar they desperately wanted.

Lebedev, the new General Secretary to the UN, was present so the shots from the photo op after dinner were supposed to be held from release until after the General Assembly vote, however the images of them giving genuine smiles and glad-handing at this function would pretty much lock in the Xhemal's legitimacy if they got out and help narrow the vote in the GA. Because of that, on the down-low, the president asked the photographer to leak them and take the fall for it, as is the American way, and when promptly fired she was immediately hired as the staff photographer for the Xhemal.

Dark clouds and silver linings as the in-house paparazzi.

It was when Caesar and Sheila showed up at the Today Show live broadcast on the 10th that people actually did a mental double-take and started to believe. To clinch the appearance they had to meet the producers at One Klick New York the night before and those people were stunned. Speechless in fact. The next morning they landed on top of Rockefeller Center and took the elevators down to the lobby. Getting across to Studio 1A is usually difficult when it's a music or film star, but today it was surprisingly easy because when Caesar and Sheila stepped off the elevator it was like parting the Red Sea. Not an everyday sight they were given wide berth.

The producers threw in the Xhemal interview at the very last minute, fully expecting their anchors to balk, which they did. They resented having to announce the appearance of the Xhemal when there was no clear evidence that they were actually real, yet when Caesar and Sheila stepped into Studio 1A ten minutes early, it sort of blew their minds. The interview was short and sweet because Caesar and Sheila insisted they go out to chat with the people outside the studio which was even more of a mind blow. The idea that they are broadcasting the small-talk between vacationers from Indiana and the Xhemal, predatory alien monsters from another world, was puerile ratings napalm.

Hartcourt could have stopped that appearance had he known but they've intentionally strayed from the itinerary. Word is that after the Today Show Hartcourt pulled stumps for home because he saw the writing on the wall.

After the show they spent the rest of the day sightseeing from the air while Mofid went over the last rewrite, pointing out things for Caesar to emphasize because he was scheduled to give this to the UN General Assembly tomorrow afternoon. After a few minutes quietly looking down over the Rocky Mountains Caesar points back that the speech is not him. He did write it, and it's good, but it's definitely not his style. He tells Mofid that he'll whip something up but *this ain't it*.

It's now the 11th and after a whole day of watching the goings on in the GA Caesar was introduced by a round of polite yet curious applause. You'd think it would be livelier since this is one of the rare occasions they had a full house. Caesar puts on his reading glasses, clears his throat, and after looking over the assembly from the podium he takes the printed speech and tosses it away. What he did say was televised live as well as transcribed into the record as follows...

Take me to your leaders. Very cliché of me, yes, but that's what this profound yet stodgy and polished to death speech was going to convey. Is this what you want to hear from me? See, I understand that those of you who are going to vote on this observer mission thing have already made up your minds so I have to ask myself what I'm trying to do here exactly? Okay, honestly, the short story is I'm asking you to take me to your leaders and (points to GA) this is the place. This is the very avenue where we can reach out to your respective governments, societies, cultures. What better place for us and you to realize that? See, we want to learn about you and do business with you and have a bright future with you. I've been watching this very body all day long beat their noggins against one another trying to resolve issues and, as best I can surmise in my little head, this is the very embodiment of a mechanism of impasse trying to break through that impasse and it is amazing to watch. Where I'm from, my planet, we have no war, no borders, we have no crime, no greed, no murder, no justice system and no contract law. These are all alien concepts to us. If we are going to hang with you, do business with you and have a future with you then we need to learn about you so, from what I understand, this is the place to start. On behalf of my species I'm asking you to teach us. Take us under your wing. That's why I'm here. Thank you.

With the thunderous applause that followed few understood what a slap in the face to the GA that was, and it went *whoosh* right

over most of their heads. What didn't go unnoticed is the affect it had on the viewers worldwide who immediately started to spam their respective governments as well as the UN to push the vote for the inclusion of the Xhemal. With the three minute delay, relaying the video to the Hyades and the Pleiades, the spamming that came from those regions also hit like an avalanche that didn't stop. It is clearly apparent that Jane and John Q. Public have been keeping up on this and they happen to like talking dinosaurs, go fig? With the vote set for tomorrow afternoon it appears to be a done deal.

To vote against the Xhemal now would be political suicide.

Getting through the crowd in the lobby of the UN was challenge enough, but the hundreds that gathered outside in the short thirty minutes after Caesar's speech would be next to impossible to get through. They had to detour through the top of the UN Office Building to get to their limo and back over to Rockefeller Center.

Lifting off the roof of the UN, Caesar looks to Sheila and says, "I apologize for hogging the lime-light, hon."

Sheila shrugs, "This is your job."

Caesar protests, "But, we're partners."

"Okay, ya, but you're the elder and got big personality. So, you're doing your job."

"You don't mind?"

"Hey, Caesar..." Sheila puts up both thumbs, "Good job!"

Caesar shakes his head, "I can't tell if you're being serious or if you're being an asshole."

"You should know me by now. I'm not Magpie. This is your time, and when it's time for the asshole of the team to step up, well that'll be my job. Just so you know I'll be ready to do my job when my time comes."

Sheila is too young to be an elder like Caesar. She was born and raised with the Annex and their technology and seamlessly works in both of their worlds like a pro. For her living the life of the Xhemal the old way was like a summer camp experience while growing up. The day in and day out hunts and hardships before the Annex arrived are only academic to her total life experience. Caesar does miss his previous mate, coined The Other Magpie by the SA tracking teams, who was trampled by a sauropod on a hunt five years before. Everyone warned her time and again about going after the young ones because that tends to bring the fight out in the adults. If a sauropod can nail you with their tail hard enough to stun you then you might as well be a melon underfoot because that's what comes next. Sheila

helped care for Magpie the long days it took her to die, comforting both her and Caesar, and when she did pass away Sheila slipped into that roll without fanfare. It's just as well because she is everything Caesar needs for this next chapter in his life. Caesar does love her a lot but he sees too much of Maria Ramirez rubbing off on her.

Caesar ponders jokingly, "Looking back, I don't know if sending you to law school was a good idea or not."

"Too late!" Sheila then adds, "You, my little feather blossom, are the designated emissary of good will where I'm the plenipotentiary of ill-tidings. A perfect division of labor!"

"A plenipotun...wha?"

Sheila smiles, "An agent or minister."

"Oh, okay." Caesar's eyes frown for a second, "But tonight, will you be sitting with those people from Indiana, right?"

Sheila rolls her eyes, "I'll heckle ya, okay! Will that make you feel better if I heckle ya from the audience?"

"Sure!"

Peter and Griego look at each other and just shake their heads, with Peter saying, "After tonight, Angel, they're all yours."

Griego replies, "Gee, thanks."

Del Frisco's Grille was next on the schedule and another first for the Xhemal—their first restaurant experience ever. If it were the Nefer Key then it'd be no problem but not being humanoid, sporting a long tail, feathers and razor like teeth, makes it rather problematic when doing something taken for granted by people like going out to dine. The health department gave their preemptive blessing because the Xhemal did attend a White House dinner so, here they are, Caesar and Sheila, 515 and 375 pounds, respectively, of seriously lean killing machine sitting on ottomans and partaking in a petite apéritif while scrutinizing the menu. Shane McElroy, who just joined their entourage at Del Frisco's, ended up ordering for the two of them with Caesar and Sheila sampling each of the steaks from the menu with Filet Minion shooters for desert.

When Caesar asked for the chef the waitress was amazed that she actually came out, and with everyone at the table, Sheila, Peter, McElroy and Greigo, Caesar applauds her, "This was some of the best noms I have ever had! My compliments to you and your staff."

The head chef, looking every bit of a thirty-something blonde bimbo, nods, "Thank you...you're those aliens? Cesar, right?"

"Caesar. Your name?"

She shrugs, "Agnes Pottinger."

Caesar smiles, "You're a potter? Look like a chef to me!"

Agnes laughs, "I'll stick with my current career path if you don't mind."

"By all means, don't deviate from that path. You're on the right one. Your human surnames I find fascinating..." He then gestures towards Peter and Griego, "Colonel Ribot means either feast or streams, depending on which language you use, and Marshal Griego here looks more Mexican than Greek to me."

Agnes smiles, "Agnes means chaste which...doesn't apply to my life style if you ask me. Or, anyone for that matter!"

Caesar chorts, then asks, "I'll bet. That prime rib special thing, that was amazing! Where's that cut from?"

Agnes pats herself under the arm, "It's from here, and you have to bake it slow or with indirect heat if on the barbie."

"Wood or charcoal?"

"Wood is fine but don't let it get smokey. Render it down to a bed of coals and slow cook or you'll end up with a tree stump. Let it rest like normal and it's ready."

"Rest? Normal? What's resting?"

"Wha'? You pull the meat and let it sit for fifteen minutes before you touch it. Anybody ever tell you that?"

Caesar rears his head, "That's a long time to wait!"

"Ya, you look like the impatient type." She points to him, "You gotta let it rest. Fifteen minutes and not a second less!"

"Seriously?"

"Did you like what we made you?" Caesar nods yes so Agnes finishes with, "There! That's the result!"

Caesar asks, "Do you give classes?"

"For you?" Agnes crosses her arms and says, "Be here, Saturday, ten o'clock sharp. Bring an apron that fits. It's a slow day for us." She looks over at Sheila, "You comin' too, sexy thing?"

Sheila shakes her head, "No, you kids have fun!"

Caesar asks, "We'll do the au jus?"

Agnes turns and heads back to the kitchen, "Most definitely the au jus, and roux too! In this line of work roux is the difference between a chef and a mess sergeant."

"Agnes, you are so on my Christmas list!"

She stops and says, "I'll also show you how to do a Kansas City brisket that'll bring tears to your eyes. You'll weep!"

Caesar smiles big, "Now you are a goddess!"

Suddenly Caesar feels something at his thigh. He looks down and sees a beautiful little girl is patting his knee. With coffee cream skin and hair, like most of the ethnically nondescript in North American anymore, she's in awe of Caesar.

She asks with a squeak, "Are you real?"

"Oh my! Look at you little one!" Caesar looks over at her parents and asks if he can pick her up, "May I?"

Caesar puts her on his knee and pokes her in the ribs with his knuckle, "Are you real? You sure giggle enough to be real!"

Through her five year old snorts, "You-r-so-funny!"

He stops and asks, "What's your name, little one?"

"Macee!"

"What's it mean?"

"Ah, like a mace. You know, a club!"

"Oh! So, you're a tough one?"

She gives a big, "Ya! What does yours mean?"

"Caesar?" She nods yes so he says, "Hair...which is funny because I have feathers, but wait!"

Caesar reaches into his plumage and, with a flinch, he pulls a long blue feather out, about the size of an eagle's flight feather, and hands it to her, "This is for you, little Macee."

Her eyes go big as she takes it. Sitting there Macee beams as if she were given a genuine Mayan Quetzal scepter.

Griego pipes up, "Ya know, I kinda get the feeling our Mic and Spic team will become more your chaperones than heads of security."

Caesar pats Macee on her back with a smile, "Consider it a dual purpose roll."

Sheila adds, "We do enjoy your company, guys. Then again, you constantly save me from being alone with him." She then rolls her eyes, "He can be such a bore."

Caesar cocks his head to the side, and with a big scrunchy grin, "Thank you, hon. Love you too!"

As if on queue both Caesar and Sheila wiggle their noses at each other and throw each other kissy faces.

McElroy asks with some surprise, "Wow, gee, dudes, do they do this all the time?"

Peter nods, "Endlessly."

"Maybe I should rethink this assignment?"

Greigo wags his hand at him. "Uh-uh! Nope, you are stuck with them like I am. Bail on me and I'll shoot you!"

Sheila smiles, "Kinda think you're stuck with us 'cause he will shoot you! No, really, he's got the crazy eyes!"

McElroy looks up, "Gawd, help me!"

Caesar has just kissed the top of Macee's head and laughs, "God's got nothing to do with this. I wonder what egregious sin you committed to get this job?"

Sheila admits, "Eeeeh, I asked for people who knew New York so, Marshal Griego, Inspector McElroy, here you are!"

McElroy shakes his head. "Angel, you only have to do this for a couple of months. Six, tops. I'm stuck on this crazy duty, pretty much semi-permanently."

After everyone gives a quick laugh, Peter says, "Now that you're all acquainted with Shane I think I'll take my leave after dinner."

Sheila asks, "Why? We're having fun."

"Well, I want to see how my little broth...sister is doing and get some stick time in."

McElroy asks, "How's she doing? That took a lot of guts."

"I hear she's doing fine." Peter then thinks about it, "Ya know, if you guys get bored how about you come visit us on the west coast? I mean you can come see the beach, stay at my grandmother's chateau. All of you! It'd be a blast."

Caesar considers it, "Sounds inviting."

Peter adds, "Better than being cooped up here!"

Macee's father has stepped up, "Sorry, we've got to go."

Caesar frowns at Macee when he hands her over, "Sorry, you gotta go." Then to her father, "Sir, contact our embassy and send me a link to your social page. I want to keep up with lil' Macee here because..." Then to Macee, "We're da bestest buds right?"

Macee glows, "Ya! You bet!"

Caesar asks the father, "You okay with that, sir?"

He smiles, "Ya, and if you can believe, it's Mace."

"Awesome! And you know what?" Macee's father shrugs clueless, "When she's older she can have me for show and tell!"

The five videos taken of the Macee encounter hit the web and all went explosively viral before they even left the restaurant.

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The green room is gorgeous. Back in the twentieth century it had the style and feel of a holding cell, but it has since evolved and nowadays it's six-hundred square feet of things to set your mind at ease. Every arcade and bar game worth a damn is here including a table shuffle-board, PacMan and skee-ball of all things—which is the first thing people gravitate towards. McElroy had to show Caesar and Sheila how to play but after a couple of rolls they were pros at it. During the monologue they overhear Mikhail Popov, the current host, refer to the UN vote tomorrow as the "Barney vote" and Griego had to pull the reference up on the net to clue the Xhemal in. After a few balls Sheila came up with a crazy idea and McElroy ran off to get the technical director to see if it were possible on short notice.

The Tonight Show has been running non-stop for 359 years and enjoyed only 43 full time hosts (with at least a year on the job) the most recent being a Mikhail "Mikey" Popov, a stand-up comedian and actor who spent his youth bouncing between Kyiv and Moscow with his Russian diplomat step-mother. He's now had this job for going on thirty years and he is considered the one host to (finally) upstage Johnny Carson as *the bestest host ever*—and he did it with Carson's help. *Exempli gratia*, every year around May 22nd Mikey does this bit where, armed with a Magic 8-Ball and Ouija Board, he kneels and burns incense to a volitive shrine to Carson, flanked by minor icons of the other big-four hosts including Leno, Rivera, Ortiz and Sullivan. This bit, a throwback to Carnac the Magnificent, is just one of the things came out of him emulating the style, understatement and boyish double-entendre innocence of Carson.

For the first half of its run the show was in a tug of war between New York and Los Angeles—which shifted between Phoenix and New York after the bulk of the film industry moved to Mesa to get away from the unions and cut costs. Now, under Mikey, the show resides in both locations, on identical sets and alternate weeks, with Mesa becoming the whipping-boy Burbank stand-in. After centuries of ongoing development Mesa is still as flat as a pancake, with no iconic

skyline or buildings to speak of, and that shows on the animated mural behind him when broadcasting in Arizona. Only lights, flatness and layered strings of mountains in the distance which, with all jokes aside, is strikingly beautiful.

In contrast the skyline behind the set for tonight's show is New York City and Mikey is doing his once a year Peeping Tom bit before they bring Caesar on. With a telescope as a prop Mikey acts as if he's peering into the windows behind him where the shocking sights of actors, singers and politicians he finds 'doing stupid' are projected on the monitors. This, with his bumbling commentary, intentionally ham-handed, always has the studio audience in stitches.

Sometimes the stupidest of shit is the best of shit.

Peter did stick around for the show and approaches Caesar as he steadies himself to go through the curtain, "Less than a minute till you're on. Sheila is sitting with the people from Indiana."

Caesar smiles, "They made it! Cool!"

"Talked to my grandmother about having you two visit and she's invited you to stay from Christmas through New Years."

"Wouldn't that be an imposition?"

"If you're invited then...it wouldn't be! If you don't have anything else going on then it'd be a blast to have you."

The show's stage manager says to Caesar, "Thirty seconds."

Caesar nods and Peter says, "Okay, Caesar, break a leg."

Caesar laughs, "I'll never understand that one but, okay!"

"Don't worry 'bout it, just have fun."

The stage manager says, "You're coming out purple on the monitors. We'll keep it up for fifteen seconds, okay!"

He puts up ten fingers to indicate ten seconds to go as Mikey is making the introduction.

Peter says, "Go get 'em, Big Bird!"

Caesar looks at Peter with a frown just as the intro music starts and the curtain opens for him.

Caesar steps out to a rowdy applause, and when the studio audience notices that he's purple on the monitors they start busting a gut while cheering him on.

After a few seconds it starts to die down and Caesar gestures to himself, "Ecce homo plumatis!" The audience goes crazy again as he thumbs up at the monitors, "And now Barney-fied!"

As Caesar steps up to Mikey to shake hands the audience starts to quiet down while on the monitors he fades from purple to his normal parrot like kaleidoscope of colors.

Before Mikey or Caesar say anything they hear Sheila shout from the studio audience, "Hey, ya puff-ball, your Latin sucks!"

Mikey asks, "An early detractor! Who's this?"

Caesar responds as a camera pans over to her and her new found friends from Indiana, "It's my mate, Sheila!"

As the audience starts to wave at the camera Sheila laughs, "Mate-shmate! Clear your Latin through me next time why don'cha? Man with the pillow, what the heck is that!?"

Mikey asks as he offers Caesar a seat, "She know Latin?"

Caesar laughs, "Ya, Sheila has been going to law school for some time." He then calls out to Sheila, "Which one, hon?"

Sheila answers from the audience, "Columbia!"

"Wow!" Mikey then asks Caesar, "I hear you got a degree. Political science, right?"

"Masters out of Georgetown." Caesar points to Mickey, "And, ya know, I really wanted to go to my commencement but...I don't think that that would have gone over well."

Mikey laughs, "I could see that now, you showing up with a *hi I got my mortar board!*"

"I'm not exactly Big Bird." Caesar nods towards Sheila, "Sheila wants to take some classes at Columbia for her final semesters and I think that will be within the realm of possibility now that people are agreeable with us."

Mikey asks, "Has anybody seen you and Sheila and run off screaming?"

"Where we're from we get that all the time, but not here."

"What happens where you're from?"

"Ah, well, everybody runs screaming because they think we're gonna eat 'em..." Caesar then gives an embarrassed laugh, "Which we are, but that's not what we do here."

"What do we do here?"

"Cow! We loooove cow! Oh my gawd, that's great stuff! You don't have to chase after it and it's sooo cooperative." Caesar holds his hands out, "Here, it just hops on my plate!"

"Is there anything you are afraid of on Earth?"

"If I were to pick something I'd have to say house cats."

"House cats?"

"Ya! We went to our friend, Shane's house last night for a night cap, and his cat kept staring at me with these wild eyes and his jaw quivering and chirping, *ynea-ynea-ynea!*"

"What do you think that was about?"

"I think he thought I was on the menu! Like I was some giant chicken entree and he was trying to psionically mind-trick me into the kitchen and into a roasting pan!" Mikey laughs as Caesar throws his hands out in mock panic, "Pat him down, Shane! I swear he has a carving knife! I know he does!"

When the laughter dies down Caesar thinks, "I'll have to get me one, ya know."

"A cat? Why's that?"

"Conquer my fears! I'll have to start out with a kitten or I'll be sleeping with one eye open for the rest of my life."

"It would keep you on your toes!" Mikey then asks, "What do you think of New York so far?"

"From what I've seen I think I'm gonna love it!"

As if on cue, Mikey slips a five dollar bill to Caesar who palms it and slides it behind him as if he were pocketing it.

It's been the running gag for three decades now. If the guest says they love New York then Mikey slips them a fin (\$5) and if Mikey says anything positive about Mesa, or Arizona for that matter, he puts his hand back behind him and the stage manager will slip him the five. All this time they've been keeping a tally and so far it's been neck and neck with \$10,720 for loving New York and \$10,805 for Mesa. It goes without saying that on weather points alone Arizona scores big and cleans up between October and April. Caesar was told about the gag and it went over so smooth that the subtlety of that hand off was doubly funny. It was like it was planned—which it wasn't.

After the laughter subsides, Caesar continues, "If the vote..." Caesar scowls at Mikey for just a second, "The Barney vote that is, goes through I suspect New York will make a perfect home away from home for us."

"Isn't it kind of hard to get a feel of a place surrounded by all the security?"

Caesar asks, "You're referring to our stop at the Lincoln memorial?" Mikey nods yes so Caesar says, "Ya! It's a pain but they say it's for our own good."

Mikey then smiles then points to the monitors, "Well, we came upon a video of a very serious security breach we want to share."

On the monitors, as well as broadcasted, is the video taken of the Macee and Caesar encounter at Del Frisco's Grille. The audience is visibly touched by the video and go "awww" when he tickles her, laugh when he flinches pulling his feather, and "awww" again when she smiles big getting it. When he kisses Macee on the top of her head they go big "AWWW" which means big points for Caesar, and when he tells her father he'll be there for her show and tell they applaud and whoop like crazy.

"Thank you!" Caesar then laughs, "Ya, she looked pretty scary, so I had to play along. Patted her down too ya know."

"She's definitely weaponized cuteness." Then Mikey asks, "So, you're going to be giving away feathers I take it?"

"Oh no! I got to get me an autograph and soon!"

"Autograph?"

"I don't have an autograph? I gave a feather to Macee and it hurts to yank those suckers out! I just realize while sitting here that now everybody is gonna want one! Hell, I'll be a plucked and naked like a roasting turkey by the end of the month!"

"You're not naked now?"

"No! You wear clothing and I wear feathers!" Caesar leans in to emphasize, "Which, by the way, I have to say is very convenient for me because I can take a shower *and* do laundry at the same time!" Caesar shakes his fists in the air, "Yea me!"

When the laughter dies down Caesar thinks deeply, "Ya know, if the Barney vote goes our way, I think I'm gonna love it here. I mean there is so much to do! Like...just this morning on a dare I tried out for Swan Lake."

Mikey laughs, "Okay, I'll bite!"

"Ya, really, look at me! I'm a shoe in for the Prince Siegfried! Don'cha think?" Caesar puts his arms out and the audience applauds.

Mikey thinks about this, "I'm not a ballet guy but, correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the Prince a human character?"

Caesar points out, "Ya know the swans are played by humans so, in all fairness, equal opportunity, right?"

"You have a point, how'd it go?"

"Well..." Caesar feigns embarrassment, "The tryouts didn't go over as well as I thought they would."

"What happened?"

"It started off well enough and I was tossing Odette in the air ever so perfectly but, when we started doing pirouettes and leaps..." Caesar is a tad self-consciousness with this tidbit of news, "I took out half of the swan maidens. They ended up in the E.R. My bad!"

Mikey laughs, "That's a vision for ya."

"I hear they're all going to make a full recovery...except the third one from the left. It's not looking good for her."

With the laughter from that last comment dying, Mikey asks, "What have you seen that strikes you as odd about Earth or people since you've been here?"

Caesar thinks about it and says, "Rule thirty-four."

"What's that?"

"I had no idea..." Caesar gives a bug-eyed and long goofy look towards Mikey, "Now I dooo!"

With about a tenth of the studio audience giving cat-call whistles and clapping Caesar thumbs towards them, "See, they know what I'm talking about!" He nods his head their way, "Don'cha!"

Mikey asks, "What's this rule thirty-four anyway?"

"Glad you asked!" Caesar spins his finger around for a second as if he was stirring a pot, "We're flying around Monument Valley, seeing the sights from the air, and my buddy, Pete says 'Aw crap! It's already started!' What started I ask? And he says 'Rule Thirty-Four started, that's what.' And I ask if there is something I gotta do? Is there a license for it? And he says 'No, it's not what you think.' And I ask, then what should I think? And he says 'Now is as good a time as any!' and hands me his N2 device."

Caesar throws his hands out as if he were flipping through the photos on Pete's device, "So, I see one photo with me and...some lady I've never seen before. Then..." He gestures flipping to the next photo, "Okay, that's...rather exposed of her! Next..." He mocks a double take with his eyes going big, "Whoa! That's...I didn't know you could do that!"

He then acts as if he's holding the device out to Sheila in a panic, "Honey, this is NOT me! I swear! I haven't been apart from you more than five minutes the entire time we've been here!"

The studio audience was laughing at these antics but when Sheila, still with a microphone in hand, opens her mouth they explode, "Five minutes is all you're good for, my lil' feather duster!"

With the audience going nuts, Mike says, "I gotta see this."

While the laughter subsiding Mikey pulls up his device while Caesar tells him, "Put in rule thirty-four and Mikey...ya, that's it."

Mikey does a quick double-take, and it's genuine, "Whoa! I had no idea!"

"My words exactly!"

Mikey cocks his head to the side while turning his device around, "No idea...but she's cute!" Mikey points to the screen, "I didn't know I could get this kind of action!"

As the audience laughs, Caesar adds, "Pete says I'm gonna be bigger than donkeys and tentacle monsters...whatever those are?"

Mikey shakes his head as the commercial music starts to queue up, "I didn't know I was a perv. We'll be back after this!"

With the audience giving a solid applause the 'on-air' light goes out and Mikey turns to Caesar saying, "That was unexpected. Thank you for coming!"

Caesar smiles, "It was a blast!"

"Sure you couldn't stay awhile and harass the next guest?"

"We gotta jet, but thank you for having us. It was fun!"

Mikey knows a good thing when he sees it and as Caesar stands to leave, "Consider this an open invitation, Caesar. Whenever you want to come on and tell stories like that we will accommodate your schedule. Anytime!"

Caesar nods, "Okay, I like that!"

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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

weighed in on this back in her day.

Maria always has all three of these sewn up whenever she comes to Earth with that last one being an unintentional but normal circumstance here or on Sapphire for that matter. It also helps that they are not in a state of war but that wouldn't matter because she is considered a head of state in her capacity. To top it off there are so many people who want to see her dead that the ROEs may simply be academic in her case so she always has a shadow team watching over her just for giggles.

Oh, to be so popular.

Random chance encounters with people from your distant past are a rare thing indeed. On most of these occurrences you will see such-n-such a person and continue on your way while mentally trying to place said person on your historical time-line. You will think to yourself *where the fuck was it* and inevitably wake up at three in the morning going *holy shit that was so-n-so!* You almost never realize who that person was at the very moment when it could have made a difference in your day. Case in point, the salt and pepper couple two tables down from them has been gnawing at Maria ever since the hostess seated them. Maria thinks she recognizes them but the mental time warp trying to figure this out is making her cranium hurt.

The ongoing discussion since the surgery has been about Diego choosing a girl's name going forward, but before Maria could weigh in and settle the issue she goes, "Motherfucker!" Then pipes up loud enough for the couple to hear, "Morning Star, is that you?"

Ndosa Khumalo, a long lost native of the Natal Province of South Africa, would look every bit at home in a civet skin with iklwa in hand as he does in the polo shirt and the three-wood he favors. As a Captain in the SADF he was sent to 83-Tau to work with Blackstone, consulting on counter-insurgency operations, and never looked back. He tutored Maria when she was a young'un and taught her everything he knew. When Maria came up with the plan to knock off the SS Colonel that wiped out her platoon at Saiph-6 he was like a proud Sifu watching his protégé go forth and kick ass. The last time Maria physically saw him was just a year ago but nobody knows that. Last time she saw Siusan Faulkner, the lady currently sitting next to Khumalo and the daughter of Blackstone's owner, was over three decades ago when she was carrying their first child.

Khumalo looks up, "Yeeea, depends on who you are?"

Maria stands and points to herself, "Tiger! Way back when?"

Both Khumalo and Faulkner do a big eyed double-take with Faulkner saying, "Holy Jesus!"

Khumalo stands to hug her, "It's been what, thirty, thirty-five years or so? My god it's been forever!"

Maria has stepped up to hug both of them, "About that. How is your baby? It's all grown up now?"

Faulkner laughs as Maria turns to hug her, "We ended up having three and we've got two grandbabies now!"

"Oh, my god! Seriously!" Maria thumbs back at Diego and Jessica, "I got my daughters with me. How about you join us?"

They both look at each other and say, "Sure!"

Two tables were pulled together and for the next hour and ten minutes they had a great time. Maria and Khumalo's charade was so perfect that nobody, not even Faulkner, could have guessed that they have been working together this whole time. After some catching up the discussion amongst them turned too Diego's name and things didn't get quite settled.

Diego wants to keep her name because that's what she's always known, and a girl called Diego is not without precedent but it's usually a nickname for Diega or Dora of all things. Diega is not even a real name but it has been under consideration. First names, with Diego as a middle name, have been bantered around with the top contenders being Ophelia, Maria and Sandra which is Jacob's mother. Jessica did jokingly suggest Sian as an option but with that name proceeding Diego, Maria warned they would never hear the end of it. '*Something* Diego Ramirez-Graves' kind of rolls off the tongue but there is no pressing need to settle this for now however; Maria made it clear that Diego has to decide by the time of her Quinceañera which is a little less than five years away. It was here and now that Maria let on that she and her mother, Ophelia, have already picked out the ball gown, the venue and the Mariachi band which made Diego groan and roll her eyes and everybody else laugh at her expense.

What none of them realize is that Maria wasn't kidding.

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The deception on the patio restaurant between Maria and Khumalo was so well played that when they decide to head on over to One Klick for a quick tour, the spies for the CIA and the Co-op just shrug at hearing this. It is clear to these 'boots on the ground' that following Maria around for some chance morsel of intel has yet again proven to be a colossal waste of their time.

With Jessica and Diego taking Siusan Faulkner around the One Klick facility, Khumalo and Maria head for the offices of the SA on

the first floor.

Entering the lobby Maria says to Khumalo, "That went better than expected."

Khumalo shakes his head, "There was a lot of people hovering around and watching over you."

"On top of my three man shadow team..." Maria stops in the middle of the lobby to count on her fingers, "There were six special agents from the Secret Service, three Delta sniper teams on the roofs, then the three Co-op and two CIA spies listening in on everything we said, which is fun to watch because I think they're all on a first name basis with each other by now..." Maria then gives a confused look, "And there were four other plain cloths types that I just can't figure out who they're with? But, they did blend in well I might add."

Khumalo says, "Oh, them, that was my doing. Those guys and gal are from a BDF security detail."

"Ah, watching over you!"

"No, watching over you."

"Hu? I thought you were supposed to be killing me!"

"Things change. A week ago, last Friday, Hartcourt sent all of us a note saying that you were now off limits."

Maria feigns shock because she knows the truth, "What?"

"My same reaction!" Khumalo points up for just a second, "And you were at the top of his proscription list for the last three years! I talked to him that afternoon, and I do see him a lot ya know, and I asked what that was about and he said (mimicing his voice) I'm extending Marshal Ramirez a professional courtesy."

Maria acts amazed, "Really!"

"Ya, beat that!" He then leans in, "What happened on the second of December is what I'm dyin' to know, and everybody is keepin' quiet 'bout it."

Maria gives him a look, "Ah, duh, you know."

Khumalo gives it back, "Ah, duh, I can't afford to break character. Not even here, 'kay? I don't know shit!"

"Got'cha!" Maria then sighs, "Thanks again for keeping me abreast on the Tinef Op. That was fricken crazy!"

Because of Maria's diplomatic standing any attempts on her life would have to be staged as an accident or the shit will rain. The thing that Khumalo cooked up, by the request of Hartcourt after the debacle from last May, was to programmatically commandeer the

Church Key Junket that ferries socialites, billionaires and high rollers between Las Vegas and New Sydney so they can take a shot at the budding casinos at the Kilosphere and the Necropolis. Since this is a chartered flight, and not subject to the scrutiny of the commercial carriers, the A.I. was updated to, when given the proper encrypted signal, feign a catastrophic failure and pitch itself into Maria's home on the approach to New Sydney, that is if Maria happened to be home. Khumalo kept her apprised of this effort and Maria made it a point never to be home when that flight was coming in.

Khumalo adds, "Ya, it kinda smacked of desperation."

"To think, they would waste all those celebs and big players just to whack lil ol'e me! Made me feel special."

Khumalo adds, "As Boxy would say..."

Maria chimes in with him, "Little pawns."

Both laugh, then Maria then adds, "Which is funny because after tonight my work will be done. I'll be coasting after this."

With that Ndosa asks, "Maria Lynn, I have to know. You really wanna to do this thing, right?"

"Ah, Ndosa, Morning Star, love of my life!"

"You mean the quickie in your youth!"

Maria nods and then shrugs with a smile, "Look, babe, my job is to ultimately win what's a-comin'...in the end. Towards that goal, to achieve this objective, my job is to make *you* look good! You've been battin' a thousand since day one and they *are* listening to everything you say now, right?"

"Hangin' on every word."

"Well, they'll continue to do so until they start gaining ground. By then you'll be voice of reason saying caution-caution-caution when they're winning-winning-winning and not hearin'-hearin'-hearin' what you're sayin'-sayin'-sayin' just like last time."

"Sure about that?"

"In eighty-seven did you not show them the road to the big win, and what happened?"

Khumalo was telling them to get out of Nu Ara and to bypass the Pleiades altogether—advising them to extend their dominion around the Pleiades and bottle up the SA because they would be committed to protecting those assets. The gains made by the Co-op up to that point now rendered them tone deaf to his advice. After the fiasco at Nu Ara it was a grind down to the inevitable stalemate.

This time Khumalo is giving them what they want and yet again he cautiously nods, "You're right, Tiger. They will overextend themselves if given the opportunity."

"I'm banking on it." Maria jabs him in the chest, "So, you're gonna give it to 'em, and we'll be sandbagging *all* the way!" She thumbs towards the conference room, "Let's get this over with."

Entering the conference room Khumalo sees, on the other side of the holo-screen protecting his identity, Lieutenant-Colonel, Peter Ribot and Ambassador, du Conde.

As Khumalo sits, Maria crosses through the holo screen while giving the quick introductions, "Colonel Ribot, Ambassador du Conde, I would like you to meet Impetus."

What's funny to Khumalo is that the Co-op has known about the existence of the "Impetus" mole since before 2280 and they've failed to link it to anybody they know. His gamer ID has always been "impiTUS" (impi for a Zulu warrior and TUS for The Ultimate Shakan) and this coincidence made them ask him once before the Nu Ara battle in 2287. And, when you think about it, nobody in their right mind would allow the use of their gamer ID as a clandestine mole name because it would be so damned obvious—and it's worked! Khumalo, with his spot on advice and unblemished loyalty, is so far off the radar for this mythological Impetus double-agent motherfucker that after this round between the SA and the Co-op he's thinking of hanging up his spurs and writing his memoirs and Maria has already agreed to give safe haven for him and his family to do just that. What kills Khumalo is how many times he sent information to Maria full well knowing that she couldn't use it except to anticipate a loss and minimize casualties. Then again, to lose a battle while avoiding mass slaughter is a big plus in most people's ledger book. To top that off the Annex excels at 'sandbagging' and making a loss look great for the Co-op, and terribly bad for themselves...when it's all bullshit to begin with.

du Conde opens with, "The great Impetus, I can't believe I'm sitting across from the legend himself."

Khumalo's voice was deep before, but now it's deep and fuzzy, "Thank you Ambassador. And to be sitting here across from you, the apocryphal 'snake-in-the-grass' in the flesh. Like, my god! The irony is that they know all about me and the shit I do behind their backs but you-YOU do it in their face! You feel 'em up then knife them when they kick and they're still clueless! I am truly humbled."

du Conde gives a look, "I'm not sure how to take that?"

"Praise. Consider it high praise, Ambassador. I am damned glad we're on the same team."

du Conde glows as Khumalo addresses Peter, "And you're the son of Field Marshal Graves and the grandson of Monique Ribot. I hear that you are an excellent officer and pilot. An old-school hands-on pilot I hear. A rare skill nowadays."

Peter breaks an ever so slight smile, "Thank you, sir."

du Conde says to Peter, "You know I always wanted to meet your grandmother, Monique."

Peter snorts, "I think she'd hate your guts."

"Ya, but she would love me if I got her on her back."

"Ya, but on her back she'll love anybody!" Peter then laughs, "Which is funny 'cause she asked Caesar if he wanted to invite anyone for New Years so you and Mofid get an invite."

"Mon Dieu! I made an impression on our feathered friend!"

"And, it pains me to say ya kinda grew on me."

Maria pipes up, "Guys, I got two more meetings after this one so, to cut this short..." She looks at Peter while pointing at du Conde, "A c-note says he scores."

Peter smirks, "I'll take that bet."

du Conde rolls his eyes as he turns back to Khumalo, "We know each other pretty good around here. If you make it out of there, wherever that is, I'm sure you'll fit in." du Conde huffs and continues, "Now, I represent Fifty-Two for the United Nations and I function as her advocate. Her protector you might say. But, I'm handing the floor over to the Colonel because this meeting is about his issues."

Peter picks it up without dropping a beat, "I'm attached to the United Nations-D.P.K.O. and I'm charged with overseeing the security built around Fifty-Two. Our concern is one of containment. To risk sounding melodramatic, when we think of Fifty-Two other things come to mind like, oh I dunno, say...ebolaX...Chicxulub...elevator music! You know, really scary things."

Khumalo interjects, "Preacher to the choir, Colonel."

"Ya, well, that may be but we need to get the message through loud and clear. Your operatives have been trying to get a sample of her DNA and I think it's time we help 'em along."

Khumalo asks with some concern, "To risk sounding more than slightly confused, but why the fuck would you do that?"

Peter has pulled an envelope from his breast pocket, opened it and, putting his hand through the holo-screen, he shakes a business data card out on the table while saying, "Well, we're getting tired of

your ops following us everywhere and, quite frankly, they're gonna eventually succeed. So, why fight it? You came really close in Warsaw and we were surprised you didn't get it then."

Khumalo picks up the business card for the Bonaventure's business office and looks at it, "What's this?"

"This morning, while having coffee across the street, I hacked my own PC and copied the whole fucker down to that card. Before you ask, yes there is a lot of shit they should not have but any really-really Secret Sam shit is not on there. What you will find are all the communiqués between me and the State Department, the White House, the D.P.K.O. and the Security Council regarding Fifty-Two and what happens if they try to clone her. If the Co-op successfully makes one then neutrality goes right out the window and every option is on the table from I-SOC all the way to W404. And, for their edification, that means deploying the model Sixty-Four version of that warhead. All sixty-four mega-fucken' tons of it."

Khumalo is surprised, "You weren't shitting them, were you!"

du Conde adds, "That stuff spells it out for 'em. Our entire play book from black ops to embargos, quarantines, blockades, all the way to dropping nukes and, let me stress this, nukes have not been ruled out as a first-step option. That is very much on the table."

Khumalo signs with relief, "Thank you. I can't even begin to thank you for this."

Peter says, "So, the hand off is going to be Wednesday morning in Europe." He sits down beside du Conde and continues, "Tomorrow, the Ambassador and I will be taking Nikki to Paris where she will spend three days and two nights with Alex Dimitri. You know the story there I take it."

"Yes, I do."

"After the first night, when we're at the Louvre, have your ops just take the tooth brushes, okay? Don't even bother with trying to replace 'em. I'll have her scrub her cheek real good."

"I know they're hot to get this but if we don't have the protocols to make the magic's happen...what's the point?"

"In the files are several protocols and one is for Nicole Burke, the NCL-3.1 protocol. We know they have her DNA but they do not have the protocol for the 4.0 which is for Fifty-Two and they'll never get it, but if they diddle-dick around and create a 3.1 in an attempt to deconstruct the 4.0 protocol then Fifty-Two will know and we can start the whole confrontational nonsense with embargoes and the shit can roll uphill from there. The 'nuke-outright' option gets shelved."

Khumalo nods, "Brilliant, absolutely brilliant! So who came up with this one?"

Maria answers, "Scarab thought it up. These two have never met Scarab but you get to in a few minutes."

Khumalo asks, "I am?"

"Yeppers, Impetus! Soon as Pete and Tristan are gone." Maria then asks Peter and du Conde, "We cover everything, guys?"

When they nod yes, Khumalo adds, "I look forward to meeting you gentlemen for a beer when this is all over."

du Conde smiles, "We too! Bonjour."

With Peter and du Conde stepping out Jessica quietly slips in through the door behind Khumalo and says, "Diego is taking Siusan up to the observation deck."

As Jessica steps around towards the wall panel to turn off the holo-screen, Maria rubs her eyes and says, "Only one more to go."

Jessica has turned it off and is now leaning against the wall, and as the longest of seconds pass, Khumalo wonders, "I thought you had two more? Like, me meeting Scarab?"

Maria stops rubbing her eyes as Jessica wiggles her fingers at him while saying, "Oi!"

Maria points to Jessica then to Khumalo "Impetus, meet Scarab. Scarab, this is Impetus."

Khumalo shakes his head, "Hu?"

Maria asks, "Ah, what did you expect?"

"Oh, from what I heard, to keep Fifty-Two in check, Scarab had to be like Medusa evil or something worse even! So, *you're* the one who's got her on a tight leash?"

Jessica nods, "I got her on a God damned choker chain, and I love yankin' on it." Jessica can feel his doubt, "I get the feelin' you have concerns about me. That was quick."

Khumalo breaths in and says, "I...was maybe expecting more? This was...not expected?"

Maria nods, "Fair enough but this is what we have to work with. In fact, Ndosa, from now on your contact will be Jessica."

Jessica tells Khumalo straight up, "Your encryption code will remain as 'impi' plus 'TUS' in large case, okay."

Khumalo asks with surprise, "Who told you that?"

Maria answers, "Nobody did, and that's why we're here."

"I don't get it? What *are* we doing here?"

"Changing of the guard?" Maria leans forward, "You know, it's getting risky for us to keep in contact the way we have. Something is bound to slip up and it will be something stupid like when things get posted. My analysts have done a study on JPEG communications and it's the postings that can be a dead giveaway. It doesn't tell ya what's being said but it does tell ya who's sayin' and who they're sayin' it too. Our postings, when compared, have shown a little too coincidental of a pattern when bounced against each other."

Khumalo is amazed by this news, "Then that's why your responses have been put off for days on end! That's why you're also putting up more non-coded images but...we're not on any common lists or networks?"

"It doesn't matter, and don't be wiping out any of your threads thinking that's going to make a difference. That will only bring attention to yourself so don't do it."

"Then how do we get in touch with each other?"

Maria readies herself, "Like I said, from here on out you will be working with Jessica. She'll be our go between."

Jessica takes the floor, "For her offing the Colonel the way she did Maria was called 'Babe Satan' by your group, which I thought was catchy, so her codex became YHVV7734. Since I'll be the lesser yhv in this venture we'll use the same codex sequence for me but the first four characters will be in small case. Agreed?"

Khumalo was trying to get this all to sink in, "Ya-h-weh...you wanna run that by me again?"

Jessica thumbs toward Maria then herself, "Yhv, the lesser yhv. You know, the Metatron. Get it?"

Khumalo gets his wits back, "I'm not working with you. You're a kid for Christ's sake!"

Jessica's lips purse just a tad at the insult, and she leans in ever so slightly, "What's it gonna take for you to work with me?"

"I dunno, I'd have to say..." Khumalo looks towards Maria with wide eyes, "An act of God?"

Jessica looks back at Maria who, with the sweep of a hand, gives Jessica permission to have at it. There is a box of facial tissue on the table by the water pitcher so she pulls three out and hands them to Khumalo who takes them.

Jessica sighs, "You're gonna need these."

"Why would..." Suddenly, and without warning, Khumalo's fist balls up and, like a shot of lightning, he punches himself in the nose, "WHAT THE FUCK!" He was spun halfway around in his chair, and as he unwinds, covering his bleeding nose with the tissue, he says while hiding the shock, "What the fuck was that!"

Maria asks with a lilt in her voice, "Didn't you just say?"

Khumalo puts a free hand out, "Yes-yes-yes, I know."

Jessica then says, "That demonstration was probably a little too blue-collared. How about we opt for interpretive dance?"

Khumalo's free hand flies into the air, and as it sweeps straight out to his side he stands and raises one foot forward in the air.

"Okay-okay-okay! You made your point!" Jessica gives him back control of his own limbs, so he asks, "How'd you do that?"

"I'm not a psi-clone so I don't rightly know." Jessica reaches for a handful of tissues and says, "While Hartcourt and Maria had their meeting two weeks ago I was sitting in the next room and, from now on, I can read his mind like a book when I have direct contact."

As Jessica pulls a chair up to Khumalo he jokes, "So, if you're not a clone then, just maybe, it's Midichlorians! Ever think of that?"

Jessica chuckles, "You're a dick." She then pulls his hand with the bloody tissue and, with spit and adept motherly attention, she starts to clean his face, "I now, like Fifty-Two, can read him enough that, from a distance, I can feel what he's up too. Between the two of us we can keep you apprised what he's actually thinking and, what you don't know is that you, of all people who is not family, are the only person alive in his good graces. If he were to ever consider anyone being an actual friend in life—you would be it."

Khumalo cooperates with Jessica and lifts his nose so that she can get to it, "Somehow I don't find that comforting."

"As well you shouldn't, but it does give you a leg up. In three weeks he'll be asking you about today and you simply say you were reconnecting with a buddy from the past. A totally random and chance encounter."

"Someone I was trying to bump off."

"Ya, but by the time he gets around to asking you can tell him to fuck off and you'll quit 'cause you can but...he won't want that because by then you'll be giving him victories! *Mucho grande* victories! And with victory, doubt, in all its shades of gray, flies with the wind like leaves. He will not argue with winning."

"It's that soon?"

"About a week, dude. Let's say that at eleven, thirty-seven *clocks will synch*. Just keep it to yourself."

Maria speaks up, "Something you need to be aware of, there's an effort to bump off Hartcourt. We need you to bring the hammer down on it. Saavedra and Tillsdale are spearheading this effort."

"Don't you want Boxy gone?"

Marie feigns surprise, "No! He's not military and, like last time, he'll fuck things up for ya. We talked about this at length last year. As smart as he is he won't let go of shit and that's his Achilles heal. Write your final report and retire before Polaris. Okay?"

Jessica adds as she finishes brushing off his polo shirt, "You'll be so marginalized by then he won't even notice."

Maria then asks, "So, Ndosa, are you going to work with her or not? I need to know P.D.Q."

Khumalo stands and nods, "Okay, I think I can work with her." He looks at Jessica, "You are one tough cookie."

Jessica snickers, "Naw, ask anyone, I'm a marshmallow pie!"

Khumalo shakes his head, "I'd love to go with you to a casino when you're old enough. Just to dick with the house."

Jessica looks back to Maria, and Maria agrees, "When you're of age we'll figure something out. Okay?"

"Cool!" Jessica turns back to Khumalo, "Two things, your eighteen year old daughter, Cloé, she's going to UCLA, right? When you leave tell Siusan you're going to hook her and I up for a play date after the Christmas break. That'll give you and her an excuse to touch my social page—start things off right. I'm in town a lot so I can show her around and hook her up with some of the in-crowd."

Khumalo nods, "Okay, she says she's been bored. What's the second thing you had in mind?"

"There's a really nice not-so-little villa in Malibu, in the Francisco Ranch area. It's definitely in your price range so I'd grab that up while you can."

"Kid, you really are on top of shit."

"Kid, eh...I'll have you know I'm secretly a red-head sociopath with blond ambitions, but you'll acclimate to me. In time."

"Right!" Khumalo smiles at that and before he steps out he looks back at Maria and remembers the night they got drunk and she came up with her infamous Plan-B, "You know, play your cards right and you'll never have to turn to that fucked up Plan-B of yours."

Maria just stares at him, "I don't know how to break the news to you, Ndosa, but...this is Plan-B."

Maria nods yes as he says flatly, "Just refined."

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It took another twenty minutes for the next guests to show. Major, Dianna Victoria Wilson, the Princess of Wales, is currently the first in line from the House of Wilson for the British throne held by her father, King William the VIII, and health-wise it's not looking good for him. The oldest of three sisters she went into the Army Air Corps to fly the HWG99b Warthog gun-ship, licensed from the SA, in the assault and close air support roles. Under the tutelage of Michelle Kiel, Victoria has become a *bona fide* monster with that machine and earned the call sign "Hedgehog" by her peers. Her friends call her Vic and her school mates called her Knuckles, but if you call her Princess Di she's been known to break your face for the privilege.

And as hot as she is this is not your Disney Princess.

Victoria was looking forward to going to Dubai because what used to be the U.A.E. has been the center of a regional shooting war that's threatening to fire up again for the third time in the last century. Unfortunately, her father's condition has taken a turn for the worse so in the up and coming weeks, instead of her G-suit and carbon-fiber armor and loving every minute of it, she may be donning a coronation gown with orb and scepter and hating every minute of it.

Victoria is here because the Prince or Princess of Wales has long been the ceremonial commander of the Brigade of Gurkhas for all of Great Britain. Accompanying Vic is the Colonel of the 8th Regiment of Gurkha Rifles (the last standing regiment) Brigadier J.G. Beacock. With them is Sergeant Major, Ganju Thapa who looks every bit of *the* fighting soldier with his khukri and slouching Terai signals hat.

In the conference room, Maria stands and addresses the guests as Jessica shows them in, "Major Wilson, Colonel Beacock, and you're Sergeant Major Thapa, right?"

Thapa snaps a sharp salute and Maria smiles, "Thank you, Sergeant Major, but we are informal around here."

Thapa bows his head, "My apologies, Marshal Ramirez."

Maria opens, "So, Victoria, or is it Vic?"

Victoria confirms, "Vic is good."

"It's really great to meet you. Gun Crazy sang your praises. Said you were a real down to earth kinda gal."

"Nap of the earth is a lot more fun."

"Very much so." Maria then gets to the point, "We've been supplementing the Gurkha Rifles for quite some time and because of the budgetary questions we hear it's become a problem for you."

"Austerity sucks. We are forced to either come clean with where the budget money comes from or we cut the regiment and, let me tell you, that last option is heartbreaking. A bloody tragedy."

"You looking for a home for them?"

Beacock speaks up, "Your organization has not been able to accommodate them in the past, so what's changed?"

Maria leans against the edge of the conference room table, "Last year we updated our JACC fighting suits to the point where even I am now not qualified to join the Annex but, instead of us thirty-thousand grandfathered shorty's continuing to use the previous systems they redesigned a JACC giving the flexibility of the new suits but sacrificing some of the armor protection for the extremities. After extensive testing we think it's a doable and fair trade off."

Victoria and Beacock's eyes go big as they look at each other then to Thapa who is obviously about to crack a smile, with Beacock asking, "What's the height limit at this point, Marshal?"

"With the new JACCs the height limitation is around five-nine or, in metric, one-hundred and seventy-five centimeters; but with the redesign we can go down to a smidge below five-three or, as you say, one-hundred and sixty centimeters. So, for you the door is open."

Victoria clarifies, "Then you'll take the regiment."

Maria nods, "As soon as humanly possible, but there's more."

Beacock asks, "More? What's the catch?"

Maria perks up, "There's no catch, we just need more!"

Victoria blinks her eyes and asks, "How many more?"

Maria pulls out a bottle of whiskey and shot glasses and pours them each a shot while saying, "I have a manpower problem. Of all the billions of human beings spreading out in every direction nobody wants to risk their ass anymore. Even if it's for a good cause! I also got a big fight comin' up, and it's gonna be a long protracted one so I'm gonna need people and, honestly, I would've come to you years ago but I didn't have the means to make the offer I can now."

As Maria hands out the shots Victoria adds, "Sounds like you need more than one regiment."

"Twenty-seven...regiments." Maria then smiles at Thapa,

who's eyes are bugging out, "So, Sergeant Major, think you and the Colonel can swing that many people?"

With some urgency, Beacock speaks up, "I think the Sergeant Major is agreeable to this."

Victoria steps in, "Georgie, I believe the word 'agreeable' may be somewhat disingenuous. Sergeant Major, what would your exact words be, and that's an order."

Thapa calls out, "Bloody hell! What are we wastin' time here for! Let's get this on the fucken' hump why don't we."

Maria says, "There's gonna be a fight."

Thapa throws it back with cold eyes, "We've never shied away from a fight."

With a great sense of relief Victoria nods, "You have your answer, Marshal. It's a deal." There was then frustration in her voice, "Can you excuse me for a second, I keep getting interrupted."

"No problem." Maria then turns to Beacock and Thapa as Victoria steps away, "Colonel, we are aware that there are many special requirements for training the Nepalese, so with that in mind we're willing to pay top dollar for you to continue training them during their initial boot stage. Is that a possibility?"

Beacock nods, "Yes! You give us the budget that we can publish and ya! Whatever you want!"

"We'll need to shake-n-bake the entire 8th Regiment into NCOs for the transition. We want the compilation of men to women at no more than four to five. We would prefer one to one but our line in the sand is a three to two ratio, okay? We won't budge on that. Also, if it sounds attractive to you we can keep the 8th Regiment stationed in the British Isles as the Kings Own Gurkha Rifles. There is something special about keeping up with traditions, and that's one to keep."

It was then that Victoria stepped up from her call, "If I may, you should consider calling them the Queens own Gurkha Rifles."

The stunned silence that followed was broken by Colonel Beacock quietly saying, "Long live the Queen."

"Ya..." Victoria says, more angry than sad. She then looks to Maria for sympathy, "I'm thirty-two, got the most kick-ass job in the world *and* respect from my peers because I can do it well. They tell me I'm smokin' and when I look in the mirror...hell, I'd do me!"

Everybody chuckled with that one, and Victoria continues, "Always thought *my* life would end around high-tea. And to think, I didn't even make it to Eleveses before it ended. An inglorious

smashup by trebuchet—right into Buckingham.” She then nods to Maria, “You sure you don’t have a slot for me? It’d be a might better than the circus I’m joining!”

Maria throws in, “No, but you can always come visit me on the Church Key when you want to get away. They won’t be able to find you there!” Maria then points up for a second, “As a consolation prize, a parting gift. Guns informed me your Razorbacks were a little thread-bare, and I got a glut of those just sittin’ around a-lookin’ for people to fly ‘em.”

Victoria perks up a bit, “Really!”

“Same as the last lease. One-pound per-unit per-year. In the ninety-nines I’m offering thirty-two gunships and sixteen slicks, and in the ninety-eights I can spring for eight of the heavy lifters.”

“I...I can’t turn that down.”

“Good! Have fun zooming in ‘em!” Maria then affirms with a smirk, “And, the offer stands if you wanna get away.”

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Maria and the girls accompany Victoria and her people to the landing pad on top of One Klick, and as they quietly go up in the elevator Diego makes an observation for clarification, “Mom, if you’re thinking Descanso Gardens then you weren’t kidding about the Quinceañera, were you?”

Maria goes, “Nope.”

Victoria asks Diego, “What’s that, love.”

Diego sighs, “It’s where I have to put on a stupid looking ball gown and walk around with a goofy smile on my face.”

Victoria snorts, “What I’m going to have to do here shortly.”

Diego looks up at Victoria, “I’m sorry.”

Victoria pats Diego on the shoulder and says, “Tell ya what, doll, you come laugh at me walking around in my stupid looking gown and I’ll come laugh at you in yours.”

Maria and Jessica glance at each other and shake their heads as Diego says, “You’re on, lady.”

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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'

about it, okay? This is Marshal Ramirez's niece and she'll be going to Que Ball next month to start training. That cycle will be attached to the Thirty-Six."

There is a quick round of applause and whoops with one guy a few rows back giving a bad impersonation of, what's best described as, Adolphia's 'cubanaza' war cry. With that Paula give him the two finger death-ray gesture which was good for a laugh.

Jacob adds, "On behalf of everyone here, welcome aboard." He then calls out, "Will one Oscar Peña, please rise."

In the middle of the seats, towards the back, Peña stands and Jacob points at him for a second, "That's the one that got away! He should have been one-ninety-seven, but here he's sittin' all smug an' shit! For those who do not know four years ago Oscar here was the Marine Lieutenant who shot down Kati Conners and stayed one step ahead of me hightailin' it out of New York. So, son, how do you like boomin' and zoomin' in the Thunderbolt?"

Peña thinks about it for a second, "I do miss the Bulldog, you gotta admit the style points are off the chart, but since I've strapped on the Thunderbolt I believe that fucker is pure sidewindin' evil!"

"Have you seen Conners since you came on board?"

"I fly with her regularly, actually."

Conners has her own flight group now, and Jacob keeps up with her on the by and by, but what she hasn't mentioned is that she cougared this young man right into the sack. Jacob thinks it's funny how things worked out but he can't let on that he knows.

"Well, glad you could make it and say hi to Kati for me." Jacob has a sample of every weapon he talks about and he pulls a gladius from the stack, "Yesterday we started off with swords and, yes, if you haven't guessed, I would take the rapier over the katana, but today we continue with the *Gladius Hispaniensis*."

Jacob spins the gladius in the air, "As I mentioned, about half of all swords are dedicated to the thrusty-stabby attack. Most of those have dull axe-like edges but are still pretty wicked when hitting edge on, but that's edge on only in a situational application—not normal use. Remember, swingin' means exposed and that's especially true with the gladius. Some of 'em cleave well enough which imparts a lot of shock to the target, but it's not the go-to dismemberment resolution tool as shown in movies and in gaming! That's fantasy bullshit."

Jacob smiles big, "Awhile back I was watching an old gladiator movie and this guy had two of these in hand and he sliced off the head of the guy he was fighting with one swipe and I go *what!*" Jacob then

gives an exaggerated startled expression while throwing his free hand out, "Whoa! Wait a God damned minute! In what plane of existence is *that* possible because it ain't this one!"

Jacob shakes his head, "For most people it would take some serious effort, like maybe three or more whacks, to take a head off with one of these, so here's some un-reality check for ya!" Jacob thumbs back at the screen behind him, "Here's that clip and a few more impossibly stylish gladius decapitations for the lulz!"

01100010-01100101-01111010-01101111-01100001-01110010

Stone Garden, the ghost host world for the troopers of the Steel Annex, is so idyllically tranquil that it really goes against the residents' grain. Everywhere you turn is pastoral, or charming, or picturesque beyond comprehension. The people *living* here lived their life with a spirit for challenge, but with no challenge or purpose all they do is party and fuck. When you think about it...that's not a bad deal! However, to actually live it...it gets old real fast.

It's now 10:56zulu and when Jacob visits this place he usually materializes about a half a block from Sophia's home. When he crosses over to this world he usually pops in to see Sophia for a quick visit before he calls on Babette, Bud Sheatz's aunt from Vegas³ who's been at the Garden somewhat semi-permanently ever since she met Jacob. Visiting one ghost host world from another is not that unusual, but to green-card it here at the Garden from a place like Vegas³ is.

When Maria told Jacob to expand his horizons he didn't think she meant for him to start something up with a dead person. It's not unheard of but at least it's not the N2 interactive porn or personal A.I. "ChiP" that he just can't seem to get into. Everyone else does, pretty much without exception, but Jacob is that exception. Babette is a construct, yes, but a true to life and free-willed compilation like Bud and Sophia—not a lifelike automaton whose purpose is to service ones expectations. He's also been tapping Glados on the sly, the prototype SYLN-b for the Spike, which is out of character for Jacob but they have a history and are weirdly attracted to each other. Go fig...

He's also tearing it up with Sasha Demitri on the by and by, which is what Maria actually had in mind, but those visits are when she brings Alex to see Nikki, so when Alex gets his Sasha gets hers. Till now those visits have been every other month so he's expecting to see her again in mid-January. Jacob does miss Cricket but it's been seven months since she cut it off and it's just as well. Saved him the trouble. Maria has been busy as all get out and that's just as well too because the last time they were together back in May she surprised him by wanting to cuddle at the end and he didn't know what got into her

exactly. Jacob would rather she keep her rancorous exterior on even keel just so he can retain some peace of mind. That love/hate yoyo at the end of their marriage was just awful and something he would not want to revisit.

Walking up to Sophia's home Jacob notices a handsome young man leaving, and while passing him on the sidewalk he cheerfully says to Jacob, "Hey, old guy!"

Jacob stops and looks back, watching the young buck head down the street with happy in his stride. He's sporting a stylish pencil beard along his jaw with an unruly shock of brown-flowing hair and Jacob mentally scratches his head wondering where he's seen this kid before? He remembers him from somewhere and brushes the thought off thinking it'll come to him one way or another.

It took Jacob a good year to work up the nerve to come visit Sophia after she died. She never had a real home growing up and the Annex was the first place she ever felt like she belonged—only to have it cut short by a freak accident on her first combat drop. This little house in the Garden is the very first place she could call 'a home' per se and she put a lot of effort in the décor. The entire inside is the same bone white for both the walls, ceilings and floors. The furniture is dark wood and black leather with dark wood carvings of Hindu and Asian gods and animals strategically placed along the walls and corners of the rooms. The exception is one wall with small Indonesian spirit carvings in the same white as the walls. Thirty-five of them hung up in a grid pattern, five high by seven across, these faces look like they are morphing out of the wall and the effect is both beautiful and spooky all in the same breath. It's very much like how Jacob has decorated his quarters on the Iron Maiden except that he opted for a collection of Batik masks but its uncanny how they think alike.

Jacob has visited enough that the formalities of knocking and answering have been done away with, so as he enters he calls out, "Hey, honey, you here?"

Which is a stupid question because Jacob tends to be punctual and Sophia makes a point to be here when he says he's going to stop by, so from the kitchen he hears her ask, "Coffee or a beer?"

"Beer, beer is good!"

Taking a seat on the couch Jacob notices that her two kittens, Tacg and Long, are again chasing each other for the umpteenth quintillion time and, honestly, these two never get old. That is they never age (forever at sixteen weeks) and Jacob never really tires of them. The creators of this model struck the right balance between cuddly, frolicsome and down-right ornery that they had to add a safe phrase of 'knock it off' in case they get out of hand. These two

creatures are a construct, but instead of being programs they have the personality of kittens imaged from real life animals. To themselves they are alive and wouldn't know any different. Pets in a ghost host world are taken very seriously, and those who choose to have pets are screened and scrutinized as if they were going to adopt a human child in the real world.

Obviously, Sophia passed muster yet some don't.

Here they come again, and as Sophia steps out of the kitchen with a pair of beers she does so in an all too short and clinging silk peignoir. She might as well be wearing nothing at all and yet, with or without, both are acceptable modes of dress nowadays. If it were anybody else Jacob wouldn't give a damn but he turns his glance away in time to see the two kittens cheetah their way back into the living room and along the back of the couch.

Jacob couldn't resist as the little monsters race past his head, "Me-me-me-me-me-me-me-me-meow-meooow-meooow-meooow."

Sophie hands him a bottle with a perplexed look on her face, "What was that?"

He takes the bottle with a smile, "Doppler kittens."

She laughs as she drops into the Papazan chair across from him, "Ain't that the truth."

"Good thing I like cats." Jacob takes a sip and asks, "Who's the young stud I saw leaving?"

"You don't recognize him?"

"If I did I wouldn't ask."

"True?" Sophia grins as she avoids answering, "You can appreciate this, he accidentally stepped on Tacg last night, but cool thing with these guys they bounce back like squeak toys."

"Knowing Tacg I don't think he took kindly to that."

"Ya think?" She shakes her head, "Later, while we were at it, little-black Tacg came flying up between his legs and, claws and all, clamps down on his nuts!" Jacob laughs as Sophie claws and gnashes her teeth in the air, "I almost went into orbit when he leaps out of my bed with this cat hangin' between his legs!"

Jacob exclaims, "Aww, shit, poor bastard!"

With a sly smile, Sophie lifts one leg along the edge of the chair making her gown slide back—almost exposing herself, "Kissed it and made it all feel better too."

Jacob pleads, "Will you put some clothes on!"

Sophia laughs inside because the peignoir drives people crazy where if she were simply naked they wouldn't look twice, "Why?"

"Do I have to say it?"

"Do I make you uncomfortable? You sound like a prude if you ask me. Most people sittin' where you are would drop to their knees and offer their services, and I for one would be obliging."

At first Jacob found it troublesome coming to visit Sophia never having established a father-daughter relationship before she died. The two spent an entire year ogling and flirting from afar never knowing their actual connection and it is still fresh in both their minds. After the last three years this is something he can put behind them but for Sophia it seems to be coming to a head as of late.

Jacob protests, "You're my daughter."

"Was your daughter." Sophia motions to her surroundings, "To risk sounding like a closeted nihilist—here I am only in spirit."

Faced with this dilemma Jacob just shakes his head. In the ghost host worlds the concept of family ties still hold true, but with everybody being perfect physical specimens of humanity, at the Saint Augustine ideal of thirty-five, all of the real world conventions on lineage and barriers between father-daughter, sister-brother, mother and son tend to break down over time. It kind of creeps Jacob out that incest has become a non-issue in these afterlife realms just as case law made it a moot point in the digital aether of the neuronet.

Sophia and he never knew each other as father and daughter in real life, and realistically she *is* dead, but here she is sitting across from him feeling more alive than alive as they say. Where she has no hang up over a slight technicality, Jacob mentally wrestles with his latent desire for her. It really bugs him that he can actually see himself going there with Sophia in the exact same way he can *never* envision himself being physically intimate with Jessie.

In his mind that one is not possible in any universe.

Sophia, no matter how forward she can be, will not dissuade Jacob one iota, "I want to know you as my daughter. Period."

"Suit yourself." Sophie then huffs with a smile, "But, just to clear the air, 'cause it's gonna come up, it always does, I've already gotten to know you in that special...Oedipus sort of way. Regularly, in fact!" She swirls her finger in the air, "With the roles reversed and none of that messy tragedy nonsense of course."

"Of course." Jacob grunts, thinking it was maybe the files that were circulating with his encounters staring Maria or Nicole, and when it sinks in he points towards the street realizing who the young

stud was, "No! Ah, wha-why is he here?"

Jacob knew they had a 'digi-clone' of him, floating around somewhere, working with Sandoval to develop and perfect the cutting edge 'ghost droid' and the 'ghost drone' concepts—which is now a reality and in full production. Good thing too because the residents in the Garden have been whining for something to do.

When Bud 'Kno' Sheatz got his air-to-air kill in New York City, Sandoval got a crazy light-bulb of an idea. Why not make an offer to the hundred-thousand troopers who have crossed-over to the Garden the opportunity to cross-back over to the real world and do it again? Not in the support role, like Bud was when he got his kill, but as the primary operator in a robotic JACC designed for them. She thought that maybe she would get some modicum of interest but when the survey's went out the response she got was a resounding 100% e.g. *do-want!, how soon?, sign me up!, gimme-gimme-gimme!*

Jacob has previewed the tech and it is impressive. The droid is oddly thinner than the current JACC fighting suit and with no life-support systems needed the logistical train necessary to keep troopers alive and fighting can be cut back dramatically. If a droid becomes combat ineffective or destroyed outright then it's no biggie. The 'ghost' can simply respawn in another one and get back into the fight. The most revolutionary COD-N2 interface, in the comfort of your living room, has become an honest to God warfighting system in real life.

You just have to join and then die for the privilege.

"They had to put him somewhere! This is as good as any?" Sophia then laughs, "And, you'll love this, for some time they've been calling him Paleo-Jake! He's really impressed the shit out of our handlers, even for being twenty-eight."

Jacob thinks, "If he's that young—"

Sophia finishes his thought for him, "Yes, it was before he met my mom."

With some relief Jacob says, "That's good to know."

"What difference does that make?"

"I dunno, it just does, but do you really have to go there?"

"Ah, d'uh, you got this killer rep!" Sophia tugs her peignoir, "Look, most boy-toys, all they want to do is to squeeze as many kicks outta ya as they can. That's okay but you, the Paleo you, damn! Tha boy takes his time and makes me see-saw on the brink, and that's the torture I like! I'm bettin' you're at the top of your game now."

"You'll never know, so knock it off."

"M'kay, but not with Paleo."

"Wouldn't expect you too. Just keep it out of my face."

"Deal..." Sophia chuckles, "It just breaks my heart that my daddy doesn't like the boy I'm bringing home."

Jacob wags his finger at her, almost laughing at that last remark, then, "Your handlers? That sounds you-inclusive, plural."

Sophia shrugs, "Good thing too, since *all* of us on this side of the great-mystery are involved our opt-out rate has dropped to zero. For training the last few months we've been running daily recon out of the Spike and, for proof of concept, Bud, Paleo and I were on Earth shadowing Marshal Ramirez last week and, as strange as this sounds, Paleo thinks he may remember her."

"Roll-backs are not clean. What lingers can be suppressed to a point. As long as nobody tells him shit it will remain a gut feeling."

"Well, I'm not sayin' nothin'."

Jacob takes a swig from his beer and asks, "I'm curious, when Paleo is not a walking divining rod, looking for action, what does he do with himself?"

Sophia was genuinely surprised by the question, "Funny you should ask. He's been writing a childrens book."

Jacob's astonished reaction to that was not unexpected, and the long seconds it took him to dig into his memory just to come up with the title stressed his brain, "The Fiddler...and..." Sophia mouths the words with him as he says it, "The...Hourglass?"

"Yes! That's it!" Sophia then adds, "I loved how Ms Buttons warned Mr. Grylli not to dance on the twig while it was raining. What a fuckin' dork!"

The Fiddler and the Hourglass was a little story Jacob pulled out of thin air when his pre-school brother and sister watched a black widow spider capture a cricket. The story was about how the cricket played for the spider and they became good friends, but one day he got careless and was caught in her web where she defied her nature by releasing him. That's when times were good—when he told them the story it was cold and wet and Ms Buttons couldn't deny the needs of her babies when Mr. Grylli carelessly got caught when times were bad. The moral being there's a limit to forgiving stupid.

Jacob is both elated and disappointed, "I never got around to doing that. I really wanted too!"

From over his shoulder he hears his own voice speak up, "Well, consider yourself having gotten around to it."

"Aw crap!" Jacob snorts as he looks up at Paleo who is standing and leaning against the door jamb to the room.

Paleo nods his head, "How do you two know each other?"

Sophia says to Paleo, "Don't ask!"

"Okay, then riddle me this..." Paleo swirls his hand in the air, "I got this dilemma I call the three decade paradox. Follow?"

Jacob stresses, "I know this age was carefully selected."

Paleo crosses his arms, "They've taken heroic measures to keep what you are away from me and...one look at you and I realize I've been given the gift of *new born baby duck*. Tell me I'm wrong?"

"Didn't realize I was that smart at twenty-eight."

"Could've fooled me? I thought I was dumb as fuck!"

Jacob laughs, "Well, from where I'm sitting I'm jealous as fuck!" He stands and adds, "Let me get outta here but before I do let's establish some ground rules, okay? When you find out what happened to me, which is soon, it's gonna be academic for you. Keep in mind that is *my* life, *my* shit and *my* burden to deal with. From where you are going forward have fun with it because it *is* a gift. Deal?"

Paleo nods big in agreement, "Deal!"

Jacob turns to Sophia, "Let me talk to him for a minute and he'll be back to put a smile on that face! Cool beans?"

Sophia gestures away, "I can always use my toes curled."

As they step out front Paleo asks, "I take it Sophia is—"

Jacob cuts him off, "Not *your* daughter, got that? My sole concern is her well-being and you make her happy. You're doing a great job so keep it up! Capiche?"

Paleo scowls, "Best thing that ever happened to me."

Jacob adds, "Since Maggie—"

Paleo cuts him off, "I don't want to talk about her."

Jacob leans in, "Well we're gonna. It broke my heart when she died, but it was devastating when she opted out. For me it's now a distant whisper in the past but for you it's raw as hell."

Paleo almost snarls, "Point being?"

Jacob thumbs behind him towards Sophia's home, "If you promise to keep those toes curled then I have another gift for you."

Hope and confusion envelops Paleo, "Okay, you're on."

"For all opt-outs we reserve the right to defib 'em at least two more times and all of them are going to be asked if they want to get in on Sandoval's droid program."

"Can I be there?" Paleo says poker faced.

"I'll make sure of that, but it gets one better. I just found out a few weeks ago, from Sandoval, that Maggie wanted to be revived once I crossed over..." Jacob gestures big, "And here you are!"

Paleo asks, "Why are you doing this?"

"I have a thirty-five year baggage train behind me with too many commitments and spread way too thin. That's my stupid ass excuse. Truth is this is my gift to me when I needed it the most."

"I didn't know I was a righteously cool guy!"

"Could've fooled me. I thought I was dumb as fuck?" As Paleo laughs, Jacob thumbs behind him, "Again, hurt her and there's nowhere to hide from me, motherfucker. Got that?"

Paleo throws his hands out with a big smile, "No! No, I got this! A genuine *Deus ex temporal*-reset I'm good to go with."

Jacob returns the smile, "Glad we can see eye to eye, son."

Jacob steps past him and after a few feet out he turns and goes, "Oh! One more thing. Good news and bad news."

Paleo shrugs, "Okay, bad."

"I don't know how to say this but, Jordan died a long time ago. She hemorrhaged out during childbirth."

"Oh..." Paleo suddenly realizes there is only one reason that Jacob would bring this up, "Boy or girl?"

"Both!" Paleo is surprised by that, so Jacob adds, "Peter and Jordan Junior, and they just turned forty. Thought you should know because you'll get to meet them and...grandkids. Josav, Connie and little Mini-Monique!"

"Wow."

"And you should know, for your edification, Peter is now a Lieutenant Colonel with the Marine Corps *and*, one other thing, I shot him in combat when he was a lieutenant-lieutenant a few years back. That was when we didn't know each other."

"Really!?! " Paleo asks making a shooting-gun motion.

"Ya...ya I'll bring him to see you in a couple of weeks when the dust settles. We're good. He an' I are real cool!"

Then it dawns on Paleo, "Then Zoot was Jordan's father."

"Yup!"

"There was a lot of speculation about that." Paleo then asks, "How's Zoot? Any word from him?" Jacob kinda looks around with a guilty look so Paleo follows with, "So, you shot him too?" Jacob nods yes and Paleo asks, "And it was fatal."

"Ya, didn't want to do that but...it's the job!"

Paleo shakes his head in wonderment, "Just curious, but is there anything else that involves me?"

Jacob knows of one last thing and while starting to nod yes he says, "Nooo, come to think that pretty much covers it."

Paleo dares to suggest, "And it gets weird from there."

Jacob huffs, "Ho'boy, does it ever."

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Babette Dubois, Bud Sheatz's great aunt from the South of France, broke the mold and opted for the garishness of Vegas³ over the stale vaingloriousness of *le Tour Eiffel*. That place is too damned Parisian and snooty for her taste even though by all appearances she should fit right in. Glance at Nicole and Babette when put side by side and off-hand you would assume they were twins, but where Nicole is provocatively hard and cut Babette is sensuously lithe and soft—and so much so that with her hair done up and the right dress if it wasn't for the chaotic cyclone of freckles all over her face and body you would swear that Jessica Rabbit herself genie-blinked into reality. Then in a blind-silhouette comparison between Babette from Agde to Monique, originally from Marseille, the similarities in their heavy accents, speech, walk and mannerisms are so remarkable that you'd bet the farm that *they* were sisters. Imagine the jaw-drop unmasking that one.

When Jacob met Babette, against his better judgment, he ignored the little voice in his head saying, *warning Will Robinson*. This woman is undamaged goods, too damned perfect to walk away from, and in his mind this is a ride he has to see to the end. With or without Babette he'd have given Maggie to Paleo simply because it would have been the right thing to do. Babette just made it easy.

Jacob has been here so many times over the last few months that the formalities of knocking on Bud's door have been done away with as well, and every time Jacob steps through that door he half expects to find a big empty because Bud is rarely there and he thinks this is the day where Babette finally tires of him, "Hey, Babs!"

Just then Jacob hears a cork pop, "Oui!"

After a half-minute of hearing Babette tinkering around and pouring wine into glasses she steps from the kitchen without a stitch of clothes on, and where most people naked are old hat—with Babette it's a game of connect the dots with your eyes, "Jacques! My, you're early. I was hoping for the wine to breathe before you showed."

Jacob has closed the distance between them and, with their lips hovering only a centimeter apart, this almost-kiss lingers. It's the anticipation that especially kills her. With their lips almost touching they can feel one another's breath which takes Babette's breath away.

Nicking a glass of wine from her Jacob pulls back with a little groan. Licking her teeth, Babette is clearly panting which clues him in on how much that affected her.

After a few seconds she gulps, "Why don't you just take me?"

Jacob ponders, "I wonder about that sometimes."

She protests, "*Mon ange, je prie*, stop being the gentleman!"

Jacob gets his wits back, and with a clear head, "I hear ya, Babs, but with my luck the day I burst through that door and throw down on you is probably gonna be the day you aren't in the mood."

Babette is surprised, "*Pardon!* If you do not try then how are we to find out?" Babette then pouts, "*Je t'aime!*"

Wow, she said it, thinks Jacob with his poker face intact. He then feigns getting a call and puts a hand out, "Aaaarrgh! Give me a second. They won't leave me alone."

Jacob hops up and steps outside for some air while wondering what to do. Some women like to act out being raped on the by and by and Jacob can't stand that. Trying to find out what their expectations are is like pulling teeth because not knowing those expectations is a formula for disaster. Then Jacob realizes that that's not what Babette wants. She wants what she wants forced on her. It's not like she's going to fight it, it's just that she doesn't want the option. Then to top that off she's asking for it followed with an all too sweet, '*I love you.*' Jacob hasn't heard anybody say these words to him in so long that it's like kryptonite to his sense of chivalry and decorum.

He looks up to the sky and says, "Okay, fuck it!"

Jacob steps back through the door and faces off with Babette who is now standing. She looks up and before she could say anything Jacob pushes her back into the wall behind her with a thud. Not with a violence, but just enough umph to get her attention.

With wide-eyed surprise, Babette goes, "*Monsieur!*"

Jacob has admin rights in the Garden, and as he closes the

distance between them his hand sweeps across his body and his clothes drop off just in time for his flesh to press into hers.

The open mouthed delight in Babette's face urges Jacob on so he takes her arms and pulls them behind her back with a force. Controlling them with one hand the other reaches up to thread his fingers into her hair. Pulling her head to the side his teeth clamp down on her neck and with that she moans between gasps of air.

It's not like Jacob loses track of time as he works it but what clues him in that he's working it right is that her moans have now morphed into broken sobs. Jacob could kick himself for getting too into this so he lets go of her hands and hair and, as if she can read his mind, her arms drape around his neck so she can hold on while he picks her up and sets her on the arm of the couch.

"*Aaaah, mon Dieu!*" Babette tucks her face into the crook of his neck, and as her legs wrap around him she chirps an oh-so quiet little wish, "*Prends-moi maintenant!*"

Babette gets her wish as Jacob thrusts into her body—full to the hilt—and not expecting the abruptness of being impaled like this she whips her head around and locks her eyes on his. Crying out she grips tight as wave upon wave radiates through her body.

Wow, thinks Jacob, surprised to see that Babette has peaked so suddenly, and where the big five in his past, Maria, Nicole, Cricket, Monique and Maggie all could fly off the handle like this—Babette is something altogether different. She is expressive, responsive, vocal and the perfect hybrid between demanding and compliant, which is a tough juggling act in anyone's repertoire. Her frankness and honesty makes Jacob feel like he is up to the task and that there's no string attached or another shoe is about to fall—where he has to take his lumps with the love. What cinches this deal for him is where most women get lost in the cottony numbness as their core becomes a churning volcano ready to explode, cliché as that sounds, Babette, when she plateaus, almost always manages to lock her soft eyes onto Jacob's and gaze into his just enough to draw him in—making them one of the same flesh before those eyes roll back into her head at the point where she lets go.

Or, like today, when her will was taken from her.

Where he can lay waste to Maria and purposefully so, where he has allowed Nicole to ply her trade then turns the tables to service her and shore up her broken spirit by making her feel wanted if only for a fleeting moment, Babette's unique gift to Jacob is her unbridled deliverance into ecstasy—while bringing him along for the ride.

In Babette he finds a plenary equal.

Jacob holds on tight as her core goes into convulsions and her legs spasm uncontrollably however, as these tremors peak she doesn't pass out, oh no, she grabs his face and locks lips with his—playing a card she's been holding onto for just this very moment.

Jacob is talented at kissing, he's got 'skillz' you could say, and he's a master of self-control when it comes to these intimate encounters but his club foot, quietly hidden from all, is the unbreakable kiss with this level of intimacy and intensity thrown in for good measure. Babette thought she discovered that little secret, drew him in and snatches that control away from him...and as he falls apart, shuddering along with her, it's as if she shived him—but in a good way! The emotion Babette feels by this success, and the love she has for this man, overwhelms her and she explosively weeps in their embrace.

Jacob cradles her gently while she cries this out.

He was half-expecting Sasha to pull this very stunt but it was Babette who got there first, and where Sasha and Glados are simply diversions, okay—both hell of a diversion, he's convinced that nothing substantive will ever come of them. Babette, on the other hand, has managed to breach the impenetrable wall Jacob built around himself after losing Maggie decades ago and that realization bowls him over as if he were hit by a train, *Oh shit, I'm in love!*

As her sobs die off this perfect moment is made ever more so as she wistfully bleats, *"Il n'est rien de réel que le rêve et l'amour."*

Jacob tenders Babette the savoriest of kisses he could muster, but this longest of moments is abruptly shattered by an emergency text flashing in his visual cortex, "Babs, I have to go!"

She huffs big, twice, "Is everything alright?"

"No, it hit the fan." Jacob pulls back, "We're at war!"

Babette stands and urges him on, "Go-go-go-go! Just be safe my love. Please come back in one piece, whole, I beg you!"

Jacob gets another text, "Oh shit, they can't find Bud!"

"I know where he is!" She urges him to go, "Poof, be gone!"

Jacob kisses her quick and says, "Love you!"

"Au revior!" And as he vanishes from sight Babette whispers to herself with surprise, *"Mon Dieu, il a dit qu'il!"*

00000100101

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.

Maria is trying to watch the game from the bleachers and is flanked by Jessica on one side and Nikki-8 on the other who is busy drawing Diego with the pencils given to her last May, and if it wasn't for this noob reporter, Daniel Opie, on his externship with the local news outlet, Maria could maybe enjoy the action, "Bottom line, like I asked, don't post my name. This is about Diego, okay? What you can do is drop these names in your article. I've already contacted both of them and they're waiting to hear from you."

Looking at the slip with contact information for Michal Pitney and Lucia Herrero, Opie yammers on, "For human interest stories like this showing support from the family is important and..." Looking up Opie asks, "How do you know these people?"

"If it helps, Lucia is my cousin and Michal and I go back a ways. Look, our family is one-thousand percent behind Diego but keep my name out. Don't draw the focus away from my child."

"Mam, I know what makes for a good article."

"You're like what, twelve?" Maria leans forward and gestures for him to lean in, "Listen up, Danny Boy, from Brigham Young like your shirt says, right?" Opie nods yes, "If you cross me your editor is gonna send you packin' back to BYU. Your very first go-pro article, fresh outta collage, should not get your ass fired! Follow?"

"You're with the SA? They warned us about you."

"The threads didn't clue you in?" Maria sits back with a huff, "Okay, Wonderbread, I'm just a little cog, an itty-bitty curmudgeon in that SA they warned you about, but one you don't wanna fuck with."

"Okay, point made, but I do have one last question." Maria motions for him to spit it out, "I get this weird vibe. Everyone says they're supportive of Sian, but on a sunny day like today they act like there's this gloomy-dark cloud overhead. I don't get it?"

Maria glances at Jessica and asks Opie, "Sian?"

He grimaces, "Oh, my bad, sorry."

Jessica spells it out, "As in S-I-A-N?"

"Ya, the Welsh spelling. She wanted it to be a surprise."

"Oh, we're surprised, alright!" Maria then throws her hands out for Opie not to worry, "I'm glad that slipped out, so we'll act surprised like everybody else when your article is posted."

Opie is a little nervous, "Is this bad?"

"Let's say there were different expectations." Maria then nods, "As for your question, ever since Diego was little everyone thought that *he* had a shot at the Majors."

"Only a handful of women have made it to the Majors."

"That's right, everyone was hoping for Diego to represent. It's that expectation thingy, ya know. With this metamorphosis that kinda puts a damper on all their enthusiasm."

"Was that your expectation?"

"The family and I are rooting for Diego to do what Diego needs to do for Diego. Everything else, all other hopes, dreams or wishful thinking can go to hell. Notice I didn't say *everyone else*, but either way don't quote me on that."

The batter grounds to second for a double play as Opie says, "Okay, Ms. Ramirez, I think we're done here then."

"Maybe your camera gal should stay and take extra video."

"They're walking her, we have enough footage of that."

"She's gettin' pissed. I think she's gonna pull a fast one."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, I'm a little rusty on baseball, but isn't getting walked a good thing?"

Watching Diego toss her fielders glove in the dugout and look for her batting glove, Maria shakes her head, "Not if you're ten."

As Opie wanders off to shoot, Nicole steps up with Seth and bags of food for everyone. Passing them out she hands a chili-cheese fry to Nikki who glances at Nicole with this puzzled look and then looks down with her hand covering her eyes that are tearing up.

Noticing this, Nicole sets Seth down with his fries and asks, "What's the matter, Hon?"

Nikki blurts out, "I don't know? You asked everybody what they wanted and I didn't say anything, and you come back and bring me what I really wanted. I don't understand! I push your and Marshal Ramirez's buttons at every turn and it's this that confuses me."

"You wanted them, right?"

"That's the point! It's these little expressions of generosity that confuse me. I don't get it?"

Overhearing, Maria weighs in, "You're a kid, d'uh!"

Nicole touches her shoulder, "You're the closest thing I have to actual blood and we shouldn't be at odds with each other but we are. So, excuse me for giving a shit."

Maria waves Nicole off who kisses Nikki on top of the head and goes to sit with Seth as Maria, trying to figure out what to say, looks to Jessica and nets, <"You see this coming?">

Jessica nods, <"Yep, Nikki's been unraveling a bit, but I didn't think she was gonna snap this soon.">

At first they impressed two or three of the Nikki clones in all their family gatherings and social events thinking it was going to have a positive affect on the whole. This meticulous effort of inclusion was to give the 'collective her' a sense of belonging and chip away at the memories—the horrors of her first eight years, or sixteen for the Beta pair. The hope being they can tame the monster inside and let her off the leash, but the problem Maria has been faced with is losing her objectivity and becoming attached to them which she has. Where Nicole is a kindred spirit, like a sister, Maria has resigned herself to the role of being a mother figure to Fifty-Two.

Maria asks, <"You were going to share this when?">

In wide-eyed repartee, Jessica smiles, <"When your plate was not so full?">

Maria sighs and puts an arm around Nikki, "Babe, the rage you felt when you first came here was, wow, smothering to be around. You didn't have a childhood. What you had were people who fed you and watered you and fucked you over and over and over and I can't fix that. I can't make that hurt go away but I will say this...I really wish our relationship was one of nurturing instead of adversarial."

Nikki's voice shudders, "I think you may get your wish."

"Is this you talking or the collective you?"

"Both."

Absorbing this, Maria frowns, "Talk about a turn of events!"

Nikki apologies, "I know this is a bad day for you."

"Ya think!" Maria smiles and gives her a little warm squeeze, "I need you to pull it together until the dust settles after today. You do have Jessie to go to if you need to talk."

"Jessie's been nice lately."

"Well, what the hell got into her!"

Nikki snorts a chuckle, "Ya, who'duv thought that possible?"

Maria points to the drawing, "By the way, this is really good but don'tcha think you got Diego's butt a bit too skinny, here?"

"She's ten. All ten year olds have skinny butts!"

Jessica nets to Maria, <"We got ourselves a butterfly.">

Maria again squeezes Nikki who rests her head on her shoulder for just a second, <"Let's say I'm holding my breath.">

Just then Diego steps up, "Hey mom!" She leans over Nikki and gives Maria a kiss, "You seem preoccupied?"

"Just a tad."

"Making the world a safer place."

Maria avoids responding to that, "So, if you don't mind me asking, how'd the interview go?"

Looking at the drawing, Diego says, "I think it went well, and if it wasn't for this pitcher walking me they'd get better video."

"What do you think of their pitcher, Kim Jhang is it?"

"Ya, little slant-eyed fucker is good."

Maria calls her on that, "Watch your mouth!"

"Okay...the little Korean fucker is good."

Jessie, Nikki and Nicole all start cracking up as Maria just shakes her head, "Does he have a weakness, ya think?"

"Ya." Diego turns her head away and with a *fizz* she spits a thin stream from between her front teeth, "He throws like a girl."

"Hu? He's one of the best pitchers I've ever seen!"

"When pitching he's nuts on, but when he's just throwing he throws like a girl. The two times he walked me he threw meat-balls high—just outside the strike zone. Big fat lazy meat-balls."

The first batter just hit and gets on second base so Maria asks, "Waddya gonna do?"

"I ain't gonna walk." And as Diego trots off to get on deck she turns around and says, "Hey, Nikki, love the picture, it looks great but you drew me with a scrawny ass!"

Nikki looks up at Maria, "No-no-no-no!"

Maria smiles and make a curving motion with her hand, "Round it off ju-ju-just a hair!"

With Nikki rolling her eyes and setting to work to give Diego a hairs-breath more plumpness to her hip, Maria realizes that this day is a perfect day. With the second batter striking out here in the bottom of the inning, Maria has lost all track of time which is what she wanted. It's now Diego's turn at bat, or in this case walk. Diego usually warms up on the deck before batting, but she didn't this time around because with a guy on second it's obvious that they're going to walk her again. Even the opposing players know it and, instead of getting set and ready to spring into action, they just stand there waiting for the pitcher and catcher to go through the motions.

After two balls Diego points the bat to right field which is good for a laugh because they are intentionally walking her. She can't hit a wide pitch from inside the batter's box but Diego has never been known to accept limitations or stick with convention.

Jessica reaches around Maria and nudges Nikki with her fingers who looks up as Jessica says, "She's gonna do it!"

Just then the pitch is thrown, predictably wide and high, and as it starts to drop Diego leans forward and pushes off hard with her toes—taking a swing at the ball while in midair and vaulting it over the first baseman's head with a sharp crack.

Diego hits the dirt and is up and scrambling for first base before the outfield reacts. The time it took for the right fielder to get the ball the base runner from second was already rounding third for home, and instead of throwing it to second to cut Diego off he threw it home where it was two seconds too late to stop the run. Diego ended up on second base for that effort.

The coach for the other team shouts, "What was that!"

The umpire knows what he's talking about, "Her feet did *not* touch the ground, so it's good!"

He shouts back, "What! Waddya mean? That's un-sportsman like conduct! We were walking her!"

"What's un-sportsman like is your team taking advantage of a technicality and walking her incessantly..."

As the argument heats up Diego shrugs and slowly meanders over to third base where she stops, and when the other coach sees her there he flips, "Why is she on third now? Why is she stealing a base!"

"Can it or I'll eject you from the game!" The umpire turns to Diego and asks with his hands on his hips, "Why did you advance?"

Diego says matter of fact, "Aaah, you didn't call time?"

Grimacing to keep from laughing he asks, "That means you stole a base. Do you have anything to say before I call you out?"

"Well..." Diego then flicks her mustang like ponytail and says, "That base stealing rule was made to prevent me from injuring myself, but what I did was simply *walk* over to third base and, the way I see it, I advanced to third within the spirit of that rule."

"Let me guess, your mother or father is a lawyer, right?" With Diego nodding yes the umpire shouts, "Play ball!"

With the next batter coming up the kid covering third base turns to Diego, "Well, little miss clean-up got the RBI. You're the shit!"

Knowing what's coming up Jessica puts her arm around Maria and gives her a quick hug. Patting Jessica on the knee she looks up in time to see the next player strike out. Fighting the emotions, her eyes tear up as the children play—oblivious to what's looming over the near horizon. Maria knows she and Nicole are being watched and they both need to react as if they were caught off-guard.

Maria can feel that it's close and as the seconds tick away she mumbles to herself a passage she remembers from catechism, "Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine, least they trample them underfoot and...tear you to pieces."

Without turning back Jessica asks, "Wha'?"

Maria composes herself, "Nothing, it's nothing."

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Between the Pleiades and the Hyades is a partition of systems that were hotly contested during the last go round. By treaty the Annex has continued to patrol these systems and, much to the dismay of the Co-op, those systems were thrilled with this arrangement. Also per the treaty for twenty-seven of the busiest ones the Co-op has been maintaining a space station in geocentric orbit around the primary inhabited planet or moon as a weigh point for shipping and trading.

What few people know is that on each station a whole platoon of Security Services personnel have been on hand to track and report on the movements of the Annex and to constantly maintain a targeting solution on all their battle platforms in orbit. As it is the magic number is seven, and the second the Command and Control center in New Brisbane has a clear fix on seven of the platforms the go-code will be transmitted.

Khumalo has the teams conducting at least one surprise drill a day. During an armed conflict they know they have anywhere from four to twelve seconds to respond to an SA platform coming out of a dash or a jump and racing out again, but this is peacetime and they've since learned that they have a minimum of ninety seconds when that magical seventh ship appears.

Khumalo was getting ready to step out to lunch with the local Colonel overseeing this operation when at 11:37:43zulu they get two situational reports blowing into the command center alerting them that battle platforms just appeared at 69-Tau and HIP-19504, and follow up reports indicating that those ships along with the SA platforms they were tracking at 95-Tau, HIP-21459, 67-Tau, 51-Tau, HIP-18735 and Hip 18170 all launched a combat drop consisting of six Razorbacks and eight fighters—a drill that has become all too commonplace.

Khumalo is absolutely thrilled to death because even with him and the Colonel standing there the crew ignores them completely. They immediately confirm the count and transmit the go-code to release their Zodiac missiles inside fifteen seconds as they were drilled over and over to do. If all goes well it will take another six seconds for the command to 'launch the weapons' to reach the space stations and another twelve to fourteen for them to send the 50-megaton tipped missiles on their merry way.

In a post mission briefing Khumalo and the Colonel will go over the after action report with Hartcourt. From first appearance to launch they had a goal of fifty-five seconds, and with the daily drilling they were shaving many seconds off that clock. All but two of the missiles were shot at the thirty-nine second mark which far exceeded their expectations. The crews out at 95-Tau and HIP-21459 were clearly behind the curve at forty seconds.

Harcourt's only comment about that was, "Slackers."

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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 it 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."

As the glider quickly drifts into the adjoining field, Bill radios, ["U-Tau launches in ten minutes. Nufa launches in thirty and we're short a hand full of HWG pilots for that one but we're lookin'."]

With the glider's nose now pointing skyward, Nicole shouts to the reporters, "Hang on!"

Maria grunts as she fights the g-forces as they blast into the sky like a rocket, "You got Nicole and myself."

["No fucken' way! Uh-uh, boss lady!"]

Maria snorts, "Bill, that's the direct order from your one and only Über Führer. Got that! We'll be there in about six, out." She then ties into Vossler who was waiting, "Voss, where's my tactical?"

["Ah..."] Vossler fumbles then says, ["They're workin' on it."]

Now a thousand meters up Nicole pulls the glider into a sharp rotation and kicks the throttle open—where the ship blasts into a mach speed ballistic arc towards the Spike over ninety kilometers away.

Hearing the commotion over the link Maria says, "Sounds like your people are yacking it up. How 'bout you tell 'em to shut the fuck up and get coloring, hu? Get me my feed!"

Voss is a bit frazzled, ["The situation is nuts! Very fluid! You heard we now have to throw together two rapid reaction teams that were not planned for, right?"]

"Sorry to add to your plate, Voss, but I need the tactical the second I get to CIC. We'll be there in about five or six, out."

As the glider reaches top speed, and the severe g-forces lighten up, Nicole says to Opie and Oshiro to, "Guys, transmit the video and notes you have over to your editor, just in case."

Oshiro says, "We're already on it."

Maria looks at Nicole, "I don't get my tactical...yet." She glances over her shoulder, "Send the contact information I gave you. Your editor will know what to do with it if you don't come back."

Looking out the window, and with nothing to do, Maria asks, "By the way, BYU boy, where'd you do your mission?"

Opie openly laughs, "Not a marmoset."

Maria blinks several times and looks back again, "Oh?"

"Told my family to fuck the faith. At least I got to finish my degree before getting cut off."

"Hu!" Maria shrugs back, "I'm still Catholic."

Opie is surprised, "Seriously? I'm sorry."

"Superficially, for my grandmother!" After that protest, Maria quietly adds, "And now that my mother has become my grandmother my sister and I will have to wait her out too—and my sis happens to be a priest of all things!"

"No shit? That's a scream!"

"We go through the motions, but I'm not so ego-maniacal to think that God would be interested in listening to my shit."

"Sentiment shared." Opie thinks for a second, "I dunno about Catholics, but Kolobsters think they're so fucken' special, and now that the herd is thinning it's doubly so. And, while we're sharing, my mother still treats her twat like a clown car. I was the first of eight thigh-sprouts and the bitch is knocked up again." Opie then adds introspectively, "Sounds like I got unresolved issues, hu?"

Oshiro snorts, "Ya think?"

Maria smirks, "All God's children 'as got issues."

Oshiro knows who Maria is and she mentions her name for Opie's benefit, "Marshal Ramirez, we're broadcasting live, right?"

Opie mouths the words '*Marshal Ramirez*' to Oshiro as Maria replies, "You bet you are."

Opie pipes up, "I'm not a broadcast journalist!"

Maria laughs once, "You are now, Wonderbread!"

Oshiro pokes him, "You took a class in it."

He protests, "That's right, Yoshi. I took...a-class."

Maria smirks, "Then you'd better flex your chops, son, because in a short while you'll be live-at-five in all markets!"

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Watching the first rapid reaction force launch, two kilometers below, Colonel Karan of the RAF, asks, "You say a Geisha Hut, aye?"

Vossler confirms, "Yup, Colonel, and we could use the help. And, you have to admit, it is for a good cause."

"Then I say it would be amiss of me to not to authorize it." Colonel Karan turns to the six RAF Warthog pilots standing behind him, in unarmed JACCs, and asks, "You scallies up for a tumble?"

The RAF crews originally came to pick up the first delivery of their new HWGs, but now they've been offered the chance to join in the fight out at Nufa (HIP20842) and they actually give a cheer.

The Colonel turns to Victoria Wilson, "All except you, Major. You'll have to sit this one out."

Victoria scowls, "Group Captain, sir, I'm in the service for another week, nor am I entitled to special treatment."

"As your superior officer I'm holding you in reserve, Major."

"Aside the fact that I am the senior combat officer here..." Victoria then says in her best monarchial parlance, "We *are* your queen and as your queen we demand that you to order us into action."

"No!" Maria has just stepped into the CIC and she heard the exchange, "What are we doing here, people?" She motions to Victoria for a side-bar, "Major, you gotta sec?"

Out of earshot Victoria says, "I need this."

Maria snarls slightly, "Ah, I'm going—you're not!"

"Maria, love, don't make me beg. You need HWG drivers and here we are! And these are some stonking good pilots!"

So, we ARE on a first name basis now, thinks Maria as she just shakes her head at Victoria, "Okay, Vic, it's bat-shit crazy for me even to consider taking you, but what if you die, hu?"

"So what? It'll spare me from what's coming. Anyway, my sister thrives in all the pomp and stuffiness. She can have it."

"Then I'm off the hook, then. Right?"

"Guaranteed!" Victoria then adds, "And, I swear, if we make it out I'll drop to my knees and blow your brains out."

Maria mouths the word *okay*, then says, "Dually noted."

Victoria coyly adds, "You could use a good snogging."

"Let's hope it's a milk-run." Shaking her head, Maria then realizes that something is missing. She turns around and throws her hands out while shouting, "Goddam it! Where's my—"

Suddenly, the tactical hologram Maria was waiting for flashes into being overhead, and instead of looking up at it she closes her eyes and paths the file through her mind—absorbing the data in real time. Maria really hates this interface but the time restraints imposed upon them requires her to put personal phobias aside and work with the technology the way it was intended to be used. Vossler is amazed that Maria is accepting the download and keeps attentively quiet.

Maria's eyes open and they flutter slightly as she turns to Vossler and says with a nod, "Damned good work, Voss."

She then motions for Vossler and a handful of the "geezer"

retreads working the Spike to follow her. They reach a closet and she cracks it open with a sign. They step in and seconds later they come out with BR1 rail guns and bandoliers of magazines for each of the pilots and their WSOs who are inspecting their new HWG drop ships down at the airfield.

Maria hands Victoria a bandolier of magazines then starts strapping a rail gun to her all-the-while saying, "These are the K models in six-point-eight. You've trained with the four-seven-five and they are exactly the same."

Vic smiles, "Little kick—bigger boom."

"Exactly!"

Nicole motions for Maria to follow, "The lift is here with our waldos so let's go!"

With Colonel Karan staying behind in the CIC everybody else beat feet for the freight elevator as Nicole and Maria frantically rip off their clothes on the run. As they pile in the British pilots help lift the two into their JACC fighting suits while the elevator starts to drop like a rock. Most everyone nowadays are desensitized to people being naked but Victoria, who was not helping them mount up, did manage to sneak a glance at both and this was not lost on Maria.

Maria then gets a prompt from Jacob trying to radio her so she takes the call and snarls, "Wha', *pandejo!* Whaddaya want?"

Through the tacnet, Jacob asks, ["Before I jump are you sure you don't want my finger to peel off and fly CAP for you?"]

Maria's huffs, "We can't claim the mission as humanitarian if there is a fighter escort overhead and, for what it's worth, we will be armed to the god-damned teeth so what's your problem?"

["There's a battalion of Security Services on Nufa and that concerns me."]

"No, that concerns me! What concerns you is the fight *you* are going to. Get our people outta there and if you free up any HWGs then send those my way. We may need 'em. Copy?"

["Copy, copy!"]

"Oh and, Graves..." Maria was going say something nice but reverts to her old gnarly self, "Get your ass back in one piece or I'm gonna squat over your corpse!"

Jacob laughs over the radio then adds, ["You got it, Ramirez. Fly friendly! Out."]

As Maria and Nicole quickly spot check each other's suits, and as the elevator starts to bottom out, Maria says, "All right, everybody,

listen up! The four SA drop ships will go in on point and orbit the AO as forward screens. Kiel will be in command of the AO..."

She snaps her canopy on, switches to the speaker system, "You brit drivers pick your two best crews to hang back for close air support and the other four will go in for the extraction."

Victoria volunteers, "Alfie and I, we'll be conking overhead."

"That'll do!" The elevator opens and they fly from the lift and race through the bay door from under the Spike, and as they land beside Michelle Kiel and Angela Simmons, between the SA and the British drop ships, Maria asks, "So, you two up for this?"

Under the ever watchful cameras of Opie and Oshiro, standing by the nearest RAF gunship and shooting pre-mission footage of them, Simmons nods towards Victoria, "That who I think it is?"

Kiel nods, "Yup, Klicks, it is."

Victoria has stepped up and does a slap palms with a knuckle knock with Kiel, "Hey ho, Guns! Ready for a dustup?"

Kiel smiles, "Make me proud, Vic."

"Vic, hang back..." Maria claps her hands and shouts, "All ya'll let's saddle up! This show hits the road in three!"

Simmons manages to get a double-knuckles from Victoria as she scatters with the rest leaving Maria and Victoria, whereas Victoria notices a low-visibility image of the Ewa symbol from the Order of the Smile and points to it, "Mar, I was under the impression—"

So, now I have a nickname thinks Maria, putting a hand out, "No, we don't have a roundel, we have a mascot. I'm not thrilled with this shit but the troops dig it so I'm stuck with it."

"Like that flag of yours—"

Maria cuts her off, "Banner! And, it's specific to our ship the Phoenix-Marauder and not the organization as a whole."

Victoria nods, "Long ago our Union-Jack unraveled then reunited soon afterwards. Symbology counts for a lot."

"That banner...it's a little militaristic don'cha think?"

"It's definitely you."

"Ya, then I just want to get this out of the way up front." Maria then flips Victoria the bird, "Kewl beans?"

"Hu, a simple fuck you?"

Maria's hand starts shaking wildly, "No, it's a grand maul fuck you!" Her hands drop to her hips and she leans forward for emphasis,

"You make it back an' I'll take it back. Deal?"

Victoria laughs, "Yes, love, I'll be happy to give it back."

Maria grits her teeth, "'Kay, *poco puta*, don' die! Feel me?"

Victoria nods with a smile, "Loud and clear."

It's 12:06 and they still have over two minutes left before the mission was to launch, jump and drop smack-dab over the pastoral Mari Lug region of Nufa at 12:15. With Victoria and Maria bumping shoulders, which is the closest thing you have to a hug in a fighting suit, Maria gets an alert from the tactical download.

With wide-eyed surprise, Maria shouts as she broadcasts to the team, "Oh, shit! We gotta jump now!"

As Maria and Victoria break and race for their gunships, Opie asks Oshiro as they stop shooting and hurry up the ramp of their ship, "Yoshi, you know who that was?" With Oshiro nodding yes he asks, "Tell me you got all that!"

Oshiro smiles back, "Queueing it up!"

000000100111

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.

The Annex has enjoyed a wonderful working relationship with Arrakis and once every quarter a lucky platoon gets to participate in training maneuvers with the indigenous reserve force. Usually it goes to a platoon permanently assigned to one of the five battle stations but it was just by the luck of the draw that Anthony Gudici's platoon got picked for this coveted assignment. His regiment's six month tour on the Carrie Nation actually paid off for once.

In passing it was suggested to Guidici that he keep his two dropships planet-side but Bill Nguyen did not have the authority to explain why. Thumbing one's nose at SOP defeats the whole purpose of this training regimen so, according to standard procedure, Gudici parked the empty slicks into geocentric orbit where they belonged.

If the two ships would have been on the deck then Gudici's platoon would have made a quick getaway but, as tough breaks go, the dropships got blasted seconds after the Zodiac missiles blotted out SA27—the venerated battle platform known as Devil Anise.

The six dropships that launched from SA27 were filled to the gills with ops crew so they bugged out immediately, where their eight escort fighters dove down and scooped up twenty-four of the troopers from the platoon. The remaining eighteen scattered into the brush in teams of three while the Thunderbolts start to circle the Moloka'i botanical preserve in a high-speed low-altitude CAP.

At the far end of the ninety-five kilometer island is a satellite Arrakis base affectionately known as the Leper Colony, and where they're on affable terms with the Steel Annex their chain of command meanders up through the ARC (Arrakis Reserve Corps), to the BDF (Base Defense Force) division of the CDF (Co-op Defense Force) which is part of this incarnation of the MAD (Military Alliance Deputation) under the leadership of the Steel Chain Cooperative (SCC) who is openly hostile to the SA so...

So much for maintaining friendly relations.

With eight of the catastrophically lethal 'bisE' models of the Thunderbolt buzzing around Moloka'i, like angry Mach-3 hornets, the ARC didn't feel emboldened to follow new orders calling on them to attack the SA platoon they were supposed to be training with that day. In counterpoint an attached squad of Security Services, the comically aggressive PMC that answers only to the core leadership of the SCC, saw only dollar-sign\$ as they commandeered the SAM site at the base and fired a ground based version of the Centipede-Azul missile at the closest Thunderbolt only twenty-nine clicks away.

The pilot of this recently upgraded Thunderbolt kicked in her reverse vector, which is like hitting the breaks, and flipped her fighter up and over the missile as it shrieked by at Mach-6. The beauty of

measure verses countermeasure is demonstrated here by two Co-op micro-missiles released by the centipede being intercepted by SA micropedes launched from the Thunderbolt with an extra one blowing up and spinning the advanced Azul missile into the desert floor.

Dipping under the treetops at high speed the pilot closed the distance to the SAM site and at just under ten kilometers she lobbed three of her 20/20 cluster bombs at the base.

The bombs rocket over the SAM site and, while spinning, each one ejects 40 nuclear bomblets in a crazy-quilt pattern chewing up an area the size of a football pitch. The third one vaulted up and dove into the center of the target area—letting loose with a combined explosive force of 40,000 kilograms. With the SAM site gone and the SS squad genie-blinked out of existence, what troops still combat effective for the ARC elected to *not* stick their necks out.

It was just then that Jacob's crew pops in from Electra.

Pathing the tactical feed, Jacob finds it amusing to see that there is still a use for the oversized cockpit of the Thunderbolt other than him taking friends and family out to space for a quick sight-see. Initially these cockpits were designed a century ago for the old F40 Cottonmouth but the long two-week missions they planned for never did materialize. Early on the WSO seat was substituted with three folding jump seats and this handy little feature allowed for quick troop insertions and extractions and was one of the many sub-assemblies that found their way into the Thunderbolt. Its usefulness ended when the Annex acquired the HWG line of drop ships, but that cockpit still affords Jacob endless opportunities to shag his flame of the day senseless while they weave in-n-out through the rings of Saturn.

Approaching combat many experienced fighter commanders will hand off the lead position of their squad to their wingman. Point being a pilot can only learn to lead by leading. The Annex used to fly Luftwaffe style, in the ragged Schwarm-Rotte formations, but to hide numbers they now fly in tight classic formations. Having jumped in a stacked diamond, to piggy back all four of the squad within Peña's displacement field, when they popped out Peña and Jacob raced ahead for a quick recon as the rest of the force spread out in pairs.

Absorbing the tacnet feed of the AO, quickly realizing that the ARC is hunkered down at the Leper Colony and twelve Cottonmouths from the military airbase on the far side of the planet have at least 25 minutes to get to Moloka'i, Jacob now thinks they can grab-n-go before they do, "This is gonna be too easy."

Peña snaps, ["*A la chingada!* You had to say it!"]

Jacob chuckles, "Ah...might superstitious aren't we?"

["Be puttin' a Captain Obvious hex on our shit here, dude!"] And as Jacob text-broadcasts '*LETS DO THIS*' to the fighters and drop ships, Peña complains further, ["And while I'm bitchin' how about you all find someone else to teach everybody how to fly the Beluga. I had my fill of pounding ground when I was a jar-head."]

Jacob laughs, "Sorry, Peña, you are the resident dog expert so you're stuck with it. How does the three-eighty fly anyway?"

["Fly? Birding aroun' in that thing is tits! Totally outclasses the Bulldog which is a goddamn tragedy because it's so fuckin' ugly."]

"Well, son, now is the time to make suggestions."

["Okay, how 'bout rhinoplasty?"]

Jacob laughs again, "Do you have any idea what it took to get Northrup to work with Sukhoi? Any?"

["It's fucken' ugly and...SHIT!"] That very second six Co-op battle cruisers blow in between them and the planet, with Peña instantly shouting orders, ["Two, bust on three, right!"]

Obviously the cruisers dropped off from their jump far enough away from U-Tau that, when they thought the coast was clear, they raced in unaware that Jacob and his people popped in and scattered out from their jumps only one light second from Arrakis. The cruisers were the old 'Swingline' models that came to a screeching halt right over the planet and started dumping flights of fighters not realizing they were already in trouble. What the Co-op did was the smart thing to do because nobody in their right mind would jump so damned close to their target, but Jacob thought that since they are all quick and nimble fighters and dropships then the element of surprise would work in their favor—and he was right. Many think Jacob's gut feelings and risky choices border on clairvoyance, and they have learned to go with his flow sort of speak, but the six cruisers are unexpected meat on the table when he and Peña each launch three spider missiles after them.

The closest one is only eight-hundred kilometers away and it takes Peña's first spider only 0.07 seconds to reach it at 0.98c. The missile goes right up its ass and the cruiser violently flashes over in a very hot and rapidly expanding plasma ball (that they learn later on counts for five kills which included four F51 fighters that just launched clear—then getting wiped out by that blast). Jacob's first missile hits the second cruiser at 1.25c amidships in the bridging section between flight ops in the forward-half and the habitation and drive sections in the aft-half. The explosion is huge but instead of vaporizing the ship the force blows out in the direction the missile was traveling which spins the two halves away. Peña's second missile doesn't exactly hit the third cruiser but the displacement field grazes the bridging section

at 1.5c and just enough to break its back. This battle cruiser folds up and tumbles off in a slow-lazy head-over-heels spiral.

The remaining cruisers were able to launch two squads of fighters each and evade the spiders inside 6.5 seconds, and between Peña saying 'Shit!' and their evasive jump, Jacob realizes three things: 1.) These are the hand-me-down Swingline battle cruisers and run by Security Services for sure; 2.) The old cruisers can only launch four fighters at a time so they've had to have been drilling their asses off to catapult eight and bug out inside that time; 3.) Because the SS got there so damned quick they were on a tight leash waiting for this.

Peña radios to all, ["We've got thirty Condors up ahead following two IR5...check, one IR5 to the deck. Stand by."]

Of the three spiders that missed the cruisers two stopped to lie in wait and see if those ships were stupid enough to show back up, the third sees an IR5 close by so it races out to bust on it because to the spider AI brain, unless they are told otherwise, they ignore fighters for capital ships and the IR5 is considered a capital target even though it is a fighter-interceptor by definition.

Jacob takes stock in the situation... The cruisers will now launch fighters from a stand-off range once they regroup and that'll start in about five minutes. The Cottonmouths are far enough away that they'll not factor in for at least twenty minutes, and they themselves will probably get battle platform support in about fifteen minutes, but it's those Condors that are the immediate threat.

Jacob broadcasts, "Everybody, set your spiders to M3 mode and dump 'em all. They'll know what to do. Second squad you guys go cock-block Mario Kart and for the rest of you... We got thirty M&Ms racin' for the deck so, for the now, let's go down and play."

01001001-01000111-01000001-01000010-01000110-01000001-01010100

Nufa, the forth planet orbiting Tura-Tau, was originally named Novyy Ufa by the initial Russian survey teams, but most of the people who settled the planet spoke English so they adopted New Ufa early on. Within a decade that got abridged to Nufa which became official when they joined the Cooperative. Those cosmonauts also gave the star HIP-20842 the name of Tura-Tau which has been somewhat confusing because there is no such designation in any index for the Taurus constellation due to the fact that there is no corresponding Greek Cyrillic character. Tura-Tau was the original name for Ufa.

The northern third of Nufa has its singular ocean and the rest is pretty much an out of control rainforest fed by copious amounts of CO2 from dozens of volcanos that have sprouted up from the ocean

depths in the northern pole. Here precipitation has gone totally haywire and it rains and rains and when you think you've had enough it rains some more. The original trading city, also known as Nufa, is located on a jungle delta on the northern hemisphere in an area called the Bashkir Gardens, but some blockhead jokingly referred to this perpetually damp region as Ferenginar and that stuck.

A gargantuan river, Novyy Belaya, winds back from Nufa on the coast through eight-thousand kilometers of rainforest and down under across the sprawling grasslands of the southern pole through the zero-latitude Nufimsky Metropolitan District. Now, if some architect extraordinaire and a municipal planner shared a crazy vision and unlimited budget then the Nufimsky central core, Net Basha, would be their Emerald City wet-dream. Having grown up instead of out, at a distance this three-mile tall central complex of carbon fiber and glass has the same visual impact as the towers of the Sagrada Família, and with Tura-Tau lapping the horizon in a continual civil/naval twilight cycle the citizens are about as happy and content as you can expect for a quarter-billion residents whose postal addresses are plus-four coded vertically.

Months ago an SA picket droid reported unusual activity out towards an unpopulated area far from the Nufimsky district on the edge of the rainforest called, Mari Lug. The SA finally got around to sending out three recon teams to get an idea what was going on and that morning, just by chance, one of the squads noticed an old style Dragonfly drop ship settling down on a grassy meadow. Instead of landing per se they watched it slip through a hologram of gently waving grass and vanish from sight. The other two squads beat feet for the AO as the first one conducted a thermal scan and below ground they identified profound heat signatures for 33 ambulatory objects ranging from 60 to 100 kilos in size and another district grouping of 158 fainter signatures ranging from 10 to 30 kilos...oops!

At 11:28zulu they reported on a possible Geisha Hut and this tidbit of info was like pitching a knuckleball at Bill and Scott. Orders given were to stand fast until 12:15 and at that time they were to "secure" the location and hold until Maria and company showed up to evacuate the site. That is, this was the plan until they noticed the small 10 to 30 kilo objects being herded towards the dropship wherein at 12:06 they reported they couldn't wait till 12:15 thus forcing Maria to launch at 12:07—a whole two minutes earlier than expected and totally losing them any element of surprise.

Oh, well, them's the breaks.

Maria's crew exited their jumps right above the Mesosphere of Nufa, and that's not exactly unheard of but it is dangerous as hell to pull off. Coming out of a jump that close, with air density at 0.001mb,

is like having your bell rung with a brick but, with no damage to their ships and without hesitation, they immediately dove for broke.

It was now a race between them and three assault transports with a four fighter escort that just launched from Net Basha, and even though those people were much closer by Maria's calculation she and her team will beat them by 90 seconds. The status from the recon teams was better than expected with no fight, no shots, no casualties, the staff under guard, and the children playing—yet curious as to why they were being put into a drop ship then pulled from that drop ship by complete strangers looking like scary black mechanized ghosts.

Maria clears her throat and broadcasts, "Nufa Control, this is Marshal, Maria Ramirez of the Steel Annex. We are entering your airspace on a humanitarian mission. Pursuant to the standing U.N. resolution twenty-one ninety-eight one-seven-zero-one-eight we have secured an illegal cloning facility at the far west end of the Mari Lug region, and have established an area of operation in a radius of five kilometers for the extraction phase. Please acknowledge."

[“This is Nufa Control, please stand by.”]

A few seconds later she hears, [“Marshal, Ramirez, this is Minister of State, Brenda Rice, and I'm advising you to turn around and get out of here, like now. The Annex is no longer part of the United Nations and that resolution is not applicable to you.”]

Victoria radios to Maria, [“Maria, dear, may I field this?”]

“If it'll avoid a fight then okay!”

[“Minister Rice, this is Major, Victoria Wilson with the RAF. We will have you know that those powers afforded to the Annex were not yet rescinded by the United Nations after they joined the FIS. It was held in committee and not voted on so, as it is, Marshal Ramirez retains those powers by default. The RAF was invited to join in this rescue mission and, because the nature of the violation is considered a crime against humanity, it is our duty to see it through together.”]

[“Is this, *your majesty*, Victoria Wilson?”]

[“Yes, we are.”]

Rice is clearly pissed, [“Stand by, Major.”]

Rice wasn't long, [“Major Wilson, Nufa is part of the Co-op and currently the Cooperative is at war with the Annex. We would like to avoid an international incident but we will fire on you if you push on to the Mari Lug. Please, for your safety, vacate our airspace.”]

Victoria smirks, [“Minister Rice, if you wanted to avoid an international incident then we have to say...you failed.”]

Kiel asks on a dead pause, ["We're calling their bluff, right?"]

Victory affirms, ["Well, we're not bluffing."]

Kiel says, ["Good to hear!"]

Simmons calls out, ["You're God-damned right!"]

Victoria asks, ["Simmons, doll, you always up for a scuffle?"]

["I live for it, Major!"] Simmons cackles with that.

Nicole adds, ["Major, Angie is a bit of a Berserker."]

Victoria then opens a private link to Maria with a small click, ["Maria, love, are your people for real?"]

Maria laughs, "I tell ya what, Vic. This job is a sore cock and, just like your SAS, my people fall in that category."

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In the two-hundred thousand kilometers between Arrakis and its single rocky moon, Onn, are over four-hundred spider missiles lying in wait—and they didn't have to wait long. Just as Jacob and his team descended to fifteen-thousand meters above Moloka'i a squadron of sixteen F51 Condors came charging in right on time at the five minute mark. The missiles M3 mode has been called the 'jumping spider' mode and for good reason because when the Condors were halfway between Onn and Arrakis the spider missiles make their coordinated attacks. Within seconds all sixteen of the fighters were suddenly a rapidly expanding debris field. Still in motion towards the planet the wreckage quickly starts to incinerate upon reentry and because it's daytime, and everybody on the surface is sort of busy right now, nobody notices the spectacular show overhead.

This didn't go unnoticed by the three follow on squadrons that showed up a minute later and by sheer stupid luck they were able to back off in the nick of time. The new order of business for them is to figure out a work-around the spiders and to link up with the thirty Condors that are now bearing down on Moloka'i. Where exiting a jump in thin atmosphere is dangerous as hell, zipping around in the bubble of a displacement field is not so much. In MDDSH one can travel in up to 0.01mb without too many problems—except when approaching 1.0mb where it's like molasses. With that in mind the Co-op F51's swing halfway around the planet and then plummet to seventy kilometers altitude before the spiders could fully react to the maneuver and well below the spider's operational floor at one-hundred clicks.

The spiders still managed to bag five of them.

Now with forty-three coming in from high altitude, the first

thirty kicking up dust on a low altitude approach, and an IR5 sneaking around the perimeter a hundred kilometers past them, Jacob realizes that both sides are pretty much on equal terms with the high-end centipede air-to-air missiles. Everybody knows that when they start firing volleys of these damned things at each other, with six on-board micropedes of the SA and the four mini-missiles of the Co-op, like Jacob said at mission launch, 'It may get real messy real fast.'

Jacob barks out orders, "Everybody, we're gonna do a Silver Fish with teams two and four going low and one and three going high. Designate your targets on the tactical grid and launch two centipedes each. Silver Fish on my mark in sixty seconds."

With the tactical lighting up with targets being claimed Jacob switches over to the eight fighters from SA27, "You guys down there, as soon as we do our maneuver I want you break off from CAP and go bust on those Cottonmouths."

The flight leader responds, ["Roger that, Buzzard."]

Jacob adds, "Keep 'em busy. I really don't want to shoot them down, but do what you have to do. As soon as you discourage them from pressing on I want you to get our people outta here."

["Understood."]

Jacob then switches over to Gudici on the ground, "Wopper, you watching this?"

Gudici responds, ["Yeppers, Buzzard."]

"I want you to keep your heads down but, knowing you, fat chance, right?"

["If I may make a suggestion?"]

Jacob says, "I'm all ears!"

["Use the HWGs as decoys and pick us up with the escorts."]

Jacob nods, "Ya, that'll work for a few!"

["It's a start? Out!"]

Jacob switches over to the team frequency, "Wopper had a great idea. We use the HWGs as bait and tag one escort for the pickup. We should be able to get away with this three or four times."

With the three squadron leader acknowledgements, Jacob adds, "If you grab—you go! Do not wait and do not look back."

It was just then that Jacob's second squad, the one shadowing the IR5, calls him, ["God damn it, Buzzard! Mario Kart pulled an Immelmann at low Mach and got away from us. The mutherfucker is booming in hard at twelve-thousand!"]

On the master tactical, Jacob notices that the IR5 is now eighty kilometers away at twelve kilometers altitude, and at Mach-8 that means he's only thirty seconds out, "People, we are breaking early! I got eyes on the IR5! Twenty seconds, people!"

Jacob wants that IR5 and he wants it bad.

He remembers the IR1 was like someone grafted an XB70 to the ass-end of an F40 a la Human Centipede and, from the looks of it, this one is a bit more refined. Jacob saw a fuzzy video of the IR5 and its strange double delta configuration with the forward fuselage being a lifting body and the razor like delta wings in the back framing two massive pontoon-like engine nacelles. Where the IR1 actually made aeronautical sense the IR5 looks like some mutant lawn dart incapable of powered flight—but here they are facing an IR5 and the damned machine looks like it's got that flight thing down pretty good.

The Interceptor-Reconnaissance series of fighters from Co-op have proven to be a total bitch to chase after because they are so damned fast. A Thunderbolt has to climb to five thousand meters above one just to keep up with it, and to attack you have to dive down hoping to get lucky enough to gain a firing position. It takes four or more fighters to keep one in check, and if one is fortunate enough to get into position with either cannon or missiles the IR5 pilot can simply jink the ship hundreds or even thousands of meters out of shot in just a fraction of a second with a little twitch of the wrist.

Jacob has always wanted to try his luck with one of these but he has never had the opportunity until now but, as it is, he has to pass on it because the Condors are the greater threat, "Second squad, break off of the IR5 and get in this fight." After the acknowledgement he switches channels over to Peña, "Hey, Dog, paint that IR5 and we'll both launch on it. When we break you chase that fucker away and keep it busy. You have to do this on your own, son. Copy?"

You can almost hear Peña grin, ["Copy! You got it, Boss!"]

Everyone knows that the whole idea of squads and squadrons and coordinated attacks and the very concept of leadership is going to go to hell in a handbag in short order. In just a few seconds the only thing that is going to hold true is the lead and his or her wingman, and anybody in the know knows that the wingman's job is the tougher job. Then, with the sheer number of fighters about to clash, even that tight bond is going to unravel in the worse possible way. With that thought Jacob prays that his people stick to their training and avoid the turn fights with the highly maneuverable Condors.

Something an experienced turn fighter, like Peña, would fall back on since he was a F308 pilot for years.

Jacob sees the IR5 starting to descend quickly and with that he knows he made the right call by sending Peña after it, and now the bastard just launched two centipede-azul missiles at them so Jacob quickly calls out, "Dog, switch target on the azuls and fox-fox!"

Both Jacob and Peña launch a centipede at those missiles while Jacob broadcasts to all, "Silver Fish! Silver Fish! Break!"

All forty-eight Thunderbolts explode into the sky.

They look like they are spiraling out in all kinds of crazy-ass directions but this is misleading—it's a controlled maneuver that holds for only a few seconds. The Thunderbolts maintain tight pairings, that lead and wingman relationship mentioned earlier, and before the Co-op pilots were able to mentally digest this the forty-eight Thunderbolts suddenly launch two centipede missiles apiece.

So now the Co-op is faced with twenty-four pairs of fighters launching a combined total of ninety-six centipede missiles all set for predetermined targets at close range. They in turn scatter in a panic and launch one or two missiles each at the Thunderbolts which messes up their own plan for coordinated targeting. A hundred and twenty fighters are now closing in on one another and ahead of them are over two hundred missiles taking the lead.

From faraway it looked as if three massive firework star-shells went off in quick succession with all the sparkles, instead of twirling off in some random trajectory, turning towards one another to merge into some surrealistic, techno lightning-bug mating frenzy—with Peña and Jacob in the middle of it all.

Peña, noticing the IR5 dropping below the fray, radios Jacob, ["Buzzard, I'm on Speedy Gonzales."]

With a vectored pitch, Peña flips his thunderbolt into a reverse turn and races after the IR5 while in a shallow climb so he can gain some lead and keep it guessing. In the middle of the turn Peña notices the missiles and fighters converging on one other—and all of a sudden the centipedes from both sides sprout micropede and mini-missiles thus tripling the spinning, smoke-trailing death in the sky.

Seeing this Peña thinks to himself, *O! Buzzard was right the first time! This is gonna get messy!*

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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.

Decelerating like mad, four of the RAF Warthogs drop to the landing zone with the lead ship slipping through the hologram over the landing pad, and that was after a quick radar pulse to double check the parameter of the pad against the tacnet data. The other three put down around the pad and turtle up in a defense posture against air assault. Victoria and Alfie, in the close air support role against possible ground incursion, take up a three kilometer orbit in the quadrant furthest away from the incoming transports from Net Basha.

Preceding the landing Maria, Nicole and Simmons race past the landing pad and take up sloppy looping orbits and figure-eights in the quadrants closest to the incoming airborne assault. This leaves Kiel circling over the landing zone coordinating everything.

If one were coming in towards the AO from Net Basha they would really think twice about breaching the five kilometer parameter because the SA has a reputation of not playing nice. The SA also has a reputation of following the Rules Of Engagement to the letter so, with a much larger attack wave only ten minutes behind them, the first wave lands balls-short to that parameter and were able to purge their own 'monkeys and kit' without being fired upon. Overhead the SA micro-drones are keeping tabs on the activity of the troops from Net Basha, mapping to the tacnet their deployment which is a ragged line-abreast formation hidden in the high brush and short trees.

Kiel broadcasts, ["Looks like they're gonna rush! Get ready to hose 'em down." Kiel notices Simmons to the right in a tight loop, "Klicks, hold position and if they breach you make the first run."]

["Roger that, Gun Crazy. The leash is tight!"]

Each of the dropships is staffed with the pilot, a WSO, and a three-man fire team whose job it is to provide parameter security when a ship is on the ground, and from the empty hold of the lead drop ship, Opie and Oshiro were already broadcasting live a whole minute before they touched down. Kiel is also providing them with drone video feed from the outside showcasing the four dropships landing and their lead ship slipping through the hologram. These real time external visuals from the SA, continuously fed through the broadcast channels in tandem with the commercial feed, makes it all an inside scoop inside the scoop of the decade.

On this mission both Opie and Oshiro are flagged as tacnet friendly, meaning they can run and shoot video without escorts, so on touchdown the ramp of the dropship slams open with a thud followed by the two racing down while being shadowed by commercial octodroid cameras. With the camera droids shooting in all directions Oshiro, with her own handheld camera rig and droid in tow, races into the underground facility to film the interior, specifically the culture and

cloning lab, while the 'on scene' reporter, Opie, stops short of the milling throng of children at a staging zone. Guarded by one of the recon squads, and watched over by the older late-to-market juveniles, the children here appear more apprehensive than frightened.

While being filmed by the droid, with the children and recon team in frame behind him, Opie fields questions like a pro, "Yes, it is a research and development facility, and we have confirmed the rescue of one-hundred and fifty-eight children."

In Opie's headset he hears the lady news-anchor ask him, ["Daniel, how many people did they arrest?"]

"We've been told they captured a staff of thirty-three."

["We have a press release coming in indicating that it was a joint mission with the RAF. Can you confirm that?"]

"Yes, Oshiro and I flew in on an RAF drop ship."

["Any idea how that came about?"]

"I have no details but the story I heard is that it was purely a coincidence that the RAF was on Sapphire. I was told that when the mission came up they offered to tag along. One more thing our viewers should know, especially anyone who is watching this from Great Britain, and this was confirmed, that Major, Victoria Wilson is flying one of the RAF gunships."

["The Queen! Are you sure about that?"]

In Opie's visual cortex is a HUD with multiple floating windows showing the feed being transmitted, so he queues up the short video of Victoria and the others before launch, and as it runs he narrates, "That was what we shot right before we launched. Major Wilson is flying what they're calling an overhead CAP just north of here."

["Can you get a camera droid on it?"]

"We're doing that now but, one thing our viewers should know, Nufa has sent an assault force that just landed outside the area of operation and they have more coming right on their tails. We've been informed that if those troops cross into this cordoned off zone things may get a bit harry."

["Daniel, we want you to keep your head down."]

Opie gives a flip snort, "You know full well that if the shooting starts Oshiro and I are goin' topside..."

The half-billion or so people watching this live broadcast are curious to see if this was going to get out of hand or not, and as things go they were not to be disappointed.

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In air combat a pilot is making a lot of mental calculations and guesstimates on the fly. Way back in the day when this all started it was simply an intellectual challenge, with a pair of machine guns and the sun at your back, but the performance of today's ships, and the sheer variety of weapons and countermeasures à la mode, makes it kind of maddening to wrap your brain around it all. Modern tacnet and AI interfaces do manage to ease some of the information and tactical brain-strain's overload but, relying on old school training and regular practice, the act of piloting itself remains substantially effortless and entirely hands and feet reactionary. You can program any flight model parameters into a droid and get specific and predictable results, yes, but you can't instill the abstracts of random or chance which can throw the efficiencies and overt aggressiveness of AI out of kilter.

When facing off against human pilots AI kinda sucked at it.

The underlining physics to aerial combat centers on energy management and to have a flair for flight requires you to render it all down to two distinct fighting styles. Those being 'turn fighting' and the tried and true and much overlooked 'boom and zoom' techniques.

Turn fighting is the easy one to grasp because this is what you see in 2D and the ever so popular neuronet interactives. Turn fighting is all about energy-investment loss because when you turn with an adversary you are overcoming your ships natural inclination to fly straight by creating a pocket of lift to force the direction of travel away from the straight. Doing this causes you to lose some energy and in this some ships lose energy faster than others. Some ships are designed to turn with a minimal loss of energy and if you in your ship try to turn inside the tighter turning ship then you'll end up losing. That is unless you sacrifice energy (e.g. cut power or vector) to tighten your own turn to attain lock, which could work, but if it doesn't you are now at a low energy state and in combat this is not a healthy state. Yes, it only takes 23 seconds for the latest Thunderbolt to go from 0 to Mach 5.2 at 1000mb, and 34 seconds for a Condor to go from 0 to Mach 4.8 also while on the deck, and you only need a small portion of those seconds to recoup some of that lost energy—but there's some desperate as hell seconds when the cavalry is too far out to save your dumb-ass after you dropped a wooden nickel on the Yo.

Where the F40 Cottonmouth was designed with turn fighting in mind, but turn fighting at high speeds and high altitudes, and the F308 Bulldog was designed for turn fighting at low speeds and low altitude, the ASF47 Thunderbolt, in spite of its mass and cross-section, was designed to turn fight against both of those ships however, in a

target rich environment, like here on Arrakis, turn fighting would be considered passé at best or suicidal at least.

This leaves the boom and zoom option and that's especially true when dealing with the F51 Gryphon.

The F51 Gryphon series of fighters were not designed to be turn fighters but they do it so damned well. They were originally developed by the SA for the Co-op back when they were good buddies and the ASF47 was out of the Co-op's budgetary reach. The original design was an intentional nerf to the F40 by slapping on a couple of MDDSH nacelles to the nose so that it could have some rudimentary jump capability. The original may have been a bit of a dog but the follow on models proved to be very competitive.

The Anzu, the F51a, was the whole reason the Annex had to punch things up with the D-model of the Thunderbolt, and with the export of the F303 blocked by the U.S. government the Co-op cobbled together the Buer, the F51b, which was a severe underperformer. It was the F51c near the end of the war, known as the Condor, a stripped down version of the Buer, that forced the SA to go back to Sukhoi, the original designers of the Thunderbolt, who went to task and raised the bar with the 'bis' model of the ASF47. It didn't stop there because after the tussle with the Marines in New York, the Annex came up with significant field upgrades for the ASF47 and the 'bisE' designation.

The old adage 'speed is life and altitude is life insurance' may be at the heart of flying boom and zoom, but 'chicken-shit' is its soul. The idea is to: 1.) Select the easy or safe target and preferably one that is busy or doesn't see you, and; 2.) Initiate an attack that will catch them in a poor position or a low energy state while you maintain a high energy state, and; 3.) Boom, that is launch or fire on them with the least amount of maneuvering to position yourself for that shot, then; 4.) Zoom, that is fly past the target and egress from the point of attack regardless of the success of said attack, and; 5.) Utilize your high energy state and put distance between you and the target, preferably trading it for altitude, so that you can either plan the next attack run or select the next target.

B-n-Z teams, when they work together to troll and bait for one another, regardless of who scores a kill, are by far the most lethal adversaries in aerial combat—and the pilots of the Annex eat, sleep and cerebrate the B-n-Z mantra of, "Būm-zūm, būm zūm."

Point being...

If this were a 2D thingy, like a movie, you would be treated to some fantastical pitched battle of twisting and turning fighters, all swooping about and throwing themselves at each other at high speed with lasers and plasma blasters 'pew-pewing' with the bad guys getting

fire-balled and tumbling out of the sky in flaming heaps...but that's not what you're gonna get today. The close-in switchblade street fight in New York is not going to work here on Arrakis.

What would have been a delightful little seven kilometer wide fur-ball actually hemorrhaged with most of the Thunderbolts exploding out of the other side at high Mach with five of their own accompanied by thirty-one of them destroyed and plunging towards the ground.

What happened in that seven-second/seven-kilometer wide maelstrom of fighters and missiles was a textbook example of measure versus countermeasure with most of the missiles and mini-missiles neutralizing each other and only thirty-three actually finding their mark and three more of the Condors falling to guns. Of the fighters that were destroyed the cockpits did eject clear and thirty-three of the pilots survived, and when they touch down most of those pilots will wait out the battle and enjoy the show. Some may elect to run but if they switch off their IFF or get back in the fight they'll be targeted for sure so, in compliance with general orders, in the minds of most it's probably better to sit tight and twiddle their thumbs.

Another oddity for a neutral observer is that the fighters shot down are falling from the sky as clusters of junk and debris and not burning per se. They're not burning because with the quantum particle engines they don't require fuel so, you could say, they are burning ambient air—which is not physically possible in any universe but that's the best analogy anyone can come up with in regards to the impact of quantum partial-annihilation to explosive thermal expansion. Because of this they do carry cryogenic gas (e.g. liquid nitrogen) to spritz in the engine as one would an afterburner, and this would have the same effect as a fuel but, either way, bleve or burn, plasma is still plasma.

A lot of things came with the ASF47 upgrades...

With the bisE came larger ventral fins and the 'safety-razor' engines, yes, but the 5-barrel 7.62mm cannon was upgraded to 8.80 almost doubling its lethality. Also when flying in combat the guns are now set to pre-fire so that if your targeting reticle sweeps over an enemy the AI will automatically squeeze the trigger. That's how two Condors got dropped but with Jacob he killed one trailing him. In the tail of the ASF47bis was an itsy-bitsy cyaxle railgun in 4.75 called the stinger gun, whose purpose was to down missiles, but for the bisE they swapped it out for a permanently mounted single-barrel cannon also upgunned to 8.80 and this one wrecks everything.

When Jacob was about to exit the fur-ball alone three Condors saw this and pulled around to his six-o'clock which meant he baited them perfectly. With a pair of Thunderbolts hot on the Condor's tails all five shoot missiles off at the same time. Jacob launches a 20/20

cluster bomb backwards at the three missiles closing in on him. The bomb flicks its 40 bomblets into the pathway of those missiles and all three are blown out of the sky.

One of the Condors caught a missile up the ass, in the top vector port, thus vaporizing the back half of the ship. Another Condor had a missile slam into the fuselage at the root of the wing, and spun the ship around in a crumpled mess. The lead Condor was hit by a burst from Jacob's stinger gun and this clipped its canard and sheared off the wing from the port side thus spiraling it out of control towards the ground.

The Ottoman Slap to the fighters of the Co-op did the trick. Jacob, with thirty-eight Thunderbolts following him, break free from the melee leaving only thirty-eight of the Condors swirling around each other in defensive loops. He then notices that Peña is already over twenty kilometers away chasing after the IR5, and the four fighters of second squad are screaming in towards this fight. He is also alerted by the tacnet that high above them another forty-eight F51 fighters, the last from the three cruisers, are probing the low orbit spider mine-field looking for a safe point of entry. Jacob realizes that if they're going to win then they need to scatter the Condors down here before the new ones above get past those spiders.

Jacob radios to second squad as he pitches his nose around, "Second squad, let's break them up! Dump all your missiles on 'em and we'll follow ya in!"

The Thunderbolt has been called a lot of things through the years like The Wedge, Rhodan, The Sukhoi Plague, and Jacob's all-time favorite of ZoMug (for ZOMG!), but with the bizE model a new one has come to light. Just as Jacob finishes his turn, thirty-two centipede missiles rip through followed by second squad then Jacob and the rest hot on their tails. It's as if the flying demons of the Kitab al-Bulhan have assembled into some grotesque conga line and now set upon the remaining Condors.

In short, the 'Pchela Monstrs' are on a rampage.

01100100-01100001-01100110-0110101-0110001-0011111

Simmon's Warthog pancaked into a short depression after a third mini-missile ripped through the deck from underneath. The ships AI reported that she was the only survivor and that the trauma maintenance system of her JACC is struggling to keep her alive. This was not exactly an auspicious beginning to this firefight but her perimeter run, a whole kilometer away from that five-klick barrier, netted the discovery of a whole squad of troops from Net Basha

sneaking on foot through the tall grass and Simmons bringing the hammer down with a vengeance.

Where the Thunderbolt now has the 88, a 5-barreled Gatling gun firing 8.80mm explosive bolts, and the 23, a similar 3-barreled gun in 23mm firing the wontons, a one-ton yield micro-nuke bomblet used for ground attack, the Razorbacks have three of each gun all on flexible stinger mounts with two in front, two in back and two more that can sprout out from the mortar tubes amidships.

Simmons fired her 23mm cannons on the squad which pretty much wiped them out in seconds but, instead of keeping her underside flat to the ground, she banked slightly to tighten that turn so that she could stay close in while keeping the sharpest edge of the fuselage towards the target. She should have kept her distance and her belly level to the ground because another squad of troops just a few hundred meters away from the now dead squad just couldn't resist the juicy and tempting flat underside presented to them.

The skin of the dropships is the same used on Thunderbolts. It's a carbon tube latticework that's quartz crystal hard and yet light as pine board. The skin of the Thunderbolt is a centimeter thick, but the skin on a Razorback is twelve-centimeters and the deck is three. Developed by the Russians, the American licensed version was called CCCP by Northrop (for Carbon Composite Compounding Process) and this plasma printing system was first used to make transparent canopies consisting of virtually indestructible artificial diamond for fighters like the Bulldog and the Cottonmouths. Now with the iron infused carbon based composite skins, joking referred to as Stalinium, at a steep enough angle rounds usually glance off, but at around 30° from square-on those rounds tend to crunch in a bit or penetrate when exerting enough force. When flown properly the Co-op's missiles and rail-munitions will bounce off a HWG all day long but with Simmons' deck hiked up they kind of punched right on through.

Maria and Nicole race in and hose the entire area up to the perimeter barrier with their plasma-guns, 23mm cannon and cluster bombs. With the transports from the second wave lifting off after dumping their troops, Maria and Nicole would rather be blasting them but, as of yet, nobody from the other side of the five-klick barrier has yet to fire a shot so they are still off limits pursuant to the ROEs.

The idea of off-limits doesn't last long.

While Nicole was busy blowing up the terrain along the perimeter, keeping the second wave of troops from Net Basha thinking twice about rushing forward, Maria is flat turning around Simmons' ship looking to zero in on the troops that shot her down. They have already closed in on the crash site—not to attack it as much as not to

get shot at by Maria from above. The AI on Simmons' ship was using one of the small penta guns in an attempt to drive them off but the troops from Net Basha are in the Co-ops newer ACE fighting suits, designed for all combat environments like the JACCs, so out of range the penta guns in 2.73 serves more to annoy them more than to keep them at bay. The AI on the downed Warthog then deploys the 88 gun from the mortar tubes and with this everything goes to hell.

Because of the thickness and durability of their carbon and iron composite fuselage the Razorbacks still carry cryogenic hydrogen and oxygen to spritz into their engines to maximize thrust where needed; however the skin of Simmons' warthog has a severe crack. By just casually looking at it you would notice ripples radiating away from the ship but if you were to switch to infrared you would be treated to a dazzling 30 meter plume of flame shooting out from that breach which is now glowing red. If the skin and cryogenic tanks would have been weaker the ship would have exploded outright but, as long as the combustion stays outside the shell, the fuel will just continue to burn out of control until it burns itself out.

The Warthog's AI fires the 88 through that heat plume and on the squad from Net Basha but, because the extreme heat from the burning hydrogen/oxygen mix is throwing the sighting system out of whack, some of the 8.80mm rounds deflect off of the hull and fly through the five-kilometer perimeter killing three from Net Basha. In a completely knee-jerk reaction those troops fire back en masse.

"Oh shit!" Maria then broadcasts, "Weapons free!"

Kiel has been continuously tracking and assigning targets and areas to each of the gunships, so with the missiles and miniballs flying in, Kiel radios, "Hit your targets now!" And then, very unexpectedly she orders Victoria in because her ship has a missile farm segment in the hold, "Hedgehog, step up and cover Tiger."

Victoria laughs, "Well now, Guns, isn't this a cock up!"

With Nicole doing high speed runs with all three of her 23mm cannons blazing and 20/20 cluster bombs flying in random patterns, she is effectively pushing the second wave back a whole kilometer from the five-kilometer zone, and with Simmons' AI popping a 20/20 bomb about every second straight up to scatter the wonton bomblets around her ship, that gives Maria a chance to expand her orbit and locate any squads that got past them.

With the missiles coming in the 88s have been very effective in blowing them out of the sky, but with Maria locating three squads below her she shouts, "We have contact!"

Before she could get a shot off a mini-missile from the squads

below hits the underside of the nose of her ship and shears off the 88 cannon that was fending off centipede missiles. Because of this the 88 on top failed to target a Co-op centipede that hits the topside of her nose which punches the ship into the ground. Now pitching into the dirt Maria's ship cartwheels and rolls landing upside down with its ass in the air. The 88 and 23mm cannons in the back deploy and set to work but cannot depress their aim enough to get troops that may close in from behind.

The underside penta guns didn't deploy in time so of the three mini-missiles shot at the ship, one got through and punctured the deck and blew up in the port compartment across from the cockpit thereby killing her three man support team.

Hanging upside down in the cockpit Maria shouts at her WSO, "God damn it! Ozo, get out!"

From his position across from her, Sergeant Ozo laughs back, "Fucken right about that!"

The pilot and WSO hatches above them snap open and Ozo falls out while Maria blows the explosive bolts holding the massive cargo hatch door to the fuselage. Still attached to the deck, the top edge slams into the ground and this quick thinking will give them the only cover they have for the fight that's about to come because, with her ship down, Maria knows the squads from Net Basha, the ones that took the nose cannon out, will now converge on her.

It's a hunch, a gut feeling, not the borderline feral prescience that Jacob exhibits but her hunches do serve her well.

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Peña is in a rolling scissors with a Condor, and losing energy fast, and he's thinking to himself, *how the fuck?* He could now see that his stupid mistake was made about thirty seconds ago when he decided to charge in at low altitude like when flying a Bulldog, but that little realization doesn't help right now.

Chasing after the IR5, Peña anticipated that this guy was going to try the same trick he pulled on Second Squad, and Peña was ready for it when he did. Coming down hard he dropped below the IR5 who was in a vertical turn, and while pulling up to get guns on he raked his 88 through the right wing cutting off the horizontal stabilizer on the tip that functions as a rudder. This took the fight out of the IR5 who decided to git while the gittin' was good, and Peña let him get away because that's their standing orders for now.

With the IR5 high-tailing out, Peña drops below the Condors

scattered by Jacob and the others. He could see through the tacnet interface that nine more condors and one Thunderbolt were tumbling out of the sky from that last attack and that half of the remaining Thunderbolts were chasing after the rest of the Condors, but none of them were chasing any in his general direction.

Peña, near Mach 1 and tilling the dirt at 30 meters, has four Condors heading his way at Mach 1.5 with the lowest one at 1000 meters above him. At three kilometers out Peña decides to flick a micropede at that low one simply to shoo him away but instead of going up-vertically, as was expected, this guy rolls over the missile and dives down-vertically for Peña.

Obviously, Peña was looking to slip under the cover of the Thunderbolts now in command of the air over the Moloka'i preserve and, yes, that Condor should have raced off with the rest of his crew, but the bonus payout for taking down a Thunderbolt appears to be worth the risk.

Seeing this, Peña turns tight to stay under the Condor forcing him to either aerodynamically compress in the dive, thereby crashing into the ground (if he was in a stupid rush to take the shot) or pulling in alongside Peña while in that turn thereby losing that shot. The Condor pilot chose the latter option, the temporary formation-flying with Peña over the crashy-dying option, and for a split second both pilots look at each other—wondering where this was going to go.

Peña rolls up-over the Condor with the intent of falling on its six but, instead of overshooting the Thunderbolt, the Condor also rolls and coils back putting the two into their first rolling-scissors. The problem faced here by the two pilots is that this is a low-altitude and progressively losing-speed maneuvering fight that harks back to the antiquated prop and early jet days from centuries ago. Fact is, nobody on either side is going to believe that this actually happened until they see the telemetry and path the files for themselves.

Like most pilots they log hundreds of hours in flight simulator games, and what's going on here is not exactly a common occurrence even there, but it appears that in game both pilots here have mastered the art of the stall-fight. Each time they turn towards one another they cut power and follow with a quick pulse of vectored-pitch to tighten their turns trying to force an overshoot, but failing that they cross-scissors past each other only to twist around to yet again chop more power, with another smidge of vector-pitch, trying to squeeze a little more tight out of their turns.

So, here's Peña, sweating bullets and amazed that he is in an honest to God stall-fight with a Condor pilot who actually knows what he is doing, and in ships that were never designed to pull maneuvers

like these, Peña realizes that cutting through the anxiety and the adrenaline rush he's grinning like an idiot.

In Peña's mind he's actually having fun.

Here on the seventh scissors the Thunderbolt and Condor look like they are both hanging motionless in the air. They've lost so much energy and they are so slow that their AG pods have kicked in to supplement the loss of lift that was keeping them airborne. Yes, either of them could punch their throttle and shoot into the sky like a rocket but there's that little overshoot problem to consider. The pilot that loses nerve now will get an ass full of cannon rounds for sure.

At this point there is no more wiggle room. The mass of the Thunderbolt, where it usually maintains significant momentum through turns, now works like an anchor with Peña's fighter grinding to a halt in midair. The super-lite Condor, now unable to roll, is forced into an excruciatingly slow hammer-head and between the two it's obvious that the Condor is going to win this bout—and as the Condor's reticle drifts onto the Thunderbolt, Peña, in a last second Hail Marry pass, punches his throttle in a full powered vector pitch. The nose of his ship pushes over and Peña fires the very moment the Condor shoots his cannon at him.

At thirty meters apart, point-blank range in fact, the cannons are automatically set for a wide-spread dispersion. For both ships the damage from the explosive bolts is absolute with their forked MDDSH nacelles, canards and wings being swept away in a cloud of debris. Only the cockpits, encapsulated by the indestructible canopies, remain intact even though they now are covered with dozens of crush blemishes and star-fractures. These cockpits did their job and, like synchronized swimmers, they both detach from the tattered remains of their ships and drop to the ground with a controlled fall.

In space these cockpits function like a lifeboat and can operate for a month if need be, but since Peña and the Condor pilot got shot down in the atmosphere of a habitable planet they snap open and let the pilots eject free before touching down.

Peña and the other pilot, standing on the side of a small hill, and currently marked by IFF as non-combatants, both wave and walk towards the top of the hill to watch the action, and it is Peña who opens the conversation, "Lieutenant, that was a fucked up fight!"

The pilot puts out his hand with a smile, "Macquarie, Porter Macquarie's the name, and in fine company I am!"

"Oscar Peña..." Peña takes his hand with a firm shake, "And I have to say you're a hell of a pilot."

"I want to thank you, that was bonzer of a blue thar, mate!"

"Much appreciated here too." Peña has already fished out two 50ml airplane-bottles of Scotch he secretly holds onto for just these occasions, and hands one to Macquarie, "This requires a shot."

"The hell!" With a look of total surprise, Macquarie takes it in hand, "A lil' nip of Bowmore! I have to say we're cobbers to the end!"

Macquarie's three fellow Condors, overhead in a lazy Lufbery circle, suddenly break and race off. Seconds later Jacob's Thunderbolt streaks in and turns hard to orbit the downed pilots for a lap.

Peña asks, "Hey, your buddies, why didn't they jump in?"

Macquarie snorts, "I called dibs on ya."

"Oh, okay!" Peña smiles, "How much of a bonus do you get for shooting down my dumb ass?"

"A cool mill! Shite, I racked me up three spookys today, but that..." Pointing to Jacob who is now racing off towards Moloka'I, "It's ten to ground him and a hundred to scrub 'im for good."

Peña is amazed, "The Field Marshal?"

"Gob honest truth, mate!"

00100011-0110110-01101001-0100011-0110111-01101001

This broadcast will be looked back on as a seminal moment in as-it-happens reporting. Everybody will remember where they were, and there are those that will swear that they could hear the collective gasp from the over three-billion viewers watching it all in real time, and with horror, as Victoria's ship goes down.

Opie and Oshiro have done an unbelievably heroic job keeping up with the fight. Not only did they place their spare octodroid camera forward between the two crash sites, capturing incredible footage of the gun runs by the Warthogs, but they themselves have moved up and became part of this story because they are in the thick of it.

Watching Victoria, Nicole and Michelle Kiel fling their gunships in alternating runs at the troops from Net Baha was eerily terrifying for most viewers because they simply cannot wrap their brains around modern combat. There is no frame of reference in 2D and interactive media where they can compare what they are watching and have some understanding as to what's going on. It is impossible for most viewers to comprehend and digest the extreme violence and the sheer volume of firepower being exchanged between the two sides. More so their minds cannot grasp that the Warthogs appear to simply brush off all the missiles and bombs that slam up against their armor-fuselage and, now thinking them invulnerable, are shocked when the inevitable

happens and another one of them gets shot down.

The viewers just didn't expect it to be Victoria.

As Victoria was flat spinning through the exit point of her run, and turning around to fly close in behind Maria's crash site, a centipede that was hugging the ground, and not seen by the AI, shot up and punched itself into the underside mounted plasma cannon in the nose. This missile, in unison with its four mini-missiles, all exploded at once shredding the entire forward third of the Warthog. The explosion was so intense that a secondary explosion of the hydrogen and oxygen tanks followed and that almost invisible fireball was highlighted by a supersonic vapor chine that flashed as the shockwave expanded. With this the forward momentum was virtually killed off as the rest of the ship skipped like a rock then plowed into a stand of trees.

Opie and Oshiro have already split with her racing towards Maria's crash site to get footage of that firefight while Opie and his octodroid rush up to Victoria's crash site, all the while reporting, "We have three of the Annex troopers crawling out of the wreckage and no sign of Major Wilson. Aaah, stand by, we have activity..."

The deck hatch is ripped open from the inside and an RAF crewman in a JACC steps out followed by Victoria in her JACC. The underside of Victoria's canopy is shattered and she has blood splattered all over the inside of the visor.

Victoria cries out, "Crickey, this is gonna hurt!"

As she bends over saline sprays the inside of the canopy, and as Victoria stands blood and water pour out of the breach. Opie's octodroid camera picks up her face that now sports a huge-ragged cut through the brow, past her eye and down through her cheek and into her jaw, but instead of bleeding profusely like it was the cut is filled with a metallic trauma compound. As if fixing a broken vase, this medical Kintsugi compound of silvery micro med-bot infused remedial mucilage fills the cut and tamps off the bleeding.

The SA Corporal says, "We need to get to the crash site."

The RAF crewman follows with, "I'll watch the Major, here."

Victoria protests, "No, Lieutenant, I'm coming with."

"You need to set this one out, Major."

Victoria snarls, "The fuck I will!" She pulls her BR1 railgun around and nods to the SA troops, "Corporal, lead the way."

As the five high-tail it towards Maria's crash site, under three-hundred meters away, Opie turns towards the octodroid camera and, with a totally surprised look, he says, "I guess we're goin' too!"

Opie and his droid are only thirty meters behind the five, and he continues to report while running, "If you just joined us, Major Wilson survived that crash! In fact, everybody on that ship survived that crash. Major Wilson received a severe injury to her face but, as you can see, she's still in this fight. Right now we are heading to the second crash site. That's camera feed number seventeen, Oshiro is filming that fight that's currently taking place...oh, shit!"

Victoria saw them first and opened up.

They ran in behind a nine man squad of enemy troops that were also moving onto the crash site. Victoria took to her knee and dropped three of them outright. The SA troopers dive to the ground and chew up the squad with the guns on their scorpion boom mounts. All of the nine were already dead when the plasma-pulse flail gun finally torches the whole area in front of them.

When Victoria fired on them one was able to get a few shots back and what was caught on camera was Opie getting hit in the helmet with a miniball. The round clipped his helmet and spun it around while knocking him off his feet. With the flail gun being fired a second time Opie stands and is bleeding profusely out his nose and from the large cuts on the side of his face and scalp.

With Victoria reloading her BR1, Opie, in the foreground, picks up his helmet and laughs as he puts his finger through the hole in it, "That was close!"

The SA troopers leap to their feet and skirt around the flames with Victoria and the lieutenant trailing behind.

Opie sees this and, without any hesitation, he beats feet after them with the droid on his tail, "Here we go!"

Seconds later they run into another group of enemy troops, and another exchange of fire, and the viewers are entreated to yet another amazing shot of Victoria fearlessly kicking ass while a few miniballs glance off the armor of her fighting suit.

On the now five-billion viewers this leaves an impression.

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At Maria's crash site, Oshiro has hunkered down near the back of the cargo door and is filming the exchange of fire between Maria and the squad that has crept in close. The gun mounted on her scorpion boom is the heavy barreled cyaxle cannon which is so lethal she has no problem keeping that enemy squad at bay. Ozo, on the other side of the cargo door, has the traditional five barreled scorpion gun. Maria and Ozo know that Oshiro is there but they are intent on

ignoring her and focus on their job. The odd thing is that the mic on her camera is so powerful that she is able to pick up on their small talk during the firefight.

Maria laughs while she continues to fire, "No shit! I didn't see you there, Sergeant!"

Ozo radio's back, ["Ya, my son was on the other team."]

"Which position does he play?"

["Third base."]

Maria lifts her right arm and sprays the foliage with 2.73mm bolts followed by two grenades, "That is one good looking boy of yours!" Maria then thinks for a second as the grenades go off, "Hey, wasn't he the kid hanging out with Diego on Second Hand?"

["Ya, I was there for three years, remember?"]

Maria is surprised as her cycaxle cannon continues to chatter away, "Oh yea! That's right! Growing your legs back! I remember now! That was a long haul for you."

Ozo mumbles, ["Take that, Homer! Ya bastard!"] Then perks up with, ["It was worth it. I got to know the Xhemal pretty good!"]

Maria's cyaxle cannon continues to fire small bursts as she smiles, "I'm glad our kids can stay in touch now that you're back."

Ozo laughs, ["I have to tell ya, Marshal. Now that Diego has made this change, Jose is totally in love with her!"]

"That's a scream!" There was then a huge explosion on the other side that shakes the ground and rattled the wreckage of the ship, "How's the misses?"

There was a lull, and suddenly two enemy troopers in ACE suits pop up over the berm Maria was crouched behind. She instantly let loose a barrage from the five-barreled penta guns attached to each of her forearms. At this distance the bolts cut right through the suits killing them instantly, and as the two bodies collapse she notices the emblem on their suits and suddenly realizes that they are fighting Security Services and not forces from Nufa.

"No shit!" Maria was wondering why they were so aggressive and got her answer, then radios, "Ozo, status?"

No response so she pops another three wonton grenades over the rise and slips in behind the cargo door. On the other side she finds the lower-half of Ozo lying beside a shallow crater. The upper half of his suit and body were tattered shreds of tech and gore spattered about in the interior hold of the ship.

Seeing this, two things come to mind: First is that she can't hold this position without Ozo and, Ozo getting killed like this really pisses her off to no end.

Desperate measures, thinks Maria when through the tacnet she commands the Warthog to eject a spider missile. As Maria slips back to her side of the cargo door she hears the missile hit the deck and roll down towards the front of the ship that's nosed into the dirt.

"Gun Crazy! Ozo is dead. I can't hold."

Kiel radios back, ["Hedgehog and her support team are almost there so if you can hold on for just another minute."]

Maria leaps up and empties her penta guns into the troops inching up to her position. She then lets loose with four grenades and drops back down behind the berm as miniballs from the tree line start to chew it up.

Maria squats in front of Oshiro, "You need to get outta here." Another ACE suit hops up and over the berm and, without looking back, Maria's cyaxle cannon blows him in half, "Yoshi, you've got twenty seconds to get clear."

Oshiro hops up and trots backwards all the while filming Maria swapping out the magazines of her penta guns while stepping around the ship. Her cyaxle gun continues to fire burst after burst at the enemy troops as she approaches the spider missile.

Maria calls out orders as she scopes the bar code on the missile and pulls up the menu in her JACC, "Gun's I'm gonna pop a spider! I need you and Red Hell clear by three clicks!"

Kiel radios back, ["You are fucking crazy! You know that!"]

"Get outta here!" Maria then notices Victoria and the others break free through the trees behind the ship and broadcasts to all, "Vic, everybody, get down now!"

Oshiro stops retreating and films what happens next. Maria launches grenades over the wreck and picks up the missile, cradling it in her left arm and holding onto the handle in the back with her right hand. She pushes the missile straight up into the air and it loses all weight as it starts to deploy. Maria anchors herself by hooking her left arm into the landing gear that is sticking out of the ship.

It took little effort to coax the missile to point out over the end of the gunship and towards the bulk of the troops from Net Basha. In that direction are all the transports and fighters that have kept their distance because of the Warthogs but are taking the opportunity to close in now that Michelle and Nicole's ships are streaking away.

The missile is pulling hard on Maria who is struggling to hold onto it, the very second she sees the transports and fighters lined up on the tacnet she lets go of it. As the missile starts to fly forward Maria throws herself onto the deck of the ship and rolls and slides down as fast as she can. At one-hundred and fifty meters away the missile snaps open and launches.

There was a strange breeze swirling around the missile as the MDDSH vanes blossom out, and in a thousandth of a second the thing attempts to go 300,000kps from 30kph. In atmospheric conditions, at that level of acceleration, basically from zero to light-speed, the 500 kilos of its mass converts from a construct of solid components—to a rapidly expanding degenerate mass that basically goes boom.

The event was approximately 1.2 megatons of explosive force but, instead of going kaboom all in one spot, that explosion was stretched out over five kilometers.

The compression and destructive force of the shockwave was devastating out along the axis of the explosion. Many of the troops from Net Basha outside the perimeter were killed outright, and all the transports and fighters that were racing in were knocked out of the sky. Maria knows that the Security Services troops close to the crash site will not be hurt by this blast but they sure as hell will be demoralized by it if they have half a brain.

With all the firing from outside the perimeter stopped, and Kiel charging back in at high speed, and with twenty-two seconds of rolling thunder shaking the ground, Maria turns to Victoria and the rest and thumbs back behind her, "You wanna get in on this?"

The corporal and his crew break left and Victoria and her Lieutenant head towards Maria on the right—and Oshiro captures the three of them charging the berm and firing as they do, which is made even more dramatic because Victoria and her Lieutenant are firing away with hand held railguns.

As they reach the berm, spraying fire crazily over the top of it, Maria first gets an alert that Jacob is calling her of all things, and another alert that the troops from Net Basha, what remains of them, have just broadcast a stand down order.

Maria waves her hand up and down, "Cease fire! Cease fire!" In the sudden stillness she looks around and then turns to Victoria, "Hold your position. Give me a minute." She then steps away and pulls up Jacob, "It had better be good, Chuckle-fuck!"

["I'm patching Hartcourt through to ya."]

Maria's mood changes, "Oh! Okay, thanks."

Maria looks to Victoria and shrugs with surprise as Hartcourt comes on the line, ["Maria, love, how are you?"]

Maria is amazed by how soothing his voice is, "Hey, Box! It's been a bang up day, if you know what I mean."

["I hear you're having a row with my Security Services."]

"Oh, ya know, differences of opinion and all that. I kind of got it all sitch-a-fuckenated for now."

["I hear you've also uncovered some more of those...children. Is that true? If so I have a modest proposal."]

"Tell ya what, how 'bout you give me the low-down-low, and give it PDQ before I start scrappin' the last of your people. I mean I'm on a roll here, Box!"

["A truce then. You take the children, all of them. Just leave me the staff. I will personally come deal with them."]

Maria thinks about what that means and wonders if leaving them here is the morally right thing to do because if Hartcourt is going to come interrogate them then you can guarantee that it's not going to be pretty. Then again, who else would take the short cuts necessary to extract what they need from these soulless degenerates and stomp the Geisha Huts out once and for all.

"Well now!" Maria snorts, "I guess it's best to leave that ugly interrogation business to the pro! You got yourself a deal."

Harcourt is obviously stewing on what she just said, and his response blows Maria away, ["Maria, I do know what people say about me but, just so you know, I personally abhor violence. (deep breath) Doing this...interrogation...I consider it my penance for ignoring the obvious. I hope you, of all people, would understand."]

Maria has the shocking realization that he's telling the truth, "Ya, Box, I do. Let's touch base when I get back to Sapphire. We can hammer out the ROE's then. Kewl beans?"

Harcourt gives a small, uncustomary and very subtle laugh, "Yes, Maria. Cool beans it is, and...what I extract from those bastards I will most definitely share with you."

Cutting the link, Maria then turns and steps up to Victoria, "It's over. We take the kids and we're outty."

"Mar, dearie..." Victoria surveys the destruction around them and shakes her head in amazement, "You *are* the dog's bollocks."

Oshiro caught that on camera and the viewers, especially in the UK, will be curious as to who this 'Mar' person is.

01101111-01101001-01101110-01100010-01100001-01100010-00100001

["Mr. Graves, I was wondering if you can help me. I'm trying to get ahold of your Marshal Ramirez."]

Jacob grunts as he pulls a tight turn and dives after a Condor, trying to drive him away, "No problem, Mr. Hartcourt. (grunts) I'll be happy to put you through." In the video feed he notices the new Secretary General behind him, "Just let me talk to that guy behind you when I transfer you. Deal?"

Hartcourt glances behind himself for a second, ["Lebedev?"]

"That's the one!" Jacob then gets an alert that a cease fire has been called, "We get a cease fire?"

["Yes, Field Marshal. Orders have been issued."]

Jacob is sort of surprised, "Oh, okay! Thanks for that!"

Now in a leisurely turn, waiting for Maria to pick up, Jacob asks, "Mr. Hartcourt, if I may, Sir."

["May away, Mr. Graves."]

"Your pilots, they're good, but they are taking excessive risks. A little too aggressive! As an observation I would say that your bonus structure needs to be flattened out a little."

["And that would accomplish?"]

"They need to work together? Think wolf-pack."

["And you're telling me this?"]

Jacob smiles, "I prefer a challenge."

["You're saying it was a bit of a shooting gallery today?"] Jacob nods yes, so Hartcourt nods, ["I'll take it under advisement."]

Maria then comes on the channel with a little bit of a snarl, ["It had better be good, Chuckle-fuck!"]

"I'm patching Hartcourt through to ya."

Maria's mood changes, ["Oh! Okay, thanks."]

After a quarter minute Lebedev comes on line with a scowl, ["Da, Field Marshal."]

"Well, Vasily, you sure as fuck got there fast. I mean the shit just started and...here you are!"

["I am here to intercede for peace."]

"Really, you...a man of peace."

Lebedev admits, ["Peace will come. It always does."]

Jacob pushes his button, "So, you're there to broker the post war peace. I know what's up your sleeve."

Lebedev smiles, ["I am sure you have ideas."]

"You've been very vocal about your position on the FIS, so I don't think it's an idea I just pulled out of my ass."

["Makes sense to plan ahead, no? It's going to take time but not that much time."]

Jacob's eyes bore through his, "I just want you to know this, Vasily. I want there to be no misunderstanding. When this is all over I will be the one to lie in the grass."

Lebedev smiles, ["Whatever you say, Strelok."]

"The permanent members of the Security Council have always cock-blocked overreach by your types in the past. I expect this time to be no different."

["Jacob, that's the beauty of time."]

After a pregnant pause, "Okay, I'm on pins and needles."

Lebedev laughs big as he reaches out to terminate the feed, ["Given enough time things change. *Dos vedanya Tovarisch!*"]

As Jacob drops altitude, he has a light bulb of a realization, "Mutherfucker! So, that's what you're up too!"

01011001-01001101-01001101-01000011

The Mari Lug is a pocked mark moonscape around the two hotly contested crash sites. What trees still standing are stripped of bark and splintered beyond help. Oshiro filmed the SA load the children into the drop ship and left with them. The spare octodroid camera filmed the facility and the staff being handed over to Security Services, and with that done it zipped back to the crash sites.

Security Services have already cleared out the bodies of their dead that litter the berm and depression by Maria's downed ship. They are in a hurry because they've been advised that Pandemonium, now in orbit high above them, is going to vaporize those wrecks the second Maria and her people bug out.

The fire team that came with Victoria have already picked through the debris and collected what body parts they could of the support fire team that were blown up in Maria's ship. Maria herself reverently carried what was left of Sergeant Ozo onto Kiel's Warthog and put it with all the body parts that were forward in the hold.

Kiel's support team was already dropped off at the first crash site to recover Simmons herself. They also collected the remains of the other four and were waiting for Kiel to arrive.

When the Warthog touched down, with the ramp already open, they start loading up the dead before gingerly bringing Simmons up the ramp. They set her down gently across from the cockpit.

Kiel calls out as she takes off, "Red Leg Three-Three, we are out of here. You are clear to destroy the HWGs on your next pass."

On the radio they hear, ["Roger that, Gun Crazy. We are adjusting orbit and will initiate the fire mission in eighty-five seconds. Perigee will be two hundred kilometers with burns from west to east. Please confirm that you are north and clear."]

"Roger that. Egress is to the north and we are clear."

["Copy that, north and clear. Seventy seconds."]

This is the smoothest ride Michelle Kiel has ever given. Most everybody have already popped their helmet/visor assemblies and hung them on the racking.

Simmons is a mess. The lower half of her suit is gone from below the diaphragm and her right arm is also missing. The visor was shattered completely and half her face and throat is covered with the silvery trauma compound. The bleeding is under control but if you look closely you would see that her lower jaw and right eye are also missing. Maria kneels beside her and pulls up the suit trauma maintenance interface through the tacnet.

Simmons shouldn't be alive but she is—just barely. Her spine is severed and the suit is working her heart and lungs for her but they can do this indefinitely, and the three bleeds in her cranium has been stopped by internal micro-bots. The tacnet analyses the data from the suit and reports that it will take at least five years to rebuild her as good as new, and Maria just shakes her head at that last tidbit.

It was Victoria who realizes that Simons was conscious and aware when her one eye opened, "Angie, doll, you with us?"

There was an audible click when Simmons answers through the suit's speaker via the tacnet, <"How do I look?">

Maria is suddenly both pissed and worried sick. Pissed that Simmons has bypassed the chemicals that would put her out, and worried if she finds out just how bad off she really is. That last one being academic because Simmons suddenly pulls up the trauma Maintenance interface and looks for herself. Maria, in administrative override, cuts that access but Simmons already saw enough.

Simmons goes, <"Hey, I was looking at that.">

Maria grits her teeth, "Well, you don't need to be."

<"It's that bad, hu? Don't bullshit me.">

Maria then sighs, "Five years."

<"To make me whole again?">

"Show-room new, five years."

<"Oh, fuck me. I can't do five years.">

Maria tries to sound encouraging, "Yes, you can."

<"Ah, no. And that means fuck no, I can't.">

"You've done it before."

<"An arm! Three times and that's a cakewalk. What am I supposed to do with my little girl, hu? What do I say to her when she walks in on me while I'm layin' in a Petri dish?">

Maria asks, "Then what are we supposed to do?"

<"Let me go.">

"Just like that?"

<"Give me admin rights and it's out of your hands.">

"Okay..." Through the net, Maria releases administrative rights back to Angie and says, "It's out of my hands."

Simmons' one eye smiles at her, <"Thank you, Boss.">

Maria takes her hand and says quietly, "We love you, Angie."

Simmons has already cut stimulus to her heart and lungs, <"Look at the bright side. I'll be back to work by Friday.">

Maria smiles, and as Angie starts to slip away she asks, <"How many we lose today?">

Maria says, "Eight."

<"Ah...still single digits.">

A few seconds later her pupil blows.

Maria grimaces slightly and leans into Victoria while fighting back the tears. She breaths heavy a couple of times, sniffs hard and says to herself, "Okay."

Victoria pulls her hair back, leans over and gives Maria a little kiss on the forehead, "Sorry, Mar."

Across from them, sitting on the deck beside the cockpit is Opie and the octodroid camera, Opie reaches up and pushes the mic

button on his headset and asks, "Tell me you got that."

Over the radio he hears the anchor say, ["Every bit of it."]

One of the support fire team members on Kiel's ship squats beside Opie and says, "We need to take a look at that face."

Opie nods and looks at the camera with a mixed expression of both shock and relief, "This is Daniel Opie, coming to you live from the Mari Lug on Nufa, signing off."

000000101001

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."

It was just then that Maria steps up while tucking her t-shirt into her BDU pants, "We done here, guys?" Both nod yes so Maria reaches up and pounds an Ewa pin from the Order of the Smile into webbing over the chest plate of her JACC, "Here, this is for you."

"What is this?"

Maria smiles, "You're now part of the club, Orderu Zajebiste. You earned it like the rest of us, so you get to wear it like us."

Victoria looks over the black and red Ewa face and points to it while saying to Karan, "This means more to me than a VC, Colonel."

Maria throws her hand out, "Whoa! Whoa! You mean to say that a VC is going to a Queen Victoria? Are you shitting me!"

Karan says, "That's about the size of it."

"That's so..." Maria chuckles, "Comically apropos!"

Victoria shakes her head while Maria hands her a tray of the Ewa pins, "You're not helping, Love."

"These are for your crews." Maria then flashes two fingers, "Two things, your replacement Warthog will be available on the next pick up." She then taps Victoria in the chest, "And you, you are invited to my new year's bash. I'm sure you'll have a previous engagement, but mine will be in Southern California, seven hours after your soiree, and I figure you can catch some Z's on the way out."

Victoria ponders the offer as Kevin Vossler steps up beside Maria, "That's putting the squeeze to my calendar."

Vossler quietly whispers to Maria, "Hartcourt is on the line."

Maria nods and says, "Mikey and the Xhemal will be there!"

Victoria squints, "Those feathered alien beasts?" Maria nods yes with a big smile so Victoria goes, "Pencil me in!"

With Victoria and Colonel Karan gone Maria and Vossler step through the center of the C3 for the office, while Voss giving her a run down, "Okay, Hartcourt is on hold and we also have du Condé here."

Maria huffs, "Okay, I'll take Hartcourt now and put du Condé on hold. This shouldn't take long."

Vossler points to the ground, "No, ambassador du Condé is here now! He's here! We have him in the lobby."

"Wait, what?"

"This is the story so far. As soon as the shit hit the fan Lebedev raced off for New Brisbane and du Condé came here."

"New Brisbane! How did we find out about that?"

"That was from Field Marshal, Graves."

"How the fuck did he—"

Vossler throws up his hands, "I don't know, but we just confirmed from another source that Levedev is there! Graves is on hold waiting to talk to you and du Condé."

"This is fucking surreal." Maria gestures to the office attached to the C3, "Let's get to Hartcourt."

In the office, Vossler says, "You can't bring up Lebedev."

"Well, d'uh!"

Maria opens the line with Hartcourt, "Box, glad you could make it. Hope you weren't waiting long but we can cut this short if we agree to rubber stamp the ROEs from last time. Sound good to you?"

Harcourt frowns while nodding yes, ["Yes, that could work but we would like to consider an addendum going forward."]

Maria shrugs, "If you're looking to pull some teeth...now is as good a time as any!"

He assures her, ["No, Marshal, I think you'll be agreeable."]

"Let's have it!"

["Two things, Earth and Sapphire maintain neutrality for sure, but we would like to add Pripyat and Second Hand to that mix."]

"Ya, ah..." Maria glances at Vossler who nods yes, "I don't have a problem with that! The second thing?"

["We would like to expand the annual truce by twenty-four hours. Pushing the start from midnight on the 22nd to twelve-hundred hours on the 22nd, and from midnight of the 2nd to twelve-hundred hours on the 3rd, standard Zulu time. Is that acceptable?"]

Maria is taken aback, "That's an odd one?"

Harcourt rolls his eyes, ["We experienced...administrative problems last time. Padding this may alleviate the travel crunch-time my people were troubled with visiting their families over holiday. You know how that goes."]

Maria shakes her head in surprise, "Oh, okay! I don't know why not? You got yourself a deal."

Harcourt almost smiles, ["Let's chat on the second."]

"Love to, but..." Maria wags a finger at him, "How 'bout you make your first move. We'll chat after that."

Harcourt then smiles, ["Sounds like a deal."]

Signing off, Maria slips out to the lobby and is a little shocked that Jacob's son, Peter Ribot is here with du Condé, "Pete?"

du Condé shakes Maria's hand, "Thank you for seeing me, Marshal. Colonel Ribot is part of the discussion we are having with you and the Field Marshal. Mr. Graves is standing by, is he not?"

Wide-eyed, Maria says, "Ya, he's waiting."

du Condé hurries, "Then let's not keep him waiting!"

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Maria suddenly finds the emotions hitting her overwhelming.

Unbelievably, this whole thing went off without a hitch, and more so now because the almost debacle at uTau and the unplanned mission and battle on Nufa have so completely convinced the Co-op of the 'blind side' narrative of this ruse. Maria can now simply leak the actual truth as a false rumor in counterpoint to further strengthen that narrative. In Maria's mind this all ended up better than perfect.

Having talked to Jacob, du Condé and Peter, Jacob is now wrapping up the situation at uTau while Maria steps out to finally tell the crew in the C3 what really went down because of them only Vossler knows the truth. Everybody there believes that 45,000 people, the crews of eight battle platforms, are now dead and standing in the middle of the C3 she can feel the dread and melancholy that has descended over them all. People who thought they were responding to a catastrophe and were spot on in doing their jobs because of it.

Tears well up in Maria's eyes and for the first time in her life Tiger Bitch, sometimes called The Ice Queen, Hell's Barrister, or Babe Satan by a small contingency, can't find the words. She not only feels their grief but her own loss as well. Only fourteen from the Annex died today, five on Arrakis and nine on Nufa, but of those two she knew personally and one was an old friend. Someone she loved.

Between the tragedy of that loss and the triumphant grand slam on a plan that only had a projected three-to-one odds-out chance for success, Maria doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Her mouth is agape but she's incapable of forming words.

Maria turns and rushes towards the office while transmitting to Vossler, <"Tell them, Voss.">

As Maria slips into the office, followed by Peter and du Condé, Vossler posts overhead the hologram tactical map of their rendezvous zone out at U-Turn. In the map they see the twelve Mbande class ships, the new mini Iron Maidens they've been building and secretly

stashing away to replace their aging battle platforms. On eight of the ships the status menu shows a full complement and crew—each with a whole division ready for action.

Vossler announces, "Everybody, we only lost fourteen people today, not forty-five thousand. We couldn't tell you what was going on because we needed you to perform your jobs while not knowing the truth. Our apologies for keeping you in the dark but you have our sincere gratitude for doing such a bang up job in pulling together the Rapid Reaction Forces necessary for Arrakis and Nufa. That was a truly herculean task."

Shocked by hearing this news and seeing the tactical feed, the C3 crew does not know how to react, and from the office they now hear Maria cackling like a crazy woman—her laugh/cry dilemma was obvious to them and it appears that she found the winner. The door swings open and she steps out with Peter and du Condé following her, both with a case of champagne in hand.

Maria radios Nicole, "Red, get your ass up here!" She then shoves a bottle into the chest of a geezer brigade corporal and while opening up another bottle she shouts, "We motherfucking did it!"

The corporal with the bottle asks, "What did we do?"

"We lost!" The cork pops and Maria goes, "I know celebrating losing sounds pretty fucking counterintuitive but, trust me, this is the best thing ever! You guys here kicked serious ass!"

The C3 crew is shocked, amazed and delighted, chatting between each other as Pete and du Condé start passing out bottles.

The corporal asks, "So what's the plan now, Marshal?"

Maria gestures to the map above them, "Isn't that a beautiful sight, hu?" She turns to the corporal, "I'll give you guys a full rundown on the plan tomorrow, but to answer your question...the plan is to lose and keep losing until we spread 'em out thin."

Then it dawns on the corporal, "Thin then turn it around?"

Maria taps her nose as Vossler adds, "Corporal, at first I thought it was bat-shit crazy but...we just pulled off the impossible."

Maria takes a huge swig off the bottle she opened then pushes it into Vossler with a big smile, "Thanks, Voss!"

He takes the bottle, "Jesus, you sure did fuck this monkey!"

Laughing, she then hugs Peter, "Thanks, Pete."

Maria then turns to du Condé and says, "Hey, Tristen!" She grabs him, pulls him close, gives him a big kiss, and then a quiet little whisper in his ear, "Thanks, Sarge."

01000110-01010101-01000100

The Warthogs have been zipping around the desert picking up pilots while dropping 20/20 bombs in MOAB mode on their downed Thunderbolts. A forty-thousand kilo blast makes short work of the wreckage but this is more of a prophylactic measure than an actual necessity. Without the plasma sequencing codes it would be virtually impossible to replicate tech salvaged from the Annex, and without the software one would be left with a high-tech doorstop if they did.

Now, with most of the AO policed, Jacob orders everyone out except for the three-man teams under Anthony Gudici and Zach Nelson, who are recovering the last two pilots that died in the fight, and Jacob who is escorting the last Warthog on its way to pick up Peña far from the Moloka'i preserve then head back for the rest.

Jacob would rather another fighter or two be present but he does not want to take any chances on an incident. Security Services has four of their own drop ships leap-frogging around the desert dropping off recovery crews and picking up pilots.

Jacob and the gunship keep a respectful distance, with Jacob also flying in a low and slow non-threatening manner. Orbiting south of Peña, they have to wait until the Security Services drop ship takes off with their pilot.

Noticing the SA ships doing lazy turns over the dunes, and his own dropship closing in to pick him up, Macquarie shakes Peña's hand, "Ay, beaner, it's been stout-ripper if I say so myself."

Peña laughs, "You know how to get ahold of me, Porter. You ever find yourself on Sapphire during leave look me up!"

Macquarie assures him, "Pints and Sheila's, mate!"

From the cockpit of his Thunderbolt, Jacob is watching the Security Services pilot shake hands with Peña then fly up into the hold of the waiting SS dropship just as his link to Maria opens.

In the window is du Condé, Vossler, his son, Peter and Maria opening with, ["Sorry we were keeping you on hold."]

Jacob goes, "No biggie! Now is good."

Glancing at du Condé with a suspicious eye, Maria says flatly, ["From what I understand, it's Voss and I who don't have any clarity on the connections here. Wanna bring us up to speed, maybe?"]

"Tristen, let 'er have it both barrels."

du Condé sighs, and then with a less severe French accent, ["Marshal, originally I was an Annex Staff Sergeant, Abel Blanchett."]

["Are you shitting me? You're really one of us!"]

["I was with SA-Nineteen and was attached to the Paper Cuts group early on. We were trying to devise a way to get a mole into the diplomatic corps of one of the Security Council members."] du Condé then throws his hands up back in character, ["So, *le reste est de l'histoire!*" And, I have to say, it's been *fabuleux!*"]

Maria frowns, ["Can I ask who your contact is?"]

["The last twenty-five years has been with Bob, directly."]

Maria glances at Vossler who says, ["This was unexpected."]

Maria then points to Peter, ["What about him? How'd he get to be part of the in crowd?"]

du Condé nods big, ["Ah, that was Fifty-Two's doing. When I came on board, taking over for Lebedev, she told Peter what I really was on our first meeting together."]

Peter quickly shares, ["She said she didn't want anything hidden between us three. Sorry we had to keep this from you."]

du Condé adds, ["The Colonel was family so, as she said, she felt more comfortable with...the openness over intrigue."]

Maria asks, ["Are you afraid for your life if this gets out?"]

["I'm afraid for my livelihood. I've come to enjoy the job."]

With the Warthog picking up Peña, Jacob connects privately to Maria, <"I just found out about du Condé last May, hon.">

Maria turns her head towards Jacob on the monitor and responds, <"I'll kick your ass about that later."> She then says to Jacob verbally ["So, what about Lebedev? What's gives?"] She then points to Jacob while talking to the rest, ["I want to hear him first."]

Following the Warthog, Jacob says, "Well, when Hartcourt contacted me I saw Lebedev in the background behind him."

Maria thinks, ["Him being there was no coincidence."]

"Exactly! So, the condition for transferring him to you was me getting to chat Lebedev up."

["Seriously! And what did he say that torqued your crank?"]

Jacob shakes his head, "He was very pleasant, and it's not what he said—it's what he didn't say. I'll forward you the file."

["Okay, so what does you scrying little brain say to you?"]

"He wants the FIS. Not to destroy it, like he's been banging on about, he wants to take over. Tristen, can you confirm this?"

du Condé gestures, ["That's exactly why Bob sent me here. To personally give you a heads up, and open our dialogue."]

Maria sees the big picture and puts her hands out, ["Let me get this straight...they plan to pull the Co-op members out of the UN and join the FIS after they rub us out?"]

du Condé wags his hand, ["Yes, but...no-no-no, not exactly. The SA is so deeply incorporated in the charter and enforcement side of the FIS that they just want to beat you down enough to win and make you their puppet."]

Maria laughs, ["Well, that ain't gonna happen!"]

Jacob gets a proximity alert and says, "Guys, I got a problem to deal with. Mind if I cut out?"

Maria, signs off with, ["Ya, hon, go take care of whatever, and one other thing... You and your people did a stellar job today so, when y'all get back, the first round is on me."]

Jacob immediately switches over to Gudici and Nelson's squad channels, "Wopper, You guys recover the bodies yet?"

Gudici is huffing, ["Ya, Buzzard, we're clear. Nelson and I are one-klick west of Moloka'i and ready for pickup."]

"We see you on the tactical. When the Warthog sets down I want you to load up and then turtle up. We have two Cottonmouths out at ninety kilometers and coming in hard."

Nelson laughs, ["I thought there was a truce?"]

Jacob nods, "Yep, Hedge, but that was with Security Services. These guys are ARC and they have not acknowledged the cease fire. The HWG will be landing in less than a minute."

Gudici radios, ["Roger wilco, Buzz. Load and turtle."]

Jacob switches to the CIC of the Iron Maiden that showed up just minutes ago, "Jerry, you get through to these clowns yet?"

One can hear the stress in Jerald Starks voice, ["Naw, they are not responding so...you're gonna haf'ta dissuade them or put 'em down yourself."]

"Their Command and Control is not responding?"

Stark laughs, ["Hell, I'm on line with Security Services and Arrakis is not responding to their calls! We just launched a squad of 47's in case you want 'em, but Security Services just offered a helping hand in taking them out. You just say the word."]

"Thanks but...let the SS know I got this."

["Quick mop this thang, will ya, FM?"]

Jacob punches the throttle and shoots out towards the two incoming fighters, "I hear ya, Jerry. Don't play with my kill."

The ARC is pissed because the Annex shot down six of their F40g Cottonmouths and damaged four others. These two escorted those damaged one's home and are back out looking for a target of opportunity. The Cottonmouths are vicious little fighters for sure—well armed and fast as hell. It's just that the Thunderbolt was originally designed to make quick work of them being better armed, faster and just as maneuverable.

Jacob makes a low altitude, high-speed sweeping loop around them and instead of staying high and together, as Jacob would think they should, they split up with one coming down to play.

It would be obvious to anyone in the know that this is a classic baiting tactic, the idea being that if the Thunderbolt goes after the one that came down low then the other could boom on him from above. Instead of closing in on the one that dropped to low altitude, Jacob continues his wide loop and climbs for altitude setting himself up between them. Staying directly under the guy above, Jacob assures himself the dive avoidance advantage because the Cottonmouth will compress if the pilot charges in too fast.

After twenty or so seconds of this playing around, Jacob realizes that he has to break up this standoff so he pulls over into a steep dive towards the Cottonmouth below him and, as predicted, the fighter up on high immediately dives in after him.

The attack run, even with a missile in the air taking the lead, did not play to the Cottonmouth's strengths and Jacob easily evaded both with a vectored pitch then loops around the two as he climbs.

Now with positions totally reversed, Jacob at high altitude and the two Cottonmouths at low altitude, Jacob notes that this was way too easy, "Waddya think, Bud?"

Over the tacnet, Bud says, ["Dafuq, is what I think. These guys are idiots. How 'bout ya bag 'em and let's get outta here?"]

"You've been quiet this afternoon."

["Fuck, I've been sitting here fappin' away at watching you work. What do you want me to do?"]

"Kick yet?"

Bud snorts, ["When you do something spectacular enough for me to kick you'll hear me moaning like a bitch, okay? If in doubt that should clue you in."]

Jacob laughs as he texts to the Cottonmouths through the IFF responder, <YOU TWO HAD ENOUGH? :D>

They text back <FUCK YOU SA POS>

<ITS JACOB GRAVES...YOU STILL WANT TO PLAY?>

<YA RIGHT AND IM THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND KMA>

<WE DONT HAVE TO DO THIS>

Instead of climbing towards Jacob, the two make a break for the grounded Warthog, and inside a few quick seconds each launch a cluster-bomb at it—which was actually dumb because the Warthog has an endless supply of missiles and guns by comparison. Four centipede missiles were pickled off and two intercepted the bombs while the other two chase the Cottonmouths away.

Jacob just shakes his head and texts, <HAVE IT YOUR WAY>

To evade the missiles the two fighters split apart again, and each is forced to drop another cluster-bomb in air-mine mode to take out the centipede climbing up their respective asses. Unfortunately for the leader, Jacob was already on top of him.

In a very tight turn, with Jacob hot on his tail, this pilot is astonished by the ability of the Thunderbolt to turn inside him. Before Jacob gets his reticle on target the Cottonmouth rolls up and over the Thunderbolt. Jacob pulls a reverse skid, rolls and when he pitches in a tight nose over—that's all she wrote. The 88 fires and the right wing and canard are both stripped from the Cottonmouth which starts to spin wildly out of control. The pilot immediately detaches the cockpit then ejects from that.

The wingman was already hauling it around from over five kilometers out, intent on getting the pilot who just shot his buddy down, and even though Jacob's fighter was in a low energy state that distance allowed him to make it up. In seconds the Thunderbolt was breaking Mach 1 and charges in for what looks to be a head on pass.

The Cottonmouth pilot was not going to chicken out on this, but Jacob is neither stupid nor suicidal. At one and a half kilometers out Jacob rolls out in a corkscrew away from the hail of bolts and the centipede missile fired by the F40g. As he passes the fighter, in his wake Jacob leaves three micropede missiles that punch headfirst into the Cottonmouth.

The wreckage, with the cockpit attached and the dead pilot inside, tumbles out of the sky and smashes onto the rocks below.

With Jacob doing a leisurely turn back for the Warthog, he hears Stark from orbit call out, ["That last one was stupid."]

Jacob quietly agrees, "What a dumbass."

["By the way, what was your score this afternoon?"]

"I don't know. I'll have to count it out later."

["We have clearance from Security Services to bug out. We'll recover the flight and the HWG and you if you want a lift."]

"No, I'm heading directly to the Spike. See you tomorrow."

["Righty'o! SA-Three-Six, out."]

Jacob is seconds from passing over the Warthog gunship that is already lifting off, "Wopper, you guys are clear to launch."

["We're on it, Buzzard Chow."]

"Need me to tag along?"

["Negative, we have the Iron Maiden watching over us."]

"Roger that. See you back at the homestead." Jacob then switches over to Bud's com, "We're outty!"

As the Thunderbolt rears upward and blasts into the sky in what pilots call Saturn-Five Style, Bud replies, ["About damned time! I'm signing off, sweetheart. Wake me if you need me."]

Finally Jacob is left to his own thoughts.

He knows the score, bagging one cruiser and four fighters for a career total of 201, and he does find satisfaction excelling in this bloody business, but it's the blood, the actual killing that he finds no joy in. He knows of one pilot that survived, and that's a plus, but many died by his hand today and that's the tragedy of combat. Whether you see the results of your handiwork or not it's all the same. The guilt will eat at Jacob, yes, but at least it won't eat him alive like it does others.

Peña scored big by taking out two cruisers, five fighters, an IR5, plus damaging another one, and the post-combat reflection for him will be severe for the cruiser he obliterated. Jacob takes note that he must make time for him and a bottle of rye and soon.

Jacob has the ability to push these thoughts out of mind when necessary and for the first time today he can breathe and let that mind wander but, as things go, it didn't wander far enough. At the edge of space when his fighter kicks into MDDSH and races off towards Onn, the sterile rocky-moon of Arrakis, it hits him like a slap to the face.

Few people are mentally connected at the hip like Jacob and Maria. He felt fear for her safety today but knew deep down she was going to come out of that desperate fight without a scratch. It's after the fight that he was really worried about because, as tough as Maria

is, there is always a point where overload will trump fortitude, and as tenacious as Jacob is even he could crumble in her position.

Jacob can suddenly feel Maria—he can feel her split between not knowing whether to laugh or cry from both the elation and despair that currently possess her. He can feel her joy from today's impossible success and he can also feel the lamentable dread of her personal loss because Angela, the indelible Ten Klicks, is gone.

A loss that touches him as well.

As Jacob slips past the magnificent desolation of Arrakis' one dead moon he chooses to lighten that burden and take possession of the latter—and for a fleeting moment tears well up in his eyes as he is overcome by that despair.

□□□□□□□□□□

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.

The recovery teams just have to dig it out now.

Thinking of his new status, being that of a common consumer, Brigadier General, Charles Washington, USMC, Retired can't stand that last item on his new personal letterhead. *Id est*, retired.

Of the twelve and a half billion people on the Earth, only about 370 million or so actually hold a job. That's less than 3% of the people have a purpose other than collecting their weekly stipend and spending it as they see fit. Yes, the Earth has become a world of leisure and indulgence but the dirty little hidden-dark secret is that most people really don't like it. Most would rather junk the bots and hold down a real job but business is business and for business, business is good the way it is! Profits are in the stratosphere and nobody has a substantive reason to bitch about it so, as the CEOs say, 'Shut up and enjoy your stupidly overpriced latte on the dole!'

Strange how capitalism can cater to the free market socialist abstract when it's only prices that are actually controlled. In a world where drawing a paycheck at a place like In-n-Out, which still employs actual humans to flip-burgers, makes them the envy of all. Go fig?

Go meat-bags, w00t!

Charles Washington happens to be a Brigadier General of all things. Charles Washington is an astronaut who walked on Mars of all places. Charles Washington had a hand in breaking the light barrier and this Charles Washington does not flip fucking burgers! And, if it wasn't for what's about to happen tomorrow, this very same Charles Washington would be thrilled to death to slap that meat on a grill if that was all there was to look forward to!

Packing for this trip, and packing lite, of all the wonderful objects and mementos from NASA and the Marine Corps that Charles has collected over the years it's his Kerbal Space Program actions figures that sort of meandered their way into his bag. He wasn't about to leave Jebediah and friends behind. No way in hell.

When stepping out on Mars, Jebediah here was with him.

"Personally, I prefer Valentina. She's hot." Said the voice.

Charles looks up and at the door is the young Secret Service agent, the one Claudia shags on a regular basis, who's going with them on the flight tomorrow. Which is fine by Charles because the kid started life as a Recon-Marine and they can connect.

Charles laughs as he hands him a small pistol sleeve, "Hey, Zach, since you'll be packing here's my Ruger we talked about."

Agent Zach opens the bag, pulls a Ruger 1911 out and clears it while going, "Wow, sir, ancient history here."

"You can use it as a club but I'd rather pull the trigger."

"May I speak freely, sir." Zach really didn't have to ask but Charles shakes his head *no* with a smile, so Zach says, "It'll put a motherfucker down!"

Just then Claudia Willoughby steps through the door, "Hey, Agent Smith, can you give me and the General a minute."

Zach says, "Yes, Madam President."

She snorts, "Ya, well, that's only for five more months."

Under his breath, Charles says, "Or eighteen hours."

On screen, with another batch of reentry vehicles streaking in Claudia says, "Oh, look, it's a double-u eighty-eight!"

Charles turns and gives her that *fuck you* look so she smiles, "Honestly, Chuck, I hate it when they get that shit wrong too."

"Only NPR got it right."

Claudia laughs, "That's gotta kill ya because you hate those tree-huggy fuckers."

"So do you."

"Ya, I always wanted to call an air-strike on 'em."

"You can still do that, ya know!"

Claudia rolls her eyes, "Ooooh, choices."

Chuck gestures towards the door, "That's your boy?"

Claudia slithers in close, "Looky here, Somalia Slew. You get to bring your pussy so I get to bring mine!"

"Oh, no problem here! I was going to say, good choice."

Claudia snarks, "I don't know if he swings that way, but—"

Charles shakes his head, "Let's not find out."

"I dunno..." Claudia shrugs with disappointment, "I'm always up for a good show. You've seen me and Rachel at it! Anyway, she's waiting for me in the hot tub so, duty calls!"

"And the first lady?"

"She's meeting us at Ironwood in the morning." Stepping out the door Claudia turns and nods, "Marriage of convenience, and now a separation for convenience. And even though I hate Dawn's fucking guts I have to say we had a good time of it." She then remembers, "Oh, ya! Almost forgot, the Russians get theirs when?"

"Kura Range, this Thursday."

Claudia slips out with, "Awesomeness! You did good, Chuck."

Thinking of the agents, knowing full well that Claudia and his Rachel making out is like watching super-hot twins going at it, Chuck mutters to himself as he zips his bag up, "Give 'em a good show!"

Charles steps out and runs into Jason Kay and Robert Graves in the kitchen, "Jason, you ready for launch?"

"Ready?" Jason smiles, "You're darned tootin' Star-man!"

Robert complains, "The only reason he's going back—"

Jason talks over him, "Dude, I got shit to do!"

Charles snorts, "Ya, his wife."

Robert nods, "Okay, tappin' that...there's somethin' to do."

Jason verbally twists the knife in, "Can't fault me there. bro. Those little gray shits are primo tail riders. Like, totally gnarlatious!"

Robert's nostrils flair as he thumbs back at Jacqui, from Delta Echo, in the family room surrounded by Secret Service agents who don't know what to do with her because she doesn't have any ID yet, "Okay, but do you have to leave that behind."

Jason sighs, "I know, Jacqui takes some getting used to."

Charles wonders, "What's your problem, she's...stunning."

Robert protests, "That may be, Chuck, but she's got typical French bitchaholic written all over her."

Jason assures him, "You two will hit it off...soon enough."

Robert rears his head back, "Please."

Charles laughs, "You'll find a mutual groove!" He then nods at Robert while talking to Jason, "I need to talk to our boy here."

Charles leads Robert to the one garage that nobody but Chuck and the boys ever go into. Before them is an old 2016 Viper ACR in virtually new condition. Called the 'last of the super-sticks' this was in error because the Corvette motored on with the manual option for quite some time, but nobody remembers and few people care.

Robert, in his odd position as Earth's sole contact with the Nefer Key, has enough wealth now that he could buy whole fleets of hyper-cars, but it's this ninety-two year old black on black Viper before him that is the only car he has ever drooled over. Over the years they've helped Charles tinker with it and polish it and both have driven it around the block a few times.

Charles hits the button to the garage door and says to Robert, "Get in. We're goin' for a drive."

Pulling out of the garage, Charles tells the Secret Service agent at the end of the driveway, "Back in an hour."

With a sporadic overcast, it's unusually cool today at 118° on the Fahrenheit scale. Still useful in the United States, 118 sounds way more dramatic when reporting on the weather rather than 47.7° on the Celsius scale which sounds kind of wimpy. In silence...that is, not talking while enveloped by the guttural roar of the V10 engine and the rowing of gears down to the loop 101. Jumping onto a freeway devoid of rush hour traffic, and heading eastbound then south after only a few kilometers, Charles then turns the AC on and closes the windows for a quick chat. The air conditioning helps cool the face, but the heat from the exhaust radiating from the floorboards is inescapable.

Chuck asks, "You on board, son?"

Robert reminds him, "Like I've said, and I'll say it again, I'm Switzerland here. I am neutral and will not take sides."

"I can count on that then."

"What's your angle, Chuck?" With evil eyes Robert asks, "Obviously you got CI-this and MI-that, or i-spy whatever riding your coattails. What do you want from me?"

"That you remain Switzerland."

"I don't get it?"

"Look, they got us over a barrel and my job is to level the playing field. Marcus is behind this."

"I figured as much." Robert then shares, "I'm all for an equilibrium between the two, but I have a job to do."

"I just want an assurance you will continue to do that job."

"You can count on that."

The windows open and they enjoy the wind blowing through the cab, and even though that wind is hot it tends to mitigate the heat cooking their respective hindquarters. Riding in a Viper, surrounded by all the noise and heat assailing your senses, is the most viscerally old-school driving experience one could ever hope for.

With Charles exiting onto Power Road, and turning north to Robert's home at Red Mountain, Robert is a little confused by this heading but doesn't say anything until Charles pulls into his driveway and kills the engine, "What gives, Chuck?"

Charles nods, "Be Switzerland."

Robert shares his little tidbit of realization, "They think we're fish in a barrel. That's their one failing."

Charles asks, "Their overconfidence?"

Robert stares at him, "Arrogance, their arrogance."

Charles nods with approval. "Here, she's yours." He slaps the keys in Roberts hand and points to them, "You'll need to change out the fob battery, and the signed pink is in the glove box."

Referring to the personalized plate in the back of the Viper, Robert asks, "You're giving me TACGNOL?"

"I can't take it with me!"

01000001-0101010-01000110-01100101

Ironwood, Arizona (AFE/AZFe) is the largest spaceport in the nation and yet it's the least busiest of all, and since its security is so tight it's also the bestest place ever for both military and government space-plane launches. Lying deep in the scrub of the high Sonoran desert, between Phoenix and Tucson, and so far removed from the public eye that if you were driving there you could miss the turn off at Picacho Peak if you simply blinked at the wrong time. Because the drive sucks most VIPs coming to Ironwood will grab a helicopter from Sky Harbor, Luke or Davis Monthan to catch a ride going up.

Today, Marine-1 and its escorts choppered their way down from the Carefree airport and landed outside the must-see lounge called the Pig Sanctuary which is a mind blow because they have cute as shit miniature pigs running freely about the place. Not being a commercial operation, and in spite of all the high tech littering the hangers and maintenance bays, the facilities have more the feel of some run down air force base converted to a Podunk regional airport with too many flannel shirted hayseeds running around.

Surrounded by fewer Secret Service agents than usual, President, Claudia Willoughby steps into the Pig Sanctuary and sees the First Lady, seated at the bar with a sour-apple martini in front of her, "Hey, Dawn, glad you could make it!"

Giving her a polite little hug, Claudia motions for the barkeep while Dawn spits contempt with a smile, "Three days and two nights at Chucky's Baller Boutique. Hell, I'm surprised to see you still walking."

"Well, glad to see you too!" Claudia smiles back, "But, do ya have to be a stone-coat bitch every time we get together?"

"I don't see anyone else around?" Dawn snarls, "Don't worry, I'll continue to be your arm candy until your lame duck dynasty is up."

"You still need me for that congressional seat."

"I know but, it's moments like these I cherish."

"Reminding me of the frigid cunt you are."

Dawns pouts slightly, "By all means, frigid to you!"

Claudia wants to stomp the living shit out of Dawn once and for all. This smoking mix of Cherokee and Scotts-Irish knew right out of the chute that politics was going to eat up their quality time, and Claudia felt so damned betrayed because Dawn was having affair after affair behind her back for decades. Staying together for public image had a positive twist because Claudia made up for that betrayal and made up for it in spades. So much so that Dawn actually reaps the sympathy vote from the in-the-know DC social circuit.

"Remember, bitch, we've got Reykjavik in October, Brussels in November and the Inauguration Ball in January. Tow the fucken' line and I'll get you your motherfucking seat."

Dawn leans in, "Let's get this trip over with."

Claudia reminds her, "Smiles!"

There are all-in-one spaceplanes that are the go-to systems nowadays, but this is the President going up to International Space Station Five before being handed off to the Enterprise. The spaceplane they were using is an ultra-reliable double redundancy system called the Delta-Dart. The first stage is an autonomous flying delta wing with the spaceplane orbiter riding on top. The idea here is to save fuel and use the Delta wing to get the Dart orbiter up high enough so that when it zooms up to space, and then ejects its external tank, it has pretty much a full load of fuel to play with.

It's been likened to wearing a condom over a condom but it is the President so they intend to take no chances.

The Delta-Dart heads due east and climbs to thirty-thousand feet over the White Sands Range in New Mexico. At that point it turns towards the south east, pulls its nose up to a steep forty degree angle and kick in the booster rockets.

The Delta releases the Dart orbiter at one-hundred thousand feet and the orbiter continues on its own power into space. At eighty miles altitude it drops its empty fuel tank and throttles back to coast for seven minutes until it initiates the insertion burn. If they don't do the burn on time the dart will then start to drop and with this trajectory, and no course corrections, it will drop way too steep and burn up on reentry. Like that's gonna happen...

With one minute to go until the insertion burn the telemetry from the ship goes totally haywire—and cuts out.

Houston flags the event at: 2108/08/08:19:28 zulu.

Minutes later people living on the islands of the Caribbean, from Havana to San Juan, watch as a spiraling streak of flame make its way high across the sky. When asked, believing it was a meteoroid burning up, all they could think of was...how beautiful.

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The Dart orbiter was piloted by Charles Washington. He's flown these a dozen times into space and it is second nature to him. There is really no need for a co-pilot because the pilot himself is considered superfluous. They're really just monitoring systems here.

Charles himself has been the only astronaut to actually fly the Dart orbiter manually in an emergency launch-abort-and-return to ground situation so, because of that, everybody felt that the President of the United States was in good hands.

Because Jason Kay is now a real pilot and studied the Dart flight systems he sat in the co-pilot seat. Claudia and Dawn were behind them, and Rachel and Agent Zach were in the far back seats. Because of the nature of this flight, the first sitting President to go into space, Houston wanted extra medical telemetry from all those on board so a special encoded patch was given to each passenger.

It was uneventful launching this designated Air Force One into space. Nobody really talked much and simply listened to Charles as he monitored the systems and called out maneuvers to Houston that were actually automatic and required no assistance from him.

At the throttle back they had to wait only twenty-seconds before there was a loud clanking sound from the hatch above.

With a sigh, the hatch opens out and Marcus, from the Delta Echo, sticks his head through, "You guys ready? Let's roll!"

In the zero-G all of them move fast with Claudia and Rachel going up through the hatch first and Agent Zach tossing their bags to Jason who pushes them on through. When all their luggage was clear, Agent Zach scrambles up next.

Looking at Dawn, still strapped in her seat and unconscious, Charles asks Jason, "She's out, right?"

Jason nods, "Star-dude, you know I slipped the Mickey in the patch. Bitch is in a coma that she's not coming out of."

"Let's go..." Charles motions for Jason to move, "*Poyekhali!*"

After they slip into the Nefer Key saucer that was attached to the Dart, Marcus closes the hatch, snaps closed their own double portal hatches and breaks the seal with a, "We're clear!"

Just then, Luc pops his head out from the deck above with a big grin, "Welcome aboard! Glad you could make it!"

Marcus advises, "Luc, plasma cannon is primed."

"We have..." Luc has to think about it, "A minute and a half before that scheduled burn. Unless you have any objections we'll take the shot now if you don't mind."

It was Claudia that says, "Please."

The Nefer Key's saucer pulls away and, as if from a sweep of the hand, a plasma burst punches a hole into the crew compartment of the Dart. The force of that shot pushes the ship into a steeper dive and with the escaping gas it starts to tumble.

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Acknowledgements...

The author would like to thank the following people for their love, friendship, and contributions to this work:

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WT Community id est Magz, Squire, Bo and Orange

/k/ and you know who you are

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Shelley Gillette-Carney for the time-stamps!

J.Jae and **Chuck Russell** for more smack-down and support

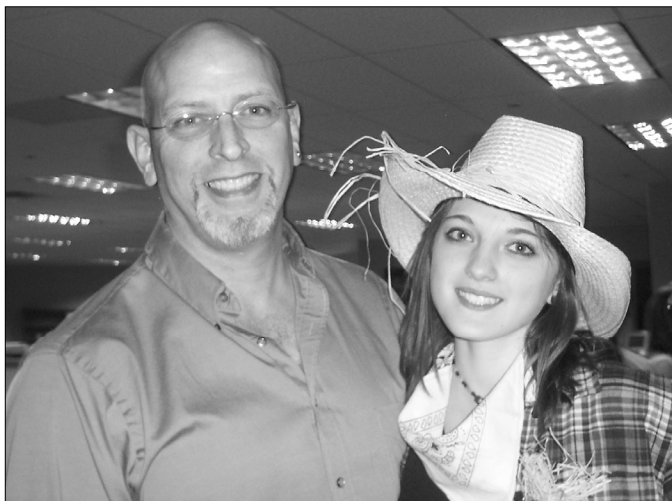
Jacob Baum for more odds, ends, and a game changer!

Arleta Okerson this was a book mostly about Maria and thanks again for her cutting remarks and attitude!

Glossary and Design Plates...

The glossary, drawings and designs that were developed for the screenplay are available at: <http://jaccinthebox.com>

About the Author...



Nicholas Ralph Baum is still all kinds of busy. He has one son, who is all grown up now, and a handful of young ladies in his life. Monster (above) is also grown up, another one is close to that finish line, and two more are relatively new on the scene.

challenge accepted



02 pearls before swine

Maria Ramirez, a chola from the Lincoln Heights, after decades with the Steel Annex she now finds herself in charge of the whole damned mess. Not exactly the expected outcome when at twenty-one she wandered into One-Klick all sliced up and bloody but those were the cards she was dealt. Now with an ex-husband who she loves but hates all in the same breath, a cherished son who has become their daughter, a stepdaughter in league with her as if they were blood, and a cloned batch of fifty-two megalomaniacal pre-teens who have come to see her as their mother figure—all Maria can do at this juncture is to step back and drink it in. Oh, to be so loved.

Now in command of the most powerful military force in history Maria secretly wishes to return to the simple life—like those knife wielding days in East LA. Maria is looking to start a fight, an interstellar war in fact, and she doesn't want to do this but to control the outcome there is no choice. How many will die on this go round? Could it be tens of thousands or maybe even billions? It all depends on the first few hours and so far it's not looking good.

Oh, yea, and then there's the aliens...



ISBN

