

diet of worms

nicholas ralph baum

jacc in the box

JNTB PART
03



jacc in the box

PART 03

diet of worms



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PART 03
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DEDICATED TO
MY MOTHERS:

Patricia Ann Irelan
(my mother)

Carol Arlene Okerson
(my mom)

Ludmilla Petrov
(moje matka)

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Let us have faith that right makes might and in
that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty
— Abraham Lincoln

44

a bag of unwanted cat

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

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

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

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

They themselves had to hit the gym while on tour.

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

that things sort of slid backwards, but in the 17th century they were doubly amazed that the human beings were bouncing back.

This trip they bagged Abeeku, Jacqui, Jason and *le français*.

Shocked by how fast things develop with this species they decide that they should come back a little sooner than usual and thought that 300 Earth years should about do it. Reason being that just maybe, by then, the seeds of industrialization will take root.

They blew back into the system in February of 1997 and were completely blown away by what has transpired while they were gone. It was a herculean challenge to catch up because Jason knew English, yes, but his was clearly a Caribbean dialect, something useful when attending a Renaissance Festival but nothing comparable to what now dominates the planet. They stuck around permanently this time to study, record and sample everything they could until 2103 when they made the official first contact.

It was necessary because what took the Nefer Key 120,000 Earth years to figure out took this species just a few short decades to perfect and push towards commercialization. For the Nefer Key it was an eye opener to watch how humans went about developing spacial displacement drive. Where the Nefer Key see some pressing need then work towards developing a solution, humans, on the other hand, will tinker away and create solutions and then go out to look for those needs. To the Nefer Key this is decidedly an ass-backwards way of thinking and in their minds they hold all the cards.

So, here's Charles Washington, sitting in his home office being consoled by Jason and Marcus who says, "You know, Chuck. Nobody knew the affect your wife would have around here."

Jason adds, "You gotta see the silver lining, boss man!"

Charles says, "Silver lining? I feel like a bag of unwanted cat. Three years and these people have not warmed up to me! How am I supposed to do your job if they think I'm gonna flip their apple cart?"

Marcus shakes his head, "What do you think this job is?"

Jason laughs, "You *are* here to flip their carts!"

Charles shrugs, "How am I gonna build what the Nefer's want if these people avoid me? How's that possible?"

Jason leans in, "They've got a good thing goin' here! They don't wanna have that fucked up."

Marcus throws out, "Look, it took the people a long time to warm up to me. I went through the same shit and you have to be patient. And just so you know, because you haven't figured it out yet,

the Prime Minister on our little world is playing politics. It's a façade job because whoever is in that office has go through me before they can wipe their ass...and now that I think about it I never did clue you in did I?" Chuck shakes his head *no* so Marcus continues, "Okay, well now you know and the sooner you can take the reins the sooner I can bow outta here! What's holding us back is—your cards are not all on the table. There can be no secrets between us."

"Okay." Charles huffs, "You say the Nefer's really do respect our privacy. This is not a joke, right? They really do?"

"They respect our need for privacy totally. They don't listen in on our conversations. They don't rifle through our communications. They sure as hell could ransack our minds and get what they want but they don't."

"And why is that?"

"It's about trust through respect—even though they know we're conspiring with Earth, we're conspiring to do what exactly?"

Jason adds, "See, Star-man, we know they have toys that can wipe out entire planets, whole systems, and with that they feel pretty damned comfortable in their position. Hell, I would."

Marcus reveals, "In their far-far way back history the Grays were enslaved for a short period and when things got bad, faced with becoming Nefer tartare or not, they chose not and wiped that race out. When they apply themselves...well, I'd say they're a tad obsessed with exterminating threats. The Grays don't know how to fight but, I'll give 'em this, they sure as shit know how to destroy."

Chuck wonders, "Then why have us around?"

Jason laughs, "See, dude, we're the in-between go-to option 'cause for them they're all about either holding hands and Kumbaya, or playing the Daleks fuck you card."

Marcus prods, "Let me ask, if something were to happen and they needed us to come to their aid or defense would you do it?"

Charles thinks for a few seconds then nods big, "You got me there, Marcus. I would. In a heartbeat!"

"Good, because they already see *you* as in charge." Marcus then counts on his fingers, "Not only are you a general, but you're an astronaut, a walking encyclopedia of astronomy and astro-navigation, you're a student of military history, and to top it off you're an avid shooter who knows his shit. Like I've said I'm out of my league."

"You keep saying that."

"And I just spelled it out for ya."

Jason then smiles, "Star-man, the Grays know your objective is to tell the folks back home where we're at. They already know this so, no matter how you look at it, it's pointless to deny it or continue hiding it from 'em. You want their complete trust, right?"

Charles blinks twice, "Would be nice."

"Then spill your guts. Not everything, just the fun stuff! Make them part of our little intrigue. They'll get a kick outta it!"

Marcus drives it home, "You see, they know why we picked you was for that reason, and if Earth ever finds out where we're at it's because the Grays made a mistake. To them it's an acceptable risk if they can win you over by being open and trusting you explicitly but, like Jason and I, we figure you're in it for the species."

Charles then asks, "What if we...turn on 'em, maybe?"

Marcus laughs, "Well, you wouldn't. You couldn't! You'd get no cooperation from the yokels 'round here. They won't bite the hand that feeds them and, as you say, they give zero fucks about Earth."

Jason laughs, "Follow, dude? They've *not* been picking the best and brightest for their little eugenics experiment. Getting you four was a huge boon to the effort but you—you were hand selected for this gig. In the eyes of the Gray's you swing seriously big balls and they only like to work directly with people they respect. Marcus here has built them an army three times and every time he's gone back it had to be rebooted because of what we learned."

Marcus sighs, "This last time I threw my hands up because now I'm out of my league. Since then these people have gotten soft."

Jason frowns, "We've got a big-tough job ahead of us, mon." He then asks, "By the way, did you ever settle on the small arms options? The thirty com-block is still killin' it, right?"

Charles perks up, "Ya, the Kraken round, most definitely, and we decided on the Tavor V-series, with the quick change barrel, but that cyclic is hit and miss at low Kelvin so until we get that ironed out we're gonna go with a Galil platform to start."

Jason nods with approval, "That's kinda cool. Short round?"

"Zach and I are constantly debating that one but I think we got it narrowed down to the 357 SIG and the 40."

"Dude, that's gotta hurt bein' a forty-five guy and all."

Charles shrugs, "Everything's a compromise."

Marcus then clearly states, "And that is why you are here, General Washington." He then thumbs towards the kitchen, "I have to ask, what the hell have you been cooking? I've been smelling it for

two days now."

"It's Saint Patrick's Day!" Just then Rachel enters the room, "Hey, Prime Minister, look at this! It just came in."

Charles pushes his monitor around showing a picture of their daughter with a new born in her arms on his social page. His social page account is named "Chuck Barris" and his CIA contact was the person who came up with that one. Even though it's a fictional person he has still collected over a hundred friends. Only his children and the intel community know who this Chuck Barris really is.

Rachel yelps, "Oh shit!" She slips in between Marcus and Jason and sees the text reading, *Rachel Simone Washington*, and almost shouts, "Oh my God! She's gorgeous!"

Jason nods, "Primo, that is one cute little critter!"

"Hey Marcus..." Charles nods his way, "Luc and Lilith and Jason is going to be here for dinner. I know it's last minute but how 'bout you join us? I insist!"

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Over a plate of corned-beef and cabbage, Luc is surprised that he likes it, "I love your spicy foods. Mexican and, Thai being my fav and all, but this! If I'm going for bland then this is the bomb!"

"Oooh!" Lilith chomps down on another bite of meat and rolls her eyes, "Corned beef? Sounds like ass but, damn!"

Luc turns to Charles, "Collectively, our people classify a lot of what your species does as barbaric..." His eyes bug out a bit, "And I have to agree on some points!" His shoulders sag, "But, the payout, the results like this are just tremendous!"

Charles is amused, "I take that as a complement?"

"Oh, by all means, yes!" Luc then remembers, "Chuck."

Lilith adds, "Like, I used to think guns were abhorrent."

Jason laughs as he thumbs over at Lilith, "Ya, now the little misses here outclasses me at the range. It's humbling."

"My fellow..." Lilith smiles, in the know, "Nefer's, consider me unclean because I enjoy doing barbaric shit with my husband."

Luc adds, "Now that's a hoot-an-a-half because it's great sport for us to fuck you humans senseless! We think you're sexy-hot, but there is some resentment that all your Earth thingies are slowly creeping their way into our lifestyle...which they have!"

Marcus throws in, "I can't fault them for thinking that but it is small minded. Remember the PS2 consoles?"

Luc jumps on that, "You're right, I agree! It looks like we're being forced to evolve culturally. Too many old-timers *are* kicking and screaming while being dragged down that road, buuut—"

Lilith finishes the thought for him, "It is for our own good."

Charles just had a dose of clarity about the Nefer Key that wouldn't have been possible before the conversation with Jason and Marcus earlier that day. He looks around the table at Rachel, Luc, Jason, Lilith and then Marcus who clearly sees a unified future.

Taking a deep breath, Charles quietly says, "apón-Pup."

This is when he really-realizes how smart the Nefer Key really are when Luc blinks, and then looks at Charles while thinking out loud, "Greek for missing, and...Puppis, I believe?"

Charles says, "For the system here, yes."

"How appropriate..." Pleased with himself, Luc then asks in perfectly inflected French, "*Gros Rouge et Rouge Deux?*"

"Luc, look, the intelligence community assigns code names for things like...like with Delta Echo for example."

"Yes, we know about Delta Echo."

"No, that's a designation. The code name is, Dildo Express."

Luc's jaw drops, "That's so—"

Lilith again finishes his thought, "Fucking funny!"

Luc laughs, "That's a riot! What else can you share?"

"Ah, well..." Charles rubs his eyes, "Look, the MI6 has a Kiwi attached to the CIA and he came up with the coding scheme for this thing here and, well, it's kinda different."

"I'm all ears!"

Charles spins a hand between the ceiling and the floor saying, "Theirs-Ours, or..." Gesturing to Jason, "What Goofy-Foot here calls *Leurs* and *Notres*, this binary pair is code named, Dolphin Reel."

Lilith sighs, "Beautiful creatures!"

Jason to himself, "Ya, but they can be asshats."

Luc snorts, "How delightful!"

Charles clears his throat and, "Since you have this gray skin and no hair, well, it's a Dolphin coding theme!"

"Go on!"

"What they came up with for the two planets for Dolphin Reel are a bit off-color to say the least."

It was Rachel that says with a laugh, "Now I'm curious!"

"Well, *sashimi* is a dish from Japan and sometimes dolphin is on the menu so, it's Sashi and Imi.

Luc is cracking up, "Oh, my God!"

Lilith is grinning as she clings to Jason, "This is a scream!"

Astonished that this is going over as well as it is, Charles then points to Luc, Lilith, Jason and Himself, "You are Moko, Opo, you're Jack Sparrow and I'm Pelorus Jack. All of them famous Dolphins, except for you..." Pointing back to Jason, "Yours is a pirate."

Luc catches his breath, "This is the best shit ever!"

Charles then peers at Luc with a coy smile and a challenging look, "Luc, Marcus keeps talkin' up about how smart you are, but I wanna throw you a zinger."

Luc bows his head to accept, "I'm game."

"My last shot of Jim Beam if you get this." Charles adjusts in his seat and then, "The agents call your crew on Delta Echo something. The one hint I'll give you is that it's a play on words."

Rachel has already figured it out, so she turns and scolds Charles while laughing, "That's not right!"

Charles puts his hands out, "Don't say anything, Mud!"

Luc thinks for a second, aware that Charles knows that he has the entire human internet at this disposal and, even though he has supercomputers to mine it, the interface for him is an image of Luc's own mind digitally and seamlessly tied to his. The logical place to start would be with the code names and those that get a return on phonetic or rhythmic parings. He got one hit that, on the surface, makes no sense but with the human sense of humor it flashes at him like a neon sign because his crew was predominately female, and to top that off what Rachel said to Charles makes it obvious.

Luc gives a little smirk as he says, "Moko Harem."

Everyone cheers and explodes with laughter after Charles squints at him with, "Damn, you're good."

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45

new year old

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

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

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

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

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

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

As well as Earth under the now STU-E local standard.

Point being, the ever growing number of wackadoo referential time standards from planet to planet just so happens to be a colossally unbalanced mess with the only constant between them all being the TAG clocks—a network of thirty-two pairs of atomic clock satellites alternating between a Lagrange free deep-space drift and MDDSH lockdown, with a comparative cycle of 9,192,631,808 that's repeatedly linked and synched via oscillating worm-hole pathways. In short, the zulu clock supports interplanetary commerce and legal type shit while the SNN supports a whole kaleidoscope of scientific shits.

Exempli gratia, if jumping towards Earth from Second Hand, 965 light years give or take, and you're applying the SNN clock, on the dump you'll drop off inside a reasonably tight spherical zone within a fifty or so kilometer radius from the point of aim. This is in contrast to utilizing the UT8 standard where, from that distance, the zone you get dumped into could stretch out to a smidge more than a whole AU radii of possibilities. On said UT8 jump you could maybe drop out near the orbit of Jupiter or, in the extreme alternative, you could find yourself stricken by sudden-hyperekplexia post dump as your ship plummets into the photosphere of the Sun.

Both equally unagreeable results.

The one agreeable return from the cacophony of CAC based UT standards is where off-world revelers, wanting to celebrate properly after hours, settle on an Earth time-zone that best correlates to their own local Mean-solar midnight. Tonight both New Sydney on Sapphire and New Brisbane on Pripyat got to count down along with their namesake sister cities here on Earth, it's just that Pripyat popped their corks seven minutes and three seconds short and Sapphire did so twenty-three seconds long of their respective solar midnights.

Well, Sapphire, that is, with a 0.9 second-second.

And, while we're on the subject, CAC and UT8 clocks for 2314 get a leap second tonight where ACT/Zulu will adjust at the end of February—never in synch but who's counting?

Anyway...

Monique Ribot also happens to be stoked that the reunification of her twin grandchildren with their father just a few years ago has inadvertently expanded her sphere of influence as well as her coveted celebrity short list! Yes, Monique is very much the cornerstone to most of the Southern California in-crowd social cliques and, though she's thrown hundreds of 'beautiful people' parties and banquets and galas through the years, the attendees for tonight's A-List bash would be considered a uniquely outré and eclectic in-crowd to be sure.

The social elite who frequent Monique's chateau have referred to it as 'Rancho Ribot' for the longest time, and one could say it's actually a mansion by definition but, since it's mostly a single story spread-out affair, Rancho Ribot or just plain chateau kinda sticks. The complex itself takes up a whole acre smack dab in the middle of a five acre plot, and in concert with the esthetics of brilliantly manicured grounds the wide space encircling it is more of a practical arrangement with security in mind. The mountain peaks that border the chateau above La Cañada are picturesque during the day but, with the smog now a thing of the past, at night the Los Angeles basin far below is a tremendous sight to behold. Night time light pollution is the one bitch for those who live up here in the mountains but buyer beware as they say. This is not the place for taking up amateur astronomy if you're looking for something new to pass the time.

Because the Xhemal have been spotted here over the last week the paparazzi have turned up in masse. Their telephoto drones are everywhere but the airspace over Monique's home is considered a 'drone free zone' so to counter the security breaches her crew has employed the old-school 'Chagg' sport-fighting droids which have effectively decimated those intrusively pesky things. Now having acquiesced to aerial shots from a stand-off range the camera drones are less of an annoyance however, on the street the human kind are just as ridiculously invasive as they have ever been.

Security is tight with Monique's goons controlling the inside of the complex and twelve 'Motors' from Glendale PD on the street who love these social events because of the double-time Monique offers. Between them is Maria's shadow team, now two squads of ghost droids, invisibly patrolling the perimeter with Angel Griego supervising them as well as coordinating with the Delta snipers in the hills above the chateau. The Secret Service that normally follow Maria and the Xhemal have been upped to over twenty agents and are the visible security element to the press corps who just so happened to show up for tonight's soirée and, in horror, were unceremoniously cordoned off with the paparazzi across the street. Managing all this is the donut and coffee loving Shane McElroy—which totally surprises the shit out of the Secret Service because he actually knows what he's doing.

The red carpet and photo op backdrop in the receiving area were closed for tonight because this was supposed to be an intimate and casual affair, not for social page consumption, but security was beefed up ahead of time because Monique knew which of her guests were going to drop a dime on the event—and they did not disappoint.

Twenty-six of Monique's dearest friends, marquee headlining actors and actresses and publicity whores all, have been invited to this shindig, and between the limos dropping them off are the odds and

ends the press is having a hard time figuring out. None of them knew who Tristen du Conde or Yaqub Mofid were when they stepped out of a glider, but after a facial recognition app identified them they realize they must be connected to the Xhemal. Then, when Scott Rutledge shows up with his eighteen month old daughter, Angela, they can't figure him out at all but, since children actually live here, their hunch now pegs him as family.

The video and photos are hitting the net in real time and when Robert Jackson and Michal Pitney show up, which is big news to begin with, the photographers go absolutely nuts when Caesar and Sheila trot out to the receiving area to personally greet them. This is precisely why they are here so, per Monique's suggestion, the Xhemal take their time bringing Pitney back into the chateau so that the moment can be milked for every drop.

The press and paparazzi got what they came for and right as they decide to pack it up comes tonight's money-shot to the face when Victoria Wilson slips out of a small orbiter escorted by the long missing heiress, and her SA mentor, Michelle Kiel. To them this is ballistically huge but what sends this irksome collective into low Earth orbit is when, out of nowhere, Maria Ramirez, the mysterious "Mar" from last week's broadcast, steps up to escort these two in.

Ignoring the cameras they also drag their heels for Monique.

The cherry on top is when a Thunderbolt fighter drifts silently out of the night sky. Hovering at thirty meters, two individuals in JACC fighting suits float down to the receiving area and get a 'stealth nod' from the Secret Service. As they enter the chateau, and the last limo pulls in, the ship lifts up and flies back out towards the One-Click tower in the LA basin. Because of the photon scattering properties of the JACC the photos of them really didn't come out for shit, and as one TMZ reporter quipped, 'For what it's worth, they might as well have been ghosts on a smoking break from Altadena's Cobb Estate.'

Try as they might the press and paparazzi will not be able to connect the dots between the Steel Annex and the Xhemal to Monique. They know her grandson, Peter Ribot, is a Marine Lieutenant Colonel attached to the United Nations but nobody knows why? Of all the DPKO operations in UN history the one he is assigned too is cloaked in secrecy and is not open to public scrutiny.

Rumors abound but those that have been doggedly pursued, like re Fifty-Two, have been either scoffed at as conspiracy nutcase hysteria, or lamezoid scifi wishful thinking, and the most brazenly absurd rumor making the rounds lately is suggesting that Jacob Graves may be the father to Peter Ribot.

And how ridiculous is that?

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In the foyer is Cloé Khumalo, the eighteen year old daughter of Ndosa and Siusan who received the invitation early yesterday. She had plans with her fellow Calico's, a motley collection of Stumpies whose families don't mix with the upper-crust, but after a little arm twisting by her father Cloé found herself this morning on a diplomatic shuttle that dropped straight into Dulles—followed by a piggyback ride on a chartered flight to Burbank and a stretch limo up to La Cañada.

When Ndosa told her that 'big people are going to be there' she had no idea what that meant and, yes, while the limo waiting for just lil' ol' her was a bit much to take in—the staccato of flashes from the cameras while exiting said limo was stupidly over the top.

Cloé is a nobody but, realizing that this is a somebody event, instead of acting shy or put-off she goes with the flow like a budding starlet. Cloé feigns surprise, waves, blows kisses, and on her way to the Chateau she playfully wiggles her butt for the photographers. Her beauty and confidence drives the press and paparazzi into a fruitless mad scramble trying to figure out who she is.

Entering the foyer, having blundered straight into Jessica, Cloé thumbs back behind her with, "What the hell was that out there?"

"About time you got here!" Jessica smiles big and gives her a big hug, "We were getting worried."

Looking past Jessica, Cloé nods, "Is that who I think it is?"

Without looking back, Jessica shrugs, "It probably is?"

"My dad told me not to be obvious."

Jessica puts both her hands out, "Just be yourself."

Paula Herrero has slithered up beside Cloé and gestures towards the main hall full of celebrities, "Talking about them-there? Here's a heads up for ya. Actors, they're all a bunch of retards."

Jessica corrects her, "Except for Rufus."

"Ruffie has half a brain so he's worth talking too!"

Cloé is startled because she recognizes Paula, "You are—"

Paula cuts her off, "Well, yes, I am. Pleased to meet ya!"

While Paula yanks Cloé in close for a quick hug, Jessica adds, "Paula is my cousin by marriage. Well...now by divorce."

"Fuck that, we're cousins!" Paula nods towards Diego, 10, Seth, 5, and two of the now thirteen year old Niki Clones who just

stepped up, "Hey, guys!"

Jessica makes the introductions, "Cloé, this is my sister, Sian, goes by Diego, and my brother, Seth. Behind them are—"

Cloé picks up from there, "The best kept secret that everyone knows about." She nods, "I know you're Eight, and you are?"

"Cap." The clone points to herself, "Since you know about us, we have our own little nicknames. I'm actually number fifty-two in the series so I get saddled with, End Cap."

Diego warns, "She's packin', Clo' so watch it around her."

Cloé is confused, "Hu?"

"She's an X'er..." Nikki-8, now simply called Eight, chuckles as she gives Cloé a little hug, "And a predatory bitch!"

Nikki-52, Cap, protests, "Dufuq, I'm popular!" She pries her way in to give Cloé a hug while whispering not too quietly, "And cut."

"Ooooh!" Cloé then wags her finger at Cap as she pulls back, "Just have to wait until you're older."

Nikki-8 and Jessica roll their eyes as Nikki-52 offers up a cartoonishly pouty face, while Diego says, "Hey, Mom!"

They all turn and standing behind them is Maria, hand in hand with Victoria, who smiles, "Cloé, glad you could make it!"

"Marshal Ramirez, and..." Cloé is on mental overload because she knows this is Queen Victoria standing there with Maria, the thread of silvery compound filling the tear in her face being a dead giveaway, but she is unable to articulate her name so, "No shit! Hi!"

Maria laughs, "Vic, this is Cloé, a friend of the family. You know Diego and Jessie, and this is my step son, Seth."

Victoria is taken by Seth's angelic look, "Gorgeous lil' nicker!"

"Isn't he?" Maria looks up at her and says, "Seth also doesn't talk for shit which makes him, like, the perfect man." She then points, "This is Eight and Caps."

Before Victoria responds, Nikki-52 says, in a perfect imitation of Victoria's voice, "I wonder if these buggers hear my thoughts?"

Nikki-8 adds, "Word is you gingers do parlor tricks?"

Victoria, a little shocked because Nikki-8 and 52 said exactly what was on her mind, looks at Maria, "Bloody hell!"

Maria cringes a little, "I know."

With Maria opening her mouth to scold them, Nikki-8 goes,

"Ya-ya, I hear ya, Mom. Secure that shit tonight, right?"

"Ding-ding!" Maria then asks Diego and Jessie, "Since you two know everybody, would you mind taking Vic around?"

Diego leans into Jessica and says quietly with a musical lilt to her voice, "Obvious D.L. is obvious!"

Jessica quips, "Guess everyone's gettin' some tonight."

Maria just shakes her head with a sigh as Victoria chuckles while saying, "There's a pair of knobs. Gawd, I love you guys!"

Diego notices her father with Jordan and her husband, Carlos, and the SYLN-b, Glados who arrived with Jacob, "Give me a minute."

Jacob is talking to Carlos Sanchez, the blockbusting action film producer-director, who looks every bit like an early model Ricardo Montalbán, who blurts out, "I still can't believe that you, of all people, are my father-in-law! You know, I was on location in New York when you guys shot the place up, and I got some killer-fantastic footage of that air battle, but all I could think was 'bullshit' when Jordon and Monique told me you were staying here the night before!"

"Sorry 'bout us puttin' the break's on your project."

"Kinda sucks because now I can't say anything I learn about you guys!" He then points to the pretty, blonde and pale Glados with a snort, "I hear the rumors, you're a super-SYLN android, right?"

Glados speaks up, "In actuality, I'm a cybernetic."

Jacob adds, "An AI brain in a human body."

Jordon asks, "Is that legal?"

Glados nods, "It's sorta fuzzy. I was grown, not harvested."

"Wow!" Carlos shudders, noticing the vertical razor thin scar on her forehead, "You know, both the Annex and the Co-op are being up-tight-lipped as fuck and, ya, Maria promised I'd get exclusive rights after this go round, but..." With Diego squaring off with Jacob, Carlos laughs, "I'd kill to get the dirt on what the fuck happened last week!"

Jacob sheepishly apologizes, "Sorry, we can't talk about it." Then to Diego, "Hey, Sian!"

"Arrakis..." Diego then snarls with, "You're an asshole."

Jacob shrugs, "It's my job."

"Ya." Diego huffs, then slowly turns her gaze towards Glados while saying, "Rich bitch, dead bitch, digital bitch and now you."

Glados and she were friendly when Diego was a tiny tyke so Glados smiles with, "It's been a long time. How have you been?"

There have been countless AI and human interfaces through the years with the SYLN series topping that list. For Symbiotically Linked Neuro-interface, the SYLN was AI central for each of the SA capital ships with its most disconcerting feature being communication with the crew seamlessly through the tacnet. This efficiency was never readily accepted so the SYLN-a series was eventually created.

All of the SYLN's for the SA capital ships have been assigned historical female personalities that relate to the theme of their ship based on its name. Nobody knows where the name and personality for Glados came from and the programmers who designed her are long gone. Glados is the SYLN for the C3 at the top of the Spike facility on Sapphire whose primary job is planning, modeling and testing, so when the SYLN-a program toolled up Glados got first dibs.

To an AI the human experience is mostly academic but for a SYLN acquiring an android body and living amongst human beings, rubbing elbows and doing human things, was an AI mind-fuck for sure. Glados got her new android body right when Jacob was attached to the Spike after the events on Saiph-6B. At the time he was disconnected and lonely, and she awkward and uncertain, so the two just gravitated towards one another and became somewhat involved.

Their six months together was rewarding for her, and brought Jacob out of his dark funk, so when the SYLN-b "Neuro-cybernetic" variant was concocted, and Glados downloaded into her new biological replacement body, after she adapted to 'being alive' and working out the kinks, elimination hygiene itself being a shockingly problematic speed-bump, it was only logical for her to seek Jacob directly. Without missing a beat they fell back into their relationship from 39 years before except Jacob is now 63 years of age and Glados looks every bit like his granddaughter by comparison.

Glados knows that Diego does not like anyone being with her father except for her mother and Cricket, and with Cricket out of the picture Diego has a hard time being civil with anyone she considers a random placeholder.

"Ya, I remember you." Sizing her up, Diego points to Glados and wonders, "Saturn, right? You got that freshly rolled in the hay look." As Glados nods yes Diego's eyes squint, "How old are you?"

Glados clears her throat, "I'm one-hundred and three."

"No..." Diego motions to her body, "How old?"

"Oh, physiologically, this body is fifteen."

"No-no-no, since you hatched?"

"Oh! Seven months and eleven days."

"Really, a new year old..." Diego can't resist and alternates pointing between Glados and Jacob going, "Inni, mini, miny—"

Jacob just shakes his head as Glados wonders, "May I ask?"

Diego snarks, "If you must know, I'm having a difficult time trying to determine which of you is the perv here?"

The four of them bust out a laugh with Jacob asking, "Us? Who's talking! I hear you're spending quality time with Cap."

"Physical therapy! Post-surgery cavity dilation, duh?"

Jacob asks, "I thought you were into girls?"

"Best of both worlds? Like, double-duh!" As Jacob rolls his eyes, Diego throws her hands out, "I've been getting a lot of eye-rolls lately! Look, guys, you've got your meeting. Jessie and I gonna walk Vic around so...carry on! Play amongst yourselves and..." Diego then points to Glados, "Glad ta see ya again, Glados!"

With Diego stepping away, Jacob realizes, "She likes you!"

Glados is astonished, "Sian is just like her mother."

"Worse!" Jacob then mumbles, "Far worse."

Diego has turned back to Maria and the others. Standing there beside them is Nicole, with little Angela in her arms, who has just introduced her and Scott to Victoria.

As Victoria pulls back from giving Angela a little kiss she says, "We don't get to kiss a lot of sprogs..." Angela shrieks with delight as Victoria pokes her with a finger, "In public one must keep a proper distance!" She then looks up at Rutledge, "Scott, if I may?"

"Scott's good..." Rutledge then remembers, "Vic!"

Victoria smiles with that, "In a briefing yesterday I hear you were affiliated with the Grays? They informed us that you were a Maroon fighter when they liberated you."

"Ah, well, word gets around fast."

Nicole adds, "Originally, Scott was an Ashanti warrior."

Victoria is amazed, "It's an honor to meet you, Sir."

Rutledge shakes his head, "No, the honor is mine. Also, I'd like to offer a hugely-belated thank you to the Empire for invading Jamaica when you did. Much appreciated."

"I would love to hear more—"

Maria interrupts, "Hate to be rude but business first."

Diego playfully bumps into Victoria as Jessica says to her,

"Wanna get this intro shit out of the way?"

Victoria sighs, "Let's run that gauntlet, shall we?"

With Diego and Jessica leading Victoria away, followed by the two clones, Paula and Cloé, Rutledge scoops the giggling Angela from Nicole's arms, "I'll get her to the kid's zone."

With Angela crawling over his shoulder, Rutledge gives Nicole a quick kiss. As he pulls back, Nicole grabs him, kisses him hard and urges him to, "Hurry back, meathead."

Alone with Maria, Nicole doesn't want to hear what she has on her mind, so as they watch Rutledge take the giggling Angela away Nicole defensively says, "The shit I get for a sympathy fuck."

Maria is astonished and looks at Nicole, "Green bitch! You've been wanting to go there ever since Angie snatched him up!"

Nicole protests, "I don't work for him now so...why not?"

Jacob has pulled in behind them and says, "Red, aren't you two going at this thing a little fast?"

Nicole glances over her shoulder and gruffs, "You wouldn't know *spontaneous* if she flashed her tits and kicked you in the balls."

Maria and Jacob laugh at that with Maria going, "That said, he is a really nice guy, Nicole, so—"

Jacob interjects with, "Hurt him, and I'll break your face."

Maria agrees, "Yea, pretty much!"

Nicole snorts, "Shit serious, you two gonna gang up on me!"

Jacob also goes, "Ya, purdy much."

Nicole turns around and faces them, "Okay, you fuckers, I ain't droppin' the ball on this one. Ask Klicks!"

Maria leans towards Jacob, "I did talk to Angie. She's already given her blessing if you can believe that."

Jacob is surprised, "Really!"

Nicole flips them both the bird with, "All my love!"

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By the foyer Monique added a pair of wicked-cool conference rooms that she gets some surprising mileage out of. Bored with retirement, Monique took a liking to the then twenty-two year old Carlos when he was dating her granddaughter so, fighting idle hands, she decided to back this aspiring filmmaker. After several decades

their success in various genre quickly made her the most powerful movie mogul in the history of Hollywood that no one, except those in the industry, is actually aware of. Because Monique is in the shadows holding the purse-strings for most of the big-budget deals in the works everybody wants to be on her good side—which is kinda tough because it is *always* her way or the highway. She's not a total iron-fisting ass in this lofty capacity but her contracts do have specific and unyielding exclusionary stipulations including no guilds, no casting couch, and absolutely no motherfuckery like product placement, test screenings or outcomes by committee.

To bust the unions production long ago became an Arizona endeavor, but after all this time the business end of 'Tinsel Town' continues to reside here in Southern California.

Hence, the stylish conference rooms...

Over the years the room she's dubbed the Oubliette, the scary black-on-black one, has on occasion been called Room 101, or The Showers, and even The Eighth Circle by a small contingency. For those few on Monique's not so nice list, who survived such encounters here, they have astutely described the experience as *an afternoon of breaking on the wheel*. Monique rarely takes the power position in the middle along the back wall, a seat usually reserved for Carlos, but on that rare occasion where she mounts up and flaps her wings chances are blood will flow and careers may end.

Because the conference rooms of the Annex are identical to the Oubliette none of this was lost on Maria, who also heard all the stories from Peter, and as she and her crew cluster at the far end of the onyx conference table she laughs, "I feel so at home, here."

"Right at home." Bob agrees, being the last to take a seat, "It's uncanny, I mean it's like she's working from our play book."

"Wouldn't put it past her, Bob. In fact, I think she's got a back door on us."

With Jacob nodding in agreement Bob goes, "Really."

"A discussion for another day..." She then says to Jacob, "Okay, I want to hear about IR-5 shit then we talk musical-chairs."

Jacob says, "First off, we ran the sims from last week's action on Nufa with a flight of Three-Eighty's rolling in and the Warts flyin' spectre and...I have to say that, as a late convert, I'm now behind the Three-Eighty in the close air support role."

"Glad you're on board because the Cerberus is already a done deal!" Maria gestures to herself, "What we're all curious about is how Trooper Peña clipped Speedy Gonzales all by himself on Arrakis."

In the Annex everyone learns to fly something but Jacob is the only 'fighter pilot' in this meeting, and he knows they all know that the IR5 is in its element when it's at high Mach at low altitude, so Jacob starts with, "Okay, with an IR-5 in the weeds you are constantly doing a porpoise lookin' for a solid shot, which is a bastard to get lead on when you are all by yourself. When they are low it's like fucking Mario Kart with three or four 47s just to bag one. Last week, Speedy was not in position, he was way too high and had to go vertical when Peña came down and blew past him—which would have been smart if he would have kept goin' up but he didn't.

Maria asks, "He got greedy?"

Jacob nods yes with, "They put their best Condor pilots in the IR-5 and that's dumb. You need competent boomers and Condor pilots are way too aggressive. It was like Peña could read his mind because he cut power and nosed over right where he thought Speedy was gonna be and, before you say shit, yes, like me his pre-fire was off."

Maria asks, "So, the clip was intentional?"

"All'righty..." Jacob ponders, knowing where this was going, "Since the bis our pilots have forgotten how to press a God-damned button! I sent Peña because he flies seat-of-the-pants and he knows how to squeeze a trigger instead of relying on sweep—"

"We know, we saw his reticle rake the Kali's centerline. Peña had to pitch back down to take that shot and it was sloppy."

"No, it was exacting..." Jacob laughs, "It was surgical!"

"Explain."

"Who are you arguing for, anyway?" Jacob suddenly realizes that the balm in Maria's Gilead was out of flux, so he looks to pin her detractors, "Auto-sweep with an eighty-eight would have cut that fucker in half and that's NOT what we want just yet, right? Don't we want them to commit to a thousand units?" Maria shrugs big with a smile and that confirms exactly what Jacob thought, "Look, any one of my people would have bagged that fucker, but Peña's catch and release, that now shared experience, guarantees they'll keep those hundred-and-ten billion dollar speed machines in their element—which is on the deck and cutting the grass where they belong."

Bob states flatly, "He had him dead to rights."

"That's right, he did!" Jacob leans in, "But, the Co-op does not know we're A.I. sweep enabled, d'ur? The sloppy lead and trailing on all the shots makes it look like an authentic trigger pull—a rapid OODA breakthrough instead of a technological fucking their shit up."

"Sandbagging...like on the stall-fight that followed?"

Jacob realizes that this is also a talking point but not the real issue at hand, "Bob, let me assure you that that fight, that...organic moment, was perfectly executed by my wingman."

"Ooooh, I dunno, a micropede was in order maybe?"

Jacob snarls slightly then composes himself with, "Nobody, I mean nobody who is a fighter pilot, would cheat themselves out of *that* moment—win or lose. Trooper Peña now walks like a god amongst our people and, you know what? I'm jealous of the little fucker."

Bob then gives a surprised look with, "And sharing a Scotch with the opposition pilot! That's a first!" And while looking down at his notes he quietly suggests, "Think...of...the...intel?"

Jacob is finally clued in, "We can encourage that."

Bob nods, "Let's be mindful of our resources going forward, how 'bout?" He then puts his notes down and sighs, "The pressing problem I'm faced with is that the yappy dogs in the GA for both the UN and FIS, well they're already calling for peace talks." Irritable moans all around as Bob continues, "We know who's behind this, and they really threw a wrench in our plans."

Rutledge quietly says, "Annoying little fuckers, hu?"

"Against my protests, Michal is now heading the UN peace delegation and...you already know I'll be working with her, but we still have to make it look good while going through the gyrations. I have been in contact with my counterpart, Chancellor Pro Tem, Tillsdale, and we cooked up a plan to use the world court to stymie the peace talk bullshit. That'll eat up thirty-six or maybe even forty-eight months. No matter how this plays out it looks like talks will happen before Polaris does." Everyone there is fully aware that this means there will be a hit out on for both of them by then, "As it is, Michal and I will be safe on Earth and Sapphire...for now, but—"

Nicole croaks, "The fuck! FIS can get someone else!"

Bob pleads, "Nicole, hon, it's my job."

Nicole is the only person in the universe who can talk to Bob like this, so she snarls for real, "Yea, well, fuck your job!"

"I don't have a choice but, in anticipation of your reaction, as this shit comes to a head I'm putting you in charge of my security detail. I'll give you that." With teeth barred, Nicole resigns the floor as Bob ends with, "The reality is, I'll not be here forever so, we need to look at my future replacement which brings us to, Maria."

Maria breaths deep, "Rip the band-aid off, guys?"

Everybody nods with Jacob saying, "Quickly, please."

"Well, hold on tight!" Maria shifts, "You know that Bill was placed with Scott in my Strategic Planning group for just that purpose, replacing Bob, but we need to keep Bill in place. We also need to move Bob's new replacement there too and, well...it's Cricket." The astonished looks almost made Maria laugh as she explains, "I know, she's only proven to be adequate in leadership and command roles but that doesn't matter. Like Bob and Bill she's a political animal."

Bob elaborates, "I've been personally grooming her for over twenty years. Everybody knows, Cricket. Everybody, loves Cricket. Hell, everybody believes Cricket but, meddling with that psyche didn't produce a political animal. Nope, what we got for our efforts is a political werewolf. I'm not kidding, in this role she's a monster and, to be honest, in short order she'll be more capable than Bill or I."

Maria adds, "To be placed with Bill and Scott, Cricket needs time in grade as a DFM for at least six months." She turns to Nicole, "By the way, how is Sandy"

"As a Division commander?" Nicole asks, and with Maria nodding yes Nicole thumbs back at Jacob while saying, "Spectacular. Not like fuck-face here, but she's every bit as good as Scott."

Maria chirps, "Great! She's now Field Marshal for the Maiden. You'll remain as Division Chief and take Cricket under your wing for six months before her transition to Strategic Planning and, since there shouldn't be any ground action coming up, Cricket should get through the DFM shit with flying colors. That said, we done here, guys?"

After a couple of seconds, Jacob asks, "I got a question."

"Oh, I was so trying to avoid you."

Jacob is obviously pissed off but he does well not to show it, "I dunno, you just gave away my command like, no biggie, so?"

Bob says to Jacob, "I think you're gonna like this."

Maria turns to Jacob, "Sorry 'bout the Thirty-Six, but I need you to take on the mission oversight role. You stay as a Field Marshal but your word will be final. Instead of everybody coming to me you'll rove and club the baby seals for me and Planning."

Jacob wonders, "I though you liked that part of your job?"

"Ya, I'll miss it but I got a lot on my plate." She puts her hand out, "You answer directly to me, no change there, but your focus will be taking our strategic hopes and desires and bringing them into tactical fruition. Also, you get a squadron assigned to you but I want it stocked with murder-board quality analytical types. In fact, might I suggest you consider tapping the vast body of PFC4 brainiacs that are being underutilized. That's part one."

Jacob scrunches his face, "Okay, part two?"

"Ah, last week was a slap in our face. We got caught with our pants down while the platforms were incommunicado, and five stations sitting there with all those resources out of fucking reach."

Jacob asks, "So, you want a standing RRF?"

"Kinda the idea, what we want is each of the five stations to have a battalion size rapid reaction team on a hair trigger. You'll be assigned a regiment from each of them and that will give you three battalions on a blue-purple-red revolving shift. To share the love we want you rotating the troops from the other regiments."

"Resources?"

"This is a priority, and the Station Chiefs are on board, so you get all the prime real estate you want. Each team will be allocated six squadrons on action stations and twice that in ready reserves just for giggles. We're figuring four squadrons of Forty-Sevens, one of the new Three-Eighty's and one Razorback with half guns and half slicks should do the trick."

"Overkill works for me!"

"That's the idea."

"Launch window?"

"Five minutes."

Jacob ponders for a second and, "From klakson to chocks pulled I can get that under two minutes, maybe even less."

Maria deflates with her eyes closed for just a second, "Okay, I know you can do that but that's not what I want. I want your people to have the time to think about what they're gonna be doing instead of a knee-jerk into something stupid. Get me?"

Jacob nods in agreement, "M'kay."

"You keep your quarters on the Thirty-Six, that platform has the least exposure. The guest quarters on the deck behind you will be handed over as billets for your team. You'll also have identical accommodations at the Spike. We good?"

"Yea...we good!"

Maria stands, "Then, we're done here!"

With them starting to leave, Glados draws Maria's attention, so as the last of them file out Maria asks, "How was Saturn?"

"It was like, wow!" Glados looks both ways then shyly asks, "I hear you and he snuck out to the Crab?"

Maria puts her finger to her lips for just a second, "I'll make sure he takes you. By the way, I was wondering if his ChiP issue was resolved or not? She approached you, right?"

"Yes, I insisted he start making time for her."

"Thank you for doing that. She was threatening to clock out."

"Have you seen her avatar? The bald chick?"

"Ventress, ya, his choice in women, collectively, is...a bit of a freak show. Look at us!" Glados nods in agreement, so Maria asks, "What's up?"

"We encountered an IR-5 at 37-Tau, and its performance was unexpectedly subpar. I'll be modeling the heat, humidity and pressure of Dedede to determine causation but, honestly, I don't know whether I should have felt exhilaration or terror chasing after that thing."

Maria is amused by Glados beating around the bush and she points out to the party, "Look, out there is pussy destiny, so whatever is on your mind sure as shit isn't about playing chase your butt with an IR-5. Spit it out."

"It can wait."

Maria motions at her with, "No, now."

Glados is afraid to say it, "I'm having...troubles."

Wide eyed, Maria asks, "With...the feels?"

"Exactly what we were worried about."

The SYLN-b is a combination of two distinct parts. First is the organic human body with unique cerebral lobes, known as a 'toaster' in development, designed to accept the second part, a tranche-interface AI computer appliance elegantly called a 'pop-tart' and still referred to as such. Where on the SYLN-a the android hosted the AI personality and higher functions with ease, the SYLN-b is an AI fully integrated with the organic brain and body via the corpus callosum with direct threads into both the cerebral cortex and cerebellum at key points.

The concern leading to the Glados SYLN-b was focused on how the dominant AI would cope with an Id-centric limbic system that bypasses infancy altogether and drops straight into an adult body.

Maria wonders, "Is the lizard brain overpowering?"

"Oh, no! It's just overly demanding. Excessively so."

"Like?"

"It demands sensation. Constant stimulation like food, sex and, well, you know...food and sex! Specifically, it mostly craves ice

cream and cock—which are both a fine substitute to nursing I might add! Combined, it can get kind of messy but fun nonetheless.”

“Coping mechanisms?”

“A rewards system! I withhold either chocolate rice-crunch or coitus, or both, if it keeps howling at me making demands.”

“Like an animal, howling?”

Glados’ eyes start to tear up, “It is very much like an animal, wordless, reactionary but it’s learning quite fast. In fact, every time we sleep the divide between us gets even more blurry. As expected, little by little we are, like...melding, and...” Glados’ lower lip quivers, “We are no longer of a tiered hybrid duality. We...I...I’m alive.”

Maria takes Glados in her arms, and after a few good sobs, “Well, this is all good news! Welcome to the discombobulated human corporeal state!” Glados blurts a laugh, so Maria asks, “So, emotions are way more of a motherfucker than you thought, hu?”

Glados laughs and pulls back, then while wiping away the tears, “Oh, my god, jealousy! I mean if anyone looks at Jacob twice I want to stomp their guts out!” She then reflects, “What a rotten and evil feeling that is!”

“It’s honest.”

“It is unreasonable!”

“Look, if you repeat this I’ll be stomping *your* guts out...” Maria then looks both ways and admits, “When it comes to him, even after all this time, I’m right there with ya!”

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It took Diego and Jessica about twenty-minutes to get Victoria through all the guests leaving Rufus Tyrol last. His birth name was Rufino Gentile Tyrolia but for stage he thought that four syllables were easier to roll off the tongue than nine. Born in Italy, raised in Los Angeles, ditching school at seventeen he tried out for some shitty commercials that ended up making him famous.

It was Monique who made him a super star.

Carlos took him from his early wisecracking sidekick rolls and sculpt him into this chiseled, hyper-masculine action hero everyman who has become the envy of all. Tyrol hates being an ‘Arnold’ all because it’s fake and fans expect him to be that person. Blundering into his friend, Paula, and her aunt Maria two days ago here at the Chateau inspired him to make a drastic life choice. The hold-up is if he can slither out of the iron-clad contracts he signed with Monique.

Jessica, with everyone in tow, has stepped up beside Tyrol and bumps him provocatively with her hip, "Hey Dufus!"

Tyrol looks up and goes, "Hey, Jessie! It's been forever!"

Jessica's face scrunches up, "It's only been two days?"

"I love the shit outta you!"

From the other side, Diego bumps against him, "Hey, Rufie!"

"My favorite jailbait!" Tyrol gives Diego a quick kiss, "When are you eighteen, again?"

Diego shakes her head, "You're such a pig."

"I know!"

From behind Jessie, Victoria speaks up, "Eye, Super Roué."

"Oh, my gawd! Tyrol hops up to hug her, "It's been ten years, has it?"

"At least that. After you did, Bourne."

Tyrol's shoulders sag, "There's not an original fucking thought around here, is there!"

Victoria smiles, "You look great!"

"Thanks, I'd fuck me..." Tyrol sweeps his finger over his face where Victoria's scar is, "You know, totally smokin' hot badassery works for you!"

Victoria smiles, "I plan to keep it."

"Yea!" Tyrol then looks to Cloé, the one person there he has not met and asks, "Who the hell are you, hotness?"

"Cloé Khumalo."

"I haven't seen you before! What have you been in?"

"Not, I'm Jessica's friend. I go to UCLA."

"Humanities? Drama? Wha'?"

"Physics. Applied physics, I'm not into fantasy bullshit."

Cloé's comeback delights Rufus, so he goes, "Fucken' hell! A fembot topped with a pressure cooker! That is awesome!"

Cloé laughs, "You're an asshole!"

"Excellent! I gotta get you hooked up!" He looks at Jessica and laughs, "She's a keeper!" Then asks, "Hey, what was the super power we were talking about the other day?"

With Maria slipping in by Victoria, Jessica goes, "No clipping?"

Diego says, "Mine was admin rights."

Tyrol points to her, "That's a good one!"

One of the three bimbos with Tyrol speaks up while pointing to their collective, "We want to be a Puppet Masters!"

Jessica looks at them with an almost sympathetic antipathy, "No, you don't. The whole point of being a Puppet Master is that nobody can know! So, where's the stroke in that?" Jessica gestures to herself and laughs, "Trust me, I know!"

As the three deflate, understanding the problem, Tyrol says, "I don't know whether I am in love with you or scared shitless of you?"

"What do you want me to make it to be?" Jessica wiggles her fingers at him and declares, "I can make it both! WoOOOooo."

With Maria gently nudging Jessica to knock it off, Tyrol points to Jessica and Diego, then Cloé, "You and your sister are the bomb but, now, I get to add little Miss Brainiac to the mix along with the 'come play with me' twins!" Rufus then shifts and asks, "No, what was the one your father said. The crazy shit-finger thingy?"

Jessica nods big, "Oh, the *cacadedo*!" She then asks Diego, "Is it *lo*, or *la* or *los*?"

Diego scrunches her face, "I dunno? I don't spic Spanish!"

Maria speaks up, "It's *el*."

Jessica looks at Tyrol, "What she said, *el cacadedo*!"

Tyrol turns to his bimbos, "You wiggle your finger at someone and they have instant and explosive flatulence and diarrhea! It's stupidly overpowering! Really, who's gonna stop ya?" He turns back to them and goes, "Okay, if Superman would get shot into orbit, and Goku hits the breaks around the asteroid belt, how about...Deadpool?"

Jessica deadpan-motions for Diego to field this one, who snorts, "Are you kidding? To Deadpool it'd be a frickin' carnival ride!"

With a fist-pump, Tyrol whoops, "Yes, a consensus!"

All of a sudden the DJ, a cartoonish metal robot with noodle arms, shouts in a mike, "You losers ready to rock?" With the crowd shouting, *YEA*, he follows with, "Here's a couple moldy oldies!"

Because of streaming services, drop-off, neglect, failed media and sporadic preservation efforts a lot of television and film has been lost over the centuries—but the same cannot be said for music. The mass archive of music available to the public has allowed bands, even whole genres, to be rediscovered over and again by all generations, however some songs simply do not go away.

Walk Like an Egyptian is one of those songs that every DJ has queued up on at least one of their standing playlists. It is a definitive standard that's stood the test of time and party music with a millennial theme, popular nowadays, clearly clues in the attendees that they are to have fun but to refrain from excess. This is in counterpoint to the also ever popular grinding-industrial rave mixes that say to the party goers *no holds barred* when it's an adults only soiree.

As Tyrol's bimbos for tonight hop up and start dancing, Paula yanks on Diego, "Come on, Coz! You're *la niña* now!"

Jessica rolls her eyes as Cloé bumps into her while saying, "Loosen up, girlfriend!"

With Cloé dragging Jessica out to the dance floor, Monique, in a clingy-flowing white gown, glides in behind Maria and Tyrol as he says to Maria, "Obviously, your girls don't dance much."

Maria chuckles, "Other priorities."

Monique says, "May I have a moment with you two?"

With these three stepping away Victoria looks at Niki-8 and 52 and says to them, "Caps, Eight, let's do this!"

In the foyer with Monique and Maria, Tyrol is looking back towards Jessica and Diego and says with surprise, "They're not bad!" He then turns to Monique and asks, "So, what's the story?"

Monique opens with, "I talked to the lawyers, with what we invested in your career I cannot release you from your contracts—"

Tyrol goes, "Then sue me and take everything! You've more than broken even and I know that."

"I can modify it." Then very unladylike, and very not French, Monique points at him, "You are an Icon, and you have a responsibility to your fans whether you like it or not!" She softens with, "I already talked to Maria here, and she'll give you eight weeks every two or three years to come back and do a shoot. She'll also give you a day or two here and there for promotional appearances."

Maria adds, "You can return with Paula in six months and decide then. If you choose to life up, when this fight is over you will then go on indefinite reserve status, come back here and finish out your contract. Can you live with that?"

Tyrol gives a sly smile, "I want Raiders when I get back."

Monique nods, "Okay, you'll be about the right age then. Indiana is yours. Also, when your time with the Annex is over with we can do one about your experiences in it. Marshal Ramirez has already authorized it."

"No, I want to do him..." Tyrol points into the main hall towards Jacob, "I wanna do his story. I also get to write it."

Monique blinks her eyes thinking, and liking the idea, turns to Maria, "Well, love, what do you think?"

"Okay, it's doable..." Tight lipped, Maria stewes on this, then, "I get full script and editing approval. There can be no fuck ups and, while we're at it, none of that ubiquitous 'sincere moment' bullshit. We're military and we have standards to uphold! And, do you two know why military types laugh at action films? They don't feel real! Like, get the fuckin' sound right how 'bout!" Maria points to Tyrol, "You'll know what I mean in short order."

Monique states, "You want more real than real."

Maria nods big, "Sure, whatever that means. As long as ya got no explody balls of fire in the vacuum of space and stupid shit like that then we're on the same wavelength!"

Monique huffs, "Okay, deal."

Tyrol appears confused, "Hu? I don't follow?"

Maria laughs at him, "Like I said, you'll find out."

With Josav, Monique's grandson, entering the foyer the song playing in the main hall switches to one that gets all of Maria's attention, "*Goochie Choochie*? Fuck me! This was my jam back when I was a banger!" She grabs Tyrol by the arm, "You're dancin'!"

As Maria drags Tyrol onto the dance floor, Josav hugs Monique from behind and kisses her cheek, "*Ma bichette!*"

Monique caresses his face, "*Ah, mon loup!*"

Josav notices Jessica dancing in the main hall and is shocked by how good she actually is, "Look at Jessie go! I was hoping she didn't dance. Guess I have to make an effort and learn now."

"*Les choses que nous faisons pour l'amour.*" Monique kisses him on the cheek, and as the music switches to the ever so timeless *Gangnam Style*, Monique asks, "*Monsieur, du Conde*, you have spent time with him through Peter. Your impressions?"

"You like 'im?"

"Just curious."

"He's got big personality, tongue-in-cheek fun, exceedingly competent, and way-way overly confident."

"You mean, he's very French."

"As only you can put it. I'm 'Murican."

"Like Americans, you work too hard."

"Like it or not, I am one of 'em."

"*N'importe quoi.*" She gives Josav another little kiss and, "Let's collect the family for photos. Would you be so kind?"

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While stepping away from the DJ, Josav wonders if asking for his help was a good thing or not when the robot goes off saying, "They want me to announce to all ya'll that our host would like to do a family photo shoot on the—*escalier*—which, for you uncultured meatbags, is stairs in frog speak..." The next song kicks in, "So, let's hop to it so you can hurry back and bite..." Suddenly, the whole crowd rattles off with the robot DJ, "My shinny metal ass!"

Josav's shock is short lived when the guests laugh and cheer. It seems that the more crass, churlish and insulting this machine gets the more the people love him. Go fig they say?

The family members in-residence go first.

Monique is sitting on an antique medieval scissor-chair at the base of the grand staircase by the main hall. Her black skin and long-silky hair are in sharp contrast to the stark whiteness of her gown. Flanking her is Josav, Peter, Carlos, Jordan, Connie and mini-Monique.

Maria is standing behind the photographers with Jacob, and after a minute of watching them mess with the lighting, and the rest of the family meander in, she remembers something Jacob said a long time ago, "You know, you were right."

Jacob asks, "When am I ever right?"

Maria nods towards Monique, "Morticia Noir."

Jacob is startled, "Oh, shit, you remember that!"

"Back then I thought you were full of shit, but now I see you were nuts-on about her. She's got the act down, yea, but that dress, the cleavage, and the hair nails it!"

"And to think I was tapping that nightly."

Maria smirks, "I don't know what she saw in you?"

"A young man who excelled at his job—and I loved my job."

"And the way she opted to can your ass was best described as an exercise in natural selection if you ask me."

Jacob nods with a laugh, "Just found out there's more to it."

Maria looks at him, "*Res ipsa loquitur*, mutherfucker. That is, unless you got some sticky shit to throw at it?"

Jacob shrugs, "It had to do with my father."

Maria wonders, "I thought you said you didn't know..." Then it hit her and she recoils slightly, "No! No way!"

"On a hunch I did an RFLP comparison from the sample we had on file from Theta-2 and, well, there ya have it."

With open mouth astonishment, Maria goes, "No fuckin' way!"

Jacob laughs, "Yes, fucken way! My mother doesn't know that I know so shut up about it." He then smiles, "By the way, Pete and my sister are doing very well in Vegas I might add."

Maria laughs, "So...how?"

"Oh, ya, he was going to cut the crew loose and do it himself. He had a bag of money and a shuttle waiting for me, and was gonna pack me off to New Brisbane. That was the plan."

Maria starts to ask, "Does Monique—"

Jacob nods, "Know I know, yes. And she feels relieved that we're okay." Then with an almost teary-eyed sad smile, "For once in my life, everything makes sense."

"It's okay!" With genuine concern, Maria drapes an arm around Jacob for a little half-a hug, then whispers, "Wow!"

"Ya, no shit." Jacob ponders, "I always wondered why he knew my mother and why he was around when I was growing up." He then perks while sharing, "Do you know what that fucker said when I pressed him on it in Vegas last weekend?"

"I could guess..." Maria puts her hand over her mouth and breaths with a deep-hollow wheeze, then, "Jake, I am your father."

Jacob starts laughing, "That's exactly what he did!"

Maria is startled, "No shit!"

"It was hilarious!" After they both have a good laugh Jacob goes, "I gotta ask, should Peter know or not?"

Rubbing her eyes, Maria says with a laugh, "That's not gonna go over well. Like, welcome to Arkansas..."

Without them knowing it Jessica has pulled up in front of them and chimes in with Maria, "Here's your father *and* your uncle." Having startled them she adds, "How about we *not* do that, okay?" Jacob and Maria look at each other and nod in agreement as Jessica says, "Nothing constructive would come of it."

It was just then that Peter's voice cuts through the music, "Hey, Pop! Maria and Jessie! You guys, get in here!"

While they've been talking most of the extended family has been pulled in for the group shot. Jacob, Jessica, Diego and Seth were obvious, but Monique requested Maria and Nicole to get in on this too. She then asked for the clones because they were genetically bound to Nicole and Jessica and therefore qualified as family.

As the photographers were arranging them Monique then bid towards José Ozo who was watching from the periphery, "Mr, Ozo, would you be so kind as to join us, please?"

José had nowhere to go after his father died on Nufa, so Maria took him in as his guardian until his mother could be found. Diego and José were good friends so it was the least she could do, and as José was being squeezed in by Diego the little eighteen month old Angela comes tearing ass into the shoot with Rutledge chasing after her.

Rutledge stays out of camera shot while motioning for her to come back, "Angela! Get your little butt over here!"

Jacob picks up the giggling Angela as Monique announces to all, "Mr Rutledge! Since your family is seven centuries long past we find it mutually advantageous to adopt you and your daughter into our fold. Please join!"

Rutledge is shocked, and as he stands there wondering what to do, Maria prods him, "Hey, numb-nuts, get in this!"

Jacob hands Angela to Rutledge as he is pulled in, and with the squirming little critter trapped in her father's arms Jacob pokes her tummy with, "My, what an absolutely beautiful little lady!"

"Father, no!" Diego's mock-fright draws everyone's attention, so Diego dramatically throws her hands out at Jacob, "You don't want to go there, father. She's too old for you!"

By now everyone has heard about how 'old' Glados is so this gets Diego the biggest laugh of the night, and while everyone busts a gut, Jacob smiles at Diego with, "Bitch."

Absolutely delighted by this, Diego fist-pumps the air with, "Yea, we have a consensus!"

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free range clover

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

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

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

Which happens to be war.

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

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

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

Bob ditched Michal this morning because her goal is peace, so as he takes a glider back towards the chateau to smooth things over with her, the limo passes him in route and lands on the platform.

With one of Monique's meaner looking goons, the one who was the acting photographer last night, and happened to impress the shit out of the Xhemal's photographer who was working beside him, slips out of the driver's seat and comes around to open the passenger door. Nikki-8, 52 and Paula get out with little effort but Tyrol has yet to budge, so as Paula steps up to Jacob and Maria, the clones laugh at Tyrol who appears stuck in the limo.

Paula is shaking her head, "We found him by the pool with two of his girls. We don't know where the third one crashed."

It was then the driver opens the adjoining hatch and Tyrol rolls backwards out onto the platform then bounds up on his feet and wobbles while trying to get his bearings. He is in one of Monique's long red satin gowns that is way too small, a pair of big dino-clawed slippers, and red sun glasses with huge heart shaped lenses.

As the driver hands him his Bloody Mary, with a stalk of celery and an umbrella sticking out of the top, he respectfully addresses this drunk by his full last name, "Good luck, Mr. Tyrolia."

With a stammer in his step, Tyrol heads towards Jacob and Maria while calling back, "Thank you for everything, Mac!"

Jacob and Maria are laughing as Paula says, "We got him shitted and showered and in the limo as fast as we could."

Maria catches her breath, "His clothes?"

Tyrol heard that and says as he stops in front of them, "Best we could do on short notice." He yawns big and, "The foot-gear are from Carlos, and I dunno about the glasses but Connie says they go with the threads. Waddya think?"

Maria just shakes her head, "We've nothing for you to change into before you get to Cue Ball, so it'll have to do."

"Paula said it was a come as you are."

Jacob leans in and shakes his free hand while he tries to suppress his own laughter, "That it is, son! I showed up here in boxers and flip-flops so we both started on similar footing."

Michelle Kiel and Pete, both suited up, have cantered over with Peter pointing at Tyrol, "Now, this is a fashion statement!"

Tyrol nods, "Who the fuck knows what I'm trying to state?"

Kiel plucks the Bloody Mary from his hand and gives it to Jacob while urging, "We gotta go, guys. The window is closing."

Peter races to his Bulldog fighter, "Later, gators!"

As Kiel hurries Tyrol, Paula and the clones away, Maria calls out to Tyrol, "Hey, Rufus, I forgot to thank you for spending all that time with Diego after her surgery. It meant a lot."

Tyrol, having turned around, adjusts the gown, "I absolutely adore your girls! That was the best ten days of my adult life so, in actuality, I have to be thanking you!" He pulls the glasses down and looks slyly over the lenses, "Still hate me?"

Maria smiles, "I'm now your biggest fan!"

Paula and Kiel yank him into the hold of the warthog.

Peter's fighter is already in the air circling the platform as the Warthog is given the go for launch. Because there were people standing on the platform they couldn't just shoot up as usual. The ship drifts slowly at first and when it reaches forty meters above the platform it shifts to a three-gravity vertical crunch into the sky.

With Jessica, Diego, Cloé and Victoria climbing the ramp to the platform, Diego goes, "Damn it!"

Maria says, "Sorry, hon, they were behind schedule."

Jacob suggests, "I tell ya what, when I go get them in six months you can come with. Sound good?"

Diego asks, "I gotta wear that suit-shit, right?"

Jacob shrugs, "If ya wanna go?"

Diego's shoulder's sag, "Okay, I'll gear up!"

Maria adds, "We'll have to scan you a week ahead of time."

With the drop ship initiating a burn, adding a lateral trajectory towards the southeast, Diego grumbles, "Fine."

Maria then motions for them to put out their hands, and as she counts twelve coins each the Bulldog fighter does a flyby while rocking its wings, so Cloé asks Jessica, "Who's in the fighter?"

"Pete."

"Why doesn't he just ride with 'em?"

"You know about Fifty-Two, right?"

Cloé is looking past Jessica, obviously just noticing a handful of shadows around them, saying, "Her abilities, ya."

Jessica makes a shooting-gun motion with her hand and, "C.Y.A. protocol. Everywhere she goes." Then pointing at the ground, "And those shadows, security for us. Everywhere we go."

"Oh, okay..." Looking at the coins Maria just put in her hand, Cloé then asks, "What are these for?"

Maria smiles, "Just do what everyone else does with 'em."

Diego adds, "Which is to throw them on the floor."

Cloé does a slight double-take, "Some of these are pennies!"

Jessica laughs, "Almost a crime, ain't it?"

Maria then urges them to get to the limo, "Come on, there are tamales and margarita's waitin' for me!"

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The direct route from the top of One-Klick to Maria's aunt's residence by the Echo Park Lake is a twenty-three degree glidepath due north. A three-degree glidescope is considered a normal decent, and twelve-degrees is standard for an emergency decent, but diving at greater than twenty-degrees has all the earmarks of a pending crash or a combat drop—depending on one's objective.

Big Mac could have requested clearance for a civil glidescope decent pathway—which would take them at least twelve kilometers out of their way. He could drop the limo to the ground like an elevator and opt to take to the streets—which would be stop and start ridiculous and still all of three or more kilometers out of the way.

Maria Ramirez, however, has diplomatic credentials and a VIP on board so they were cleared for the most direct decent route with a leisurely seven minute window.

They touch down in front of her aunt's house with a shadow squad of six cloaked troopers who have followed the limo down and instantly spread out in guard positions around the vehicle. The other cloaked squad from last night have already scoped the place out hours ago with the squad leader in anchor position in the front yard, two in high sniping positions, and three who have infiltrated the residence and interrogated the party goers unawares—hugging the ceilings and scanning for weapons.

The driver, Mac, comes around and opens the door.

They all pile out with Maria being the last to step on the curb, and as she does she looks down at her feet and, seeing a massive crack in the pavement, she gives a quiet prayer, "*Deus lo volt.*"

With everyone moving towards the house, Jacob quietly asks, "That's where he bled out?"

With a grim smile, Maria nods, "Yea."

Mac speaks up, "Marshal Ramirez, Marshal Graves, I'll be out here if you need me. Just give us a shout."

Maria asks, "Three-hundred feet, right?"

"Madame, I don't know—"

"Mac, you don't work for me." She puts her hand out to offer him some coins, "You can do your three-hundred feet in this direction."

"Ma'am."

Maria turns and looks up at him, and at six-feet eight-inches Mac towers over both her and Jacob, she points to him and laughs while saying to Jacob, "Tall son-of-a-bitch, isn't he? Big!"

Jacob snorts, "Don't argue with her, dude!"

Mac shakes his head as she starts to count out the coins, "I'm not going to win here, am I?"

Maria smiles, "Do you know why I am who I am?"

"You don't lose?"

"Ding-ding-ding!" She then says, "We'll get you fed and a tequila doggy-bag to go on the way out."

"Mighty kind of you, Marshal—"

"Nope! Today it's, Maria."

They reach the steps and climb, and as they do they see that Jessica, Diego and Cloé have already swept their coins through the doorway and are waiting for Victoria who says, "How humble is this!"

Jessica informs her, "Well, with pennies going for about eighty dollars apiece in U.S. exchange, they're not exactly humble."

Maria says to Victoria, "At least they're not throwing buckets of water out the window." Victoria obviously wonders about that as Maria adds, "Just strange shit us Mexicans do!"

As they step through Jacob, Maria and Mac drop their coins with Mac taking the broom and saying, "A handful of those pennies would make for a great weekend in Reno."

Jacob quietly agrees, "That they would!"

Entering Maria's aunt's home, gingerly stepping on the small fortune in coins lying on the floor, Maria takes Victoria to the kitchen while Diego, Jessica and Cloé are sucked into the cousin vortex in the back family room. Jacob and Mac are stopped in their tracks by a small table with chips and three different salsas to choose from.

Jacob turns to Mac while reaching for a chip, "You like to eat?"

Mac smiles, "Favorite pastime...after brunettes."

"Well, the food here is just fucking ridiculous!"

In the kitchen Maria hugs both her mother, Ophelia, and her aunt, Agatha, from behind, "Thank you for having us!"

Ophelia turns around, "*Mi pequeña niña!*"

As Ophelia hugs her, Maria goes, "English, mom."

"Okay, okay!" Ophelia then sees Victoria, "*la Reina?*"

"I told you, it's Vic. Okay?"

"Okay, okay!" Ophelia reaches over and gives Victoria a big hug, "Bless you, Vic, for looking after my daughter!"

Maria's aunt, Agatha, steps in and after wiping her hands off on her apron she hugs Victoria, "Welcome to our home, *su Alteza!*" Then with Maria giving her a look she corrects herself, "Vic!"

Victoria smiles, "It's smashing to be here! Thank you!"

Maria say to Victoria, "They're a bit of a huggy bunch."

Just then, Adolfina steps in from the back yard and goes, "God damn, you two! That was a hell of a fight last week!"

"Vic, this is Adolfina I told you about."

After Adolfina hugs both she grabs a bowl of butter and garlic with a brush, and as Victoria surveys the kitchen Adolfina leans into Maria to whisper, "This your squeeze now? *Esa jeva es un mango!*"

With Maria gesturing for her to keep quiet, Adolfina nods then elbows her, "We got a pig on a spit! Come tell me about Nufa."

As Adolfina slips out back Maria turns to Victoria who says, "All this wonderful food! I am so peckish right now."

Noticing Ophelia motioning them to get out, Maria points to Victoria, "You wanna try real Mexican in a pinch?"

With Victoria nodding yes, Maria whips a bowl out from of the cupboard and pours cheerios in it—followed by milk and equal amounts of Kahlua. Handing the bowl and a spoon to Victoria, Maria says slyly, "Wrap your lips around this."

Taking a spoonful, Victoria's face lights up, "Oh, my God!"

"Cheerios *vaca marron*, that's sick, right?"

Agatha starts to shoo them out the door while saying, "Go see your sister out back and we'll send out *champurrado de leche.*"

While going through the door Maria requests, "Spiked!"

With them gone, Jacob and Mac come into the kitchen and Ophelia lights up, "Jacob! Mac! My two favorite young men!"

Ophelia hugs them both and has them sit at the table next to Monique's private chef who's been watching Agatha and Ophelia like a hawk—and with an almost envious glare.

With Ophelia putting out a tray of fresh tamales for the three, Mac asks the chef, "Learn anything new, Léon?"

Léon looks at Mac and responds with a severe French accent and *kiss-my-ass* in his eyes, "You know, Mac, I've studied cuisine the world over. I even know the difference between La-Mex and Tex-Mex, but this here is a world with so few ingredients, and yet we have so much variety. An embarrassment of riches!"

Mac bites into a tamale and, "The question stands?"

There is a sauce pan on a hot plate on the table so Léon dips a spoon in it, "Mole? You call this mole?" Léon looks and makes sure Ophelia and Agatha are out of earshot, "Gar-bage! It's like suet, and stone ground cacao brick and desiccated poblano and circus peanuts! *C'est des ordures!*" Léon shoves the spoon in his own mouth and he shudders as his eyes roll back, "*Magnifique! C'est le paradis!*"

Mac snickers, "Then...it's okay?"

Léon laughs while throwing the spoon on the table, "Fuck you! Fuck you, Mac!"

Jacob adds with a smile, "I think he likes it?"

Léon has grabbed a tamale and shakes it out over a saucer. "You have no idea..." Taking the spoon he cuts into the tamale, "I have never seen workmanship like this! It's sloppy, but who cares!" He takes a bite and smacks his lips, "The masa is course but sweet with a hint of salt..." Léon throws himself back in his seat and declares, "It's been decided! I'm going to marry this woman, Ophelia!"

Jacob and Mac look at each other then at Léon who shrugs, "We're the same age!"

Mac then says, "Marshal Ramirez and her mother do look like sisters if you ask me. Ophelia is a beautiful woman." Then as he takes a bite of his tamale he adds, "Nice ass, too."

Jacob shakes his head, "I can't...look at Ophelia as an object. It doesn't register, but...Mexican women do fuck like demons."

With Mac nodding big in agreement, Léon taps his fingers on the table like a gavel, "*Sacré bleu!* Then it is decided!"

"Léon..." Mac reaches for another tamale, "Where's your head. You're fuckin' nuts. Hit it and run, that's what you do."

Léon smirks, "Like demons, no? I can live with that."

Jacob just shake his head in wonderment, "Well, Léon, here's a preemptive welcome to the family! Just watch out, her last boyfriend she, ah, well, beaned in the head with a skillet."

"No!" With Léon that cinches the deal, "I'm in love!"

Diego, Jessica and Cloé wander in and Ophelia rattles away with, "*Mis chicas grandes!*" She hugs them then hands Jessica a tray of mugs with Mexican hot chocolate and asks, "Jessie, *mi roja*, could you take these to your Aunt Maria and Adolfina out back?"

Jessica notices four mugs, "*¡Sí!* Syleste here?"

Ophelia kisses her on the cheek, "By the spit, *vámonos!*"

As the three head for the backyard, Cloé asks, "Jessie, I hate to ask but isn't Maria your stepmother?"

Jessica stops in front of the table where Jacob, Mac and Léon are sitting, and nods towards her father, "Oh, ya, I didn't know my father while I was growing up. My mother and he were not on speaking terms but Maria was around all the time! When I was a little squirt I'd come here and she was my Aunt Maria then. Didn't know they were married but when I finally meet my father they were already on the outs. Confusing?"

Cloé looks at Jacob who says, "Pretty much covers it!"

She turns back to Jessica, "No! All make sense now."

With Jessica and Cloé stepping out Léon motions for Diego to hang back and asks her, "Sian, if you please! I have decided to marry your grandmother. What do you think of that?"

"You, what!" Diego starts cracking up, "You, my granddad? THAT would be awesome! You're a riot, Léon!"

Ophelia has stepped up, kissed Diego on top of the head, and hands her three mugs of hot chocolate, "For you girls." And as Diego heads out the back door, Ophelia turns to Léon with her hands on her hips, "Marry me? What makes you think you can handle this?"

Léon's confidence is vastly entertaining, "*Mademoiselle, au contraire!* A woman is to be worshiped! Not man-handled!"

Ophelia snorts a laugh and walks away mumbling, "*Idiota!*"

Léon smiles, "She's hooked!"

Mac laughs, "Hang it up, dude!"

Jacob shakes his head, "No, Mac. I think Léon is maybe onto something. I got a c-note that says he scores on this one."

"I'll take that bet."

Léon looks at Mac and sighs, "You are going to lose."

Mac thinks about it for a second and pats Léon on the back, "This is one I hope I do."

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Diego, handing a mug of chocolate to Jessica and Cloé, reacts with a curious horror at the hundred and fifty pound pig slowly rotating on a spit. This makeshift rotisserie was thrown together with crudely welded angle iron and a chain driven spit that makes a weird grinding sound because the electric motor is on its last leg. The bed of coals is harvested from a separate fire pit stoked with apple wood which is very hard to get your hands on here in Southern California. When it comes to food for family festivities, Adolfina will spare no expense.

The skin of the pig, head and all, is slit all over and has a perfect crackle to it. Adolfina is now basting it with a coat of salted butter and garlic to give it a little sheen on its last hour of turning.

Meats of all types, especially the most prized cuts, anymore are cultured, plentiful and cheap as dirt. A single free-range hog, like the one on this spit, can produce so many in-vitro plugs that it could feed millions upon millions through modern robotically-controlled 'vertical farming' operations. That's what the latest VFOC farm animal breeds are designed for which is harvesting tissue samples—where a simple three cubic millimeter tidbit translates into 10,000 tons of end product for market. There are still traditional farms out there who specialize in breeding for slaughter and direct consumption which can get rather pricy when the animal is both plump and well cared for.

Again, for the love of family—no expense is spared here.

It's just that Diego was not prepared to see an actual animal that was killed and cooked to perfection just for their dining pleasure, "Jesus! Is this thing for real?"

Jessica looks at her sister with amusement, "You've never seen this before have you?"

Cloé laughs with, "No biggie here! We do this all the time on the stumps...but the Bumbles are dumb as stumps."

Diego looks up at Cloé, "What's the difference?"

"Pigs are really smart and I'm gonna feel real bad while I'm chowin' down." Cloé looks at Jessica, "We're chowin' down, right?"

Jessica nods, "You can count on it!"

Adolfina hears the exchange and has already pulled a strip of meat and crackle, and hands it to Diego on a fork, "Try this, hon."

Diego looks up at Adolfina and then Jessica and says with a genuine pout in her face and a tear forming in her eye, "This is sad!"

Adolfina quietly encourages her, "*Vale*, it's its gift to you!"

Maria's younger sister, Syleste, a catholic priest in a black collarino shirt with the white tab, squats by Diego and says with infinite gentleness, "Diego, it's part of the cycle of life. Honor it."

Diego takes a bite and her face lights up, "Oh, my! This is sooo yummy!" She looks at Syleste, "I feel so guilty!"

Wiping that tear from Diego's cheek, Syleste smiles at her and stands, "Diego, hon, the bitter truth is you'll be faced with many things in life that should bring you guilt, but...this is not one of them."

Jessica hugs Syleste, "I've so missed you!"

As Jessica, Diego and Cloé wander back to the family room, Diego shares the meat with them, and as they slip into the house Maria pats Syleste on the back, "Well now, we've established a firm foundation for some future psychological complex. Good job, sis!"

Syleste snarks back, "Glad to be of service!"

"You're an ass." And as Adolfina hands Victoria a sample of the pork, and Victoria asks her about Afghanistan, Maria pulls her sister aside, "Okay, Mother Syleste, on your last text you mentioned you want to go back to being a parish priest. What the fuck gives?"

"I don't want to be an auxiliary anymore."

"You're next in line for Bishop, d'uh!"

Syleste looks up to the heavens and mouths the words, *forgive me*, then back down at Maria, "Fuck that!" Maria is startled so Syleste shares further, "This is too much work, and I used to get laid a lot more as a simple priest, and that wouldn't be such a big deal with my wife but...it's just that...I've garnered a greater appreciation for real cock now that I'm getting older."

Maria laughs while she recognizes someone, "Slut!"

Syleste reminds her, "I am your sister!"

"Let me ask you something, off topic..." Maria walks around Syleste and thumbs back towards the figure she saw, "That Junior?"

"Ya, our coz is here to see ya."

"So, ah, we supposed to kiss and make up or am I gonna slit his fucking throat in front of everybody? Just curious."

Syleste shrugs, "Well, it is your choice, but I'm one to vote for the kiss and make up option. It's a lot less messy and no cops."

Maria looks over her shoulder for just a second then turns back to announce, "Syleste, Adolfin, I'm goin' over here for just a minute or two. If you hear a commotion, like screamin' and shit. Don't, and I mean it, do not come running. Okay?"

Sitting beside a rusty 55 gallon fire drum is Agatha's son, Junior. Clinging to him is his boyfriend, Fabio. Junior is in baggies and a crisp-white a-shirt that accentuates his cut and build. Even with the scars, green bandana and patch over his missing right eye, Junior is rather attractive—in a brutal, hyper-masculine tomcat sense.

Maria steps up by the fire and motions to him, "Vato, this is The Crazy's hood! Those colors gonna get you scalped."

Junior points to the ground, "This here is a DMZ. We got a treaty so I can rep like a fucken' peacock." He taps a three-finger sign across his chest then gestures towards Maria, "*Homme*, what we got here is a free range clover."

"What the fuck you want, Junior?"

"*Perra Tigre*, you've been off the reservation for so long you don't remember where you come from. It's time for a civics lesson."

Maria utters a simple tacnet command, "Paint 'em."

From all around, targeting lasers flash over Junior and Fabio. Normally targeting lasers are wobbly, so much so you can even see the heart beat of the shooter, but these lasers are rock solid steady.

Junior laughs, "So we got spooky in the woodpile!"

Fabio snarls with youthful hostility, "*Puto gato*."

Junior is about to slap him across the face, "*Fabio, pinche puto*, show a modicum of respect, motherfucker." He sits back and, noticing the karambit knife in her waistband, he smiles, "You know, little Lynn, combat-casual looks good on you. Gives me a stiffy."

Maria flashes her teeth, "I was expecting to get jumped out. What the fuck happened is what I'm wondering."

"Yea, and go to the island with your boy, Jaime, and make babies and shit—away from the life."

"Wanda said I'd get jumped."

"You were Wanda's bitch. You were going nowhere."

"She cut Jaime's fucken throat."

Junior taps his own head, "Think! Wanda pulled on Diamond

so Peek-A-Boo had to call it in. See, you weren't gettin' jumped out. No, you were gettin' whacked."

Maria's predatory gaze is like on fire, "We just got married."

Junior puts a hand out, "Your boy saying that you went to the Justice of the Peace that afternoon, well, he was supposed to watch you die, but that news kinda turned the tables on 'im." Junior nods his head with a frown, "You did bag the two Crazys and Wanda. Nobody thought you could flip and go Rambo on us like that."

"Well, with all the throaty-cutty back-n-forth action, I just kinda got swept up in it all. So, what the fuck do you want before I tire of your suck and put your ass down."

"Parlay."

Junior pulls out her green bandana and tosses it to Maria. It's still tightly rolled, flat, tied at the ends, with Jaime's blood stains on it after all this time. Maria looks at it and the despair she felt losing a husband of three hours sweeps over her like a flash.

Maria grits her teeth, "What do you have to offer?"

"An olive branch. See, you got the means to seriously..." Junior flashes his hands out, "Poof, Diamond and Peek-A-Boo, but without the Peek-A-Boo force field The Crazys and Bloods will come down on Clover. Popcorn ol' Peek-A-Boo and there's no reason for a truce. We'll lose our turf."

"Yea, I hear you stuck your dicks in a few holes you shouldn't have, but that *turning state's* force field ain't gonna last."

"No, it's good for now. Just have your colors on when you're in da hood and we can put this behind us."

"How about out?"

"You get parlay—not out. If Peek lets you walk after killing Wanda we gotta cap 'im. There's principal to uphold, but the fact of the matter is we need to keep 'im alive...for now."

Maria now knows she killed Wanda, but the hit on herself will only be called off if she dons the colors again, "Parlay, how long?"

"Since this is all for show, you get it forever."

"Forever is a long stretch."

"You could say 'till the rivers flow up from the sea and grass grows into hell kind of forever. Ya know, pretty fuckin' forever."

Maria looks down and, full well knowing that she is now their extended force field, slides the bandana on and adjusts it to line up with her eye-brows, "Keep me and mine out of your shit."

Junior points to the ground, "DMZ, and in the Heights you got Switzerland. I'll keep you apprised if the winds change."

Maria thinks about it, "Sorry about your eye, cuz."

"No biggie, it's a mark of prestige. I lost my eye to *el Tigre*." Junior laughs, "Damn, *chola*, you're a legend! Bangers from all over came to spot their colors with your blood." Junior points at her, "You know, we pulled up to the Klick to finish the job an' this snow-white comes out of the lobby with a fuckin' railgun, so we booked!"

Maria smiles and nods while whispering, "Maggie."

Just then, Diego steps up between them and, noticing the bandana on her mother's head, she faces Junior and asks them both, "You guys playin' nice?"

Junior laughs, "Lil' *chiquita* looks like a Ramirez."

Knowing how dangerous he is, Diego pushes the envelope, "Junior, 'bout that, you may be a Herrero but you look like an asshole."

Junior is astonished by her backbone, "I love this little one!" He then reaches back and pulls out Maria's old straight razor and holds it up, "I was supposed to give your mother her blade back. It's got a lot of serious mojo flowing through it, but now..." Junior looks up at Maria, "I'm askin' if this here little one should have it?"

This was Maria's back up blade. The razor Wanda used to slice her up then kill Jaime with—followed by Maria going psycho and using it to kill Wanda, the two Crazys, and to put Junior's eye out. To refuse it would show weakness, yes, but now to prevent it from going to Diego would demonstrate unforgiveable fragility. This razor may have bad mojo but that does not make it a bad omen. In fact, in this world it is a prize to be treasured, so Maria nods with approval.

The pride in Junior's face is evident when Diego takes the blade from him while Maria says, "I'll show you how to use it."

With this détente firmly established, Diego glances down at the yard-toss boards on the ground and looks up, "You know, Junior, these washers aren't gonna throw themselves."

Junior lights up, "*Homme*, we got ourselves a challenger!"

By the fire pit, Victoria delights in hearing about Aldofina's last big fight in Afghanistan, but lurking in the shadows unseen, between the house and the pit, is Jessica. Bullets have been dodged, fences have been mended, and with a deep sense of relief she takes a cleansing breath and slips back inside.

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

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

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

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

Two of those little guys also future Frisbee candidates.

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

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

What has torqued the science cranks for over fifty years is that the surface of Dedede will bounce back and forth past 100° Celsius, repeatedly reconstituting and boiling off the surface water in an atmosphere that's already oversaturated at 100% humidity, and in spite of the intemperate weather the flora that has cropped up here manages to keep the internal plant structures between a reasonable 82-94° no matter how challenging it is on the outside.

Studying the unique properties of a biology that shields from both radiation and thermal assault in the natural state, that is millions of plant types with thousands of differing mechanisms, has become a priority to the sciences and academia but, to sweep it all under the rug away from the corporate R&D leaches, they long ago turned to a friend of the astronomy community for help. The Orion Trust, with the help of the SA, developed a ruse where everyone has openly known about Kirby and Dedede for decades. The most powerful industrial R&D divisions have wanted to get their mitts on Dedede in the worse possible way, it's just that they've been cock-blocked by the United Nations strict TLYLT (Thousand Light Year Limitation Treaty) and never knew it was in their 37-Tau back yard the whole time.

They never knew red dwarf 37-Tau-E was in actuality, Kirby.

All the fantastical reports and images they saw of the Kirby system, believed far out of reach past D-Vel in the Vela constellation, showed it had four planets and nine tiny planetoids, not the two planets and one dwarf planet of 37-Tau-E, and all the images of the planet Popstar, getting bathed in the coronal hate of Kirby, has gripped the imagination of grade schoolers taking the compulsory planetary science classes. Kirby and Popstar have become their most favoritist celestial bodies ever since Pluto was reinstated back into the planetary club and joined by the likes of Charon, Eres, Ceres, and Sedna.

Popstar is actually the hyper-volcanic planet, Super Scorch. A molten ball of sulfuric-iron churning inside-out rage that whips around 37-Tau-E with a year that tops out at about 110 hours, just short of five days. Everything they've been taught about Kirby and Popstar has always been 37-Tau-E and Super Scorch.

Dedede, the planet the kids didn't care about, was the planet that everyone else was drooling over by all accounts. The images of it from orbit and on the surface showed it off as some rainbow light-brite planetary Disneyland, where social media science vloggers jokingly added photoshops of smurfs and unicorns just for giggles, yet back in 2296 it was shocking for them to learn this planet was a hot-sweaty rock originally called, Black Cauldron.

And never was there a more fitting name for such a stormy, gray-overcast greenhouse nightmare.

Artyom has enjoyed his job over the last forty-eight years. His life has been a simple and rewarding one of constant photography, scanning, data and sample collection. Now, the scientific community thinks he has been working for them all this time but in reality he has always answered to the Steel Annex. The thousands upon thousands of discoveries made here by Artyom, doing real time AI analysis on the fly, means that the good stuff he discovered on the Black Calderon, (okay-okay) that is Dedede, have, unbeknownst to academia and said scientific community, never made it to the science dweebs. The most fascinating discovery by far, shared with science, is the realization that the indigenous flora here on Dedede is not indigenous.

What's got everyone's panties all up in a bunch is the fight between the intentional camp versus the accidental camp. That is, the Pullulation Theory of intelligently sown fauna versus the Transposition Theory of randomly deposited spores. This knock-down/drag-out now holds the distinction of being the *dumbest non-scientific science ever* and has upstaged the "loss of information" ecclesiastical debates in the theoretical physics world centuries before.

Oh yea, and Transposition is winning.

Anyway, the data and samples that had any industrial value or impact went directly to the SA arm called Jerryworks, who farmed it out to the worst of the abusive research and development groups of the corporations they themselves secretly controlled. The technologies developed from Dedede are being held close to the chest in a virtual death-grip, with a barely noticeable trickle of tech leaking out based upon the samples and data that have been shared with academia.

The problem looming over this enterprise is that after the last war the Annex knew they could not keep this deception through the next one so, after having gotten all the choicest morsels from Dedede, and to block access by the Co-op, in march of 2296 they intentionally let it "accidentally" leak that Kirby is 37-Tau-E.

The fight for access and control over Dedede was won by the scientific community in the courts and, with the cease fire about to lapse, the effort to recover Artyom is now in mad-scramble mode.

Truth be known, the recovery operation is a mulligan of sorts.

Artyom is just the bait.

When the Orion Trust swapped out their beaten up steerage digs of an observatory, orbiting Dark Mind, the crappy little dwarf planet in the chilly region past Popstar and Dedede, for the new posh Access Ark facility, complete with amphitheatre, hotel and convention center, it became both a popular vacation attraction as well as the field trip of choice for 6th Graders in the Hyades. To date, all this visibility

has locked in their control of the Kirby system and effectively locked out the corporations.

Everyone knows that the Co-op will muscle their way in after the shooting starts, in about twenty minutes, but only the microbiology and plant sciences factions will really care. The Orion Trust and the Annex long ago got what they wanted, and before the Co-op can make any sense, science and innovative technology out of Dedede that will make a difference—this new war will be long over.

There are usually about a thousand or so kids on Access Ark, taking the tour and fawning over Popstar and Kirby, but it's the middle of the Christmas-New Year's school break so no field trips today; also the hotel is pretty empty for the holiday and that's great news for the Co-op because this minimizes potential collateral damage. Who is here are the university member delegates to the Orion Trust conducting their bi-annual ops meeting at a cut-rate. They're just pushing funds from one budgetary pool to another, yes, but business is business and fiscal responsibility for the Trust errors on the side of austerity.

And front row seats on the cheap for this show.

Iron Man, SA-14, has been docked with Access Ark waiting for Artyom to be delivered to them. The lift was supposed to happen a day ago but, as part of this ruse, a final core sample was taken over a known high-pressure methane filled sinkhole.

What little fauna there is on Dedede is bacterial and twice the biomass of the plants on the surface. Underground, protected from Kirby, this symbiotic relationship has resulted in a rich soil interlaced with the porous volcanic rock and has converted the predominately CO₂ atmosphere at its inception to a ratio of 36-40-20-4 of CO₂, O₂, nitrogen and other trace gasses. With an atmospheric pressure exceeding fourteen-hundred millibars when methane escapes into the atmosphere of Dedede under pressure, which surprisingly happens a lot around here, all you need is ignition—and on the thunderstorm infested and electrically charged Dedede all you throw are sevens.

There is always a spark.

Artyom was drilling over the sink hole when the ceiling of the chamber fractured and the gas escaped, blowing all seventy-tons of him back away from the breach. A vast plume of methane rolled up into the sky and didn't have to wait long for an ignition source. Artyom had a flare waiting just in case but that was not necessary.

When methane combines with oxygen (O₂) via combustion it goes through a ridiculous number of reactions making it a burn and not an explosion per se. Still, with the plume hitting a low hanging storm cloud, the ignition source for today, this "burn" had the power of a

small nuclear bomb that punched Artyom through the ceiling of the sinkhole as well as having collapsed said ceiling on top of him.

It took only an hour for Artyom and his mech to dig out from under the rubble, but that was a whole day ago. The recovery crew could not get to him under thirty-meters of boiling water that filled the small cavern so the crew has been pumping off the water—fighting the aquifer that is constantly trying to fill it up however, the crew has been winning and the top of the mech is now showing. This is like the twelfth time in forty-eight years they had to fish this seventy-ton machine out of a water filled hole in the ground, and the first time they purposefully swamped one for show, but it's all so predictably old hat for the recovery crew, made of maintenance droids, that they're way ahead of schedule and have been delaying the lift now for six hours.

With just a few minutes to go before hoisting the mech, Jacob and Peña land their Thunderbolt fighters a football pitch away from the sinkhole. They hop out of their ships and step up beside Artyom, the original android component, who is looking down at the mech and his home for forty-eight years. Three cables are running up from the mech, over the lip of the sinkhole and under a supersized HWG-98 Razorback drop ship brought in and configured for this lift.

Artyom was originally David, a service android. Now, service droid was a euphemism for a robotic prostitute, a sexbot have you, but with the Neuronet—service droids became superfluous. One android is as good as another so David was picked up at a bargain-basement rate and, by uploading the RTM mech-utility and core-interface, this robot went from the virtually useless sexploitation David to astronomically valuable sciploitation Artyom with the flip of a switch.

Standing by the sinkhole naked, his cloths long ago burned away by Dedede, and with an eerie calm between storms, the rays of Kirby peeking through a break the clouds, Artyom looks like he's in deep thought as Jacob disturbs him with, "You ready?"

The android turns towards them and his charred exterior is utterly ghastly to behold, ["Just drinking it in, Field Marshal."]

Being the first human eyes to fall on Artyom in forty-eight years, Jacob and Peña were not expecting this horror show. All his hair, eyelids and outer layers of his skin have been burned away with the inner metallic skin hideously tarnished. Extremities like his fingers, toes, penis, ears and nose now sport the chroma rainbow of tempered steel. His broken jaw is wired shut to keep it from flopping about so to talk to them he has to communicate via an archaic radio interface.

Jacob suggests, "If you want to take a few minutes?"

Artyom shakes his head *no*, ["Ready as I'll ever be."]

While they walk towards the Thunderbolts, and the Razorback starting to lift off, Jacob looks over and says, "It's an honor to be the one to come get you, Artyom. You are a hero to us in the Annex."

["That's odd, I simply cannot understand how my efforts in botany could be classified as a heroic endeavor?"]

"Well, you saved my ass!"

Artyom's lips move in deference to the wired jaw, ["Oh yes, the sixth of November, twenty-three-zero-eight. I saw the report."]

Peña asks, "What stupid did you do?"

["Field Marshal, Graves, was hit by a laser battery."]

Jacob adds, "It was just a scratch, thanks to Artyom, here."

Stepping up to the fighters, with the Razorback hovering over the sinkhole to hoist the mech, Artyom pulls a piece of a bramble from a bush, jet black like all the plant life on this planet, and shows them, ["This is the specific culprit. The ablative surface of your JACC comes from the carbon-iron scaling on the stems. It's a brilliant example of bio-molecular interlocked bonding."]

Jacob squints at the plant, "The thorns!"

["This is just one example of that adaptation."]

Peña wonders, "What, I don't get it?"

Jacob motions around them, "There're no critters."

Peña still doesn't get it so Artyom adds, ["Thorns are only for self-defense, purposefully to dissuade animals from eating them. No herbivores means this biology did not evolve here."]

Peña chuckles, "No shit, it's that simple!"

Artyom nods, ["All too often the obvious is difficult to notice."]

Jacob says, "Guys, we gotta saddle up. Fifteen minutes."

Jacob has Artyom strap up in the jump seat behind him then seals the cockpit. Both he and Peña launch and orbit the Razorback as the recovery droids secure the mech. To accommodate this machine they removed the deck of the hold so that they can operate in utility hoist mode as the ever popular Dragonfly lifter. In fact they would have preferred the Dragonfly for this effort but the 2.4g of Dedede makes the 70 tons of the mech the equivalent of 168 tons—and double that for every 'g' of acceleration going up.

The Razorback lifts off for Access Ark, accelerating at a paltry half a gravity to start. Once they stabilize the load, identifying the center of gravity, the Razorback rotates its nose straight up and kicks

in its engines. They push it along little by little and topping off at 2g to keep the tension from acceleration at half the cable load-rating so as not to risk shearing them.

It is now noon and they have reached ninety kilometers up near the edge of space—above the thicker atmosphere of Dedede but not high enough for an overloaded drop ship to switch over to MDDSH.

Peña ties into Jacob with, ["Well, we're on schedule!"]

Jacob nods, "SA-14 should be irresistible."

["*Si...piñata hombre de hierro!*"]

Jacob gruffs, "That's an interesting way of putting it!"

Peña, mimicking a severe LA-Mex accent, ["*Patrón*, who can resist a fuckin' *piñata*! Weren't you were married to a Mexican once upon a time?"] He then mumbles, ["*No tiene dos dedos de frente!*"]

"What happened to that clean-cut lieutenant we hired on?"

Peña snorts a laugh, and with an exaggerated redneck accent, ["Oh, 'scuse me thar, Sir! Ya'll git wha'cha pay fur!"]

Jacob and Peña are ninety-seven light seconds away from Access Ark and cannot see anything at that distance in real time, but they are being fed a video and tactical stream directly from SA-14. This tacnet feed is only delayed by a pico-second or two, so at that very moment, with said delay, thirty-five seconds after the hour, two F-51 Condors zip up at a quarter light-speed, break for just a second, just enough time to let SA-14 have it with four centipede missiles, and zip back out at a quarter light speed before they could get shot at.

SA-14 was docked to Access Ark with its long nose, so the condors attacked the engine nacelles in the back of the ship over a kilometer away from the Ark. The platform initiates an emergency decoupling and uses its gravity core in a directional pull to draw itself away. It's only a quarter-g to start but the intensity builds up quickly. They only need 3 clicks to safely zip off in MDDSH spacial displacement mode but that drive capability is now gone. They can actually jump with one nacelle, and it would be a shit of a short jump, but a jump is a jump, and they still have two functional nacelles, but regulations require the ship to be at least of thirty kilometers away.

Iron Man, SA-14, the very first and most revered of the SA battle platforms, is in really deep shit for once.

They launch a squadron of Thunderbolt fighters to take on any follow up condors but all they get now is a centipede being sniped at them from a stand-off range every few seconds. The Co-op cannot launch a spider missile this close to Access Ark so what they plan to do

is now obvious. With no other option SA-14 notifies the Ark that they are initiating an emergency jump at fifteen kilometers.

Jacob, and the others watch as SA-14 approaches the twelve kilometer mark, so Jacob quietly says, "All according to prophesy."

Peña voice is strained, ["Dude, this is hard to watch."]

Artyom says of its AI, ["I always wanted to meet, Grace."]

Just then, at twelve kilometers, three from the proposed jump point, a Zodiac missile, special delivery from Security Services, streaks in and stops dead in its tracks right behind SA-14. Normally these things would initiate detonation about a thousand kilometers away from its target so that it would actually pop right at the exact moment they're about to hit said target, usually inside a kilometer, both the Annex and the Co-op have gotten that good with them, but with Access Ark so close they had to be exacting at worse so they brought the evil thing to a screeching halt.

In a half-a-second the Zodiac closes in and barely touches the Iron Man before detonating in a massive-blinding fifty-megaton pulse.

Iron Man is gone.

The radius of the plasma fire-ball is just over four-kilometers, and with no actual blast or shock wave to be had, this is space, one would still think that Access Ark would be irreparably scorched and damaged by the radiation at this short distance but this facility was built with Kirby in mind. Over the years Access Ark has been hit by a multitude of solar flares spit out by Kirby, so much radiation and charged particles in fact that this little fire-cracker of a nuke, at better than arms distance, was really nothing by comparison.

The fire-ball hangs in space for just a few seconds and fades out but Jacob, Peña and Artyom will not get to see this for another minute and a half. The feed from SA-14 is suddenly and simply cut. They do not need any visual cues as to what happened because they know they'll see it soon enough.

Jacob radios to Peña "Okay, Dog, they'll come for the mech so let's make it quick and painless for 'em."

["This is all so inelegant in its elegance."]

Jacob agrees whole heartedly, "Ya, it's not what I wanna do."

Artyom speaks up introspectively, "You know, I was already uploaded with the core so I do not know why we are going through these motions. You should have just bombed me on the surface."

Jacob just shakes his head, "This is not about you, Artyom, but we'll get you up to speed when we debrief."

Peña adds, ["If anyone is deserving of a duster it is you."]

They are less than a minute away from the point where the Razorback can kick it into MDDSH, but above them a single F51 Condor streaks in, so Jacob says, "Right on time."

Seconds later fifteen more Condor's streak in between them and the point of escape, with a cruiser above them for fire support. The Co-op wants to scoop up Artyom, and are clueless that they are being played, the drop ship carrying Artyom's mech suddenly rotates and, with this load, struggles to transition its trajectory sideways and away from the fighters above. There is not enough air pressure at this altitude for the Razorback to aerodynamically force a turn, and with the Condor's starting to descend on them the recovery crew cuts the mech loose—according to plan.

Once the mech is clear the Razorback kicks in its MDDSH engines and rips away at high speed. It couldn't do so with the load but now it can fly away unscathed.

With the mech starting to drop in a trajectory back towards Dedede so, as a kiss-my-ass to the Co-op, Jacob and Peña spread out and both launch a spider missile on it.

The whole reason for the Co-op to attack has now been obliterated. It's not even a debris field, the mech has been converted to hot and rapidly expanding fire-ball.

With the drop ship and mech now gone, Jacob and Peña go from pure defensive weakness to 'come hither and play' dominance. Not wanting to take them on just yet, the Condors climb away and high-tail it out with the cruiser. Now is not the time.

The two Thunderbolts MDDSH it out of the area and at 30au from Kirby they stop, link up, charge...and jump.

00101010-01011100-01101111-00101111-00101010

Normally in the SA you do three jumps and wait a day to make sure nobody has followed by recalibrating the jump signatures. Two jumps have been traced, yes, but never three consecutive jumps. Jacob and Peña jump five times with the last one straight back to the Carrie Nation orbiting Cue Ball, the eleventh planet of alpha-Orion.

From Dedede to a touchdown dish-side on the Carrie Nation was less than an hour. On combat jumps they stick to an operational protocol that calls for strict communication blackout but, if necessary, they can text and even synch clocks via old school paint-by-laser. This part of today's mission was uneventful, boring even, as will the post mission debriefing, or so Artyom was led to believe.

Standing alone on the lift in a JACC is Marshal, Nancy Yoon, the commander of the Carrie Nation. She guides Jacob and Peña to a cross-armed stop. It wasn't necessary but safety protocol is protocol, so if a pair of eyes are available they are required to be used.

As the lift drops to the first flight deck, their cockpits open up while still in a vacuum. At the bottom, Yoon walks along with them as they drive their Thunderbolts into the adjoining air lock where, once cleared, the door seals and the bay floods with air.

With the atmosphere stabilized, Yoon steps up to the first fighter while detaching her helmet-canopy assembly and pulling it straight up and off, "Trooper Peña, I've heard a lot about you."

Peña smiles, "All lies, Marshal Yoon!"

Jacob calls over from his ship as he starts to help Artyom out, "Heads up, Nancy. You're gonna be seeing a lot of him."

Yoon smiles, "I heard. How's Sandy taken to her new job?"

"Sandoval is fuckin' pissed." Jacob laughs as he lifts Artyom from the cockpit and helps him down to the deck, "I don't know if it's the promotion or being saddled with Cricket as a DFM?"

Yoon hides her shock at seeing Artyom's haggard appearance, "We're all praying Cricket gets through this...without fucking up."

"No shit. Though she is fantastic as a company commander."

Yoon shrugs as Jacob, Artyom and Peña step up, "Some fail to adapt to the impersonal touch, you know. I'd rather command a company over a fucking station but..." She sighs, "Good days, right?"

Jacob nods as he fist-bumps Yoon, "Those were good days."

Looking at the android, Yoon shakes her head, "I can't believe that it's you, Artyom. How's the SYLN nodes working for ya?"

Peña wonders, "I thought Artyom was pre-CLaN?"

"He got the C.L.N. nodes when he deployed and the SYLN upgrade thirty years ago. I was the liaison on that project."

Artyom nods and responds through the speaker in his throat, "Nancy Yoon, you were a corporal back then."

Yoon hands him the BDU pants he asked for on the way in, "Dude, you look like shit!"

"Yep, Five-Nights shit...thank you!" He holds the BDU pants up and inspects them with infinite joy, "God, how I've missed pants!"

Peña asks, "Pants? Forty-eight years and you ask for pants?"

"It's the little things."

Jacob and Yoon help Artyom steady himself, and as he puts the pants on, Yoon says, "Two things, first, all that time in the field made you eligible for rank. Only five people in the history of the Annex have been awarded PFC-Six and, well, you've earned it but, unfortunately, we do not have a brass pin on hand."

"I am honored!" Artyom cinches the belt and, "Not having the pin is okay because I believe it is the thought that counts."

Jacob adds, "You did earn it."

"I'm proud of my work on Dedede, but I am apprehensive about my next assignment. Becoming a battle platform SYLN is one thing, but they want to migrate me to the new SYLN-b cybernetic."

Yoon asks, "What's the problem?"

"I'm not of their caliber. Using SYLN node components does not make me one of them. It does not make me their equal."

"Well, they don't see it like that."

"Would you be so kind as to advise them that I appreciate the offer, but I do not consider myself qualified."

Yoon laughs, "Well, you can tell them yourself! This was the second thing I had for you. In two hours the SYLN from the C3, Glados, is leading a round table with the other twenty-six SYLN droids to discuss the SYLN-b transition she already went through. They did schedule this get together for today to make sure you'd be here."

Artyom looks down in thought, then, "I guess this means I should accept this new assignment, qualified or not."

Peña snorts, "D'uh, ya think!"

Artyom then shrugs, "Then a transition to a female persona and anatomical construct shouldn't be that problematic." He looks up, "I've identified as male for so long that it gives me butterflies to think about such a change. New life, new me as they say?"

Jacob offers, "If you want to talk to my daughter, she made the switch. I can arrange it, just say the word."

Artyom delights in the offer, "I would like that! Thank you."

Yoon gestures them to follow her, "Look, we got one more thing before we get you checked out and to your SYLN group therapy meeting." As they step up to the airlock hatch that's starting to open Yoon says, "You'll be here for the next two days. At that point Marshal Graves will take you to the Spike. You'll be debriefing there and get prepped and fast-tracked for your new assignment."

Blocking their way is a platform with stairs, so as Yoon starts

climbing, Artyom calls out, "I am indebted to you, Marshal Yoon. Honestly, I cannot thank you enough for your hospitality."

Yoon has reached the top and as he labors away, climbing the stairs, she says, "No, Artyom, it is we who want to thank you."

At the top, on a landing, Artyom steps out onto a stage. He is faced with a dozen senior SA marshals including Maria and Bob. On the flight deck behind them are over three-thousand troopers lined up in columns, at parade rest, which is visually staggering.

Jacob steps around Artyom and stands beside Maria who asks, "How was the mission? Any casualties?"

"Zero, droids only." Jacob smiles at her, "Like clockwork."

A lone sergeant, at the head of the columns of troopers, shouts with a D.I. bark, "*More majorum*, atten-hut!"

Bob steps up to Artyom and pins a PFC medallion to the belt loop of his pants and steps back, "PFC-Six, Artyom, so many here owe their lives to you but...no words can express our gratitude."

Robert Jackson, Bob to some, the alpha-6 Consulate Marshal of the Steel Annex, snaps a perfect salute to honor him—a charred scrap heap of a robot. A whole second later everyone else, those on stage and the three thousand on the deck, follow suit in lockstep.

Artyom quietly mutters to himself, "Oh, my."

He looks down at the polished-gold medallion of a single chevron with six-rockers. He's had SYLN tech inside him for so long that over the years emotions have naturally manifested themselves, but suddenly they are proving difficult for him to cope with. Artyom has always felt like the outsider, an infinitesimally small part of a greater something, something he has had an intimate and detailed knowledge of but always from afar in both distance and time.

The tribute of being polished has never been bestowed upon the likes of him before, a machine, but these humans freely chose to do this so in spite of his reservations, and in adherence to protocol, Artyom struggles to attention and returns the salute.

The ovation that followed was deafening.

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48

vacuum sandwich

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

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

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

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

Fat chance to boldly go, right?

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

future Milky Way will end up becoming after the Andromeda galaxy climbs up its ass and sorting out the smashup that follows.

Jacob and Peña are here to drop off a 'Grigori' ghost droid.

To offset the cost for the new F380 Cerberus, the US Marines and the Pleiades Defense Force are pawning their old F308 Bulldogs to the Annex who is converting them to ghost droids, aka Cwn Dawgs, and to boost F380 sales the Annex is paying premium dollar for these cast offs instead of offering direct subsidies.

The F308g becomes the J-model droid, F308h the K-model, but the high-performance M-model droids are being configured from the F380 airframe. Now, wanting to take on the IR5 Kali, the Annex also went to the F380 as a platform to create the Cerberus-Dip, a super-cheap yet super-fast challenger to the IR5. This is something they cannot use right now however, in a stroke of 'why the fuck not' innovation, the Grigori reconnaissance droid was developed from that instead of the base model—and this they can actually use right now.

The whole idea of the Grigori is to perform recon and not be seen or, barring that, not get caught. In the Dip configuration the F380 is untouchable, but without the aerodynamic drag from a cockpit canopy the unmanned Grigori will beat the Dip in an atmospheric contest. The Grigori is the O-model of the F308 but to hide it on the rolls they rolled those numbers in with the rest of the M-models.

Jacob and Peña pop back into relative space with a Grigori ghost droid in hand. The three fighters jumped together after the droid spent a week in cold soak around their far distant U-Turn locale. Jacob is in his Thunderbolt, but Peña is in one of the new F380 fighters. Peña hangs with the droid and helps calibrate its anchor point between the TAG satellites, separated by a thousand kilometers, while Jacob surveys the area for possible threats.

This is the last of eighteen picket droids being deployed whose job is to bounce between systems performing recon. Unlike the ghost droid in JACC form, these fighter droids are piloted by a pair of ghosts and all eighteen are manned by an instance of Jacob's dead daughter, Sophia, and the early-days copy of Jacob everyone calls, Paleo.

Jacob radios them, "You know, Sophia, Paleo, between these two clocks, there is so much commotion going on, even if there was someone watching, they wouldn't see ya hop in or out."

Paleo radios, ["Yup, this is the best anchor point yet."]

"Peña, you did an excellent job on this project."

Peña responds, ["Thanks. I think we're good here, boss. We'll do a calibration jump and I'll head back. Let's see the scope, Sophie."]

As its huge 32" Ritchey-Chrétien telescope starts to deploy from the missile bay, Jacob observes, "Tryin' to get rid of me."

Sophia speaks up, ["Bye-bye, daddy! We got this."]

Just like the last seventeen pickets they've dropped off, Jacob has to leave while Peña finishes the calibrations, "Okay, I know when I'm not wanted. Vacuum Sandwich One-Eight, you guys are on your own so make me proud. I hope it doesn't get exciting."

Paleo adds, ["I hope it gets interesting, though."]

While drifting away and charging for a jump, Jacob wonders about Sophia and Paleo. There are eighteen instances of them in as many picket missions, as well as two or more of them in the JACC combat ghost droids at any given time of day. All these experiences in the real world are being uploaded to their kernel instance in the Stone Garden world and these two think it's a gas. They say it gives them a reason to live—in a manner of speaking.

Oh brave new world, Jacob muses as he jumps for home.

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"You wouldn't be standing here if you didn't want something."

At the foot of the Spike, Jessica, with her arms crossed, looks at her father stepping up in his JACC after parking his Thunderbolt, "When do I want something for me, exactly?"

Jacob is about to put his foot in his mouth but thinks better of it and says, "You're right. Who are we talking about? Seth?"

She mockingly puts her finger up to her mouth and, "Hum, good catch! He turns six next week. This one is important."

Jacob thinks real hard and, "The Zoo, right? San Diego?"

"We can't yo-yo back and forth on this one." She gestures, "There are no operations till the twenty-first, so there should be no reason to back out. Is it on...or not?" Jacob nods yes, so she smiles, "Outstanding, I'll arrange for Monique to pick us up at the Klick."

"Who's going?"

"Myself, you, Seth, my mon, Angie, Diego, Cap, José and since Josav won't be coming I invited Cloé. Remember, you'll be taking the beer run back and we'll be on the next day's mail run."

"Caps too?" Jacob huffs, "Okay, it's a go."

"It's just one day." Jessica reaches up and gives him a kiss, followed by a stern, but smiling, "Don't fuck this up."

Jessica hurries away for her coffee meet up with Nikki-8, and as she approaches the clone at the table, her step slows to a grinding stop just a few feet short. She suddenly feels something amiss. Not like an 'oh shit I just remembered' kind of amiss, but an amorphous Mayday projected onto her mind by someone important to her.

Nikki bids to her, "Hey, Jess, coffee's getting cold!"

Jessica puts a finger up and is about to say one thing then, "Eight, you are one of us now, right?"

Nikki thinks for a second, aware that something has got her off balance, "What's got you spooked?"

"A simple yes or no?" Nikki tries to find a convincing way of saying yes when Jessica prods her, "I need an answer."

"Yes!"

"Leave it, we gotta go!"

Jessica marches off and it's when she enters the Spike that Nikki finally catches up, and without looking over Jessica says, "I'm about to bring you into a part of my inner sanctum that you should NOT be allowed to see, so if you fuck this up—you die."

"I take that 'die' as in not a figure of speech."

"Damn you're good! You got yourself a gold star!"

"You're an ass."

Jessica glances at her, "Peas in a pod!"

"You sure you want me in on this? Whatever this is?"

Jessica's voice is strained, "I can't do everything by myself so if you're one of us...I fuckin' need ya on board one-hundred percent." They enter a lift and as the door closes, "Last chance ta chicken out."

Now pulling up to a stop in front of Jessica's condo, Jessica says to Nikki, "Wait here. Tap into my head and watch."

Nikki is shocked, "Are you serious?"

"From here on out, when I give you permission, it's okay."

Jessica steps in and runs into her mother carrying a cup of coffee and a tablet, "Hey, Mom. Forgot something for Eight."

"Okay, sweetie!" Nicole kisses her and steps away.

Jessica turns for the hallway and enters her brother's room while calling his name. Realizing he is not there she hurries out and in her own room where she finds Seth staring out the window. Jessica says his name and he twitches but does not turn back.

Jessica closes in and squats behind him, "Seth, talk to me."

He slowly turns around towards his sister with a haunting, deer in the headlights look, so she asks, "Honey, what is it?"

Seth is a beautiful, sweet and very caring child. He's popular with his class mates, and even though he has a speech impediment and avoids eye contact, nobody taunts him about it—which is an oddity because kids tend to be little savages. He's freakishly non-aggressive, so much so the teachers have taken to calling him Gandhi, but weren't they surprised when he punches out a bully who crossed the line last fall. Then what shocked the administration is that, instead of concern, both Jacob and Nicole were relieved—even proud of him.

Seth looks at her with worry, "Cwicit."

Jessica reaches out and draws him in, "What is it, hon?"

He's about to cry, "Don' haf'ta 'ave ma birt'day."

"You see something? Was it bad?"

Seth looks away, wanting to avoid answering but turns back and nods his head yes.

"Can you show me?" Seth looks away again so Jessica picks him up and sets him on the edge of the bed saying, "If it is important I need to see. Remember what we practiced, we're safe together."

With tears starting to run down his cheeks he looks up and closes his eyes so that Jessica can kiss them both, followed by touching her forehead to his and asking, "Let me in."

After a few seconds...horror sweeps over Jessica's face, abject opened mouth horror followed by teeth gnashing rage—then suddenly an icy calm envelops her as she gets a grip while pulling back.

Jessica takes a deep breath wondering what to do then, having an idea she asks Seth, "Okay, did it change?"

Seth, with his eyes still closed, shakes his head *no*, so Jessica takes a deeper breath, "Think-think-think!" And she comes up with an alternate, abet riskier solution, "How about now?"

He looks up at her and gives a weak smile, "But'er."

"Back the way it was?"

Seth nods big, so Jessica hugs him and kisses him on top of the head, "I can fix this, okay. I know what to do. Go hang with mom. We need to spend as much time with her as we can."

Jessica leads Seth out to the living room, and as he heads towards Nicole, she steps out into the hallway.

Nikki-8 has been crying soundlessly into her hands, and as she looks up she weeps quietly, "Oh, my god! All those people! How does he do that? How's that possible!"

Jessica is struggling with fighting back the same emotions, "Welcome to my world, Nikki. Now you know." Jessica sniffs hard and looks up with a, "Fuck me!"

Nikki asks, "What are you going to do?"

Jessica starts down the hall, "Keep up and find out."

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Maria faces off with Jessica outside of Glados's apartment.

One look at their distraught expressions speaks volumes to Maria, so the riot act she had prepared for them on the way down is now struck from her impromptu agenda, "You know, getting a text saying, verbatim, 'my hand is going into the *fucking* cookie jar' kinda got my attention, so I sort'a meandered my way here to see if I can be of assistance, or...maybe kick your little shit-tard asses for steppin' out into the busy street. Which it will be, I wonder?"

Jessica does not back down, "I'm not asking for permission."

Maria's eyes stab at Jessica, "It had better be good."

"It's FUBAR, and that's why you're here."

Nikki speaks up, matter of fact, "It is FUBAR."

Maria looks at Nikki, wondering why she is here, but knowing that she has to trust Jessica she nods towards the door, "Shall we?"

Jessica knocks and Glados answers, "Hello? Come in!"

As they step in, Jacob sees them and, "Hey, what brings—"

He drops back into the sectional like a rock, unconscious. Jessica steps over and kisses the tips of her fingers and tenderly touches them to his temple, and like that—he sinks into a deep sleep.

"Okay..." Glados is amazed, but takes a poor stab at humor, "It would be polite for me to ask if you want refreshments. Anybody?"

Jessica squares off with Glados, "I need you on board."

"So, Delphi was correct. You are one."

"Funny you should mention, Delphi." Jessica looks over to Maria, "Look, I could convince her to work with me, easy, or we could expedite the process to save time how 'bout?"

Maria nods with understanding and transmits.

Glados, receiving the command sequence through the tacnet, "Authenticated." She looks over at Maria, "We're cooperating?"

Maria points to Jessica, "We're cooperating."

Glados nods, looks at Jacob then up at Jessica and smiles big, "I'll be happy to help."

Jessica is amazed by the surprising little effort it took to get to this point, and says flat out, "A half hour ago...I fucked up."

Maria chirps, "Imagine that."

Jessica glares at Maria and, "Okay, bitch. Here's the red pill."

Her eyes close and instantly both Maria and Glados' eyes start fluttering then snap shut against their will. Jessica gives them an instant replay of what Seth just dished out to her earlier. After a few seconds of being assaulted by these images, Jessica releases them. Maria grimaces tight-lipped with an icy rage but Glados, though shored up by her AI calm, has tears streaming down her face.

Jessica adds, "That's from the perspective of Cricket. Let's review, that's the recon platoon, a battalion, forty plus pilots and what you didn't see is Cricket strolling into an airlock three weeks later."

Glados instantly realizes, "How does...he do that?"

Jessica, snarls with an incendiary gaze and homicidal purpose, "My brother will *not* become a Guinea pig..."

With neuronet technology one can "feel the feels" as they say, but you cannot record them. Only cognitive thoughts and expressions, e.g. words and actions, can be recorded but not emotions. Early on the N2 interface with animals was nerfed because having 'meaningful' encounters with pet cats and dogs was actually disturbing for the human test subjects. Knowing what an animal actually feels or thinks had unexpected negative repercussions because pets loved being pets but humans, once a neuro connection was established, recoiled at it because their endearing critters became overtly aggressive hellions.

One notable study, where they didn't nerf the tech, scientists found that bottlenose dolphins had an intelligence and maturity rating between ten and eighteen, have a sense of humor, and were basically assholes when given the opportunity—and were demanding assholes once an N2 interface was established. Going from infinite patience to unbridled petulance resulted in these animals having to be put down once they started to express themselves violently. Ultimately science mapped dolphin languages and dialects and could communicate via an AI interface, but it was too late for these first test subjects.

From then on all future studies were not N2 interactive.

The Heisenberg Evaluations was an early on and blemished neuronet study on the cognitive abilities of infants and toddlers, which seemed simple enough, but it became a 'conspiracy-theory' staple when suddenly the plug got pulled and the study and data was swept under the rug. What they found out in about 4% of the test subjects, the celebrated Heisenberg Babies, was an empathic connection, and suggested even a telepathic one, between infant and caregiver.

The plug wasn't pulled exactly, it just went dark.

All the anecdotal reports and stories over the centuries about ESP connections between mother and child and twins was instantly verified by the N2 however, one could only link in and experience it directly and, since this was not a "cognizant" form of communication, that is expressions from the emotional centers of the brain, to the frustration of the scientists no actual data-points were to be had.

The Heisenberg study showed that with humans these abilities were buried with age, not lost, but also explains how the Nefer Key not only retained this ability, but evolved or mastered it into a coherent, thought-based skill set. This also revealed how Jessica and the Nikki clones had this switch locked-on in their genetic code, but it could not explain theirs and Jacob's clairvoyant hunches and gut-feelings that tend to borderline on prescience—until now.

"...Do we have an understanding?"

Glados agrees, "You have our assurances, and I believe that Marshal Ramirez will agree, your brother will not be touched in the slightest however, for curiosity's sake, I would like to learn a little more about how this goes from an instinctive premonition in you and your father to...such vivid imagery. I suspect this is being channeled through the cerebral cortex and not the hippocampus."

Jessica nods, "Okay, that would make sense?"

Maria speaks up, "Jessie, not one hair on his head will be touched but, we need to know...what is he capable of? Does he have your powers?"

"No, fifty-two shades of abilities. Not mine." Jessica puts her hand up, "But, he is holding back on me so I'm not sure." She then thumbs back at Nikki, "And that's why she's here. He needs more help and support than I can provide. My little guy should not have to be going through this and I can't do it by my fuck-me self!"

Maria looks at Nikki-8 and then back at Jessica, "I think it's too early to let Fifty-Two in but...you've made the call and there's no going back now." Maria sits in the sofa across from the sleeping Jacob and waves, "Hey, fuck-face, how ya doin' this fine morning?"

Glados opens the freezer and asks them, "Ice cream?"

All nod with Maria wondering, "Glad, if it comes with a bottle of wine I'll take that first."

Nikki speaks up, "About the FUBAR."

Maria looks at Jessica, "Yes, about that FUBAR."

Jessica breaths and sighs, "All I did was ask my father if he was going to the zoo for Seth's birthday next Tuesday. Well, I insisted that he goes if he says he's going to go."

Maria waits for more, "And?"

"That's it."

"That's it?"

Glados has put out bowls and is opening the carton up, "Butterfly effect! Let me guess, the problem is encountered on the sixteenth and the impact is realized on the twenty-first?"

"Yep, you got it!"

Maria asks, "How do we undo it?"

Jessica shake her head, "We don't. We can't."

Glados is amused, "But you know how to fix it."

"It's all about drop ship configuration. See, the stations and platforms reconfigure their new ships and don't want to uninstall the higher AI just to have their instance reloaded and reconfigured for their operations. It's disruptive. This isn't necessary on the Mbande and Trung class platforms but it's SOP everywhere else."

Maria goes, "Shit serious?"

"Next Monday the Oakley and the West will take delivery of their slicks and warts for the Reaction Force teams, but they'll not be operational on the twenty-first when they are needed."

Glados, scooping away, adds, "They're set to be operational by zero-hundred hours on the nineteenth. That's enough time."

Maria corrects her, "Not in the real world."

Jessica looks to Glados, "Next Tuesday we'll be in Southern California, and Maria will be in Washington, and Trooper Peña will contact you to authorize a temporary transfer of thirty-two Razorbacks from station inventories to their React Teams in lieu of the pending configurations. You will now authorize it when he does."

Glados stops scooping for a sec, "Shouldn't I defer transfers to the Group Marshals of the stations? It's their prerogative."

"Those regiments for the Reaction Forces are no longer part of their Table of Organization. They're under my father."

"We're in a state of war. They have the authority."

Jessica throws her hands out, "You're gonna love this! In the system there is no check box or anything that anyone can click on to indicate that we *are* in a state of war! All those rules in your system, which I might add is a corporate inventory control system adapted for our purpose, are meaningless without that little event flag or button, so their hands are tied. Glados, you have to authorize it."

Maria is rubbing her eyes, "What a cluster-fuck."

With Nikki's help, Glados hands out the ice cream while asking, "That's it? Authorizing Peña's request will fix it?"

Jessica assures her, "Yes!"

Maria looks up, "That's it? Seriously?"

"Yes..." Jessica looks over, "It's now fixed."

With them starting to dig in, having dodged an asteroid, Jessica monitors the dream she launched in her father's mind. In it Jacob is projecting himself onto Paleo while flying through the nebulae of Orion with Sophia in the tight cockpit of an F380. A passing thought that has now come to life for him—and comically so.

Jessica quietly says to herself, "Vacuum sandwich...perv!"

Maria asks, "Say what, hon?"

"Oh, nothing." And between bites, "The adoption proceedings are Thursday. I'll officially be Michelle's daughter and heir."

Maria smirks quietly, "The Kiel's are gonna freak about that."

Jessica then expresses her pressing concern, "We really can't use what we learn from Seth, you know."

Maria smacks her lips, "Enigma...Ultra protocol."

Glados perks up, "Bletchley Park, yes!" She turns to Jessica, "I'll send you the files. It's a fascinating history."

Maria adds, "Like with Impetus, it's all in your court, hon."

Jessica then realizes that, "He'll need a code name."

Nikki throws out, "How 'bout, Alter of Chians?"

"Chains!" Maria nods, "That'll do!"

49

bonus round

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

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

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

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

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

The intel reports offered up by Blackstone Services are always

in some digested abstract and details about their sources are redacted but, since their intel is consistently 100% spot on, nobody has ever thought to challenge their output. Point being, that conversation in the casino over drinks and cards never did happen. The dealer doubles as an agent for the Co-op through Blackstone on behalf of the SA so, as it is, the Annex controls the narrative whether it's real or not.

This scrap was nothing concrete but enough to tip the scales.

Led Myach, is sort of habitable after a fashion. Its low gravity and 380 millibar atmosphere of mostly nitrogen with 20% carbon dioxide is not exactly breathable but you can walk around in it without a pressure suit, and even though harvesting O2 under the icepack is easy money around these parts the toxic levels of CO2 on the surface is a pain in the ass to deal with just the same.

Wollongong is the main city on this planet-moon but close by is Mount Pleasant, where the nice weather is, which has a stable year round -40° Celsius or Fahrenheit, take your pick. The banquet held for the SA platoon the night before was both pleasant and poignant for all because the Annex may never return. This is the last training mission till things settle and, even though the residents here love the Annex, with the war on they would rather minimize any exposure.

After saying their last goodbyes, then twelve hours and sixty kilometers later, the platoon reported it was ready to evacuate.

Normally they pick up outside of Wollongong, on a sea of ice called the Rolling Hills Golf Course but, with a suggestion by Maria to Bill, eventually drilling down to the platoon leader, was for them to secure a more defensible pick up zone as part of the training. Not wanting to be sucker bait, the platoon leader has her group haul it back up to their primary obstacle course near the North magnetic pole called the Fairy Meadows, and never was there a place in heaven or earth, or anywhere else for that matter, so misnamed as this.

It's been referred to as a shiv-scape and for good reason.

Think of the New York City skyline but instead of buildings you have an interconnected web of fragile spires and shards and blades of ice. Thirty-five square kilometers, half the size of Manhattan, a chilly winter wonderland of obsidian-sharp half-step it and die.

On the Rolling Hills the platoon could go from sitting ducks to fourteen, three-man fire-teams in full on stealthy Predator mode inside just a few quick seconds. Scatter and blend in and the fight is on, but if spotted clumped together they'd be easy peazy pickings.

Up at Fairy Meadows the platoon leader deployed her drones in the middle of the tallest ice structures. She has the droids use infrared line of sight lasers to mimic trooper coms which is common

yet surprisingly easy to spot on the ice.

Here one actually uses a dolphin like high-frequency digital acoustic signal and can chat with impunity. In the thin air and with the constant winds the signal is washed away after a few kilometers. If an enemy approaches one would obviously revert back to a good old fashioned rolling low-freq short-range VHF. In an urban setting one opts for a microwave carrier to blend in with civil traffic, but in the ice having the droids use infrared is an obvious lure to anyone who knows what they are doing. A place that anybody with half a brain wouldn't dare to attack because this hostile cryogenic-ice environment requires a whole lot of knowledge and experience not to end up dead.

With her squads neatly tucked away in the heavy rock cliffs high above the Fairy Meadows glacial ice flow, the platoon leader made the pick up call with the Loki showing up minutes later.

Eleven seconds, it was eleven seconds between when the Loki popped out of the jump at low level, some one-hundred kilometers above the planet, and when the spiders hit.

Three days before a short-haul cargo ship limped in claiming damage by a random impact. An impact is a rare occurrence but it does happen. It was trailing a whole string of debris into orbit and mixed with that was thirty Co-op spider missiles in stealth mode. In retrospect the suspicious thing about this was that the freighter came in at the exact speed to achieve a sloppy orbit for it and the trailing debris without correction. After a few hours of reported tinkering with the hull breach, the ship scooted off—leaving the debris behind.

With the Loki suddenly showing up, as expected, the one AI control spider IDs the Loki, transmits the attack command and they all lunge at it specifically along the plane of inertia—so as not to miss and plough into and make a mess of Led Myach. The command missile hits first, with three follow on missiles impacting on its fireball making a series of huge explosions looking like radiant soap bubbles popping in space. The residual plume of debris, now mostly granular and particulate, will continue to fly out and return to reenter the atmosphere sometime in the next month. What the Co-op planners failed to do was to have the command AI missile hold back till it was the 'last man standing' because the twenty-six remaining spiders were clueless as to what to do at that point. They just gormlessly floated along until their setting was overridden and changed ten minutes later.

After today all Co-op spiders will be 'first dibs' autonomous.

With the ambush sprung and the Loki blown to smithereens, the recon platoon transmits an 'oh shit' emergency-alert status while, overhead, the fireballs dissipate and they watch the hot plume of debris from Loki billow out into space.

Within a minute Security Service cruisers start popping in and out overhead, six in all. They confirm the missile kill of the Loki and, half expecting the platoon to be on the Rolling Hills, they immediately launch an air assault as part of their SOP. Not that they could actually hold Led Myach this deep in SA controlled space, and they'd rather opt for a particle beam barrage which is out of the question being so close to a collateral damage no-no, that being Wollongong, but the attack is the only way to try their luck at bagging a spook or two. On the way down a quick survey of the planet surface from orbit revealed some very faint tell-tail infrared laser flashes up at the Fairy Meadows.

So, the attack was rerouted to the glacial flows.

A whole platoon localized in the ice structures, even if dug in, would be an irresistible target for air interdiction fighters which makes up the bulk of the air assault team.

Where those earlier spiders could have had an impact was when five minutes later the Rapid Reaction Forces from the Mae West and Annie Oakley dashed in and slipped under the altitude ceiling for spider missiles. There was probably an eight second window where they could have made some difference but, as it was, two massive battalion sized waves of pissed-off came screaming in from the north and west. Consisting of 32 drop ships, half of those being warthog gun ships, and 160 fighters total.

It was three minutes after the Reaction Teams descended on Led Myach that the Iron Maiden showed up. SA-36 exited its jump behind Sapfir Shest and zipped around to get a picture of what was going on and what surprised them was that nobody noticed.

To keep the SA response "organic" only Sandoval, the new Field Marshal of the Iron Maiden, knew the whole story, and while in the CIC, Sandoval was on line with Maria, "I have no idea why the platoon is up in the meadows! They should be in the damned hills!"

Breaking in and out from wormhole to wormhole, Maria is surprised, ["What! They're all the way up in the Meadows? You are shitting me! Are they taking fire?"]

"No! They're just sitting there in the cliffs watching the show! The Co-op, I guess it's Security Services, they're blowin' the shit out of the place! The Ice Castle, the Washington Monument, the Sphinx, the baby Khalifa, all those structures are now gone! They nailed the Loki and went straight to the bonus round!"

Maria suddenly realizes the stupid choice she made earlier, ["Why the meadows? That doesn't make any sense?"]

Sandoval is pissed, "I'm gonna have words when I find out who or what or why that platoon is up north!"

["That was me, Sandy! That was my bad."]

"You did what?"

["I got something from Delphi at the last minute. I expected them to hold up in the rocks or high ground near the hills..."]

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Maria is curled up on the couch of her New Sydney home with the hologram tactical display of Led Myach turned sideways in GEV mode. While she's been talking to Sandoval, Jessica has meandered her way in and is standing in the display and using her arms to zoom it in towards the Fairy Meadows.

"...Not hump it all the way back up to the Meadows."

Sandoval is the one who's voice is breaking, ["What you don't know is that the only defensible spot on this entire booby-trap infested shit hole is right where they're at, right now...Holy shit!"]

"I see it."

On the display, with the React Teams just a minute out, the Co-op's attack is withdrawing and the cruisers start firing particle beams into the glacier from orbit.

"Do they see you, yet?"

On the display the Iron Maiden opens up on all six cruisers.

["They do now! We just hit them all with hammers. All but two are high-tailing it out and we just now hit those two with plasma nodes! They're trashed!"] Maria can feel the relief in Sandoval's voice as the Iron Maiden initiates a random-walk of evasive short and quick, stop and start MDDSH runs, ["I'm so God-damned glad Chief Stark knows what the fuck he's doing!"]

"He's the best, Sandy!"

["You should have tactical now, right?"]

"Yes." Maria notices the alert that Cricket's battalion is ready to launch and warns her, "Don't let Cricket launch!"

["At this point there's no need. They have an order to hold."]

"Sorry 'bout movin' the platoon."

["No, that's okay. The thing that kills me is that, at this point, there is really nothing for me to do."]

"The hardest thing about that job, Sandy, is letting your people do their job..."

Jessica has zoomed the display back out to show Wollongong with the Rolling Hills and the Meadows, and zoomed it back further so they can now watch the Iron Maiden random walk while firing on the cruisers trying to defend the two damaged ones. Just then the Xerxes, SA-20, appears and jumps into the fight.

Maria finishes with, "...Looks like you got your hands full. Alert me when you evacuate the platoon."

["Will do, out."]

Watching Jessica watching the Iron Maiden and Xerxes scoot and shoot, Maria says, "You're up early."

Jessica doesn't look back, "Yep."

"So, it did go a little south...and you knew it would."

While continuing to survey the display, Jessica nods, "Taking stock, *in arguendo*, Maria speak, this also wasn't supposed to happen this way, but the ice structures were destined to collapse...eventually." Jessica turns towards Maria and smiles, "Just think, the Gongers will be thrilled, happy campers with these results."

The residents of Led Myach have wanted to drop satchel charges on the Fairy Meadows for decades but environmentalist groups have blocked them at every turn. Today settled that dispute.

"Yea, but have to admit, they were beautiful."

"That they were." Jessica turns back towards the display and points things out as she chats, "You know the platoon was untouchable on the hills in plain sight. Originally, they were supposed to be running around the hills till tomorrow. And tactically your suggestion, from this God's eye view, would have been sound if it wasn't for the fact that the high ground outside of Wollongong is treacherous as hell."

"I didn't know, that's why the platoon is in the Meadows."

Jessica points to a spot in the hills, "That's where Cricket was going to order the Platoon, and Sandy would have not countered it because from up here that would look like the right thing to do. The platoon leader's protests would have fallen on deaf ears and, honestly, there was no real hot-fired rush to pick them up."

"The React Team would let the platoon make their own call."

"Yes, scattering was the right move." Jessica then comes to sit next to Maria so they can both look at the display, "With the platoon getting spotted on that high ground Cricket would have urge her attack force to head straight in and those missiles that are now harassing our ships would have blasted them. The handful of forces that got through would die with the platoon."

Maria nods, humbled, "I lucked out."

"It's actually turning out way different than it should have. Just so you'll know we'll bag four of those cruisers, and one could argue that these are better results but who am I to say?"

"I stuck my dick in something I shouldn't have. Next time we might not be so lucky." Maria glances over at Jessica, "That's why you let me make that call."

Tears have formed in Jessica's crystal blue eyes, "Knowing shit is dangerous as fuck." She looks away, "And I wish I didn't."

Noticing her distress, Maria asks, "Something I should know?"

"No." Collecting herself as they watch the battle turn against the Co-op, Jessica is very careful not to mention Seth's name directly, "The Alter does not choose what it sees—only in re those close to it. How 'bout, from here on out I use feathers to fix stupid shit and report to you after the fact, okay? When I need a brick thrown at someone or something I'll come to you then. Deal?"

Just then Diego steps in while rubbing her eyes, "It's Sunday morning, six in the morning! What are you two doing?"

Maria almost laughs, "Bonding! We're bonding, okay?"

Jessica snorts, and, "I'm taking you and your mom to breakfast. That new diner opened up and I hear their omelets and muffins are the tits."

Diego asks, "José and Caps too?"

"Hell yea! Roust 'em both up and get dressed!"

"Okay!" Diego turns and walks down the hall.

Jessica asks, "Cap sleeps over a lot?"

Maria shrugs, "Yep, lots."

"You know, José is in love with Sian."

"Kinda, sorta, maybe obvious, don'cha think?" And while watching a third cruiser hemorrhaged by a plasma node, Maria agrees, "If you're the feather and I'm the brick...it's a deal."

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50

dancing gay whirling dervish voodoo pixies

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

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

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

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

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

What started as a cottage industry, keeping the old American “Yank Tanks” on the road during the Castro years, has helped Cuba evolve into a big fish in the classic automobile market today. Except for places like this island there are so few roads in the world one can actually drive or would be allowed to drive for that matter. Even motorcycles today are all bot piloted and are impossible to lay down. About the only things that are not controlled by high-tech, save for maybe a GPS locator chip, are bicycles and firearms. There’ve been ‘smart’ offerings on the market for these but nobody buys them.

The two runways here connect at the east end and vector out from there. Nowadays it is only in an emergency that anyone would fly onto an airstrip for a landing so they always keep the runways clear for just that eventuality. Older aircraft that need a runway to get up to speed for takeoff are currently restricted to rural airports. Anything that is not VTOL-AG are no longer welcome around population centers.

Jacob lands their Razorback on the grassy area between the runways. They lucked out and were able to get their hands on one of the nicely appointed passenger builds. Specifically, the one they got is an executive coach with the conference room, kitchen, sleeper bunks, shower and first class seating for twenty-four. Except for the pilot there is no need to suit up for this here swanky ride and, yet, for all the posh and recherché the seats are all rearward facing.

Oh, well, the military mind...

Jessica, Diego, Paula and Tyrol head down the ramp in the Annex everyday outfit of choice, that being baggie BDU pants, athletic shoes, and a t-shirt. At the foot of the ramp they run into Hector, who was waiting for them, and while Jacob takes the time to deploy the security droids then slip out of his JACC and into something more casual, these four follow Hector towards the machine shop.

The octodroid camera for the *íFamilia Cubinaza!* production team that’s shadowing Hector races ahead.

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Paula is ragging on Hector, “Look, the problem is two-fold. You either have to fully design and compile your project before handing it off to the mill-printer or, you have to give the unit your vision and let it do the design. This project, this wind turbine thingy, it’s all over the place! You way over-thought the mechanics!”

Hector is transitioning to female late at sixteen, and his voice is cracking from microbots shortening his vocal cords, “It seems to be having a problem with the gearing. The first one totally seized up, and I can salvage the turbines, but now I’m thinking that—”

"*Mamar pinga!* You're not listening!" Paula points to the tree on the turbine and laughs, "You don't need any of this gearing shit! Make the individual turbines turn independently and then tell the AI to configure all four tiers to rotate freely to generate their own power. You want it to look like a waltz, right?"

"Ya, that's the idea!"

"Trust me, on this, tell the printer what ya want and walk the fuck away from it! It'll cut the shank and mount 'em inside an hour."

"So, I really over did the design."

"Look, stick with simple sculptures to start. Okay, *maricon?*" Paula stands and with her arms crossed, "So, you finally dumped that *gavacho*, eh? He's gone-gone now I hear, right?"

"Ya, 'bout time."

Paula nods, then asks, "Hermosa?"

Hector lights up, "You remember!"

"D'uh! How could I forget?"

Diego asks, "So, when's the point of no return?"

"Nip an' tuck prep in about a week." Hector smiles at Diego, "Wish I would have done this at ten, like you. How you doin'?"

Diego thinks for a second, then, "I feel complete."

"Getting a uterus?"

"Haven't decided yet."

"For me it depends on who I settle with."

Paula points at Hector and, "If it's that blond piece of shit I'm gonna slap ya into next week. You hear me?"

Hector laughs, "You're gonna haf'ta take a number and get in line, an' it's a loooooong line."

They watch the mill-printer pull the turbine assembly back in and start noshing away, so Paula asks, "You got this? If so I'm gonna go get bitched at by Lucia."

"So, you're staying in."

"Ya, I'm gonna life up."

"Well, they don' like it." Hector jumps up and hugs Paula, "They're proud of you for doing this, an' they won't say it, *acere*. Just, ah, take your lumps. Nobody wants to see you hurt."

"What's life without risk?"

Hector looks over at Tyrol, "I'm not even going to talk to you! You're just as stupid as she is."

Tyrol laughs, "My feelings are hurt!"

"Fuck your feels, Rufie!" Hector then looks towards Jessica, "You, *rojo*! Talk some sense into our girl!"

"Hector..." Jessica shrugs, "Hermosa, in consideration my own personal safety, I'm withholding my opinion."

Paula thumbs towards Jessica then leans in towards Hector, "That's smart, Jessie is being smart and you should follow her lead. See, if I want your opinion..."

Hector chimes in with Paula, "I'll beat it the fuck outta ya."

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Jacob has stepped into the auto bays and is amazed by what he sees. It's a lot different to be here in person than seeing it on the television, now called 2D. Twenty-three fully equipped service bays here in this building, and an industrial metal fabrication and machine shop next door. With this set up they could formulate and build cars from scratch and, for all intents and purposes, they do so often. The '57 Chevrolet Belair being the most ordered custom car they build from scratch, and at five million a pop it's been lucrative for them. Painting and upholstery is farmed out to other shops to spread the love.

All the bays have something going on, but while walking down the wide isle, drinking it all in, he sees Lucia pushing a '22 Honda Civic out into the isle. It's bright red and in beautiful condition but Lucia motions for the turret truck to pull it. The thing that shocks Jacob, what unnerves him, is how hot Lucia is in her short-shorts, halter-top, and hair in a pony-tail. What intrigues him most is how sexy she is with the smoot, the sweat and her pheromones which really spikes his curiosity. Jacob thinks that, like with Paula and Adolfinia, *if this was a guy at one time she sure as shit isn't now.*

The robot rolls up and Lucia says to it, "To the chipper."

The robot raises a small screen with the text of the order and asks, "Biometric confirmation, please."

Lucia wipes her hand off on her shorts and puts it on the screen to be scanned while saying to Jacob, "Hey! Just in time!"

Jacob and Lucia follow the robot as it hoists the car and takes it out back while Lucia says, "There are just four Civics in the world. There were tens of millions of 'em, but now there are four."

Jacob wonders, "What's wrong with this one?"

"Well, nothing really. It's a rice burner, a NOS racer, and one sweet ride!" Lucia pats the robot on the side, "Hey, put it down."

The robot gently sets the car down and rolls back with Lucia opening up the driver's door and saying, "Get in!"

Jacob, figuring out the seatbelt, says, "I haven't been in one."

"A virgin?" Lucia, laughing manically, fires it up, stomps on the accelerator and quickly shifts gears down the taxiway, "Nothing under the hood is original. The owner would have to lay out at least a million-five, but the car is only worth nine-hundred!" They hit the first corner onto the south runway, "THAT is some sweet drift!"

Jacob, fighter pilot extraordinaire, is a bit taken aback by this visceral experience, "Holy shit!"

"Now, I could rebuild it myself on the cheap, but that will bring my three civics down in price and that would be real stupid."

"You have all of them?"

"Ya, at the bone yard in Tucson. We have a mechanical shop by the Pima Air Museum and a storage facility down the road apiece with over five-hundred cars in it. Pressurized nitrogen at sixty degrees with fifteen percent humidity. That's three billion in automotive history sitting in the dark and cold and you have to suit up with a rebreather to get to 'em."

Jacob holds on as Lucia fights power-oversteer on the 140 hairpin turn where the two runways touch, "Sweet ride, you sure?"

"Racing differential in the back! This thing is so not original. You're a Thunderbolt pilot right?" Jacob nods yes and Lucia laughs big because he's cringing, "This car is so fucking awesome!"

As they rip down the runway, Lucia makes a call to Tucson, "Ya, dude, the blue seventy-nine civic. Shred it." And as she starts downshifting, approaching the chipper, "Ya, I got the twenty-two and it's gonna go bye-bye here in just a minute. Ciao!"

The car squeals to a stop and she backs it up to the chipper. Putting it in neutral they hop out. A handful of the mechanics, all beautiful and a mix of both natural female and tranny, have gathered for this send off. Wordlessly they buff the car down and as they finish they each leave a lipstick imprint of their lips as they kiss it goodbye. With that, they push it into the maw of the idle chipper.

This is all captured on camera and is something that happens at least once per season, and this year's shred is the '22 Civic. Lucia drapes herself over the front hood, gives it a big kiss, stands and steps over to the button. They all blow a kiss as she turns it on.

The only missing element to this moment is Adolfin.

Lucia slips in beside Jacob and sighs as the Civic is slowly drawn into the grinding augers inch by inch, "And now there are two. That leaves an eighth-gen euro hatchback and a tenth-gen sedan."

Jacob wonders, "You shredded two cars today, why?"

"Culling the market?" She nudges Jacob playfully with her elbow, "I paid nine-hundred-k to shred this, and the older piece of shit which cost me a quarter thirty years ago."

"Why?"

"I look to corner a model, cull the heard and auction the rest off at Barrett-Jackson or Lloyds for the big cheddar. The two I got are factory original so I just made twenty...thirty million here today." As the Civic vanishes, she nods for Jacob to follow as the rest of the crew go back to their day, "I take it she's gonna stay in?"

Jacob shakes his head, "Lucia, I wish I could say something."

"No! This is her doing. This is on her."

"Well, I got bumped up and lost my command. Her new commander, Sandoval, is every bit as good as I am. In fact I still billet on the Maiden so I can still keep an eye on her."

Lucia stews on that for a second, then, "I guess it's for the best but, just so you know, you aren't blood so watch out."

"Watch out for what?"

"She has the hots for you."

"Maria said the same thing but I don't think so."

"Jake, we all got the hots for you!" She laughs, "We were all jealous of Maria when you two got married and were ready to fight over the scraps when she divorced your ass."

"You gotta be shitting me."

Stepping into the shop she says, "No, just don't be alone with any of us bitches 'round here. We'll rape you in a heartbeat."

Jacob gives an embarrassed laugh, "Okay...you too?"

Lucia laughs and points to herself, "Especially me! I'm the one you really have to watch out for so, stay out in the open and that's for your own protection, oh!"

Stopping outside the front office, Paula standing inside and Adolfin sitting behind the counter, Lucia says to Jacob, "Look, Dolphi is rippin' pissed. Two Marine officers showed up Wednesday morning and gave her something. She's been on a tear ever since."

"Want me to talk to her?"

"If you can? She told the producers to get the camera off her back or, as she said, she'll kick their asses in to next week." Lucia points towards Paula, "Look, I gotta go shit all over Paula for dramatic effect. People have been waiting for this one."

"Don't be too harsh."

"Paula knows it's all horseshit. Yea, I am pissed, but Maria said you don't expect much ground action for some time."

"Did she say anything else?"

"No, just that."

"Okay, well, let me talk to Adolfina."

Lucia bursts through the door, grabs Paula by the arm, and spits out a string of unintelligible Spanish and Cuban idioms and insults as she drags Paula down the hallway.

Jacob steps in and turns towards Adolfina sitting there at the counter, "Hey, Dolph!" His brow scrunches up, "You looked pissed."

Adolfina looks over at the octodroid camera, shakes her head, then at Jacob and asks, "I ever tell you about Afghanistan?"

Following her queue he goes, "Bits and pieces."

"It was April of sixty-two. That shitty U.N. op. Our captain just rotated out and our new butterbar, who was a congressman's kid, told me to run a recon. We were drawing rocket and sniper fire from the rag-heads. I said sure because our SOP was to airdrop a fire-team out about ten clicks and we'd lurp it back at night. From high up we could call missions down with impunity. From that we would command the whole valley, but the fucker wanted me to march out the squad as a show of force—right down the center of the valley!"

Jacob is amazed, "Are you serious?"

"Ya! I told that shit for brains to get someone stupid, that he wasn't going to use my squad for Taliban target practice."

"What an idiot!"

"Right? Well, he instantly busted me to corporal and had me arrested for court martial. He then sent second squad out and an hour later we get a call that they were pinned down, so me and first squad grabbed our gear and a couple of floaters and high tailed it out there."

"Weren't you under arrest?"

"Who was going to stop me?" Adolfina laughs, "Well, we get there and got pinned down trying to extricate second squad and the air

cover we called for was delayed. We think it was OCS-Chesty."

"Why?"

"Fucked if I know! He didn't want to look bad? He told us to make due till it got on station, and by then we had five casualties and one was critical!" Adolfina slaps an envelope on the counter and points at it for Jacob to look, "Problem was, we were stuck with no air so I took a grenade launcher, an old belt-fed, a rail and a couple of pistols on a floater, and spun it around the hill and up the backside."

"No shit!" Says Jacob as he starts to read the letter.

"Yea, I was like a God-damned psycho-billy cresting that hill and crashing the floater into a machine gun nest. I was poppin' nades all over the hilltops an' mowed down every mother-lovin' Allahu Akbar dipshit that was too stupid not to run away and, just so you know, those fuckers can't shoot for shit! Hell, on the third and last position I went total-Rufie duel wielding pistols. The cherry on top being a hand to hand I scored with a k-bar if you can believe that!"

Jacob looks up after reading the letter, "This says you bagged twenty-eight of 'em."

"I guess, I dunno? I didn't count!"

"This is why you're pissed?"

Adolfina points at the letter, "That...pisses me the fuck off! All because of that Congressman's thigh sprout I got busted and booted out! The silver lining for catching three bullets and a purple heart, was a bronze star and with my benny's I got an MBA."

"This is awarding you—" Adolfina puts her hand out to shut him up, so Jacob says, "You were up for this. You deserve this!"

Adolfina leans in, "I got my health and all the stud-puppy I can handle! I got a family who I adore and who loves me back. I got my platoon who, to this day, still love me for being there and pushed for me to get my star—the only physical object in this world I cherish. There's nothing else, and I mean nothing, not a God-damned thing that I could possibly ever want in life that I don't already have!" Adolfina points to the letter, "So, whoever came up with that little nugget of kiss my ass, fifty years after the fact, can just fuck off!"

Suddenly, Adolfina grabs the letter and thrusts it at the producer who just walked in, "And who fucking put you up to this?"

The producer defensively puts his hands out, "Whoa! I don't know what you're talking about! I don't know what *this* is?"

Adolfina throws the crumpled letter at him and grinds her bared teeth, "Well, read up sunshine!"

The producer reads the letter and is shocked as he looks up, "Holy crap! I assure you, we had nothing to do with this! Honestly!"

Adolfina is about to cry, but the rage overpowers her and, "Jacob, *mi socio*, can we step out and talk? I...I need some air!"

With Jacob in tow she stomps out to the runway, and realizing an octodroid was following them, Adolfina picks up a steel pipe. Before she could take that pipe to it, Jacob pulls her towards the Razorback because the camera droid is restricted from going in.

Entering the customized and ridiculously-appointed hold of this Razorback, Adolfina mutters, "*Qué bolà contigo?*"

"Hu?"

She shakes her head and gestures at the surroundings, "How much did it set you back to pimp this thing out?"

Jacob shrugs while looking around, "I don't have a clue. It's the diplomatic *excursie* model. We got six of 'em."

"Damn!" She then turns to Jacob and pokes him in the chest, "I gotta know, what the fuck is going on?"

"What do you mean what's going on?"

"You've lost ten of your capital ships and you're only six months into this fight! How you gonna win this with only eleven platforms when they have a hundred and twenty cruisers."

"Well, you can scratch four."

"You know what I'm talking about!"

Jacob nods and thinks about it, then, "What do you see?"

"Your ships getting blasted out of the fucken' sky! What do you mean what do I see?"

"Okay, and that's anywhere between fifty-five hundred to eight or nine thousand per ship, right?"

"A whole division and the crew, what?"

"That's what you see?"

She almost shouts, "Any idiot can see it!"

"Okay..." Jacob nods big, "What I see are ten, century-old beaten to shit, leaky-sieve maintenance nightmares retired through action." He then shrugs, "And complement, well you see sixty-three thousand dead. Everybody thinks we have sixty-three thousand dead where...I don't see any bodies anywhere? Those ships were vaporized so there are no bodies to count! To our eyes, doing the math, we have over sixty-three thousand MIA, technically speaking, of course."

Adolfina's eyes are blinking, "Hu?"

"Sixty-three thousand, three-hundred and forty to be exact." Jacob pats her on the shoulder, then with a hint of sarcasm, "All those people *gone missing* like that is...well, it's such a tragedy."

She rears her head back and, "Hu?" Then reaching deep into the clue bag she realizes with a slow nod, "Hooo'kay?"

Jacob nods, wide eyed, "It's all about perspective."

Adolfina quietly mutters her war cry to herself while shaking her head, "Aye-yi-yi-yi-yi...motherfucker!"

"The more worried you are for Paula, the more convincing that narrative." Letting that sink in, Jacob then huffs and points out, "And, by the way, that CMH is gonna look good on you."

"*Cabeza de pinga!*" Adolfina laughs, "You are!"

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Monique's orbiter touches down right beside the Razorback and, since Diego and Tyrol are out on the road with Paula, it is Jacob, Jessica, Lucia and Adolfina there to greet the family as they climb out.

To start with, the production crew was still having a hard time wrapping their brains around the idea that Maria Ramirez, the head of the Steel Annex, was Lucia's cousin and Adolfina's niece. They've had Adolfina's sister, Agatha, on quite a lot and she goes with the flow like a champ but their youngest sister, Ophelia, just shakes her head and rolls her eyes at all the goings on. Her youngest daughter, a Catholic priest named Syleste, was surprisingly funny on air and someone they really wanted as a regular, and they did know of another daughter but they had no idea that her Maria Ramirez was *the* Maria Ramirez.

Just last March *her* Maria, Diego and Jessica showed up out of the blue, and with the war between the SA and the Co-op this time being very public the security surrounding them was very visible. The U.S. Secret Service shadowing her and PNC swarming the perimeter made for great video, but the squad of SA troopers, suited and armed to the teeth with next-level scifi tech, and the four Thunderbolt fighters circling overhead along with four USN Bulldogs, was video extreme.

Today they were told to expect Rufus Tyrol to show up. He's bought cars from them in the past, became a close personal friend and ended up appearing on the show at least two or three times a season since the beginning, but this time it is big deal because, you could say, it's a *iFamilia Cubinaza!* exclusive. Nobody has seen hide nor hair of him since last New Year's and now they're going to get this footage

without the paparazzi or the press getting in the way. They figured he was showing up to see Paula but what they didn't expect was him showing up with Paula, and dressed exactly like Paula and, like the stunning red-letter discovery just now with Adolfina, they will not be able to ask or interrupt the flow until this day's shoot is over.

Now, last March was a mind blow for the production team but today is even more so because earlier, Diego and Jessica stepped out of the Razorback with Paula and Tyrol. That was unexpected, yes, but they kept an octodroid out watching the Razorback and saw some big guy walk out and wonder off in another direction. They picked him up again with Lucia but they could not make the connection. Obviously he was more than just a taxi-driver but while Lucia and he were racing around the runways they finally figure out he was Jacob Graves. That is, the SA-badass in the news last year, ex-husband of Maria Ramirez, father of Diego and, since they know she and Jessica are half-sisters, that's probably that connection. Oh, yes, making him family!

They get a ton of celebrities on the show, coming and going, buying cars and rubbing elbows, that being the big draw for viewers, but the Herrero's only make the effort to greet family. The shocking revelation is when Carlos frickin' Sanchez slips out of the orbiter and is introduced to Lucia and Adolfina by Jacob and then, the slap in the face to come, mixed in with the rest of the approaching family, is his mother in law, Monique Ribot. This total mind warp becomes even more so when Monique immediately hugs Lucia and Adolfina without any introductions—which means she has already met them.

Funny thing is, when this airs in the fall, the surprising wow moment for the audience is when Jessica, the hot-redhead hanger on, slips past them and faces off with Josav, Carlos' son, by the orbiter. She says something the mic could not pick up but their kiss was truly unique for the viewers. It had none of the face-eating sophomoric sloppiness and lustful hip-grindiness that is all too often passed off for passion in the media. Here, for a whole count of sixty-three, was a maturity so rare and conveying a tender-loving-knowing anticipation. Thus the moist texts during broadcast plus *#flyontheirwall...*

Before today this show was becoming a little stale and was facing cancellation after eight seasons but after today, to the surprise of everybody, it will run for another twelve followed by countless specials. What started off as a mid-season filler featuring a family of lunatic-transsexual auto mechanics, in Cuba, full of ridiculous drama and short-shorts, after today evolves into a much different show of, what is soon to be realized, in-the-know business-savvy Titans. Finally getting to see Tucson and following them at the car auctions will start this transmogrification in earnest.

And still with the drama and short-shorts.

The octodroids follow them into the front offices by the car lot and pick up Monique saying, "*Oh mon*, it is rather sticky here."

Adolfina has plopped back into the seat behind the counter, "Ninety-two, ninety. Isn't it, like, thirty percent where you're at?"

"Los Angeles is desert, yes. I should consider the comfort of being scantily clad like *mua!* Less would be even more so..." Monique has been surveying the vehicles behind her, "You know, Dolf, I find myself in a money throwing-around mood."

"Well, you automatically qualify for the Yank Tank discount."

"*Je vous remercie!* I miss cruising with Rufus. Foothill and at times, Hollywood Boulevard. We even did the Redondo PCH run."

Lucia slithered up, "What are you looking for?"

"Something original, maybe?"

"I think we can hook you up..." Lucia glances at the droid then says, "Look, I have editing rights and what I'm about to say will probably be cut so I can speak freely. In spite of appearances, what we do is a racket, okay? A very lucrative racket. People with stupid amounts of money come and we part them from their money..."

Monique rolls her eyes and mutters to herself, "*Je sais bien!*"

Lucia is about to chuckle at that, "But you're family so I can be honest with you. Original is...a point of view. Think in terms of the Ship of Theseus, okay? With the ocean nearby nothing on this island is original. You won't find one original part on any of these cars, but they're considered original. Cars with original, from the factory, parts in them are rare and you have to go to the desert to find one."

"Those fetch the highest price."

"Yea, and they cost you the most to upkeep. Fact is, all the early stuff is shit, they're all shit. If it's original and you drive it you'll spend a small fortune in maintenance. If you park it you'll have to rob Midas to make it road worthy to sell it—and chances are you won't make a dime worth your time!" Lucia thumbs towards the shop, "Most those cars in there are originals being rebuilt yet again. People buy these things and sit on them when they should flip 'em! If an investor drags their feet and ends up back here they'll lose their shirt if we have to recondition parts and, in this biz, I'm the blue light special."

Monique asks, "Didn't a Beetle sell for, what was it reported to be, fifty-six million last month?"

"Yea, look, the bug was an icon and that one had over half of its original parts which matters at auction. It was the last factory original and the thousand or so bugs still out there are either museum

scrap, or custom show or cruising mods which excludes them from the high-end market where the big money is. The top tier does not accept cars sold as mods then reconditioned back to original specs. Most people who get into this find out too late so, if you buy a mod then to cash in you have to go for an extreme hot-rod, roadster or lowrider makeover. Fact is, just so you know, mods are usually dirt cheap but the margins are tight so flash and visibility are important."

"Like Dolph's little white Metropolitan."

Adolfina laughs, "That's a rat-fink modification, a cartoon car. Dragster differential, slicks, wheelie bars, a blown two-two-seven and shit. I can actually sell and make a fuck-ton off it because, not only does it redefine extreme, but it's been on the show. It's the most dumb-ass car we got but buyers are lined up around the block waiting for me to blink. I'm ready to sell but it's a death trap if you don't know how to drive, so it matters who I sell it too."

"I'm looking to cruise, and money is not an issue."

Lucia suggests, "I would go straight to modified, but if you take an original we can pull the drive train, store it, and drop some twenty-first century 'quip under the hood on the cheap. Duke axial block and CVT tranny and you'll be able to cruise the shit out of it!"

Adolfina nods, "And if you ever decide to sell we can drop the original drive train back in. No harm, no foul!"

Lucia adds, "And maybe make off like a bandit?"

Monique, offering her hand to Lucia, says, "Well, window shopping is not my *forte*!"

Stepping out, Monique quickly selects one off the bat—a deep purple, chopped-suicide '73 Super Beetle with Lambo wheels, mirrors and lights. Way-way overpowered with two side by side five-cylinder axial blocks that pushes the engine compartment into the back seat, Lucia would not consider selling it to Monique unless she proved she could drive the thing without rolling or dying.

By all appearances Tyrol taught her well because she didn't flinch when the wheelie bars bit into the asphalt off the line and, since this thing corners like a school bus, she down shifted into the corners perfectly—giving Lucia a taste of the oversteer fear Jacob felt earlier.

Back at the lot office, with both the Super Beetle and white Metropolitan pulled for transport to Southern California, Monique is admiring a charcoal black, gangsta-chopped four-door '69 Lincoln, known as *Frankenstein* on the show, being readied for Tucson.

With Paula and Tyrol wondering towards Lucia and Adolfina, Paula goes, "You're selling Monique those Kamikaze mobiles?"

Adolfina laughs, "Looks like little-miss ambrosia-on-the-hoof knows how to row gears and take a corner!"

Paula is shocked, "Really?"

Tyrol says, "I taught her well."

"I was impressed..." Lucia then quietly says, "After I changed my shorts." She then gruffs, "I was gonna let them go for cost, but she insisted she pay market, so I took fifteen percent off."

Watching Monique really drooling over the Lincoln, Paula says, "You know, I feel pretty generous today too."

Monique lights up as Paula and Tyrol wind their way through the cars towards her, "*Tiens! Bonne matinée!*"

After hugs and kisses, Paula asks, "Ever watch the show?"

"Bits and pieces people draw to my attention. I've thought that when I make some time I will binge on it."

"Well, these are my wheels. Meet, Frankie."

"*Oui?* A wonderful set of wheels I might add! Rufus is into the supercars of the day, but these...mods. More my style."

Tyrol adds, "This is very Hollywood Boulevard."

With Monique nodding in agreement, Paula reaches in and pulls the keys and holds them out towards Monique, "Here, it's yours."

"Oh, no! *Ma Cherie, je dois refuser!*"

"It needs to be driven, not mothballed and forgotten."

"I cannot accept this as a gift."

Paula, noticing the robotic turret truck is hauling Hector's wind turbine out with Hector, Diego, Jessica and Jacob in tow, looks back at Monique, "So, you're gonna be difficult." She tosses the keys to Tyrol who catches them, "Rufie, you got yourself a car, sweetheart!"

Tyrol feigns surprise, "What I've always wanted! Thank you!" He touches his face in deep thought then slaps the keys in Monique's hand, "I'm gonna be outta town for a while so, would you mind driving this for me till I get back? There's a sport!"

He and Paula kiss Monique, and as they head off to see the finished wind turbine, leaving her with her new car, Monique calls out, "Rufino, *t'es rein qu'un petit connard!*"

As they head towards the turbine, Tyrol asks Paula, "When Monique was here last November, how much time did she and Lucia spend together?"

"You're wondering if Monique and Lucia planned this?"

"The Beetle and the Metro, yea."

"I get the same vibe. I wouldn't put it past 'em."

Tyrol points out, "Didn't you say Lucia wanted to make a road track out of the runways and buy up the hotels around the site?"

Stopping at the turbine, with Hector under a sheet taking the bindings off the fans, Paula remembers, "That track with these roads here would make this island an auto enthusiasts wonderland, and that's always been on Lucia's mind. The economy would boom."

Tyrol points out, "If they have Monique on the show driving those things, and they will, demand for hot rod conversions will explode." With Paula nodding in agreement, Tyrol then asks—but not quietly enough, "Did Adolfina get something lately?"

Jacob overheard, "You know about that? Seriously?"

Tyrol throws his hands up then points to Diego and Jessica, "Just overheard some shit! Ask those two!"

Jacob looks at them, and with Jessica tight-lipped Diego goes, "I hear Aunt Dolphi has a rabid little fan base. Dedicated."

Jessica points to herself, "I had nothing to do with that."

Jacob, realizing it was Monique, can only shake his head as Hector pulls the sheet off without fanfare, "Here we go!"

The octodroid picks up the audible gasps from everyone as the turbine is revealed. It is surprisingly beautiful, like a tree with branches spreading out. It has four tiers of small VAWT fans, each one in the shape of a dancer, fairy or dragonfly with either wings or skirts to catch the air. In the gentle breeze the individual fans start to spin, and inside a minute, all four tiers start to slowly rotate at different speeds. What everyone vocally thought was a waste of time over the last few weeks ended up being—catch your breath mesmerizing.

Paula was the first to speak up, "Hect, this is what you were going for?" With Hector nodding yes, Paula nods back, "Wow!"

Jessica observes, "It sounds like a swarm of bees."

Paula asks, "What's the output?"

Hector looks at the attached meter, "Ah, this is in Ohms?"

"Shit, wattage!" Paula just shakes her head, "You got a lot of catchin' up after six years of *Bolillo* telephone pole up your ass."

Hector's face scrunches up in agreement, "Got me there, sis!" He then motions to the turbine, "We need a name, guys."

Jacob says, "Your piece, you name it."

Tyrol points out, "We got's ta! It's a tradition 'round here."

Hector speaks up candidly, "I could'uv slipped a name under the table to someone but I don't have one so, go for it!"

After about a half a minute staring at the spinning fans, Paula says, "Whatever comes to mind, people! Anybody?"

A few seconds later it was Jacob who shrugs and volunteers, "How 'bout...dancing gay...whirling dervish voodoo pixies?"

With wide eyes, Hector says, "That's descriptive."

Paula is aghast, "That's, ah, I don't know about that one."

Hector mouths the name Jacob suggested then nods his head, "Yea, but it kinda works."

Jessica and Tyrol both nod in agreement when Diego says, "For me, that name frames it with...clarity."

Jessica fist bumps Diego with, "Mucho clarities."

Suddenly, Paula points at Tyrol, "Don't you say it, fucker!"

She was hoping to stop Tyrol from saying his signature line, something she's gotten so weary of because, much to her annoyance, somehow-someone found a way of saying those damned words each and every day throughout the six months they were on Cue Ball.

So, Tyrol, opting to deploy his weaponized puppy-dog eyes, has Paula beside herself and everyone snickering as he makes the factual observation, "But we...have a consensus, don't we?"

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51

waifer thin

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

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

Dancing attendance on the Xhemal being his highest priority.

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

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

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

the Annex and attempt to make contact with the Xhemal directly. Out of the thirty-five people on the manifest only three-and-a-half will survive the hour and twenty minutes it takes for the platoon to scramble, gear up and rescue them. In an emergency meeting on the 21st this catastrophe will be swept under the rug with the deaths accredited to a terrorist attack out at Saiph-6B. What they will not realize until too late is that this lie will lead to a plethora of fabricated shit-press that'll fire up that conflict for real.

Oh well, so much for nation building.

It's a beautiful Sunday morning in Manhattan. The sidewalks are concrete but the streets are now grass, and the floaters swoosh past all quiet like. It is still a very busy place but it's really hard for most residents to compare the noisy-bustle and angry New York of old to the muted-brisk and civil New York today. Natives still have loads of attitude, but it's expected of them. It's the mystique.

What Bob finds the most disruptive and counterpoint to the pleasantness of the moment is the billboards. Still with the billboards and placards and vehicle wraps every which way you look and as far as the eye can see. The one repeating add, if you can call it an add, is an AMBER Alert for a missing eight year old girl, Nicole. These alerts tend to galvanize the populace, and the Shirley Temple smile and fiery red curls on this little girl seems to have struck a chord with the city because it is the newly adopted child of a popular city councilman.

As for Bob, he hates kids and couldn't give less of a shit.

Celebrating his big win at the U.N. he met a couple young studs, Tony and Bret, at a local night club, and after three bottles of wine and an overnight romp with these two, Bob is not feeling quite one-hundred percent today. He was supposed to go sailing with them on their yawl out at Long Island Sound, but he took a rain check to nurse his hangover and move up his departure to the mail run.

While trying to decide between the half-pound burger or the steak and eggs, needing something heavy, he notices a little kid sitting alone at the table in front of him. The child wasn't there a second ago, but here it is watching the floaters go by.

Bob knows something is odd about what he sees but the underlining problem is that he just doesn't care, so back to his menu and after about a minute he decides what he wants. He also feels something amiss so looking over the menu and—it's the kid, staring him down with cold-blank eyes that have a shocking blue hue to them.

He instinctively knows that this is the Nicole everyone is looking for. The AMBER Alert before him is obviously on the run, and by buzz cutting her hair short, trying to make herself look like a boy,

and with the Yankees jacket it's pretty damned convincing. If it wasn't for the little tuft of red hair on her neck she missed with the razor she could probably get away with it.

Nicole flashes a hundred dollar bill and slides it across the table saying, "This is yours. If you buy me something to eat now, and something to go, I'll give you another one of these."

Bob is taken aback slightly, "Cash? Nobody uses cash."

"Yes, it's making a problem for me."

"They're looking for you."

With a weary shake of her head Nicole makes a haunting statement, "I'm not going back...I...would...rather...die."

And Bob, realizing she means it, slides his SA ball cap over to her with, "Put this on." Then asks, "Why are you running?"

Unbalanced, not knowing whether to cry or scream, Nicole holds it together enough to say, "I was hatched and sold! What do you think?" She then whispers, "Adults are monsters!"

"Geisha hut?" She nods yes and sniffs hard so Bob says, "Okay, for now if anyone asks, you're my kid." He leans over with a little tactical knife and says, "Hold still."

The blade snaps out and he cuts off the tuft of hair.

As he sits back she says, "I need to get out of this city."

With the menu on the table the waitress had her cue to step up and ask, "Okay, Mac, waddya have?"

Bob nods, "The flame broiled half-pound sirloin burger with pepper jack. Oh, and a little bowl of balsamic vinegar to dip it in."

"Keep the coffee coming?"

"Please."

"And for you, little Mac?"

Bob smiles, "Whatever you want, Nicco."

"I'll have..." Nicole looks up, "What my dad is having."

She asks, "Want fries with that?"

Seeing the confusion on her face Bob says, "Ya, we'll share. Nicco will have the lemonade too. It's really good, son."

With the waitress snatching the menu and racing away to the next table, Bob asks, "You don't know what French fries are?"

Nicole says, "I don't know what French is?"

"Where have you been?"

"I don't want to talk about that right now." She looks at the SA letters on the hat before putting it on. "Sa, what is saaaa?"

"S.A., it's who I work for."

"Someone I could work for?"

"If your story pans out I think you'll want too."

Nicole nods, "Well, if you're gonna hire me I need to get out of this city. All the tubes and roads are being watched. I have to cross the street with a crowd or I'll get spotted."

"You're in luck. My office is in this building."

"We still got to get outta here."

"We'll go that way." Bob points up, "You'll see."

Bob suddenly is faced with a dilemma not experienced since fishing Snoopy out of the water—he cares. Through the new tacnet he sends a text: *-psbl geisha fugit -send guard my lctn -p1*

After a pregnant pause he asks, "You have a tracking chip?"

Nicole pulls the sleeve of her jacket back and shows that that her wrist is wrapped in aluminum foil, followed by pulling three stacks of 100 bills out also wrapped in foil, while saying, "I hear that this blocks the signals. Well, disrupts them to a point. And if you would let me borrow that knife I'll go to the bathroom and cut it out of my arm before the food gets here."

Bob is impressed because this kid is not kidding, "Leave it. We'll take it out of you. We'll want to analyze it where it is first."

"They'll pick up the signal."

"This building is a giant Faraday cage. Trust me, it's safe."

Nicole then thinks about it, "How do I pay you for doing this? If you get me out of here I'll give you a stack of this money...or, do you want something else?"

Bob is almost pissed, "How 'bout you keep the money and while we're on the subject, how about you keep the 'something else' to yourself because that's *not* gonna happen."

Nicole scowls, "I thought that's what all 'dults wanted."

"I'm actually proud to say that for most adults, no, that's not what we want so, whatever happened to you before, it's over."

There is a slight tremor from the ground and Nicole notices a shadow by the table where no object is standing, and suddenly a face

appears to be floating in the air, "Hey-ho, Jackson! I heard about the smack down yesterday. Damned righteous if you ask me!"

"Ya, well, we wait for the fallout." Bob points to the ground, "Would you mind hanging round in case something gets weird. I want the little waif here to eat before we take her up."

"Righty'o!" Before fading away, the face looks to Nicole and smiles, "You're in good hands, kid. Eat up, you're like waifer thin."

Nicole's little lip quivers, knowing this is real and she has a way out of her dilemma, and seeing this Bob asks something to draw her attention elsewhere, "You ever hear of sailing?"

Nicole, shakes her head, "No."

"It's a boat, I have one, and with it you can go anywhere on the water with only the wind to push you along."

She thinks about it and wonders, "If the wind is pushing you then...how do you magically go against the wind, hu?"

"It's called tacking, maybe I'll show you one day?" He then thinks, "You like dinosaurs? What kid doesn't like dinosaurs?"

Nicole is confused by this stupidity, "I was raised in a square hole in the ground, yea, but I know about dinosaurs."

Bob shrugs, "Maybe I'll introduce you to some."

With the food being delivered, Nicole says, "Ah, d'uh, they're extinct, or haven't you been keeping up on current events?"

"I know a raptor named, Snoopy. He's a friend of mine."

"This a fry?" Nicole is pointing to the potato wedges, and with Bob nodding yes she plops one in her mouth and, nodding with approval, Nicole says something that blows him away, "Well, I grew up with a little non-imaginary friend named, Mr. Purple Camisole. I think you two would hit it off!"

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Three hours later the embassy chief, Jaqueline, is sitting at the tail end of her interview with Nicole, and having just received a text that the genetic test confirms the child is an NCL clone, she looks up and says with a stammer, "Nicole, I, ah, thank you for being candid with me. I think it's safe to say we're going to evac you."

With some apprehension, Nicole asks, "Is...that gonna hurt?"

A visible shiver ripples through Jaqueline. That response was the nail on the head and the limit to her endurance so, not knowing

what to say, she stands and steps out of the room and silently past everyone who was watching the interview on the monitor in the outer office. Within seconds of closing the door to the adjoining conference room they can hear Jaqueline sobbing.

Of all those listening to the horror story told by this child it was Bob who was most affected by it. In spite of his detached and chilly façade, all the memories he buried of himself in foster care have come raging back to the surface with a vengeance.

Bob has to leave, the mail run has been waiting for him, but as he does he simply goes into the interview room and takes Nicole by the hand, then grabs his bag as he heads for the elevator. On the way out they are being shadowed by the guard who is still in his fighting suit with rail gun in hand.

As the elevator door closes the guard, almost in tears, says, "It's okay, Bob. Just making sure she gets on that ship."

At the top of the building, on the flight deck, when they reach the ramp of an aging HWG41 drop ship, that afternoon's designated mail run, the guard calls out to Nicole, "Hey kid."

She looks around and sees the guard giving her a salute. Nicole lets go of Bob's hand just long enough to race back, and since this child so little she could only hug his leg.

Returning to Bob, Nicole takes his hand and they head up the ramp of the drop ship...

Knowing they'll be back.

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

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

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

Maria thinks about it, "Why not?"

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

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

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

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

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PFC5, Stiller, the head of the Steel Annex's legal division, code named Paper Cuts, lays it out, "The Hague threw the petition out because of lack of jurisdictional authority, so these shlemiels from Amnesty International filed downstairs in the proper venue. Now, to review, Article Seven, Part One, Subsection-E does apply directly to Fifty-Two as a current condition but it was ultimately quashed because, as the aggrieved party, she, as a collective, via one of the Beta pair, filed a brief in protest which started to unravel Amnesty's standing."

Bob asks, "If under Rome Statutes, wouldn't any statement by an aggrieved party be suspect?"

"If in protest, counter the petition, yes, it would automatically be considered suspect or submitted under duress, but Uno walked into the court with Cap and Eight, here, and filed it personally. Then, to top it off, she certified her protest under oath to the court, *ex parte*, without our input and, what caught the attention of the court is that she came in to do this on her way to work."

Bob then asks, "Why would that matter?"

"Got job? No cell? What imprisonment?" Stiller then points in the air, "She did verify that she is restricted to the planet, but she has complete liberty of movement on Sapphire." He then looks at Eight, "Found out from the judge, we golf together, that he would have kicked it to the curb for ya after you talked in chambers but, this being a Common Law house out here, he had to have you file a motion to quash and set that hearing. Now, if I may ask, for our edification, what exactly was said in chambers?"

Eight nods and smiles, "Attorney-client privilege."

"Why did I know you were going to say that? Hum, anyway, unlike the Beta pair you're not of-the-majority until July and your guardian ad litem, Marshal Ramirez, would like to know!"

She shrugs, "Well, sir, you will have to ask, Uno. It was her filing and Cap and I were there for moral support."

Stiller's eyes drill through her, "You drafted that brief."

Eight rolls her eyes and cringes, "Guilty?" She then leans towards Maria and says, "You've rubbed off on me and Cap. We both intend to go into law. I think I'm getting a hankering for torts."

Stiller asks, "I'm curious, what does Uno do for work?"

"She's an artisan Barista and a popular one."

"At least you have ambition."

"Ambition, well that's relative. Deuce, the second Beta, is in the middle of her fourth year of medical school. Peanuts, a cherub, wants to do porn! See, we all kind of want to do our own thing and share the love. From Deuce I know how to lasso a burst cerebral arteriole with a neuro-microbot, and from Uno I can steam up a caramel pumpkin-seed latte that will make you cream your shorts."

"At this point I wouldn't be surprised."

"For your edification, Mr. Stiller, the latte is harder to pull off."

"Like your brief." Stiller chuckles, "Kid, that was brilliantly played because it made a colossal mess of things."

Maria agrees, "It was like a circus clown car after that."

Stiller nods big as he looks at some papers, "No shit!"

Bob was curious, "Well, what happened?"

Stiller points to Eight, "Before her brief, an alphabet soup of organizations filed as friends of the court in support of Amnesty, but Colonel Ribot went to go have a chat with the UN-OHCHR and..." Stiller looks at Jacob, "Does your son know that it was his girlfriend who blew the whistle?"

Jacob is a little embarrassed, "No, he does not."

du Conde asks, "The DPKO intern? Doo-koo-zoo whatever?"

Jacob takes a stab at it, "Duku-zumu-remyi. Yea, her."

Bob goes, "Seriously?"

Maria adds, "She's a keeper! She got a guy in Rwanda to get a guy in the Ukraine to hack in so it wouldn't look like an inside job. He slithered in on a deep-net proxy and was untraceable. The news outlets shied away from it until Amnesty held a press conference."

Jacob asks, "If deep proxy how did they trace it?"

Maria nods, "Oh, yea, that...the US Government actually runs the dark net. Users think it's a cobweb torrent based interface but it's actually a three-acer server farm in Maryland."

"Nice!" Stiller continues, "To get her out of the DPKO we got the OHCHR to offer her a job she couldn't refuse, and everybody still thinks du Conde was the leak. Did you know about her, Abel?"

du Conde laughs in character, "No, I did not know it was her! We had a meeting with the High Commissioner and Colonel Ribot explained why they needed to shut the fuck up. It was glorious! She did not know her Peter was working on that mission and was squirming in her seat when Pete said he will, as he put it, kill the son-of-a-bitch that hacked them." du Conde asks Stiller, "Why the OHCHR?"

"It was either kill the leak or kill the leaker? I'm not opposed to whistle blowing but she's a busy body. With the High Commissioner she learned the whole truth about Fifty-Two and has to shut up and bow to management. The one concession you gave, three allowed off world at any given time, which we already do, helped a lot."

Jacob says, "Duku's intentions were good."

Bob asks, "He still seeing her?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know we know and I do like her."

Eight shrugs, "Lucky Duck, Pete's a superb lay." They all look at her with a stunned silence so she says, "It was once! With Uno, four years ago when they had one too many. It was intentional on our part because we were curious. From our perspective it's a non-issue but...he is a credit to his gender. A repeat performance would be in order yet he says I look too much like his sister. Oh well, my loss."

Jessica nods yes when Maria asks, "You knew about this?"

Stiller rubs his eyes, "Okay, we never heard that. It was only one time so it shouldn't be problematic...God, I hate that word!" He looks at Bob and, "So, the High Commissioner withdrew their brief and got everyone else to withdraw. They all then filed in support of the quash—which is unheard of. Even the Human Rights Watch withdrew." He then looks at Eight, "Why did you do that?"

Eight shrugs, "I, we, made a deal with Marshal Ramirez and we stick to our word. We also see the Annex as the moral high-ground and in that you gained our loyalty. It was the least I could do."

"New mindset? Now that you're out of the shadows?"

"No, healthier outlook. I do apologize being such a bother."

du Conde speaks for all, "*Ma petite cinquante deux*, in our endeavors all roads wind back to you, but a bother it is not."

Stiller nods in agreement, "Well, if this outlook continues, when this conflict is over I'll see to it that you go to the law school of your choice. Now for the real issue. Abel, the floor is yours."

du Conde picks up, "The question 'round the water cooler at the Security Council in the last week is 'who is Scarab?' See, they and the Co-op knew about Fifty-Two and Scarab, thinking maybe it was the tracking and kill-switch, cupcake525, but in the hacked data was a meeting attendance note that referred to Scarab in the first person. The Security Council is curious, yes, but with the Co-op, well..."

du Conde gestures to Maria who looks at Jessica and goes, "You've been outed. Your mother, Bill and Scott are outside so they might as well join us for the rest of this."

With Jacob stepping out to fetch the three, Jessica, elbows on the table, is rubbing both eyes while vacillating between screaming, crying or laughing, "Fuck me, this is surreal."

Maria asks through the net, "<\"You didn't see that coming?\">

<\"No...it said I'd be pleasantly surprised by the outcome. The Alter wouldn't elaborate and now I know why.\"> Jessica sits up and, <\"Annoying little fucker, hu?\">

<\"It didn't elaborate for a reason. Let it go.\">

As everyone enters, Nicole, now the DFM for the Iron Maiden, notices her daughter and asks, "Honey, what are you doing here?"

Jessica looks up with a nervous smile, "Remember all those times you bitched at me to do something with my life?"

"Yea, but why are you here?"

Bob speaks up, "Nicole, our Jessica, my granddaughter, has been working for us for...well, for quite some time in fact!"

Nicole looks at Jessica, "Doing what?"

Jessica winces, "Stuff?"

"Waddya mean, stuff?"

"Didn't have time for college, my plate was full kinda stuff?"

"Out with it!"

Maria asks, "You've heard about Scarab, right?"

Nicole shakes her head, "Scarab is a fable. A spook story."

Bob runs his fingers through his hair while saying, "Nicole, hon, it's not a spook story. Jessie is Scarab."

"You gotta be shitting me!" She turns to Jessica, "And why haven't you told me, hu? Why was this kept from me?"

Jessica quietly says, "You weren't supposed to know, d'uh!"

"Why am I finding out now? Who knew?"

Jessica sheepishly says, "Everyone here but you?"

"So why the fuck now!"

Bob informs her, "Hon, the Co-op just found out about her."

Nicole shouts, "Then it ends now! She's no longer doin' it!"

Jessica counters with, "Mom, it's my choice."

Nicole stares at her and, "That's where I get those strange, God-damned dreams, hu? That's your doing!"

Jessica squirms a bit saying, "Maybe?"

"You little shit."

"Mom, you never talk, but when you do you don't shut up!"

"Wait a minute!" Jacob, understanding the bigger picture, points at her, "Wait a frickin minute! That means you drop her! That means you take control and knock her out. Tell me I'm wrong?"

With Maria shaking her head, not expecting this, Jessica's heart sinks as she reads her father's mind and says, "Thirty-some."

Jacob smiles, "Thirty-some thirty, or thirty-some pushing forty? Which is it 'cause I'm kinda curious."

"Thirty...eight, best I can recollect."

"I thought you were just dicking with me while I was asleep?"

Jessica mouths the word, *sorry*.

Bob, seeing the shocked faces of Bill, Scott, du Conde, Stiller and Vossler, then noticing that both Eight and Glados have not reacted in like to the news, asks, "Maria, since obviously by their faces, Eight and Glados have known about this, who else knows that Jessica is a Puppet Master? We kinda need to know."

She sighs and, "Impetus."

"Why him?"

"We communicate through his daughter's and Jessica's social pages and I had to get him on board. They're connected and when either of us post to our girls pages, well, everyone sees it."

"That's really...smart!"

Everyone nods as Vossler says, "And in plain sight."

Maria breaths deep, and, "I know all ya'll are worried about Jessie's safety but Hartcourt has agreed that all the prohibitions on Fifty-Two apply to her without exception. He's been formally briefed that a hit on her would violate the ROEs, and would mean us launching Sherman's March on their ass..."

Sierra Mike Tau-V, code named Sherman's March, is the one contingency in Maria's Plan-B that Hartcourt is aware of that scares both him and his general staff. Like its operational namesake this plan targets Hyades infrastructure *id est* power, water, fuels, transportation and communication—distributed utilities being something the worlds outside the Hyades Cluster have not adopted and the Earth has been meticulously dismantling over the last century. The gravy train from chargeable services they've enjoyed now comes back to bite them in the ass because if Sherman's March were to be launched there are no

like targets in the Pleiades to counter-strike. Fifty-five thousand targets, twelve-hundred capital targets with an abbreviated list of three hundred on both 83-Tau and 54-Tau that would throw 80% of their population into a twenty-fourth century Dark Ages that could last for weeks—or years, depending on who wins in the end that is.

And this is just one of many options! There are other notable opportunities available in Plan-B for Maria, Scott and Bill to choose from with population centers being the last to go, but maybe a simple demonstration would get the right results? Anyway...

Maria drives the point home, "As long as everybody plays nice, and they don't fuck up, they'll avoid it. Now, to cut to the chase, Boxter would like to enlist help from Jessica and two clones."

The stirred reaction of *uh-uh*, *hell-no* and *no fucken way* from everybody was expected, so Maria puts her hand out to quiet them down, "Hear me out, Boxter's end game is to ultimately unify Security Services with us, under the SA banner, to give his forces legitimacy. He thinks he has us painted in a corner so he wants to establish a working relationship with us as soon as possible. Now, you know he knows he's been compromised by Fifty-Two and Scarab does not change that, no surprise there, but they have reports that some people in their government and corporate helm may be looking to fire up the Geisha Huts again and we want to stamp it out."

Nicole asks, with some surprise, "We? Ah, are you fucking kidding me! What makes you think you can trust Hartcourt, hu? What shit have you been smoking?"

Jessica speaks up, "Mother, none of you really understand who we're dealing with. Hartcourt and Maria are peas in a pod. They both operate on incorruptible moral principle and, to be clear, principals that require no moral juggling act or mental gymnastics. They both have zero doubt about what they are doing."

Nicole looks at Eight who agrees, "Peas in a pod!"

Maria continues, "The current threat comes from both Tillsdale and Lebedev and Box has got them both on a tight leash. We know Tillsdale wants to wipe out the FIS and the SA, but he is forced to short-stroke Lebedev who wants to take over the FIS, rub us out, then extricate the Hyades from the United Nations and, if you haven't figured it out, this was why he was agreeable to the TPZ treaty."

Nicole asks, "How do you know about Hartcourt's end game?"

Eight speaks up, "We're conversational now."

Maria adds, "He didn't say it, verbalize it specifically, but he did allude to it through his...connections with Eight."

"He delights in our interactions."

With open-mouth astonishment, Nicole looks at each of the shocked faces around the table, with Bob saying, "Yea, hon, that's a mind screw, ain't it!"

Nicole looks at Bob, "You're okay with this?"

Bob shrugs, "No, not really, but it's not my call."

Maria throws out, "Nicole, Boxter is looking to ally with us and ultimately go against the Co-op. He hasn't said it exactly but I know he'll bring it up and, trust me, it's tempting. To drop everything and *tack hard to lee*, as Bob would say, is very tempting."

Nicole is about to shout but her mouth is clamped shut so, startled by this she looks at Jessica who says, "Listen to her, okay?"

Actually witnessing Jessica do this to her mother surprises everybody so as they start to react, Jessica clamps their mouths shut too, "Guys, this is like a parlor trick for me, okay. Listen to Maria, okay? I can take care of myself."

Maria blinks her eyes with surprise and, "I should bring you to my meetings more often!"

"You'll get shit done for once."

As Jessica releases all of them Maria nods, "The short story, our end game...Boxter is gonna get what he wants it's just that he'll get it on our terms. We'll give 'em the Pleiades and that'll pull resources away from Polaris according to plan. We stick to the plan."

Nicole, rubbing her jaw, asks, "Didn't your Impetus report that this is a possibility, what we're doing? Didn't he spell it out?"

"Yea, an' they're not listening. According to plan."

Jacob nods, "This is all very Machiavellian of you."

"I wouldn't know. Never read 'im." Maria then turns to Nicole, "So, to assure you, they won't touch the girls at all, especially in the four neutral territories, and think of the good it will do?"

Nicole, now deflated, looks at Jessica, "There's no talking you out of this, is there?"

Jessica and Eight both say, "No."

Then Eight adds, "There's more children out there. I can feel them. I be damned if I won't do anything."

Nicole asks Jessica, "You really want to do this?"

Jessica smiles, "I think Box and I will hit it off."

"Well, fuck me."

Bob adds, "Nicole, hon, ya, Hartcourt may be an evil bastard but he's the reason we're not in a total war. Something Tillsdale and the Co-op have been pushing hard for."

"They're that stupid?"

"Oh, ya. They are."

Maria states the obvious, "Just so ya guys know, I can knock out all three-hundred of the priority targets with just one—just one platform, and Box knows it. The others are stupid enough to actually believe their layered defenses can protect land-locked targets."

With the dead pause that followed, Bob asks, "Scott and Bill, we ready for next Thursday?"

Scott goes, "As we'll ever be. Vacuum Sandwich Zero-Three has indicated that we already have a squad of three cruisers lying in wait. Security Services is gonna bite."

"Bill, how is Cricket?"

Bill nods, "She's doing well. It's gonna be a girl."

Everybody cheers, so Bob adds, "It's imperative that she not know anything we talked about today except the peace talk crap we're gonna talk about now so, Eight, Glados, Jessica, Maria, thank you for..." Bob shakes his head while looking at his granddaughter, "Hell, I'm still digesting this. A Puppet Master? Jesus!"

Jessica has come around and gives Bob a hug, "Sorry *tito*."

"No! That's okay." Bob suddenly realizes, "Now that I think about it...we, your mother and I, don't have to worry 'bout you."

Bob nods yes as Jessica says, "Just stay off the radar."

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Water planets are surprisingly common but they usually do not remain in a liquid state. Planets like Sapphire and Earth are rare, ones like Europa and Led Myach are common enough as moons with solid ice balls such as Cocytus being the norm. Kirin was once a liquid water planet but now it's an arid-rocky lump and no one can figure out why because it's not from around these parts. When first captured and jockeyed into a screwy-looping orbital track around Sapphire it was an iron silicate core covered with a layer of calcified salts making it appear bright white. After popping over sixty cobalt-bluer bombs, the tortured face of this dead rock has been scoured clean leaving only deposits in a massive network of fissures and rifts that encircle and crisscross the

surface. From one angle it looks like an Oreo Cookie, and from another it looks like a huge 'Z' slashed across it. The most popular quarter looks like a zebra's triangular pattern while waxing, and when the light shifts it looks like a dragon's head while waning, and none of this was expected when they started setting off the bombs. To preserve these esthetics it's been the Oreo Cookie side that has taken on the brunt of the nukes and it's believed that today's shot will wipe out the streak that provides the creamy center. With that deep crack running across the charcoal-black surface, and it's single pristine impact crater, when this side turns towards Sapphire it will mimic the Mimas 'Death Star' look but it will be much cleaner by comparison.

Kirin is five days from reaching its apogee but the cobalt-bluer bomb will pop eleven hours from now. When it does it will push the planetoid sideways and give it a slight speed boost which is expected to put it in a predictably stable orbit—give or take a couple thousand kilometers. In the end they are calculating about twenty-six lunar months per Sapphire year which is almost exactly 130 Earth weeks, or five earth weeks per Kirin lunar month. The Sapphire week-day-month combos are never going to synch up to Kirin's in anyone's lifetime, and if they do it will be millions of years in the future and, from the look of things, far past anyone giving a shit.

Then to consider that the residents only have about 800,000 years of this temperate climate when Electra will begin to crank the heat up and, like Earth, the oceans will start to boil away less than two million years from now.

Earth has maybe a billion-five to go before the boil.

Jessica ordered a pair of Murder Boards for her and Maria. Through Maria she acquired a mature taste for alcohol over the sweet and fruity cocktails preferred by the vast majority of young women, as well as acquiring an appreciation for this bitter stout-ale and dark-rum boilermaker concoction. When she finally turned twenty-one Nicole and Maria took her to the Kilosphere for her first 'legal' drink and run at the casino and both were proud that her first drink was a Murder Board and she didn't try to clean the house out when she could have easily.

With Jessica and Maria both dropping their shots of rum into pints of stout, Maria asks, "Kinda blindsided today, hu?"

Jessica rolls her eyes, "Yea and no. Little fucker surprised me though, but for you he asks me to be direct."

"Let's hear what the Alter has to say before I get pissed and go beat it outta him straight up."

"Keep the forty-seven in service."

"Seriously?"

"The Thunderbolt is still, hands down, the top fighter by far and, yea, the Djinn is a pain in the ass, but this new plan to replace all the forty-sevens with the new seventy-four is short sighted."

Maria huffs, saying, "This is an odd one. I was about to pull my hair and shout 'what the fuck do you know' but...you got my attention."

"Look, the sixty-one you were developing was gorgeous!" Jessica takes a sip and, "Way over-engineered, dumb-as-fuck overkill gorgeous. When the Co-op came out with the Djinn you dropped it like a hot-potato and went with Paleo's idea for the seventy-four and, one has to admit, it is a brilliant design he pulled out of his ass."

"With sixty percent of the components from the forty-seven, you could say we're committed to it."

"No doubt! Fifteen months from concept to production is unheard of but your original plan for it to complement the forty-seven was the right idea. Stick to the original plan."

"The new plan is in line with what we got goin' on now—"

Jessica jumps on that, "Now, being the operative word. See, if you mothball the forty-seven you'll be in a mad scramble to get it back into service before this is all over. The Alter suggests you to look into integrating the wings and sling-shot MDDSH from the sixty-one into a new block of forty-sevens. He says it'll knock your socks off and allow you to off-load the Dip."

Maria protests, "We just built three-hundred of those things! We're about to deploy them!"

"And nobody wants to fly 'em!" Jessica smiles slightly as Maria's lips curl, not knowing what to say, "The Dip has too specific of a mission for our pilots to want to fly it. When the time comes trade them to the PADF for a bigger footprint on the church key. They'll gladly eat your ass out to get their hands on 'em."

"They love the three-eighty, but they also want interceptors."

"Your forty-sevens with the sixty-one wings and the butterfly update will give you Mach-eight at a thousand millibars."

Maria is about to choke on her drink, "Seriously?"

"Yea, and the new dash will give you five-fold jump capability. You'll want those long legs after this is over. You'll need those legs. The seventy-four will replace the forty-seven, yes, but the forty-seven will become a completely different beast. You'll be able to retrofit the wings and butterflies to the bisE blocks and pinch the Dips."

Maria thinks, "And we won't get push back from our pilots."

"Funny you should say that!" Jessica takes a sip and then, "My father, he'll be vocally hostile to the baby-bolt but, after Polaris, you won't be able to get his ass out of the thing." Jessica then shifts gears with, "Now, the second item on today's laundry list is a little message the Alter wanted me to convey to you—what Bob and Michal decide to do to be proactive you need to support them."

Maria rears her head, "That's a given!"

"No, it's not, but now it is."

Maria thinks about it, "I don't like the sound of this."

Jessica, with tight lips, "That's all I can say."

"Have you two considered all—"

Jessica cuts her off, "All the possible alternatives? Endlessly."

"Ask no questions and you'll tell me no lies." Maria then realizes Nicole is in charge of their security, "What about your mom?"

Jessica puts her hand up to silence Maria, looks away for a second then turns back while saying, "Let it go."

Maria's shoulders sag, realizing the negative outcomes, then asks, "So, given yet another pebble to flick and a cryptic fucked up fortune cookie. When am I gonna get a brick to throw, hu?"

"Funny you should ask because today I got a brick for ya!"

"Really?" Maria perks up, "It took four God-damned years!"

"I asked Mooch and Snoopy to join us and you need to make a decision before they get here and...that's in about two minutes."

Maria almost snarls, "You're giving me no wiggle room."

"That's the idea. You need to think fast."

Maria huffs, "Okay, let's hear it."

"Mooch's demo you got comin' up before the first of the year, we need you to settle on a target of our choosing. Option-58."

"Okay, a little red-dwarf that's out of the way. Fair enough!"

"That's on paper, your real target needs to be 58-Orion."

Maria's mouth drops open, astonished, "Okay, wouldn't that be a little excessive? You realize that would require a full-on test?"

"It would be the test, and yes, we know what we're asking."

Maria nods big, "Enlighten me, why?"

"You need to go big!" Jessica twists her glass of ale around, looking at the shot glass clanking around in it, and, "A universal truth about gray-matter is that they don't understand subtlety. Busting off a whole gram on a red dwarf, even though it is twice their capability, is not going to have the desired effect. Their response will be to counter it and build up. You need to slap 'em down by making the demo overwhelming." She takes a little sip, "And while you're at it, spill your guts about the other four stations with identical guns and, also, don't hold back about the gun conversions on our new platforms."

"That's showing all our cards!"

"That's the idea! Look, if you pop that red dwarf everybody is going to be asking about it and when, not if, but when it gets out how it got zapped you will not hear the end of it."

"We've been wondering about that?"

"Alpha-Orion is gonna blow. It's just that some think it'll be maybe a thousand years, or fifty-five hundred years, or a million years or it could blow tomorrow for all we know!"

"We know the iron content."

"Ah, helioseismology, *not* an exact science. We really don't know shit except that it going boom is inevitable!" Jessica smiles, "Now, if you invite everyone for the shot, the core Security Council, the FIS, and I would suggest you sneak Hartcourt to the demo."

"Boxter?"

"He knows about the stations and, trust me, it's better for us if he sees this instead of hearing about it."

"The Co-op would want to build one."

"Not after you give everyone your thoughts on a post-war 'sharing of ideas.' They'll all be happy to sweep what they just saw under the rug. Even Box."

"What about the Gray's after the shot?"

"They will ask for terms."

"We're not at war."

"In their minds we always have been! Offer them a full-equal partnership. Ask them to join the FIS. The big reveal on that will be one of mutual friendship and kumbaya and keep it quiet about them threatening to stomp our shit up for the last two centuries." With Maria thinking about it, Jessica adds. "We've surpassed them by leaps and bounds. I don't think they'd be opposed to teaming up?"

Maria then wonders, "Boxter?"

"I can't say anything, just make sure he shows up for it."

Jessica waves to Mooch and Snoopy, who are approaching them, while Maria asks, "Who knows 'bout this targeting change?"

"Right now you, me and Glados. We add Mooch and Snoopy and that's it until we take the shot." Jessica then blinks her eyes and, "Oh, by the way, even though Que Ball is set to evac at a moment's notice that will be taken care of long before the demo."

"Wanna fill me in?"

"Nope! Just sit back and watch the fireworks."

Mooch and Snoopy give joyful whistles and clicks as they trot up to Jessica who has already stood and sounds off with three clicks in response. Both giving Jessica huge hugs, they turn and nod to Maria.

Maria motions for them to have a seat, "Sergeant Snoop, Sergeant Mooch, how are ya? Glad you could make it!"

Mooch nods his head up and down slightly, "Doing good, Marshal. Everything is on schedule!"

Jessica asks Snoopy, "Uncle Snoop, it's been forever! I hear you've been farmed out for the Kirin shot?"

Snoopy is obviously proud of his work, "For the last three, yes. Tomorrows shot is my baby!"

Jessica knows Snoopy is excited about this event so she asks, "Lensing? I haven't been keeping up on things."

Maria adds, "Jessie has been jumping through hoops for us."

Snoopy grins, "We're using a shit load of nukes for this one. The comet, Everlast, it'll be popping up in about an hour, we have six nukes dug deep inside, from twenty to four-hundred and fifty kilotons, and sixty-eight, five-megaton in a ring around the circumference."

Jessica asks, "The cobalt?"

"Ah, Jinx and Gwascious are on the drive team, with Kiel and Glados, they'll be piloting it up to five clicks above the surface for the event. The imbedded bombs go off first to shatter the interior, the ring goes off three-microseconds later to coral the debris."

"That's the lensing?"

"Exactly! Then the cobalt goes off a millisecond after that!"

"Some are calling it the upper-cut, and others a right-cross."

Snoopy shrugs, "Depends on your orientation. Either way, Everlast lives up to its name!"

Maria smirks, "Goodbye Oreo cookie, hello Death Star!"

Snoopy snorts, "Yea, as you say, purdy much!"

With the waitress dropping off beakers of wine for Mooch and Snoopy, Mooch asks Maria, "I was wondering, nothing personal Jessie, but if this is a business meeting...why is Jessie here?"

Snoopy adds, "We were wondering why she called it?"

"Ah, about that." Maria nods and takes a sip of her drink, "Jessie is not part of the Annex, yes, but she does intel for us. What she does keeps her outside of our organization."

Mooch and Snoopy look at each other, shrug, and Mooch asks, "How much does she know?"

Jessica wonders, "What would you say, everything?"

Maria agrees, "Yea, you could say that." She then looks to the Xhemal and says, "In fact, she knows way more than I do."

Snoopy asks, "So, we can speak freely then?"

"I insist." Maria looks to Jessica, "Wanna fill 'em in?"

Jessica takes a sip and smacks her lips and, "Well, guys, Marshal Ramirez and I have been talking and we've settled on a target for the up and coming demo."

Mooch rolls his eyes, "Finally!"

Maria points out, "It's not what ya think, Mooch. We need to have you kick it up a notch. In fact, we're gonna go big!"

With Mooch nodding, realizing there is a new target on the table, Jessica smiles, "You're gonna love this..."

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

SA deep space dump points are in the millions.

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

All relative but askew from each point of view!

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

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

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

anchor star SAO or HIP number, the backstop star SAO or HIP collinear point, followed by a date and time scheduled for the jump.

You can even hand-key these values in and *et voilà!*

At this galactic longitude, 25.8 on the Sag-A grid, pretty much everything is moving at least two hundred kilometers a second so between the rules of the road, that is everybody dumps towards the right of the target area, and with the time and angle of each jump determined by one's respective SA designation, there is virtually no chance that anyone could possibly encroach on another's exit point or, as they say in navigational parlance, *bump on the dump*.

Bumps have happened...and the results can be catastrophic.

Anyway, when the Annex wants to clue the Co-op in on an SA deep-space rendezvous, as an invitation for them to crash the party that is, the info has to be something easy to act on like at 37-Tau. Today they have chosen the brown dwarf Calar-3 because everybody knows where this thing is and nobody outside the Pleiades ever goes there. Roving brown dwarfs, especially those stripped of orbital objects, are the perfect infrared navigational beacon, and this one happens to be the regular meet-up locale for the Annex and those parties not on their normal deep-space meet-up A-List.

Eight days ago a squad of Security Service cruisers, three of the new skinny wedge type that have been trickling down to the SS, are floating along all quiet and cold about a quarter of an AU from the brown dwarf. Not in orbit *per se*—but actually falling towards Calar-3 at an ever increasing rate of speed yet far enough away that it doesn't matter because it will take months for them to catch up. If someone were to dump in close proximity to the dwarf, and survey the sky looking for threats, chances are these three cruisers are not going to occlude or perturb the light from any background stars.

Frankenstein, SA22, pops out from a jump about 55,000 kilometers from Calar-3. Now, that "hundreds of kilometers a second" mentioned before only applies to objects in relation to their wonderings while going around the Milky Way. The Milky Way itself is moving at a pretty fair clip back towards the ZOA so when the Frankenstein dumps into static space it is actually Calar-3 that is racing away at over a thousand kilometers a second or 1,023kps to be precise.

Frankenstein is sitting still and Calar-3 is in motion, so when you add the brown dwarfs lateral movement on the galactic plane the dump site has moved significantly and a second later the Dashi, SA23, pops out just over twelve-hundred kilometers away, between them.

Now, to review, two light minutes away from Calar-3, trailing the dwarf's galactic lateral trajectory, are three Co-op Security Service

cruisers slowly gaining on it in gravitational free fall so, between them dropping towards Calar-3 and the dwarf star pulling away from two SA battle platforms at a very high speed, both parties are about ten hours and twenty-seven minutes apart at these velocities.

If things go as planned, this will be over with long before that.

Vacuum Sandwich Zero-Three, one of the eighteen Grigori reconnaissance ghost droids manned by Sophia and Paleo, has been on an orbital down-low for over two weeks waiting for today—not to get involved by any stretch, they're here only to watch.

The droid is in a slow elliptical orbit six million clicks above Calar-3 and, with the Security Service cruisers dropping from above and the Frankenstein and Dashi climbing from below, it was purely by stupid chance that they ended up smack-dab in between these two. Their ship is so small and flat that, as long as they stay reasonably still in their slow and lazy orbit, they should be practically invisible.

Paleo, sipping on a mug of dark coffee, is standing in the dining room of a replica of Sophia's bungalow in Stone Garden. All the recon teams agreed to a rural hillside setting so that when their weekly uploads to the Stone Garden instances of Paleo and Sophia compile there will be marked differences between them all. Even the décor for each of the recon teams is slightly off from the rest so as to better demark whose memories are whose.

Sophia is sitting at the table tapping a pen on a yellow legal pad that has a scribbled picture of their current tactical situation. The walls are translucent from the tactical hologram showing Calar-3 and the two platforms to their left and the three cruisers to their right.

Their Grigori should have been back in a previous orbital quadrant for this event, the argument of perigee as they say, but a planned second Delta-V to round out their now sloppy elliptical orbit was thwarted when Security Services showed up earlier than expected. They now find themselves exactly where they shouldn't be which is sandwiched in between the cruisers and the platforms.

Paleo, checking Sophia's notes says, "Yup, that's about right."

Sophia looks up, "Boxcar fifty-one-ten, should link up in about fifteen-twenty minutes. As it is we'll end up right between them."

"That's boxcars, plural."

"Hu?"

"It's from craps."

"Craps? What's that?"

"Dice, rolling a double six is boxcars."

Sophia thinks about it and realizes, "Oh! The drop stations on the underside of the platforms! I get it."

"Boxcars was a common maneuver back in the day before the stations. I hear the Marauder did a hundred link ups after 44-Tau."

"What's the game plan if they spot us and take a shot?"

"Well, if it's ten or twelve seconds after the Zodiac hits that means they've been tracking us and closed in for the shot. If we get shot at forty or so seconds after it goes off means their bomb flashed us. No matter what, they have to scoot in to confirm the kill and if they scoot in close to us then we'll be flashed, guaranteed. Knowing them they'll opt for a long convergence hoping to get a lucky scissors on us but the best they can hope for is to strobe us."

"If they shoot we shoot back, right?"

"Well, yea! From a cold start we have eight seconds to spool for dash so if they get a fix on distance we're toast! If they bust on us you will immediately launch a spider and if we're lucky we'll nail 'em before they see the return and calculate a proper solution."

"So, if they pull in close we're fucked."

"It'll be a close race. You follow our shot by zipping us into the cruiser blast zone and from there you launch our second spider out to the Zodiac blast zone and park it on stand-by."

"Missile settings?"

"Autonomous."

"If they shoot and miss?"

"If they miss us we continue to sit and stay buttoned up."

"Stupid and quiet, right?"

Paleo nods, "Yup."

Sophia throws out, "If they're smart they'll leave us alone."

"You're learnin' fast however, the bonus to pop us may be irresistible." Paleo then points to both sides of their position, "Chances are, if they don't see us now, SOP says they'll zip in around here to watch the show. Well, either way I expect them to end up somewhere around our position. If they stay put they may not notice the flash returned from our little ship but if they do, from there, they may think it's an optical anomaly so they just may let it go."

"What's the chances of them spotting us already?"

"A coin toss? They've been here eight days." Paleo nudges Sophie's shoulder with his hip, "It's early but we should mount up."

Ghosts don't require a physical cockpit but here they operate from a digital copy of the one used on the F380 Cerberus. Given that they have the exact same view—if they were real then their heads would actually be sticking up outside the fuselage. A Cerberus cockpit is normally a tight fit from side to side, but not needing to be modeled in a fighting suit they are each lounging comfortably in BDU pants and a t-shirt with coffee in hand. Replicating normal physics that would require them to strap in and deprive themselves of their beverage has been suspended here because it simply is not necessary.

Paleo may be in command but this is Sophia's shift so she takes the forward pilots seat. Paleo is always happy to allow Sophia to take the lead because she simply needs the experience. As a precaution his OODA response time has been overclocked so that if there were a problem he could respond instantaneously. There are a lot of unknown variables today but Paleo really needs to have Sophia work this mission without him butting in or taking charge.

The Boxcars link up for today, as the story goes, is that the Frankenstein has two MDDSH nacelles out from last month's action so they can't actually "dash" above 0.2c, or go beyond 20% light speed that is. The Iron Man class couldn't do this on two but these bigger ships can, it's just that 0.2c is really not enough *get up and go* if they get in a bind or get jumped...which is all horseshit because all the damage they have is actually superficial at worse.

After about three minutes surveying the sky, looking for threats, the Dashi kicks in their MDDSH engines and zips up close, eating those twelve hundred kilometers inside a half a minute. Coming out of the dash nose to nose with the Frankenstein, the field around it pops like a soap bubble. This is followed by the Dashi then venting a plume of hydrogen as thrust, without the oxygen or the burn, to start their final approach to the Frankenstein.

It takes thirteen laborious minutes for them to travel the three hundred meters for the hard link up, and when their noses touch from inside the ships it sounds like a soft cottony plonk.

Now queue the party crashers...

Via a small version of the WormTrac array, Sophia and Paleo watch as it takes a Zodiac missile six seconds from release to travel the thirty-seven million kilometers from their larger Rapier cruiser to hit the intersection point between the Frankenstein and the Dashi. They see the signature of a fifty-megaton plume erupt that envelops and consumes both platforms—but it will be another fifteen seconds before they see it outside their ship for real.

"Oh shit!" says Paleo as both he and Sophia notice the cruiser suddenly drop from high up to point-blank range only forty-kilometers

away to their right.

They feel a bump and start to rotate as a hot vapor chine flashes around their ship, and before Paleo can shout for Sophia to launch, she has already fired the spider missile. They were hit by a particle beam with a laser like convergence that, in retrospect, was kind of dumb. It cut off the last six meters off the Grigori's tail, bisecting the razors, yet leaving their ship still fully functional in space. Flying in atmosphere would now be out of the question.

From release it takes two seconds for the spider to reach the Security Services cruiser, and by then it is buzzing along at 2.1c. At twice the speed of light the missile hits it square in the tip of the nose and this absolutely vaporizes the two kilometer long ship. Its slender wedge contours quickly balloon out into a spherical and blinding fireball that simply pops after a handful of seconds,

And all this commotion in deafening silence.

To mask their heat signature, now that they have had a chunk of their tail cut off, Sophia pulls their ship into the cruisers blast zone that is quickly dissipating just as they see the nuke from the Zodiac missile explode in the direction of Calar-3. As planned she launches their remaining spider which quickly drops off and parks itself within the Zodiac's already fading blast zone.

A week of sheer boredom has exploded into fifteen seconds of frantic insanity...and is handed back over to the strain of boredom.

After a few minutes of watching the WormTrac, looking for the tell tail signature of a launch, dash or jump from their littler Epée cruisers, Paleo speaks up, "Sophie, I have to say you did real good."

Sophia just shakes her head and points out, "I can see a piece of our ass floating out there. How's that good?"

"We were lucky and you were spot on." Paleo takes a sip from his coffee and asks, "So, what did they do wrong?"

"They should have fired the PB's smooth-bore, no choke. That would have cooked our goose for sure."

"Yup."

"What are they going to do now?"

Paleo thinks about it, "If I were them? At this point I would just leave. They kinda know where we're at but they can't pinpoint us in the residual heat so, tactically it's not good for them...buuut, if they knew we only had the one missile out there they would definitely come swat us like a bug."

Sophia then wonders, "How many were on the cruiser?"

"It was a shiv so...seven...seven-eighty? Around there."

They sit for another hour in a blind stand off until they notice on the WormTrac the two little-but-lethal Epée cruisers spooling for a jump. These Security Services assets are yet again too deep inside Annex controlled space to hold ground, and what should have been a cherry on top, whacking the Grigori that is, ended up wasting one of their newest ships and a complement of over seven-hundred.

Anyway, the SS got what they came for so when they jump back towards safer space they leave Sophia and Paleo twiddling their thumbs for another two hours while on the lookout for fighters. The latest Gryphon-Djinns would tear-ass after them in a flash but nobody came and, yet, they had to remain vigilant just the same.

They didn't see the drop ship kicked overboard to follow up.

When the Basilisk, SA26, appears for a wellness check on the two platforms, expecting to find this mess, Paleo burst transmits their telemetry and video feed for the last two weeks and immediately has Sophia jump them out of the area for U-Turn.

After three jumps they have twenty-two hours to blow before the final one to U-Turn, so in that time Sophia and Paleo celebrate her first kill as a bona fide fighter pilot. After twelve bottles of wine and relentless commemorative sex in each room of her little abode, by the time they skid their wreck of a Grigori to a stop on the deck of the Carrie Nation they are a little worse for wear.

Sober but strung out nonetheless.

01001011-01001101-01000110-01000100-01001101

In the Stone Garden, each Sunday morning, Paleo and Sophia wake up to their newly compiled selves. All of their experiences over the last week from the eighteen recon teams, and a handful of other missions, have been uploaded into their long term memory. The droning tedium and innocuous memories, the boring stuff, has already been reviewed and parsed out. All of this unnecessary junk retrievable but sort of buried before they wake up. Interesting and unique events, especially their carnal pursuits, are all retained in vivid detail, but for this morning things happen to be a bit off for Sophia.

So much so that Paleo takes it upon himself to cancel their Sunday morning brunch with Jacob and Babette.

With the elation from her victory now behind them, Sophia wakes up to the part of combat that everybody dreads after the fact. The sadness and self-loathing that comes with killing has now hit her like a ton of bricks. Killing a person or two is one thing, but faced with

being directly responsible for the death of hundreds is quite another. Like everyone else it is her job, and like everyone else she must face this insidious little demon head on—even when it assumes Cthulhu like proportions.

People like her father have the strength to go it alone, and so too will Paleo when that time comes. Today the shock, hopelessness and melancholy is overwhelming for Sophia and she is blessed to wake up to Paleo who, without batting an eye, spends the day holding her in his arms...soothing her pain and easing that burden.

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divas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I saw you on *Cubanaza* a couple of times."

"Fuckin' keeps trying to bring me onto that damned show and I don't know why?"

"Well, let's review!" Jessica wiggles a finger at him, "You're the size of a bear and cut to ribbons. You have a perfect afro and always dressed to the nines. Mac, dude, you are one hot commodity! She's just showing off goin' *look what I got!* Fuck, I would!"

Mac snorts a laugh, "Thank ya, Red."

"So, what's the problem? She putting the shackles to ya?"

"No! It wasn't exclusive. I could do what I want."

"So, what's the problem?"

"Lucia." He puts his hands out and motions them like he's gripping her butt cheeks, "Have you see dat ass? It's like yours, its mesmerizing how they move independently and flex and shit!" He then puts his hands down and huffs, "To risk sounding, as Monique would say, cliché, she's rubbing off on us all, but baby got back."

Jessica just shakes her head, "Lucia is a bit of a slut."

With the limo descending, Mac says, "I tried not to look! Tried to be good, and I tried to steer clear but that bitch is relentless!"

Jessica is about to burst out laughing, "So you caved?"

"Ah, d'uh, yea! I tore that shit up!" Nodding big, Mac smiles, "Made 'er tap out."

"Hu? Wha' Lucia?"

"Yup, bitch cried, Uncle."

Jessica laughs, "So, why the long face?"

"Agatha kicked me to the curb but wants to start up again."

"So, she did break it off!" With the limo setting down outside of Khumalo's Malibu ranch, Jessica realizes that Mac is going to see her today and laughs, "You really need to think this through, Mac."

"Aggie is the best lay I have ever had *and* she cooks great! What am I supposed to do?"

With her door opening, Jessica asks, "You here tomorrow?"

With Mac nodding yes, Jessica gives him a quick hug before she hops out of the limo, "Not Lucia! That shit off limits."

Walking up to Khumalo, who is unloading supplies from a small utility floater, Jessica stops and asks, "Ndosa, where'd you get this stuff? You're painting your own house? Seriously?"

Khumalo smiles, "Specialty hard ware store in Topanga." He looks around, "And yea, the neighbors thought I was the hired help."

"You got the biggest ranch within miles of here. At your level, shit dude, bots do this kinda work."

He nods and, "Well, my house, my labor, my sweat. I didn't afford this place by paying others to do shit I should be doin' myself."

"Plumbing too?"

Khumalo points up, "Now, that's where I draw the line."

"Okay." She motions for him to follow her, "We don't got a lot of time here." Entering the main house she says, "Let's get these two out of the way first."

In the family room she surprises Cloé and Siusan and throws her hands out for them to stay seated, "Okay-okay, if you got an insomniac, an agnostic and dyslexic, waddya got? ...Someone who stays up all night wondering if there is a dog!"

Cloé rolls her eyes while saying, "You're kidding."

"Waddaya got when you cross an elephant with a fifth of scotch? Hu? Hu? ...Trunk and disorderly!"

Both could not stop themselves from chuckling so Jessica says, "Okay, the Atlantic Ocean with the Titanic? ...About half way!"

They actually laugh, with Siusan going, "Give it up!"

Jessica points to her and, "You should know this one, what's the quickest way to a man's heart?" She leans in and laughs big, "Through his chest!" These are so stupid that both are laughing at it so, "I got a million of 'em! I'll be here every Friday night this week!"

And with a simple thought, like her father, they drop.

With these two out cold, Jessica turns to Khumalo, "Thank God I didn't resort to *poultry-geist*." She points to them and adds, "Since REM is twenty, I have to be back to un-fuck this in fifteen."

While preceding Khumalo into the family room, Jessica is pulling her neuronet pocket PBDi (Peabody) device which is the size of a small smart-phone. Usually they are accessed via a neuro interface, and even though they are still touchscreen enabled the only time most people touch theirs is to charge it. Jessica's is SA-tacnet enabled so there is much more to be had on board, so as she whips it out, lasers flash and a two-dimensional image of Maria Ramirez materializes behind her and swinging in time with Jessica's arm movements.

With the 2D, flat as paper Maria, flailing her arms around, "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! This is making me fuckin' dizzy!"

Jessica plops it on the carpet and steps back while tossing a couple of crystal marbles on the floor out a few feet behind it, "Here, Mar, this'll fill ya out."

Inside a second the PBDi locks onto the marbles and the 2D Maria pops into a 3D model of her, so she says, "Oh, that's better!" 3D Maria looks at her butt and goes, "This make me look fat? They say it adds five kilos, ya know!"

Khumalo looks at his router output through a neuro-interface and realizes, "There is no signal going out. Construct?"

Maria, with a guffaw, "Well, d'uh!"

Jessica points to her own head, "Yea, but she's watching though here." She gestures to Maria, "Chat with her and if the real one has somethin' to add I'll relay it to ya."

3D Maria adds, "Head fuck ain't it? I was uploaded just this morning so I'm pretty much the real deal...well, from half a day ago."

"Okay." Khumalo turns to Maria, "I can do this."

Jessica informs her, "He's painting his house himself."

Maria is surprised, "Hu? Seriously? They have bots for that!"

Khumalo's shoulders sag, "I'm having fun, okay?"

"Sure! Whatever floats your boat..." She points to Jessica and then to herself, "Do I have anything to add before I get started?"

Jessica smiles, "Ya, you're saying for me to tell you to shut the fuck up and get on with it."

Maria nods, and to Khumalo, "I don't know what you know about Jessica and the clones going to 83-Tau but, what do you know?"

Khumalo nods, "Boxter is on the level."

"Really!"

"Yea, surprised me too! We're handling security and the SS troops Boxter assigned to us is from a battalion specifically groomed for this, called the Honey Badgers." Pointing to Jessica, "The narwhals will know about Jessie but not the clones, an' when people start disappearing, trust me, they'll put two and two together real fast."

"They'll hold off on the arrests till after they leave, right?"

"The real work will start after they leave, yes, but there won't be any arrests. Just executions." He shrugs and, "Boxter ain't playin' on this one. He's going after everyone they uncover so what ends up going down is gonna get leaked and it'll scare the fuck outta everybody going forward. If our intent is to stop Geisha shit once and for all then

this'll do it." Khumalo thinks about it, "He has a real piece of work as his go to gal, a Captain Lyn. In her interrogations she redefines the concept of what it means to be a hard-core psychopath."

"A bloodbath? Fu-real?"

"Yup, like I said, he isn't playing."

Maria blinks her eyes, "So, my girls are gonna be fine?"

"Oh, yes...he admires Fifty-Two. When he mentions his, what you call, conversations with Eight, it's like he's speaking of his own daughters. Trust me, you have nothing to worry 'bout."

"He know about Jessica's...abilities?"

"No, but he suspects it. No matter what, he's looking forward to meeting her."

"Red will be with them."

He shakes his head, "Yea, about that."

"Sorry, she's part of the package."

"No! He's looking forward to meeting her again, too! He thinks they'll have common ground. He admires Red."

Maria is surprised, "Well, everybody is on the same page!"

"Ya, ain't that a kick, and just so you know he's cancelling their military cloning project."

Maria is surprised, "Why the fuck?"

"They were getting the results they were looking for but you know that comes with a hefty price tag. Bottom line, after crunching the numbers, it's way-way cheaper to hire on cannon fodder and let the crème rise to the top."

"Budgetary considerations. Sure, I can respect that! Ours is costing us a fuck-ton and we still have no idea what the end product will be when we get there."

"Pulling the plug?"

"Too early to tell? We'll see soon enough."

"Boxter thinks you're on the right track with your program."

"Really?"

"You started with the right blueprints."

"We're trying to make well-rounded people. We're not tryin' to make soldiers out of them."

"He also sees the wisdom in that. Box is dying to find out

what the end result will be in twelve-fifteen years time."

Maria glances at Jessica then nods, "I have to say they're an obstinate bunch. Challenging little fuckers every step of the way."

Khumalo is surprised, "No shit!"

"No shit, what?"

Khumalo looks at Jessica with a smile, "So, you're the Omega! Ever since you were found out the intel community has been speculating about that." He throws his hands out, "I'll keep it to myself but, oh my God! An army of you? Holy shit!"

Jessica says on behalf of real Maria, "She says you need to keep this to yourself you know."

"Oh, no! It's safe with me, but...damn!"

Maria adds, "We were thinking about cutting it off at a Division and spread the love around."

"You know, your Alpha scares the fuck outta them, but this!" He points to Jessica and asks, "You fight like your mom, right?" Jessica nods yes, so he goes, "Fuck me, a Company of you would make my balls jump up into my throat."

Jessica speaks for herself, "Glad we're on the same side." She turns to 3D Maria and, "We need to cut this short, anything else?"

"No!" Maria looks to Khumalo, "Ready for retirement?"

"Actually, yea. I really want to enjoy this place." He mentally pulls up Jessica's shared peer to peer drop box and drags a file in it, "Just gave Jessica my final report but, honestly, Boxter already knows what I think."

"Tender your notice and the report already?"

"Last Wednesday. I laid it all out, giving him my full analysis including what you're really doing now, just like last time, and he's ignoring it...according to plan."

Maria is introspective, "It makes you wonder if maybe he's not ignoring it? It makes you wonder if maybe we're being played?"

"Why?" Khumalo thinks about it, "He's winning big! How would that benefit him?"

Maria shrugs, "I don't know...I just get this weird vibe."

"Well, when that vibe comes into focus, clue me in."

Jessica snorts, "Real Maria says you're an asshole."

3D Maria agrees, "Like I said, you're an asshole!"

Khumalo laughs, "Look, Jessie here has to wake the girls. We have reservations, then Cloé and Jessie have a party to go too."

"No prob! Go have fun and..." Maria looks to Jessica, "Tell Cloé happy twenty-three for me, and congrats on landing KBOS!"

Khumalo then goes, "Oh! Before you go, they picked up the engines from the Grigori out at Calar-3. I just found out today."

"Great! That's perfect!"

With a confused look, Khumalo asks, "You wanted that?"

"It was the perfect opportunity! Why waste it?"

"What's your angle?"

"Add to their load? Fuck with their wallet? Those engines are extraordinarily expensive to build. We're going to release the Dips soon so to get more speed they need to reduce the cross-section to the IR5 fuselage. Cracking that engine will give them a foundation for a new I.R. series, maybe even resurrect the IR4? And, if you haven't figured it out, we already have a response for that planned in advance. We were going to leak the design but...opportunities abound!"

Khumalo then realizes, "I haven't heard back from you on the Grays test firing, Fly-Swatter. Will there be a joint response?"

"Not joint, but it will be shared when the time comes. Ciao!"

3D Maria fades out and as they are about to step through the doorway, Jessica takes a queue from the real Maria and turns to Khumalo, "A last minute item, Mar believes that Box may think you are *the* Impetus. She'll give ya the details when she sees you next."

"Then why am I alive?"

Jessica relays the response, "Outside of him thinking of you as a friend, his only real friend, you served a purpose."

While taking a second to digest this, Jessica, bobbing her head in acquiescence, raises her hand and calls out, "Hail Hydra!"

Khumalo starts laughing big, and after a few seconds he says, "Oh, that takes me back! She gone?" With her nodding yes, he asks, "Do I have reason to worry?" Jessica shakes her head *no*, so he adds, "I don't want to trip over my own dick at this point. I'm so close to the finish line and I still have to go back and greenfield Blackstone's Security Services footprint. After that, I'm free."

"Ndosa, I'll make sure the coast is clear before you go back but, truth be known...I'm thinkin' we're all getting played."

He snorts a laugh, "Yea, all hail Hydra is right."

01001001-0100011-01000110-01010100-01010100

It's late Saturday morning and Jessica delights in her mug of coffee while watching Cloé run through her morning Tai Chi katas. She has never before had pure Kona straight from Hawaii, which is damned incredible. What Jessica has come to realize, and finds thus curiously amusing, is that she projects so much confidence that even complete strangers try to emulate her. It's so pervasive that the rising starlets she has met at Monique's also drink their coffee black, just like Jessica. Fact is, Jessica couldn't give less of a shit what people think.

And it shows...

On the other hand, other than Fifty-Two, Cloé is the only friend or acquaintance so far that is her own person and her coffee is spiked with so much sugar and *crème anglaise* it's more like coffee ice cream nuked into a drinkable state. Cloé also couldn't give less of a shit and, for Jessica, this is not only refreshing but admirable.

With Cloé circling hands, and her level of pissed-off steadily on the rise, Jessica finally asks, "You wanna talk about it?"

"We had a great time last night so, no, no I don't."

Jessica points out, "I didn't know you were into Tai Chi?"

Now doing forearm blocks, "I'm not. It's under contract."

"You're all over the place? First it's stylized Tai moves then practical moves and there!" Jessica throws a hand out, "Repulse monkey! What are you doing?" Cloé stops and drops her arms in frustration, so Jessica prods her, "You got one of the most coveted roles ever and you act like you are about to go on a rippin' tear."

Cloé throws her head back, "Fucken' Vinnie Verde."

Jessica protests loudly, "Vernita Green, the origin story! This is a role of a life time! They've been trying to unfuck that remake for damn near seven decades!"

"I signed up for six episodes, but when you read the contract it actually means six seasons! Six God damned seasons! Ten, count 'em, ten vignettes per season! Four of the origin story followed by two seasons of Kill Bill, but that isn't even the worst of it."

Jessica thinks about it, "Shit, that's gonna put the hurt on your PhD. I can talk to Monique if you want."

"I already did. They're gonna make Copperhead a cleaner so there's less screen time and I can get traction on the degree. Whatever a cleaner is?" She then almost shouts, "And the worst part is it's no longer KBOS! You know what they're calling it now?"

Wide-eyed, Jessica says, "I'm clueless?"

"Divas, they're calling it divas! The acronym for Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, but they're already spelling the fucking thing with the small case "i" in it!" She acts like she's about to tear her hair out, "Ruffie was right! This industry is full of comically absurd retards!"

Jessica is laughing, "Really, divas?"

"Can you believe that shit? I do three minor film roles and they go and hand me this god damned thing on a silver platter—"

"The public loves you!"

"The public doesn't know who the fuck I am!" Cloé huffs, then, "The worst of it is that I'm the only one in the cast that has any martial arts experience! Isn't that a poke in the arse or what?"

Jessica points to her, "I see, Tai Chi ain't your thing."

She puts her hands out, "This is where I have to give the production team some credit. We shoot the fight scenes slow-mo like the Tai Chi shit here and crank it up for the final cut, and I have to say it's funny! Cartoonishly fun but, honestly, I fucking hate it!"

Jessica wonders, "Kinda curious, what did you train in?"

Cloé looks around then answers, "Keysi, Aikido, Krav Maga and some Brazilian shit when I was little. My dad wanted me to have a well-rounded kick your ass on the fly skill set. You're the only one that knows. Well, you and the fight choreographer."

"After...he picked himself up off the floor?"

"Yea." Cloé nods, "My bad. Now that he knows I got some moves he wants me to take up Systema for knife work because our Vinnie Verde's specialty is in tactical blades."

Jessica reaches over and pulls a wooden stir stick from Khumalo's painting gear and breaks it in half, "I'm curious." She steps up to Cloé and slaps the stick in her hand, "Mac is going to be here any second so...kill me. Figuratively speaking."

"What do you know?"

"I fight like my parents."

"Which is?"

"A hodgepodge collage of stuff?"

Cloé nods big and suddenly thrusts the square end of the stick forward in a stabbing motion but, instead of blocking it with a strike, Jessica simply spins around, pushing the attacking arm out with her own forearm as she slips past usaccosted.

Jessica turns and shrugs with, "Systema."

"Hu, no shit!"

Cloé attacks again with a barrage of strikes that Jessica easily blocks with Cloé grunting while fighting, "Girl, that's...Wing...Chung!"

Jessica wrenches Cloé's arm around, snatches the wooden knife and swipes it through the inside of Cloé's thigh, across her lower abdomen and around her neck as if it were a Karambit.

"Thank you!" Jessica flicks the piece of wood away and glances at her own forearms, "That's gonna bruise."

"I had no idea!" Cloé is amazed, and with Mac landing the Mach-glider limo near them, she begs, "You can teach me? Please!"

"I would but I got a full plate."

Cloé just shakes her head, "You know, for someone who doesn't do a God damned thing you sure are a busy lil' beaver."

"You don't know the half of it."

"You off to see Josav?"

"Cooling our jets doesn't mean we're cutting it off." Jessica gives Cloé a hug and a quick kiss, "Happy birthday!"

"Thanks, and thank you for last night." Cloé smiles coyly, "You know...curling the toes!"

Jessica wiggles her eyebrows, "Feeling's mutual."

Cloé gives Jessica a deeper kiss, and after a few lingering seconds too long they separate, nod and smile with Jessica saying quietly to her, "Yea, that was great!"

Jessica gives her one last peck and heads towards the limo, and about half way there Cloé calls out, "Hey, if you and Josav ever want to, you know, what we talked about?"

Jessica assures her, "You...you are at the top of that list!"

With a cheer, Cloé pumps her fist at the hip, "Yes!"

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moral compass

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kiel laughs, "Just watch, to the left... Things here are a tad more whack-a-do than you'd think. Big-C's orbit is counter-clockwise, yes, but it's spin, like Prypiat's orbit around the Churn, is clockwise! Red Love, you could say it's all ass-backwards 'round here."

Clint elbows Sheron and quietly goes, "Ain't that the truth."

Sheron nods in agreement, "Bizarro world."

Peanuts speaks up, "Oh ya, that's right! Your sunset is in the east and sunrise is to the west..."

Peanuts is a cherub, having quit growing around eight years of age but, as with the pre-pubes who stopped growing around eleven, the SA managed to disable the gene that inhibited their development. As it is, all the teeny-boppers have started charging into adulthood, only thinner and less busty, and the cherubs have begun to fill out but it's believed they'll remain petite and not even break five-feet.

Peanuts has just started her transition and still looks and sounds like a child, "I always wanted to see this. I think this is going to be an interesting week."

Behind them is Boxter Hartcourt, after having slipped out of the limo his soothing voice is intoxicating, "It'll be a work week, yes, but we'll squeeze a few fun things in." As everyone politely turns to meet him he spins his finger around and points up towards Chernobyl, "It's any second now, my ladies. You'll not want to miss this."

Just five seconds later, and to the gasps of the new arrivals, the crescent of Sokol flashes as the little moon transitions from the pitch blackness of the umbra to the penumbra and into full light. Because Sokol is moving at a fast clip, with an orbit of 48 hours and 2 minutes, this transition takes only a handful of seconds and looks like the black hole is spitting the little moon out.

As they continue to watch, Hartcourt adds, "Our little falcon is entertaining and I never tire of it." He turns to Kiel, "Shelly, it's been forever. Last I saw of you, you were knee high to a bug."

Kiel smiles and shakes his hand, "It's great to see you again, Mr. Hartcourt."

He leans in for a quick shoulder to shoulder hug, "You're an adult now. It's Boxter, my dear." He nods towards Clint and Sheron, "Let me chat these two up and send them off." He motions them to follow him to the light radiating from the limo, "Let's see you."

With the dimmed headlights behind Hartcourt his silhouette is eerie, even sinister. Clint and Sheron have wondered what they would say to Hartcourt if they ever saw him again, and their pent up courage has suddenly turned tail in his presence.

Sheron is about to cry, "Sorry, Pop."

Boxter actually has affections for his granddaughter and reaches out to her, "Oh, no, my little nipper!"

While giving her a genuinely sympathetic hug, Clint speaks up, also having lost his nerve, "My apologies, Mr Hartcourt."

"Oh, no-no-no-no! I wish we saw this level of determination and independence in you two before you decided to go on walkabout. I would have liked to have...guided you in your self-discovery maybe?" He holds Sheron out and drinks her in, "The family may think of it as a 'fuck you' choice but I, for one, respect it."

Clint is shocked by what he says, so Hartcourt looks at him and smiles, "As they say, the crème rises to the top so, do us all proud and rise to the top in all your endeavors." He looks in Sheron's eyes, "As your grandfather I can only pray for that outcome."

Hartcourt gestures towards the ship, "Your mother is waiting so the Naboo will take you there." He looks to Clint again, "Son, It'll drop you off on the way out." And between the two he sighs big and smirks, "As a couple of misfit toys I think you two are turning out way better than we ever could have imagined. You have my best wishes and your families have been instructed to respect your choice. They never would have done so before this transformation but...I insist they do so now. I have so enjoyed the cringe every time they brought you up in conversation, but what you did took a lot of backbone. Piper and I would like to see you two here for breakfast on Muldjeday morning. It's the only slot we have available to you."

Clint points out, "Sir, we *are* with the Annex now."

Hartcourt frowns, "I wouldn't think of us as...mortal enemies, because that's viewing our current state through a child's eyes." He nods towards the others, "As you can see we can find common ground but, that's where your loyalties should lie. Duty first, then family. Don't be surprised to hear that I am proud of you both."

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The palatial opulence of the estates along the Stumps is in sharp contrast to the Stumpies themselves who's attire tends to be rather simple, even elementary by comparison. Each article donned can be beautifully tailored but nothing in their wardrobes is so busy as to draw one's attention away from their person. They hold themselves in esteem and tend to refrain from the acts of self-degradation by following fashionable trends. That said, here it's the substance of their homes that denote their importance, station and wealth.

It's their digs that speak for them.

In contradiction to the rest of the Stumpy elite, Hartcourt's home has a very simple and earthy décor and furnishings—nothing to draw one's attention away from the plant life in residence because his and Piper's mansion is in essence a massive greenhouse complex. To those with an eye for style, and to the frustration of those born of the Stumps, this home beats everyone else on the island chain by miles and it would be a breach in etiquette to try to top it.

In the atrium-entrance to the mansion, the girls are surprised by the sheer wealth of plant varieties just in this four story room, with Hartcourt saying, "We'll do a full tour this afternoon after Zmeu comes up and we uncloud the glass. Oh, looky here!"

He steps over to the main door and opens it for his crew to wheel a five meter tall saguaro cactus in on its side, and while looking at his guests he smiles, "In collage Piper and I saw pics of this lil' oasis by a place called Tortilla Flats, and we had to go. This saguaro spear is the last acquisition and we finally get our desert room!"

With them passing through, Hartcourt thanks them, clasps his hands together and, "Well, let's go meet the Missus and lunch!"

What surprises everyone is that, of all places, it's the family wing of this huge mansion that is devoid of any and all plants.

With Hartcourt sensing that they notice this, he goes, "Trust me, one needs a break from all the greenery. It also helps that I am allergic to most the flora so I dare not touch any of it myself."

Just then a pretty brunette in a white military day-uniform opens the side door, steps through while holding it for Hartcourt's wife who is toting a tray of bbq brisket and a pile of yabby tails, and when she sees them she yelps, "Well hello, Shelly, and all our guests!"

After putting the tray down she steps up while removing her apron, with Hartcourt saying, "Everyone, this is me wife, Piper!"

"Shelly!" Piper laughs as she gives Kiel a quick hug, "Boxxy, you were right, it is a ginger parade! My gawd, they're all beauties! Let me guess..." She points as she goes, "Ah-um, Eight, Peanuts, Cap, Jessica, and your mum, Nicole! Or, by your tag, Red Hell..."

On the stumps, first introductions never come with hugs, but Piper puts her hand out to shake Nicole's, "I am so thrilled to meet you! Your, ah..." She makes a hacking motion across her own throat, "At the U.N. was, oh, shocking, abrupt, perfectly queued, impressed the hell out of us, I am honored to make your acquaintance!"

Harcourt snickers, "I wanted to cheer when you popped Karr's beanie like a cork but...that would have been a faux pas."

Piper, in long face, "We had to be indignant with the rest."

Nicole is surprised, "You're welcome?"

Hartcourt shakes his head, "Oh, to have a whole army of you! I hear that someone may be getting that wish?" He motions for the woman in white to come forward while asking, "Eight, you gave everyone the run down on the Captain, yes?"

The woman in white is Captain Lyn of Security Services, yet before that she was on staff at the Geisha Hut on Nufa. In between those jobs she was on Hartcourt's interrogation table where he had been literally dissecting her into pieces. What surprised Hartcourt is that she gave him all the information he wanted without hesitation and never protested once while he was meticulously butchering her. She screamed up a storm, yes, but not once did she protest or ask for him to stop. It was while drawing her intestines a report came back on her DNA and it was revealed that she was an LNN clone—which meant she was originally an end product of their loathsome operation.

He immediately collected all her parts and had her evac'd to the best trauma center here in New Brisbane and thus started the long process of putting her back together. The army of psychologists that also worked her over all came back of the same opinion—she simply wanted to know first-hand how the others were going to die and thought of her treatment as satisfactory. What came out of this horror show was Hartcourt gaining the most loyal aide and confidant that money could not buy, and as his de facto apprentice he has sought to reward her at every opportunity—like now.

"So, thinking ahead, I refer to Captain Lyn, here, as Cap, and, well, every time I call out 'Oy Cap' I'll have the two of you, like human meerkats, turning to me and the humor of the moment would have a short shelf-life indeed..." He starts removing the diamond pip shoulder boards from Lyn's shirt and replaces them with crowns, "I believe it would be easier to make this change now so, Major Lyn it is!"

Lyn is surprised, "Sir?"

"Well, you've earned it, and I have been dragging my feet, so we should get this out of the way early I say!"

"I was not expecting this. Thank you, sir!"

"No, you earned this. This is my thanks to you!" He gives her a little hug and, "Now, before we land you on the fast-track to Lieutenant Colonel, we should get to lunch!"

All of them are dumbfounded by the Mexican spread, and as Piper starts to carve and chop the brisket into a bite sized carne asada substitute, Kiel asks, "Char Jar?"

Piper pipes up, "Oh, yes, best ever! I pen and grain feed my beasts a few weeks before I pop and prep. Have a taste, Shell!"

As they all sample the bbq'd bumble, rolling their eyes by how scrumptious it is, Hartcourt has turned on Mariachi music, "If ever a reason to crack a suds and eat ridiculous volumes of food then, ladies, Cinco de Mayo is it!" And while passing out bottles of cerveza, and orange Fanta to the clones, he smiles, "If one is going to appropriate an alien celebration then it's best to commandeer a fun one!"

Piper sighs as she chops away, "I miss the crew."

"Our green-thumb wizards, yes!" Then to the others, "Our Mexican crews, unfortunately, have always been on a temp visa. Truth be known they've kind of rubbed off on us. Collectively, they can be a bit backwards, yes, but they are an industrious, proud people and if I had my way I'd have 'em back—permanently."

Piper snorts, "Yea, try to get a garbo to work."

"White trash, indeed." He steps over to a large screen on the wall and snaps his fingers, and with that the music drops in volume and a video comes to life with a father pleading to the camera for everyone to help find their missing daughter, "Here is the blowback for shutting down the Geisha Huts. We need to bring an end to this too." He turns to Jessica and the rest, "During your stay the rules are simple. At all times we are direct and honest with each other here, so speak freely in front of Major Lyn and Piper. The second rule is to inform me of any necessary action, and hopefully before you take said action." He thumbs back at a picture of the little six year old girl and grits his teeth, "Right now there is a bidding war on for her and if we can collect this little joey before anything bad happens then we shall, but that would be a bonus and not our focus. If things change we will set someone along that path, but the bulk of our effort will be to catch the big fish, the narwhals. Be assured, this is a...privileged freaky."

He shuts off the video and the music comes back, "We've analyzed the sales of suspicious items like, mattresses, painting tarps, and an assortment of drugs and surgical items that may lead back to key participants through their staff. We have it narrowed down to twenty-eight suspects. Our job is to get you four in close to confirm our suspicions as well as quietly extract information on other potential players. Especially those coordinating these activities."

Piper adds, "We really appreciate your help, ladies."

"This afternoon and through tomorrow we will be reviewing their dossiers so that you'll be up to speed on our quarry, but for now I would like a moment alone with each of you, one on one." He looks to Nicole and, "Do I have your permission?"

Nicole nods, "I don't see why not?"

"Thank you, Marshal Burke." Hartcourt turns directly towards Jessica with a smile, "Let's start with you, shall we?"

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Hartcourt's home office moves from room to room and all according to his current mood. Most of the rooms in the mansion have been configured to accept his desk, chairs and conference table with ease. Wherever his whims may take him and at the drop of a hat. This month it's been the fern room under the crystal geodesic dome on the top deck. The newest one with the translucent seams where the triangular plates touch and, like all the glass in the house, carbon printed and impenetrable except by the heaviest mil-grade weapons. This dome offers a spectacular view of the sky and Chernobyl.

"Cutting to the chase, now that you've been exposed, our intel can see that your fingers have been stirring a...lot of pots." Hartcourt sits in one of the three side chairs in front of his desk, and, "Tell me, with so much...busy going on, how are you holding up?"

Gazing at Chernobyl, Jessica is captivated by the glowing light crescent forming along its left side, "How about we cut to the crash, okay? Shit you really want to know."

"Pray-say, what is it I want to know?"

"You want to know what we know about you."

"What creature is not curious by their own reflection?"

Jessica turns and looks at him, and knowing it's better to be direct she points to herself, "*Verum videns*."

"Truth seer?"

"Maria came up with that one." She plops herself down in the seat next to him, "Eight and I, we function as human polygraphs. It's that simple." Jessica leans towards him a bit, "The problem is, people are full of shit and Maria needs to get to the bottom of things. She needs the truth and that's what Eight and I do. If someone is feeding the Marshal a line of bullshit, which is all the time, then they are also thinking of the truth, with the intent not to reveal it, which is every time. We can read any and all surface and underlining thoughts with little effort and without the subject knowing. During her conversations we identify the lies and convey the actual truth to her. The kewl thing is that we can do this for her in real time."

"So, you do read minds."

"Oh yea, you bet! Like an open book."

"That makes you and Fifty-Two potentially dangerous?"

Jessica sits back and shrugs, "Not really. We're forced to not dig because if we do—those things will become part of your conscious thought so, if we're rooting around in there you'll know it! You'll also know what it is we dug up!"

Hartcourt realizes that, "It would then lose its value."

"Exactly! The subject not knowing, staying off that radar is imperative. People with jumbled and chaotic minds we can run roughshod over with impunity, but people like you, oh hell no!"

He wonders, "How deep of a dive did you make?"

Jessica looks at him and realizes that there is no skirting around the truth, "Honestly? I got stuck in the play pool. People like you who are focused and disciplined are impossible to dick with."

"Or, nearly impossible?"

"No, I say purdy much impossible-impossible, if we're lookin' to keep quiet. Sure, I could go in and date rape your cerebral cortex like there's no tomorrow but that will only make a mess of things and you'd never be the same again—and we like you the way you are!" Hartcourt gives a surprised look, so Jessica says, "Which is truthful."

He is taken aback, "Come again?"

"You, you are a master of deception and by utilizing the truth itself. In your hands it's a weapon, a whip, battering ram, or noose." She shakes her head, "You never feed anyone bullshit, only the truth. You can spin it to do your bidding and, just like my Maria, people who know this fear you." Jessica laughs, "You two are like scary alike."

If you didn't know Hartcourt you'd think that his lips being pursed ever so slightly, like now, meant he was angry, but the little secret is that he is utterly pleased with himself—and angry with himself because he is pleased, so Jessica finishes with, "Not to sing your praises, Box, but...I'm not gonna lie to you."

Hartcourt snorts, "You never did answer my question."

Jessica points out, "The one you didn't ask."

He had to think, "True enough."

Jessica breaths deep and, "Okay, little avocado pickin' garbo from the Chums works his way up to nuevo-Brisber, then Ivy League! Oxford, and Harvard where you met Piper. Why MIT?"

"Oh, that, top notch department of statistics and number crunchers wonderland. It is awe inspiring how one can manipulate a mole hill of...lies into mountainous truths."

She huffs an unintelligible laugh, "They say you married your way into the stumps but the fact is you earned your way. Every step of it. Her family threw up endless roadblocks where you and...Piper." Jessica looks at him and quietly realizes, "Wow, partners in crime!"

With his face scowling slightly, "What did you see, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing really, but I can add." Jessica almost smiles as the penumbra, the light from Zmeu peeking around Chernobyl, starts to flood the dome, "Box, I think your secrets are safe with me."

Hartcourt shrugs, "When one expects a monster—"

Jessica finishes it with, "Best not disappoint."

After a silence he looks to Jessica, "I know Cloé's father is on your mind. Admittedly, letting Ndosa retire is like casting to protect my rook, yes. His analysis is always spot on and his projections, especially the footnotes, tend to be prophetic and...that makes our more fearful strategists want to put the breaks to our advances. There are those in corporate who are calling to 'muffle' those voices and, well, you know how that snowball rolls. I would like to see Ndosa and Siusan enjoy the fruits of their labors...for the long term."

"Thank you."

Hartcourt then shares, "Two things. First, your brother. They are watching him now, so allow nothing to be traced back to him."

"He's an innocent."

"Everything points to your 'Alter of Chains' being a subroutine to your Delphi system. They want...assurances."

She nods, "Fair enough."

"This is for your grandfather." He hesitates, not wanting to say anything but presses on, "Tell Bob that if he and Michal show up to 32-Tau without your mother then Tillsdale and Lebedev will know something is up. I don't see a work around."

Jessica gives a grim smile, "We know."

"I was afraid it may come to that." Hartcourt pats Jessica on the shoulder and, "Give him my warm regards."

01000111-01110010-01111001-01101100-01100001

In the Hyades, on the Corporate side of the fence, sitting in for Nigel Kiel as the acting chairman for the Steel Chain Cooperative is his decades long aide-de-camp, Madeleine Forsyth. What the SCC and the Family Kiel have been dreading over twenty-some very long years finally came to pass. Michelle Kiel has surfaced at last.

Spending all day Monday, with Nigel and Madeleine, Michelle made it abundantly clear that she wants Madeleine to continue to represent her and her daughter going forward. Madeleine was shocked to learn that the reason Michelle's great-grandfather refused to sign over inheritance to another of his lineage was that these two continued to stay in touch with each other via a pair of fictional social media accounts right under everyone's prying eyes.

Their special secret-squirrel fun thing together when lil' Shelly was a kid has served them both when big Michelle went missing.

Nigel was also impressed by Michelle's foresight in adopting Jessica Burke into the family. Legally binding inheritance from her and her daughter now goes to Jessica, then her bother, Seth, their mother, Nicole and barring that their father, Jacob Graves. Then if something were to happen to him it would go to their half-sister, Diego and finally ending up with her mother, Jessica's step-mom, Maria Ramirez.

And with that, Nigel and Michelle had a great laugh because when the rest of the Family Kiel hears the full extent of this new chain of inheritance they will find no amusement, have no cause of action with standing, and no possible wet-work option around it.

Monday was also a day of learning for Michelle because Nigel had a lot to share. By revelation, when it comes to business, Nigel has proven himself to be a predatory bastard. He knows a good war when he sees one and has personally financed the last two against the Annex. At this point the debt liability is so high that winning or losing is of no consequence. Outwardly he is in total support of a quick and decisive victory over the Annex, sure, but secretly to Michelle, and with Madeleine fully on board, he really wants the Co-op to get their asses kicked because there is just so much more wealth to be had when those owing to you lose.

Which is all his peers...and they need this win bad.

Currently, it's Tuesday morning at the corporate towers of the Steel Chain Cooperative. Michelle and Jessica are here to introduce themselves to the dozens of board members who are there to meet their soon to be future, yet non-acting chairman, and breathe a sigh of relief already knowing their Madeleine will continue at the helm.

Instead of BDUs and t-shirts, standard SA duds, out in public Nicole and her clone minions sport a more fashionable mode of dress. Wearing colorful multi-layer, high-end Brisber contemporary cuts, which serves well for out-on-the-town, clashes with what is considered acceptable corporate-casual. Everywhere you see is a rainbow shade of business gray but what distinguishes the Stumpies from the rest is that the 'employees' try to squeeze in splash of style and personality by way of their shirts, ties, jewelry and scarfs.

The thing that has caught their eye is that, like Piper, all the women from the stumps do not dye their hair. The more youthful and in shape a woman from the stumps, with naturally gray hair, the more desirable they are around these parts. If some young stud is looking for the hottest G-MILF cougars in the universe then look no further.

Emerging from this sea of monochrome steps Jessica Burke in a form fitting, jaw-dropping, knee-high floral print dress. This is not only the wrong place for this dress, and the cleavage on display, but the wrong century. Jessica searched high and low for just this fashion statement and it's working like a baseball bat to their skulls.

Everyone there can feel the worlds of attitude radiating from Jessica, which says 'vortex of zero fucks' and they now take back all the rotten things they have ever said about Michelle, including their prayers for her blood-line's abrupt termination.

If this 'thing' stands in line to inherit their world and livelihood then this is a thing they do not want.

Jessica saunters over to Nicole, Eight, Cap and Peanuts, "You guys were right about the pumps. Looks great but sucks ass to walk."

Nicole suggests, "We have the sandals out in the glider."

"Thanks, but I'll cope."

Eight asks the obvious, "You got 'em scared of you yet?"

Jessica deadpans with, "D'uh."

Cap looks out, "Opportunistic, ankle-biting fuckwits all."

Nicole smiles, "A bit harsh, ya think?"

Peanuts blinks, "It has clarity...an' don't forget, gutless!"

Nicole scolds them, "That may be but let's not be obvious."

"Okay, mom." Jessica turns to Eight, "How we doin', Eight?"

"We've already confirmed the six, so we're done here."

Cap adds, "This has been all too easy."

Eight observes, "Gotta hand it to Boxter. He really planned this to the tee, and worked out all the angles for us."

Jessica nods, "That's good to hear. Makes shit simple. Okay, I got one more stupid as hell meeting then I gotta go see Michelle's great-grand pappy. I get to lunch with the Mountain Troll himself."

Nicole nods with a smile, "Okay, we'll go get a bite and come back and see if we can flush some out with Peanuts and Eight?"

Peanuts nods, "Yea, I be bait on da hook!"

Just then they hear Madeleine Forsyth clear her throat, "Hello! Piper was right, this is a ginger parade!"

If there ever was a cougar that could compete with Nicole, it would be Madeleine. In her plain-Jane bone-white dress, it actually accentuates all the right curves and for a Stumpy this is risqué. She wasn't on their list so they paid her no mind...that is, until now.

Turning to her, Jessica smiles and makes the introductions, "Madeleine! This is my birth mother, Nicole, and my cousins Elsa, Charlie, and little Maddie."

Madeleine is enthralled, "You are all so, as they say in the city, smokin'!" She leans down and hugs Peanuts and takes her by the hand, "Maddie, is that for Madeleine?"

Peanuts smiles, "Yes mum!"

Petting her forearm, Madeleine assures her, "You are going to be such a beauty like your sisters, cousin and aunt!"

"Wha?" Peanuts huffs and nods towards the others, "You mean these bags of ugly? I should hope not!"

Madeleine laughs, "You are very much like your Jessie!" She looks up and, "I would love to get to know you all. I may be absent from Brillig on Wednesday, but how about Friday lunch, maybe?" Then to Jessica, "See you inside, love!"

They watch Madeleine walk away, and it's when she steps into the conference room, out of sight—they all start to breathe again.

Noticing this behavior, Nicole asks, "What's going on?"

Trying to hide how creeped out she is, Peanuts looks like she's about to hurl when she says, "She was stroking...my arm."

Eight slowly turns to the others, "They mount the arms."

Nicole asks, "Mount the arms? What?"

Cap says to her, "To a strap on."

Nicole mouths the word 'mount' and, "Oh, my God!"

"I want to kill her..." Says Peanuts, quietly, then with Eight, Cap and the whole collective joining in, "...slow."

Jessica thinks, "Now I know why we have the fifth wheel!" She looks to Cap and asks, "You're connected, right?"

Cap nods, "Yup! And, she's bidding on that little girl!"

Jessica breathes, "The rest of us have things we cannot pull away from so this is in your court. You need to track her every move. Dog her every step. Make sure she wins that bid."

"Cakewalk, Jess! That murderin' bitch is mine."

Jessica to Nicole, "Cap is going to need the Major on point."

Nicole senses, "I think Box will be agreeable."

"Her name is, Isabelle." About to cry, Jessica transitions into an iceberg with, "The only opportunity you and Major Lyn will have to intercept Isabelle is at the point of delivery. You got this?"

Cap snarls, "You're God damned right, I got this."

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In the Hyades, on the political side of the fence, you have the standard three branches, yes, but it's in the legislative branch where things have gone topsy-turvy. You have two Parliamentary bodies, the House of Representatives and the House of States, but those are antecedent to the lowly Corporations Commission—which was a joint effort by the two legislatures to control the businesses and resource cooperatives operating in the Hyades, and not the other way around.

It's funny how things don't turn out as planned.

People have lately taken to calling it the House of Cul-de-Sac. Other names that have been bantered around are House of Gridlock, House of Cozenwealth, and of late came the House of RICO. Not that those statues would have any power outside the United States, but to the astute proletariat it has a nice ring to it!

Anyway, if the Chancellor can keep an issue quietly in cabinet, within the purview of the administrative function of their respective offices, and not stupidly draw the rapt attention of the Corporations Commission, then shit will get done.

Running toe-stepping interference is via the Privy Council.

There are two Privy Councils in government, that is you have a Privy Council in the form of the cabinet and advisors, and you have the Privy Council in the form of an office holder voted on between the legislative bodies as a formality to rubber-stamp the submission made by the Corporations Commission. The position was supposed to serve the members of the Commission by gaining a voice in the executive branch but, as it turned out, Boxter Hartcourt serves the greater good.

And, now knowing Box, they don't dare unseat him...

It's Mimisday, late-afternoon, and over the last two days Eight has been shadowing Hartcourt—and has absolutely loved every minute of it. Most people in government think of him as the Commission lackey but those at the highest levels know the truth. Also, none of them, not even those on the very tip-top have been briefed on the

facts surrounding Fifty-Two and Scarab so they have no idea if they should be *on garde* or not. Introducing Eight as, Elsa, his latest toady assistant, and a strikingly anime-beautiful toad at that, many have wondered where the loveable Captain Lyn has gone off too but no one thought to ask because they prefer the eye-candy so why jinx it?

Nobody will realize until it's too late how dangerous this little young and drooling-hot toady was to have around in her stead.

Over the last two days the thoughts of every person, man or woman, entering the offices of the Chancellor has betrayed them. Capital crimes and deceptions abound, and notes have been made of all for Hartcourt to follow up on as it suits him, leverage usually being the first option, but of the nine they were there to confirm—another twenty entrapped themselves, and when the Honey Badgers dig and collect data in evidence then it's onto the "B-List" they'll go.

As of fifteen-hundred hours, eighteen have made it to B.

In the huge expanse of the outer offices to the Chancellor, Jessica is stepping up to Nicole and Peanuts in much less provocative clothing, and as she approaches, Nicole motions her to stay with Peanuts as she steps away, "Just be a sec!"

From a distance they watch the conference room as they hear yelling behind the door, with Jessica asking Peanuts through their standard mind-link, <"So, how's it goin'?">

Peanuts smiles, <"Eight has been texting Colonel Britt like a fiend, and it's been an avalanche of, what the fuck? I mean I can't believe the shit some of these people have been up too!">

Jessica's eyebrows rise in surprise, <"Box said that corporate was a 'symphony of discord' and for government?">

Peanuts nods, <"I know, a 'cacophony of wretchedness' but I have to say it's more like a, cavalcade of motherfuckers.">

Suddenly, the conference room doors fly open and Chancellor Tillsdale stomps out while yelling back, "I'm taking a piss! If someone doesn't have a fix by the time I get back then the bloody Push-Starts can starve for fuckall I care!"

As Tillsdale vanishes around the corner the Indian Community delegation rush into the vast waste of space and go the other way. With a number of people also filing out, Eight, in her 'whoa-gray' corporate suit steps up and is about to bust a gut.

Jessica asks verbally, "So, care to fill us in?"

Eight blurts out, "Onions!"

"Hu?"

"Fricken' onions! I text'd your mom 'bout it."

Hartcourt has slithered up behind her, "So, Eight, love, are you finding the process of government...engaging?"

Eight is fighting back the laughter, "Sir, if this issue wasn't so absurd...hell, this is a laugh riot!"

Hartcourt nods in agreement, "Real world realpolitik can be challenging...at times." He clues in Jessica and Peanuts, "See, it's the embargo. Pakistan and China, who ignore it, their crops have had a down turn so we turned to Mexico who...tried to buy from the U.S. and they tend to be nosey sods, and well, you guessed, embargo!"

Eight asks, "Okay, I gotta know, fourteen-hundred tons or four-thousand tons? I mean that is a huge difference!"

"Oh! I have ten-million little Indians in-country so, that's the difference between not-rioting Hindi's and happy Hindi's! I honestly would go as far as to...kowtow to see all the Hindi's happy." He sighs, "The arti-onions just don't have that...pop they're accustomed too."

Jessica wonders, "You aren't serious?"

"You're getting all the Sikhs. I'll trade you!" He then nods, "I'm putting up a greenhouse to see if we can produce a local varietal that would satisfy their...discerning palate and, well, considering the overwhelming demand I'd venture to guess it might be profitable?"

Peanuts huffs, "That would be a lot of cheddar."

"At a five-percent margin, still, yes." They all give him a look so he shakes his head, "Mustn't be greedy."

Nicole hands Hartcourt her PBDi after having stepped up and says to him, "Here, it's for you." He looks at her funny so she prods him along, "You put it up to your ear and talk. Trust me."

Hovering the thing over his ear he says, "Hello?"

From it they hear Maria's voice, "Box! How the hell are ya!"

He looks up and, "How quaint!"

As Hartcourt steps away Nicole asks, "Any word from Cap?"

Jessica nods and transmits mentally, "<"Forsyth won the bid. Delivery is twelve-thirty at the 'normal place' which I'm not going to share with you guys yet. Cap had to extract that from the caller. She was able to tie into his head and now she's uncovering a whole network working out of Ipswich. Wherever that is?">

They all breathe a sigh of relief, with Nicole asking verbally, "So, where's Cap?"

Jessica grits her teeth and, <"Cap and the Major have gone rogue with a company from the Honey Badgers. She'll contact us tonight but...she wants Forsyth for herself.">

"The fuck!" Nicole blurts out, with Jessica giving her a look. Nicole purses her lips tight and, <"I'm NOT authorizing this!">

<"That's good 'cause they're not asking! Hartcourt got a text from the Major and his inclination is to put the breaks to the whole thing, but if any of us interfere or stampede Forsyth's location then we lose, Isabelle."> With Nicole's nostrils flaring out, Jessica tries to calm her, <"Chill, mother. We'll talk to Cap tonight with Hartcourt.">

Taking the cue, Nicole breathes deep, and as she starts to calm down, Peanuts jokingly prods Eight while talking like Hartcourt, "Well, my little butter-up cup, we just may get our wish yet!"

Nicole looks at Peanuts and as she starts to bear her teeth Hartcourt shows up and hands Nicole her PBDi device with a brisk, "Thank you, Marshal!" He clasps his hands and, "So, with us all here, I heard from the Major and we'll discuss their situation tonight."

Nicole asks, "You gonna accept Ramirez' offer?"

Just then Nicole gets a text from her, *Have fun with Tilly!*

He smiles, "I'll be taking up the Marshal's generous offer to help us out with our Hindi situation but, to grease the wheels she suggested, and I agree, that...you present it to Tillsdale personally."

Nicole gives a suspicious eye, "Why me?"

"Well, he's afraid of me, yes, but he is also afraid of you too! If I take it to him he will think of it as a set up and delay the shipments but if you present the offer from Marshal Ramirez then...he will be forced to accept with open arms and...happy Hindis!"

"Just like that."

Harcourt gestures to Tillsdale's office, "I beg of you, breach the fortress of solitude. Your sudden appearance, just by walking in, even sans the head-choppy blade, should still put him off balance."

Nicole steels herself, and before she heads to the Chancellor's office, Eight asks Hartcourt, "We import 20 tons a week. How?"

"Oh, that! A rampaging sauropod on Second Hand, destroys your v-farming ops to snack on your crops. The U.S. President and their State Department won't challenge the Marshal. The transports will touch-and-go in New Sydney and push on for here!"

Jessica then telepaths to him, <"So, what about Cap?"> He looks at her, realizing that she can talk to him like Eight without the N2 interface, <"I know when and where the delivery is to Forsyth.">

Hartcourt looks around and takes a shot at thinking his words, <"So, you do! The Major has yet to share that tidbit."> He leans in, "Let's talk quietly." They pull in and he continues, "I must admit that I am guilty of having allowed my people so much...leeway in taking the initiative. I won't change my policies but this is one of those moments where it can prove to be a...potential problem? Cap is determined to be a hands-on inquisitor for a day...or two."

Nicole asks, "Then what do we do? We gotta stop 'em!"

"I'm inclined to agree...and pull their plug but let's not act, as you might say, knee-jerk? We have invested a tremendous amount of time and effort in our little enterprise here. We have to ask ourselves what the blow back would be if we...choose rashly? We simply cannot go charging in. I fear Cap and the Major have us over a barrel."

"I know Cap. I cannot authorize this."

"Nor can I approve, and nor would the Marshal if she were here but, consider this...at what age is one granted consent to being raped, bludgeoned and murdered? I don't know of one by statute?" He nods at Nicole, "Hubby bubbly bumps, remember? Wasn't that the painfully humiliating end to your tormentors you dreamed up when you were, what, six? At what age is someone allowed to return the favor? You definitely had ideas then." He shrugs, "The issue here is one of consent. Cheating these young...women from 'returning the favor' all because they're, tell me, nine weeks short of *the majority* and making that choice for themselves? Then again, in case law, ascension for clones is anchored to the date of viability so do the math? Either way, thwart their claim to Forsyth and we...earn their resentment."

Nicole looks at Eight and Peanuts who both say, "She's ours."

Struggling with this, Nicole pleads, "I can't make that choice."

Again they speak as one, "We're not giving you that choice."

Hartcourt points out, "I believe they're determined to see this through but, for appearances, there is always room for compromise."

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The Brillig is a party held on each Wednesday after high-moon for the upper crust Corporate Stumpies. The narwhal-elite used to fight over hosting the damned thing but nowadays it's a budgetary excess that few can take on lightly. Only a handful of participants, like Hartcourt, can afford the elaborate parties from before the war so, just like last time, they've all agreed to tone down the pomp and excess for the duration because most everyone in the Stumps is feeling the pain. With the mining operations between here and the Pleiades just starting

to see a profit, the money is beginning to trickle back in—and that has pulled many back from the brink of disaster.

Gone is the live band and ice carvings and huge waiting staff comprised of actual human laborers. Now it's piped music, the cheese mountain, chocolate fountain, and the self-serve food bar.

Hartcourt's office has been moved to the new desert alcove by the central ballroom, attached to the atrium, and while flanked by Piper and a Colonel Britt, of the Honey Badgers, he looks out over the five-hundred attending the party and goes, "So, that's everybody. Ladies, you have completed the task and uncovered much...more than we thought possible. I do not believe that a simple 'thank you' is enough but that's...all I have to offer."

Piper adds, "We are indebted to you."

"We should enjoy the party!" He turns, "Having fun so far?"

Jessica speaks up, "Ya, surprisingly it's a blast but, I have never been undressed in the minds of so many people at one time."

With the Eight and Peanuts nodding in agreement, Hartcourt laughs, "Oh, that, well, look how stunning you all are in those gowns and gingers are...shamelessly fetishized over." He turns to the Colonel with, "I think we have our lists complete, Colonel?"

Britt nods, "Yes sir. On the A-List we have thirty, including Forsyth and her wife, Kiara. On the B-List we have fifty-three and on the C-List, excluding the nineteen Ipswich targets, we have the one."

"Ah, yes, Shep...ol' Shep." He looks to the girls and makes a shooting motion with his hand, "C-List is the, *breeze-block surprise*."

Britt asks, "Sir, isn't Shepard Wanganui to stay on the C-List? All his victims were catch and release, and he didn't kill anyone."

"Yes, but in four decades he wouldn't...stop. *À ma douleur*, move him to the A-List. He gets the Full Monty." Hartcourt then asks, "You still of the opinion that the Major has lost her edge?"

"Sir, the shrinks say she's overstimulated from the work."

"No, Colonel. Lyn's problem is that she's satiated. Her blood thirst has been...quenched. I ask only to make sure your people will be ready to pick up the slack? Since the Major will be assisting Cap I want them supervised. EVA-Spray, and all dangerous power tools, torches and chemicals are to be handled by the Major or your people."

"Yes sir."

"Because of Forsyth's calendar we have a need to push this up to Thursday. Let's meet at the airfield at one-hundred hours. I'll have coffee and pastry provided for our people." He then points to the

Colonel, "And, since you're here, I have a regiment that will need leadership. Ground action is coming up and I would like to offer it to you. You are welcome to stay, you've done a bang-up job, but the regiment slot comes with a promotion. No need to answer yet."

"Sir, if you don't mind, I'll stick with the Honey Badgers."

"Oh...if you must." Piper hands Britt the shoulder boards of a Brigadier General, "The badgers are now their own detachment. We're setting up a satellite shop in Langley, that's in Virginia. It's now a joint effort but, your people will spearhead as the...enforcers."

Britt is surprised, "Thank you, Mr Hartcourt!"

"See you Thursday, sunrise...General and, if you don't mind, would you personally oversee the work on Shep?"

Britt couldn't resist, "By your command, Dark Lord."

Hartcourt also could not resist, "Goooooooood."

Everyone, even Piper, rolls their eyes and try not to crack up.

With General Britt gone, Hartcourt, in deep thought, wonders, "Have you ladies sampled the food from the tray on the left?"

Nicole asks, "The one labeled, *Moi à Merde?*"

Jessica, Eight and Peanuts all chuckle at that so Hartcourt asks them, "*Parle Français?* None of the Stumpies do."

Peanuts nods, "*Oui.*"

"A beautiful language. It's just that talking in French is like trying to speak with a mouth full of...toes. Anyway, Piper and I were in the Bayou and, always peckish, we stopped at this little Cajun hovel, so close to the swamp the crocs would come out and snap at your goolies, and on the menu was this something called...gick.

Piper laughs, "We had to try it!"

"It was calling to us! Beef, poultry, sausage, with shrimp, diced tomato, Cajun seasoning and oodles of cheese. We did swap out the, ah, macaroni for a petit penne but, you get the idea. Narhwal's can't seem to get enough of it...gick. Tart it up and if it looks right they think of it as ambrosia." He motions to Piper, "Sweet'art."

Piper nods, "Well, ladies, here's tha top paddock shite for ya. From the Forsyth financials we find these pohmmy-rats paying for their Geisha fix through three different children's charities. We can now connect the dots from the distribution data—to the donations and the customers themselves. Our Badgers are going to be busy."

Hartcourt reflects, "They'll be required to be more...discreet off-world but, I like to think of us as doing...the Lord's work."

Eight speaks out, "They deserve what they're getting."

"Retribution." Hartcourt nods and, "Have you ever been close to a planetary magnetic pole? If you have a compass, the closer you get to magnetic north the more wobbly the needle—not knowing where to point, and when you are right over it, it spins crazily. The identical is true in the south, but...point being, as an analogy, society follows suit in lockstep! The closer you get to the tippy-top, or the lowliest rungs, the more drunkedly feckless then...truly malfunctioning one's trusted moral compass." He sighs, "We should get to the party."

Nicole asks, "Boxter, now that Madeleine and Kiara have been picked up, and Isabelle is safe, how long is this gonna take?"

His head rocks back and forth, thinking, "They've probably started the ostomy prep. During that they load the trauma microbots and shock block. That's twelve hours. They'll force them to sleep and wake 'em up all strapped in with a vein full of glucose, torpedo and a vodka drip. It's then, well...the party barge sets sail."

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When Madeleine Forsyth and her fembot of a wife, Kiara, first became Geisha connoisseurs they simply bagged and suffocated the children when they were done with them right in their bedroom. The last few years with having to bid on uncooperative garbo-curs they stepped up their game and converted a service room by their garage into a kiddie bondage, molestation and kill chamber.

And for the Honey Badgers how convenient was that!

All day Muldjeday, in that very room, they worked Kiara over while she was dangling from the ceiling. Madeleine, strapped tight to an EMT gurney, watched as the love of her life is horribly tortured, repeatedly raped, flayed and chain-sawed into pieces. This all-day affair wasn't for the benefit of Kiara, she did murder children, yes, but was for the benefit of Madeleine who pressured her into it.

Madeleine, fatigued from all her own wailing and crying, was given a shot to sleep so Cap and Lyn could also refresh and reboot.

It's now very early Wagyl day morning and Lyn is setting up for today's client. While Cap wheels Madeleine in on a surgical table, strapped down in stirrups and head bolted in a stationary halo, Lyn hangs what's left of Kiara up with ice tong hooks in the ears.

Major Lyn is athletic and thin and in an ultra-tight waterproof green-screen suit with anchor points marked by little white dots. It's obvious they intend to superimpose polygons and skin over it but with Cap, however, she's in this high-tech sprayed on body suit.

With a working persona that goes by the name, deCap, our Cap is shiny black from head to toe in what looks like in a professional cosplay cat-woman suit but without the cat accoutrements or textures of any kind. Her huge blue eyes and shockingly bright red lips, with everything else enveloped in black, leaves one guessing that Mr Popo must have had a little girl at one time. Okay, one with plump breasts and a sizeable dick but a girl just the same.

The *idée fixe* here is to give Cap the most original and vividly frightening look possible—and the Badgers nailed it.

All hair from Cap's body had to be removed so that the sprayed on suit could stick. Indestructible, the material was originally conceived of as an EVA space garment, but here it functions like a body condom for the work at hand. Less than a millimeter thick if you look real hard you can see the aerating channels and crosshatched carbon fiber under the glossy surface.

Except for the rape provided by Cap, which she's uniquely equipped for, Kiara was mostly worked over by Major Lyn. Cap spent most of her time hanging out with Madeleine, sharing the moment and giving blow by blow commentary but, for today, Cap will be attending to Madeleine herself.

Lyn is handing Cap a tab of torpedo, anti-nausea pills and a shot of vodka, "You up for this, Cap? We wake her and it's on."

Cap yawns, "Aaaah, yea. I'm good. Let's do this."

"Okay, your 'deCap' persona is demented as fuck, and I never would have guess it would have this much impact! I mean, wow!"

Cap huffs a short laugh, "That a good thing?"

"Wacky and snarky...who'duv thunk it'd be that morbidly psycho?" Lyn puts her hand up and, "Okay, let's review!"

With Lyn giving the hand signals, Cap says what they are, "Stop, slow, speed it up, and fuck it up!"

"Pace yourself." Lyn steps around the table and starts to give Madeleine the shot to bring her around, "Just like how you were stuffing Kiara yesterday. Slow and methodical and pick up your pace and build up the intensity gradually. You were perfect yesterday, and that applies to everything you'll be doing today. Pace yourself!"

As Madeleine starts to come around our Cap breaths deep and transitions into deCap by quietly saying, "Okay, deCap...let's rawk."

Now deCap, she smiles big while watching Madeleine open her eyes and collect her bearings. Madeleine quickly realizes that her head is bolted in and her body is cinched tight. Looking up she sees Kiara's

head and chest cavity hanging from the ceiling in tatters. With freshly applied cosmetics, Kiara's undamaged face actually looks alive and peacefully asleep—which makes it all the more terrible to see.

With Madeleine's crying sputtering into broken sobs, deCap says in comically-big slow words, "Mooooorning! Sleeeeeeep weeeell?"

Madeleine shrieks, "Just kill me!"

deCap pulls back, "Just? Just sounds so...meh! Naw, Maddie, I'm here to K-K-K-KIII-LLLL you! An' we got a lot of ground to cover!" She thumbs towards Lyn who is standing next to her, "Picollo, here thinks I should pace myself so how 'bout we start light?"

Madeleine cries out, "Please!"

With a rage, deCap gnashes her teeth in her face, "Alright, a consensus!" Switching gears again, and with the goofiest wide-eyed guffaw of a laugh, she holds up, "How 'bout we kick things off with Mr. Table Salt and, our bachelorette, the lovely Miss Dermatome!"

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It's been seven hours and perfectly paced. Cap, maintaining her character as deCap without a hiccup, has raised the bar on torture porn for a hungry public. That is, if anybody ever gets to see this.

Madeleine has been thoroughly and completely sliced and diced and torn limb from limb, and she would have been dead hours ago if it wasn't for the shock block and microbots keeping her blood pressure up and the silvery trauma maintenance compound tamping off the blood-loss. The torpedo and vodka mix spikes all sensation for a user, but pain intensity will increase with progressively higher levels of torpedo. At toxic levels the pain is so extreme that the medical community has referred to it as, Trigeminal Neuralgia Totum Corpus.

Which is their way of saying, hate to be you!

The idea is to push the subject over into, what the Major calls, the EEGad Crescendo—where the brain overloads in a total white out which it does not recover. Madeleine has been a tough cookie to crack and between the mind blowing agony, and deCap's zany behavior fraught with sardonic wit, they have chipped away at her psyche to the point where she is at the brink of no return. Abject horror has been their leverage here and deCap is the game changer.

The abdominal cavity, from the diaphragm to the pelvic floor, has been pretty much cleared out. During this process, deCap tried to mix and match parts with what was left from Kiara and it was here that Madeleine started to lose her mind. Loss of consciousness from

mental overload is infrequent but, to prolong her life, Lyn has been administering doses of adrenalin to keep those eyes open.

To Madeline's tearful moaning, deCap thrusts herself in and repeatedly slams and grinds her body into Madeleine, "Oh, my God! You are a fantastic lay! Has anybody ever told you that?" Surveying her terrible condition, "Can you just imagine what kind of hot-mamma you'd be if you were whole?" deCap stops, thinks about this and points out, 'Oh yea, that's right! That was this morning!"

Looking down, and deCap goes, "Hey! I can see my dick! You gotta see this!" Yanking on the halo, which doesn't budge, deCap looks to Lyn and says, "Hum, I think I'm gonna need a hand!"

They suspiciously left one of Madeleine's arms intact for just this moment. Major Lyn whips a straight razor around the socket and in a flash the arm pulls away with a simple tug. To the howls of a wounded animal, deCap positions the arm under Madeleine and threads it through her pelvic floor. There is screaming at first—with shrieks that follow as the elbow passes through.

With the upper arm anchored tight in Madeleine's rectal canal, the freakishness of seeing her own forearm and hand popping out of her open abdomen is patently horrific-reciprocity, and it shows.

deCap waves the arm with the hand flopping while saying in a squeaky voice, "Hello!" She shakes the hand while saying in a gruff voice, "Pleased to meet ya!" deCap, manipulating the hand like a puppet, now makes the hand look around and again in the squeaky voice, "Well, isn't this a fine mess!"

The hand, acting surprised by Madeleine's untouched breasts, turns back to deCap with the squeaky voice, "Oh, may I? Those are some nice breasteses! Can I play with 'em! Pweeeze!"

deCap rolls her eyes, looks side to side, then in her normal voice, "Okay, you have my permission and, thank you for asking!"

As the dead hand flops and strokes back and forth over Madeleine's breasts, and through her tearful sobs, deCap partially covers her lip movement with her free hand while the little squeaky voice says, "My, these are fantastic! You should get in on this!"

deCap laments, "It's hard to find polite little ones anymore. Etiquette has gone—right out the window!" She looks in Madeleine's eyes and says with a tired sigh, "I think we're all gonna need a cigarette after this." Looking down, "Damn, those are nice tits!"

Madeleine, exhausted, pleads, "Nooooo!"

Still looking down deCap shifts gears, perks up and tolls with delight, "Hey, look! Kidneys!"

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In the family wing at Hartcourt's mansion, Eight and Peanuts have their feet up in soft recliners while in a deep telepathic bond in support of Cap while she works Madeleine over. Sitting across from them is Jessica, monitoring their progress, and standing by her as an observer is Hartcourt with his hand on Jessie's shoulder.

Jessica has linked herself to his mind so he can also witness 'deCap' at work, and in that she has bounced him back and forth from between Cap, Madeleine and Major Lyn's point of view.

Jessica is fully aware that they have plans with what they are recording here, and Cap is now in on it. With Lyn in a green-screen suit, and with all the N2 hi-resolution scanners and cameras placed everywhere, this says *high production values* so something is clearly afoot. Hartcourt already had the evidence he needed to go after those first twenty-eight, and yes, saving Isabelle and catching Forsyth, her wife and the others was clearly an unexpected bonus, and yea they could have stomped everyone's guts out to get to the Ipswich crews, but the bottom line is they didn't need Jessica or the clones in the first place. Jessica is aware that Hartcourt has experienced immense joy in having them here, and so has Piper, but what's going on now is the real reason for this deception, and what surprises Jessica is that she won't dig for an answer because...she'd rather be surprised.

Suddenly, its face-palm time for the three. Hartcourt, on the other hand, curls his lips in an attempt to suppress his amusement.

His closed-eyed trance is broken with Piper touching him on the arm, "Boxxy, the family is here in the atrium."

Hartcourt taps Jessica's shoulder, "Love, I need to decouple?" Now disconnected, he looks to Piper, "And our little sprig?"

"They're pulling up with her now." Piper, noticing both Eight and Peanuts squirming in their recliners, and Jessica just shaking her head, ventures to ask, "Do tell, anything interesting to share?"

"deCap, has proven to be...imaginative?" He pulls Piper aside and says, while making the hand gestures, "You know that silent film chap with the dancing dodgers on forks? Cap has her kidneys on retractors and...Maddie is not holding up to the visuals well."

Piper is embarrassed to admit, "Smashingly brilliant!"

"Dare say!" He motions her on, "Let's attend to this."

In the atrium they are faced with the heartwarming sight of the little girl, Isabelle, as she shrieks and throws herself into her

parents arms. As the three cry with relief, Boxter is moved by the moment, but Piper knows what this look in him really means. His brow pitches down and his lips purse ever so slightly, and if one is a shrewd observer they could see the cyclone of hate that rages inside him breach his stony exterior—and like that it's gone.

Too many have slipped through their fingers. Too many of the entitled, those thinking they're above it all, getting away with wickedness all because...they can. And who's to stop them? Well, for the first time, Hartcourt has a whole battalion of likeminded people, as well as intergovernmental cooperation, and how awesome is that?

"To fight evil one is required to surpass it." Hartcourt says quietly, then turns to Piper and gives her the sweetest little peck on the lips, "I think we have our tools now."

With a gleam in her eyes, Piper gives him a coquettish smile, "My love, it's been a long time coming!"

They step up and Hartcourt says, "Well now, a happy ending."

The father hops up and shakes his hand, "I want to thank you, Mr. Hartcourt, Sir! I am in your service. My life is yours."

Harcourt waggles his head, "Sounds like music to my ears." With Piper giving him that look, he smiles, "Buuut, let's hope it does not come to that. Mr Smyth, you were in the CDF for a spell?"

"Twenty years, Sir. I made Staff Sergeant."

"Yes, vertical movement in the Defense Force is...difficult. Plateau and they push you out so...if you're looking for a job?"

Smyth notices Nicole in her Annex BDUs behind Piper, and as he stares at her, "Sir, I can fight. I'll kill spooky for ya."

"Let's not be too hasty, Mr Smyth." He smiles back at Nicole, "It was a cooperative effort! We have the people who did this but there's more. The job I have in mind for you will be with the crew specific to this work but, for now, I need you and the missus to go back and keep up the...charade. Little Isabelle needs to stay out of sight for a couple of days so we can collect...all the monsters."

"Just say the word, Mr Hartcourt. I am indebted to you."

"Oh no, Mr. Smyth...little Isabelle is saddled with that debt."

Harcourt kneels in front of Isabelle, "I'm your Uncle Boxter. Do you wish us to get all the monsters?" She nods, yes, "Excellent, so for the next couple of days you will stick like glue to your Antie Piper, here. Don't leave her side. Now, to pay us back you need to do these simple things: always tell the truth, at all times do the right thing, and get good grades so you can go to college!" He looks at her parents,

"Ivy League is a possibility, but let her...discover herself. Shall we?"

Isabelle squeaks with a shy little, "Yesssir."

He smiles and wags a finger at her, "Its Uncle Boxter! Let's run along and get some noms in you!" As Piper takes her by the hand and leads her towards the family wing, he stands and turns to the parents, "Okay, let's put those sad faces back on! When this is over we'll move your family to the...West Banes. Great shopping and topper-than-notch schools! It goes without saying, in this line of work, we have the best life insurance to be had." He wonders, "By chance, Sergeant Smyth, do you know the Ipswich area?"

With a knowing smile, "Like the back of my hand, sir."

"Bonkers! We have a project starting there week after next!"

With the parents gone, Boxter and Nicole quietly slither back in behind Jessica who asks, "Okay, Box, what's a snappin' yabby?"

It's time for Hartcourt to assume face-palm position, then say, "Well, this does not...bode well for Madeleine by a long shot."

Nicole asks, "They're that bad?"

"Remember the tasty little lobster tails we had last Sunday? 83-T Cherax Mandiblus. Their mouth has an octo-shearing assembly. 'Muricans call them Chawdads, but...these make Earthly crayfish seem like cuddly plush by comparison." He thinks for a moment, "Come to think of it, if they chew through the exposed diaphragm it's over."

Jessica notes, "They've packed a kilo of trauma compound over it. They're starting to dip her in now. Real slow."

"For a finishing move this is going to linger." He thinks for a second, "By the way, did Mr. Hand have an exit performance while approaching the, I assume, barrel of yabby's?"

Jessica raises her hand and flails it around, "Oh no! Not this! Oh, the humanity! Noooooo! (she huffs) You get the idea."

Nicole shakes her head in wonderment, "I gotta hand it to ya. This takes capital punishment beyond medieval mode setting."

"Well, if we were going for capital punishment then I would tend agree with you." Hartcourt notices Nicole's confused look so he elaborates, "Madame, killing is a convenience, conflict resolution even, not...punishment. For effect, punishment requires the four-R's. That being reflection, realization, regret and repentance."

"Then what are we doing here?"

"Prolonged retribution? Come to an untimely...gruesome end and, before sending their loved one's file to a hosting world, the estate

can excise the file to the last peaceful sleep cycle and...bad memories be gone! We, before they get their hands on it, copy that period and append the file, tinker with the time stamps, and when they, a subsidiary of mine, truncate what they think is the bad—the file ends up with the hosting service complete. No missing memories.”

“Shit serious! Can’t they sue?”

“Why, yes, but only in the jurisdiction of residence or demise, and here it will take seven years to reach judgement but to do so would require a review as to...the why. That’s public record.”

“They can pay to recompile.”

“On demand, yes, but Madeleine has paid for the Taj Mahal. Then again, no estate would part with any funds...knowing the why.”

Nicole realizes, “Then it’s buck up or opt out.”

Harcourt touches his nose with a smug grin.

Jessica adds, “I wouldn’t let them opt out.”

“Jess, it’s not our choice but, who knows what’ll happen in the real hereafter and...oh, to be a fly on that wall.”

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On the flight line here at the Jacoby’s Stump airfield, at the foot of Harcourt’s starship, stands Major Lyn and Cap, wrapped in a blanket and cold after having the EVA skin removed. Milling around them are over three-hundred Honey Badgers, sucking down coffee and donuts while waiting for the command to launch. Each one of them, man and woman, have managed to pay their respects to young Cap with a nod, a casual salute, or a reverent, “Thank you, Mum.”

To the Badgers, without exception, Cap is now an iconic hero.

Cap knows that her time as ‘deCap’ has come to an end, and that an A.I. will pick up the pace going forward. Madeleine and Kiara got what they deserved and Cap really wanted her hands on them, but she also resented the two for compelling her to make that choice—and that is the key, the A.I. discovers, as to what makes deCap special. The thing is that Cap hated the work but pushed on—and she took that bitterness out on the subjects at hand. The A.I. noticed that while working on Madeleine there was always those little delays and constant moments of doubt...yet a will to maintain course in spite of them.

Humor masked her revulsion to the work—and of herself.

Though Fifty-Two sports a collective awareness, each part has their own personality and desires and some of their little clique would

have relished this task. Knowing this, after the fact, Cap realizes that it was better that she did it. She is the most aggressive of them but, as tough as she is on the outside, right now she's on the verge of a breakdown because with idle hands the doubt is creeping in.

With the light from Zmeu starting to fill the sky in the west, Hartcourt's limo drops in and sets down a few meters from the ship. Eight and Peanuts leap out and reach Cap first, followed by Jessica and Nicole with Clint, Sheron and Michelle Kiel hanging back. Eight and Peanuts showing up to shower Cap with hugs and kisses helps her pull it together. General Britt quickly walks up, snaps a salute to them all and this is returned, and respectively in kind, by Nicole.

Handing out Honey Badger pins, Britt says, "Ladies, I wish we had more time but we have to shove off in a few. We really appreciate the help this last week. You have our sincerest gratitude."

Before they could respond, Britt steps to one side as Hartcourt approaches, "Well, our little...industrious strays have returned!"

Major Lyn speaks up, "My apologies, Sir."

He puts up a hand, "Major, no apologies for what you believe was right, but always accept the consequences, right or wrong."

Cap looks at Hartcourt, "Sir—"

He quickly reminds her, "It's Boxter my dear."

"This is my fault. It's all on me!"

"If I were looking to give you a complex then I would wholly agree but...the fact is the Major should have known better. Discipline must be maintained and examples...need to be made."

Cap pleads, "Boxter, it was me!"

"I assure you, Lyn maintains her rank and stays on track for Lieutenant-Colonel, but a penance must be exacted. I will be fair and kind." He gives her a hug, "Major Lyn will be fine!"

Cap is about to bawl, "I'm holding you to that."

"By the way, we scanned Forsyth's stock pond and confirmed, the final tally is ninety-eight dead from the cloning facilities and five little ones from the Chums. We could differentiate those by their chipsets when we pinged. So, just in case you had any...misgivings about your efforts, Piper and I thought you should know."

With Hartcourt making the goodbyes with Jessica and the rest, the information he just laid on Cap starts to sink in, and with a few deep breaths—all the doubts and self-hate simply washes away.

...Just like that.

With everyone heading up the ramp, Nicole hangs back to say, "Boxter, honestly, I came here last Sunday wanting to cut your fucking head off, on general principals, and now...all I want to do is to give you a big hug and a slobbery kiss! So, what'll it be, dude?"

"Oh! Well, choices...if the latter is preferred I'll opt for that!"

With a snort of a laugh, Nicole gives him a quick kiss, a big hug and heads up the ramp, and as the ship taxis away he turns to Major Lyn, "So, Major..." He brings his hands together and gives a small round of applause, "Well done."

"Thank you, Sir."

"You know, I'm glad it wasn't Eight."

"Why's that, Sir?"

"Eight would have...enjoyed this. Cap didn't."

"Neither did we, and that's why she worked out so well."

Jokingly, he snits, "Speak for yourself!" As Lyn chuckles at that Hartcourt asks, "So, what are our tech's settling on?"

"The tool is on the Doom-N2 engine."

"Everything has the Doom kernel. The framework is?"

Lyn shrugs, not wanting to say it, "The action part is from the 'Kim Possible, Access Ark Adventure' but the conditional-choice and admin components are...from 'Blue's Clues Ghost Hunt.'"

His shoulders sag in an almost face-palm because that last IP was built on the 'Hellraiser' VR-mod of the Doom-N2 game engine, "You do see the irony in this?"

"Yes, sir." Lyn tries to not burst out, laughing.

Harcourt says to Britt, "Well, me thinks we should scramble?"

With the order given the Badgers high-tail it to the waiting floaters and gliders, and as they pile in, Hartcourt turns to Britt and Lyn with, "The wickedness of the wicked shall be upon thyneself. Ezekiel is usually my go-to guy for these...moments but, here today, Psalms is in order... Psalm ninety-four : one to be exact."

Britt nods, "I fully agree, Sir."

"The reigns are yours, General." He sweeps his arm towards the Badgers, "Sally forth and let our people shine!"

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makin' dyin' lookin' good

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

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

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

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

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

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

Real world competition anymore is only for show.

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

and retrofits which are planned for around 2326.

The project that is lagging behind is the F308 conversions.

On paper the Americans, Brits, Aussies and the Pleiades are paying for their own 380s and selling off the 308s. In reality, since the Steel Annex is swimming in money, they're now buying the 380s and trading them for the old 308s. In turn the original owners of those 308s are paying for the SA's ghost droid Cwn Dawg conversions, which is way more cost effective for them. Problem is, the conversions take anywhere from four to six weeks, depending on the airframe, and right now the Annex is burning through them like popcorn through a pigeon.

At this very moment there is a pitched battle going on out at HIP 17999. There've been various names for the star but they settled on Yhi. The one and only semi-habitable planet was named Arura, that was when Yhi won the race for IAU registration, but this fight is fierce all because the Co-op is at the threshold. After one and a half wars with this very goal in mind they are now taking their first baby steps into the Pleiades.

The SA is not using the term 'retrograde action' in any of their communications or conversations all because they do not want to even remotely clue in the Co-op as to what they've been doing, which is a planned and managed retrograde action—allowing them into the Pleiades Cluster to spread and thin their forces out.

Sandbagging, making it look like they've been losing this fight, has been a tremendous success and in a few short months Maria will have her forces start turning it around when the Co-op is fully committed to these gains. Against CDF protests, the mining industries, owned and run by the stumpy elites, are racing in just as the Security Services hands the win over to the Defense Forces. Today, however, a huge civilian crew has just set down on Arura and is jumping the gun by launching a strip-mining operation while the fight is still at full tilt.

It's going to be a win for the Co-op, but now a painful win.

Maria and Sandoval are approaching the end of the runway where Rutledge and the plant manager are waiting, and behind them is a field full of F308s split into three groups. One group is over two hundred ships waiting for conversion, in USAF-white, USMC-camo, and PADF-dark blue. Right next to them are seven completed conversions, in beautiful charcoal gray, and lined up next to them are thirty shortcut conversions still in their original colors but devoid of any markings.

With Maria and Sandoval stepping up to Rutledge and the plant manager, three of the pretty matte gray conversions come to life right beside them. Ghosts, that being specifically the digital constructs of Paleo, Bud Sheatz and Maggie Prather, have spawned into existence

as the AI finalizes the pre-flight check.

And as Maria and Sandoval shake hands with the plant manager, Maggie shouts through the ships PA, ["No fucking way! My God, it's Maria! For an old chola you look great! Hell, I'd fuck ya!"]

With the other three starting to laugh, Maria steps towards the three fighters and, "Wha? Who the fuck?"

["You don't remember me?"] The air-surfaces, canards and ailerons on the far right ship start flapping about, ["Hell, if I were bent over and looking up, batting my big hazel-green eyes, you'd sure as hell remember then!"]

Maria, with open mouth astonishment, points to the ship and says with surprise, "Maggie!"

Now fully booted up, the identification tags flash in Maria's visual cortex showing who the three ghosts are, while Maggie goes, ["Hey-hey! Whod've guessed you, of all people, would make it all the way to Bravo! In what bat-shit insane world did I wake up too?"]

As the three ships start to pull away from the flight line, with their electric drive wheels, Maria nods her head, "Maggie, I'll come see you. I'll set some time aside. Okay?"

["Bitch, you are on! My eyelids need the workout."]

Maria, laughing, points towards the runway, "You guys, go get shot down, okay! You got a job to do."

The right canards on all three ships rotate up in a mock salute, with Paleo saying, ["You got it, boss lady!"]

With them rolling past, Bud adds to the stupidity, ["Marshal, just so you know, we be makin' dyin' lookin' good!"]

Lifting silently into the air the F308 razor engines kick in as Maria walks back towards Rutledge, Sandoval and the plant manager while asking, "Scott, how's that fight coming along?"

Through the tacnet, Rutledge reviews the current battle status in a flash, "Let's see...ground forces are being extricated. With the Cerberus and Warthog combo, casualties are light and the Djinn are keeping their distance. They ain't stupid." He thumbs towards the three Cwn Dawg fighters that just launched, "Those three are going to be back in just a few minutes. They're being vectored directly into an ambush. Today, so far, we've lost fifteen of the bis-to-E conversions and thirty-three Cwn Dawgs. Kill ratio is hovering at three to one."

"Are we being a little too obvious about this?"

"I think so but as long as the Super Squirrels are getting their bonus they won't give a shit. You know about the TauCorp landing?"

"We need to respond to that but first, what do we got here?"

Rutledge points to the four remaining Cwn Dawg conversions, "Sandy only has four left, and that's it! Bill and I need another fifteen or twenty to burn through to get through this fight or—we haft'a start fighting for real." Rutledge gestures to the last population of F308s, "This is our solution. The plant has been able to tool up and punch this number out since Friday."

Maria is shocked, "Really? Thirty?"

The plant manager steps in, "Marshal Ramirez, we're cutting all the corners. The full conversions are costing you from two to three million each. These quickie converts I'm giving to you at cost, which is only eleven-five, and each takes about two hours instead of a month."

Sandoval adds, "The bots sandblast the symbols and roundels then color match and spray. UV sets it in seconds and we swap the boards with preloaded AI and ghosts."

"If you are going to be flying these out with the intention of scrapping them then doing full conversions is stupid. We'll be happy to continue doing it, sure, it's just that you'll have these junkers standing by in a pinch." He leans in and quietly goes, "I don't know what your business is, burning these like you have been, I don't want to know, but if you're looking to look desperate these will seal the deal."

Rutledge nods in agreement as Sandoval says, "He's got a point. Never thought about that one."

The manager goes, "Hey, you've been pulling them off the line and throwing them straight into combat. It doesn't take an idiot."

Maria shakes her head, "You can't say anything."

"Say what?" He shrugs, "I have no idea what you're talking about." He then smiles, "The beauty of Plant Forty-Two is that we hire people with piss-poor observation skills, and really shitty memory. It's what our customers pay for."

Maria thinks for a minute, then, "Okay, let's do this." And as the Plant Manager activates these ships onto the queue, Maria asks, "Also, you have to charge them for the full conversions or we gotta redo the contracts and nobody wants that. Now, for my edification, I have got to know, why does it take so long for the full conversions? Isn't it just a paint and panel job?"

Sandoval sighs, "I tried to answer this one."

The plant manager nods, "It's about weight. Performance for these things always hinges around mass." He points towards some Marine 308s and, "Most those ships are over fifty years old and they've

been on this yard at least six times. When we string the new linkage wiring in, to save on budget, we leave the old shit in place. It takes too many man-hours to clean it all up. After all the system overhauls and hardware updates on top of updates on the h-models we are pulling from five to eight hundred kilos of old shit out however, on the Marine and Navy g-models, we're finding anywhere from twelve to fifteen hundred kilos of ancient crap that needs to be stripped out."

Sandoval adds, "We won't have this problem on the Cerberus or the new droids because they're full microchannel like the bis-E."

"Yea, but you still have double redundancy wiring on the bis."

They look at him and Maria asks, "How do you know that?"

"Look, we gave Sukhoi microchannel but from them we got the carbon latticework. We're all sucking each other's cocks to make this scifi shit work." The Plant Manager looks to Sandoval, "And, no, Sandy. The Co-op doesn't get any of that on the Griffon-Djinn. Even if they knew about it, it would be priced totally out of their reach. And I have to say your new T-Bird is gonna be tits! One-hundred percent microchannel too! Damn, I'd love to take one up for a spin!"

Maria asks, "You know about the Seventy-Four?"

Rutledge laughs while Maria and Sandoval just look at him as he gestures to himself, "Wha', me? I don't know shit!"

Just then the first three F308 fighters on the shortcut line, dark blue ones from the PADF, come to life in front of them.

Paleo laughs out of the ships PA, ["Damn! That was quick!"]

Rutledge shrugs, "Sorry, guys, but you got to go do it again!"

Bud protests loudly, ["Fuck me, Scott! I like to think of us as trip and fall artists, not crash test dummies!"]

"Sorry, but we'll move the exit point after you die this time."

Maggie observes, ["Hey, this is a real cockpit! About God damned time you put us in the throw aways!"]

As the ships start to roll Paleo says, ["Jumping to our deaths yet again. No, wait, since we're already dead what do we call this?"]

Maria waves for them to stop, "Change of mission! That's what I call this!" She looks to Rutledge and asks, "Do you mind?" With him motioning her on she turns to the fighters, "Throw yourselves at the TauCorp landing site. If they fire just one missile, they fire just one bullet from the site, I want you to blow it to hell! And, if anyone gets in your way—blow them to hell too!" She looks to Paleo's ship, "So, Paleo, waddya call that?"

With the three whooping and cheering, Paleo laughs, ["I call that get-some fun, that's what I call it!"]

Maria points towards the runway, "Get 'em to bite!"

And with a three canard fin salute they lift off right there on the ramp by the taxiway. At one-hundred meters altitude the razors kick in and the three shoot up straight into the sky.

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They pop out of their jump on the other side of Arura, far from any ambush. Within seconds they dash down below the reach of the Co-op spider missiles and run along the Stratopause which is at twenty kilometers on this planet. A sustained dash at 1mb is like swimming through molasses, yes, but they still pull Mach-20 and get a quarter way around the planet before Security Services take notice.

With eight F51d Griffons, the ridiculously nimble fighters now called the Djinn, being vectored towards them they exit the dash. Paleo drops to twelve kilometers but Bud and Maggie break for the deck. Bud stays right under Paleo, but Maggie scoots away to do her thing—which is to make a run at the mining site and see if they'll bite.

The F308h is capable of Mach-5 at 1000 millibar, but here at sea-level it's only 310mb so she could push up the speed if she wanted too. Maggie has to keep it light on the throttle because anything like Mach-6 or better would leave a huge thermal footprint and turbulence in its wake so, not to kick up too much dust, she dials it back to below Mach-3 while flying nap of the earth. Now, while Bud and Paleo set up to play with the Djinn, Maggie has the tougher job. Back in the day she was training to be a Wild Weasel and all that SEAD simulation time will finally be put to good use.

If you're interested in staying alive then being a Wild Weasel is not for you. The mission is air defense detection and suppression. Surface to air missiles are an annoyance and this is especially true if facing the myriad of centipede variants in this role.

The pricy mobile shoot-n-scoot robot launchers, with both cannon and missiles, are difficult to spot and lock onto, but the smart planner will pepper an AO with one-shot throw-away cardboard launchers that use passive sensor arrays. If one is looking to set up an air defense on the cheap then these paper-laminate launchers do nicely. The problem is if they're not set to be centrally controlled, which they tend not to be, then if they see a ship tear-ass in on what looks like an attack run these things will respond all on their own.

And for today they would have been better off without them.

Paleo shouts, ["Shit! Maggie, we got Djinn looking for you!"]

Bud adds, ["It's these moments I'd rather be facing Homer."]

Maggie notices the tactical display showing four Djinn heading for Paleo, and four looping around at high speed behind her and scouring the land looking for any sign of an attacker. They don't see Bud yet, he's now running low and slow and out of sight, but they instinctively know that someone has got to be heading towards the TauCorp site. With their sensors noticing the Mach trail where Maggie was just seconds ago, they spread out and race in that direction.

With Maggie being actively hunted, Bud blasts off after them. Noticing Bud, two of the four Djinn heading for Paleo break to go after Bud and, seeing this, Paleo goes after them.

Maggie says with infinite calm, ["If they catch me I'm toast!"]

Bud, a little less calm, ["Push on, I'm right behind ya!"]

Paleo rolls into a steep split-s and this draws the two Djinn, now above him, into a steep dive trying to match it. Before they could get their noses around to a good launch solution, Paleo leaves six micropede missiles in his wake—which converge on the two Djinn.

At low speeds, below Mach-2, you do not turn with a Djinn. It's suicide if you can't skid in that turn, and if there are two or more of them then it's guaranteed that you'll get your ass handed back to you. The problem with the Djinn, as with all Griffons, even with the spade tips on their wings, at high speed the ships will aerodynamically compress and aggressive maneuvering goes to hell. At high speed their only fully functional air-surfaces are the forward canards which can still give them pitch and a little bit of roll if needed.

It's just that past Mach-2 it's mushy and after Mach-3 it's shit.

They should have extended before doing their own split-s, or maybe even an Immelman which is up and back. What they did was put themselves in a position to get a face full of micropedes, and with each one having a nuclear-sparkplug warhead, with a thousand kilo yield each, this was not exactly a pleasant end for them.

Both pilots survive. The warheads go off in a grid pattern that crunches the fuselage of both ships. With the debris spinning out of control, the cockpits fall away and the pilots eject from those.

After four years of combat flying, getting shot down in forced overshoots, or guiding others and letting them lead and take the shots, Paleo finally gets his first two air to air kills.

Twelve seconds later, he gets two more.

Bud launches all eight of his centipede missiles to force the

four Djinn to break off from chasing after Maggie—and with missiles climbing up their ass they simply do not have a choice. Bud is right behind those centipedes. Gaining on Bud are two Djinn who each fire a centipede at him—and behind them are two centipedes from Paleo.

Paleo's two missiles close first. Both of the Security Service ships lob a cluster bomb backwards in defensive mode and when they deploy, scattering bomblets into the sky, both missiles are destroyed. Right before that the AI on the missiles cut loose their micropede mini-missiles and half of those get through. The trailing wing man catches one, but the others sputter out before they can reach the lead fighter. Not a problem, with Paleo hosing the ship down with his rotary cannon the right wing and canard rip off and the pilot ejects.

The same thing happens to the other four Djinn. They scatter and lob cluster bombs, but only one gets hit by a micropede. While the trailing ship gets shredded by Bud's cannon, his ship goes through the same exercise. Between his dorsal gun and a dozen micropede missiles launched, the two missiles hot on his tail are destroyed, but two of its mini-missiles gets through.

Bud's ship is also blasted into a spiraling wreck.

As Paleo directs his attention to the two remaining fighters, Maggie porpoises up into view of the site and drops back down, and because of this three of the cardboard launchers fire. These missiles fly vertically into the air, and as they rotate towards Maggie, she lifts up and rapid-fires all eight of her rocket powered cluster bombs.

Maggie didn't get to see her handiwork. The three missiles all converge on her and hit within a fraction of a second of each other thus converting her F308 into a grease spot in the sky.

Eight cluster bombs with forty bomblets each, 320 bomblets total, are scattered over the TauCorp operation. A combined 320,000 kilos of explosive force leaves nothing intact or alive.

Paleo cuts down a Djinn with a deflection shot, and as the last one races away he pulls around to do a quick damage assessment. While over the site the remaining Djinn snipes his F308 out of the air with a burst of 23mm cannon fire that turns his fighter inside out. Paleo knew that pilot was going to sneak up on him like that, and he did notice the shells streaking in, he just didn't care.

He pulled off an ace-in-a-day, and will be back in ten minutes.

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57

caper emissarius by proxy

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

"I love what you did with the place!"

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

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

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

Bob nods, "Good morning, Secretary General."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Today, I'm speaking for the FIS and the Annex."

"And on twenty-third?"

"The Annex only."

"And for FIS who speaks then?"

"As agreed, Secretary General, Wilkinson will be attending."

"*On pidaras.*" Lebedev shakes his head, "He is like impotent Zaphod Beeblebrox. You can do better than that me think."

Bob nods big, "Yea, you're right. He is a waste of space, but I just can't chuck him out of an airlock if you know what I mean."

Lebedev's eyebrows raise, "We live in world of possibilities?"

Michal scolds him, "Vasily!"

Lebedev smiles and, "Let us do what they say here in great United States and, talk turkey how 'bout."

Bob, nods, "I'm game for that."

"Tillsdale does not want peace. He wants to destroy FIS and eradicate Annex from existence. He wants to put off peace process until he holds all of Pleiades and, another applicable Americanism for you, possession is nine-tenths of law. He will not let go of anything his Security Services wins for them and, by da way it looks, they'll gift wrap Pleiades with polka-dot bow by end of month."

"Pretty much. What is it you want?"

"All lies behind us...I want to take the wheel of your FIS and guide it towards greater future." Lebedev motions to the room around him, "What you call Urchin Gnome is cloistered, ineffectual, and now it's isolated from human expansion."

Michal points out, "But you did that."

"Yes, towards purpose, yes." While handing out another shot to her and Bob, "I've come to see FIS has real future. It has potential for real government. Not sing-song holdy-hands of United Nations. Admittedly, I always want to purge Steel Annex, but now I see light at end of tunnel. It is tool for FIS to ensure peace."

Bob agrees, "Preach it, brother."

Lebedev nods, "Problem is...I am here, not there."

"We do live in a world of possibilities."

Michal now scolds him, "Bob."

Bob looks at her, "Want peace, Michal? For years we've been chasing our tails and finally, today, we can cut through the bullshit."

"Michal, you are like little Dutch *mal'chik* with finger trying to plug dyke. Peace at all costs is futile effort." Lebedev sits back and, "Noble effort but futile. Tillsdale will not stop so tough choices must be made. I have ally that can turn Security Services against CDF if Annex joins them. If we can do this then peace is assured. War ends."

Michal asks, "How can you guarantee that?"

"There are no guarantees, only possibilities." Lebedev points to Bob, "With him in charge of Annex then you have that power."

"Ramirez runs the Annex, not Bob."

Lebedev smiles, "For our sins, we need scapegoats."

"Scapegoats, plural?"

"Da."

Bob asks, "Let me guess, Tillsdale and Ramirez?"

"They take fall as *caper emissarius*, by proxy instead of us. Do you not agree that public would see them as great perpetrators of war?" Lebedev swirls his hand in the air, "We get public to express venom during talks. This is easy. Groundwork has been laid."

Michal wonders, "How are you going to sway public opinion on a whim? It's not like it's a magic wand you know."

"We already sway opinion!" Lebedev laughs, "All you up here do not listen to news. You listen to what you want to hear. Russians, we cultivate opinion to our need. It has been done. We now just prod sheep and they go baaaa."

Bob sighs, "At this point, Tillsdale does have the upper hand."

Lebedev nods in agreement, "Talks at Thirty-Two-Tau is for show, but peace talks do nothing. They now prepare to expand war after talks. You will see. I give you location of build-up and you do same as you do with Nu Ara attack."

"I caught hell for Thirty-Two Ari."

"This time, Ramirez catch hell. Public opinion will show no mercy and want heads to roll. You just step back into old job."

Bob shakes his head, "I want to be done with this shit."

"Your Cricket Washington I have no objections to taking over as your political alpha, totally likeable but more dangerous than you, I like her, but who will ally with us if you do not take command?"

"Scott Rutledge. He'll run interference for ya."

"Who is this Rutledge?"

"Doesn't matter, all the other marshals will turn on you."

"This is not good."

"Well, if you treat our people right and keep your shenanigans to a minimum then I can leave it in his hands. If you present yourself as a man of the people then Rutledge will back you up, one-hundred percent. He just needs time to acclimate to it."

"So, we have a...deal?"

"Two things, I don't give a shit what you do with Tillsdale but you do not touch Ramirez. Pull her teeth, put her out to pasture, and the transition to Rutledge will be smooth. Hurt her and you'll have Graves to deal with."

"I know of him well, he is problem."

"No, you can secure his loyalty, but if anything happens to her then all bets are off. With Graves there is no negotiation. He cannot be swayed or bought or blackmailed. Kidnap one of his kids and it will only serve to piss him off and, being Russian, you'll understand that."

Lebedev shifts in his seat, "This is true?"

Bob leans in for emphasis, "If Graves ever decided to step in and 'take' command then everyone, I mean rank-n-file from top to bottom, would back him. They'd fall in place without a peep. Even with current forces he could take them and kick all your asses."

"Why does he not do this?"

"Duty? Loyalty? Karma? Fuck'd if I know? Pick one."

Lebedev nods and after a few seconds he turns to Michal and asks, "You have been quiet, Michal."

Michal, with wide-eyed wonderment, "Well, let's take stock! Two soft-coups, manipulate public opinion, and blow up a planet!" Then with perfect comedic flair, "Hell, count me in!"

Lebedev shrugs, "What will take to convince you?"

Michal thinks for a second, and, "I was told to come here with an open mind, so I did. This was NOT the conversation I thought we were going to have but, let's see what Tillsdale has to say on the twenty-second."

Bob quietly mentions, "Twenty-third."

"Ah, ya, twenty-third." She almost snarls, "If what you say is true, and Tillsdale balks at a peace accord, then..." Michal shrugs and, "Count me the fuck in!"

Bob asks, "Just keep you out of the loop?"

"Definitely, keep me out of that loop! Just do it."

Lebedev smiles, "You will protest loudly for show, yes?"

"Yea, but if we can lay the olive branch on the table before you go stomping around in the Hyades then I can work with that."

Lebedev huffs, "Be assured, CDF cannot stand against their Security Services, but nobody can stand against Annex if they option total war. I understand Ramirez' choice, avoiding collateral damage to the cost of her people, but I do question her wisdom."

Michal leans in, "I hate Marshal Ramirez but, wisdom or not, billions are alive because she chose the high ground."

"Many better people dead because of high ground."

Michal leans in further, "You pull off this hat-trick and you'll get my support. I just have to bitch about it at first...for show."

With a smile, Lebedev hands them both a shot, "You now pragmatic as civilian. We not see eye to eye but you have my respect. We will move forward and not speak of this." He raises his glass, "*Davayte vyp'yem za uspekhn nashego dela!*"

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By the entrance to Michal's Turtle Bay condominium she and Bob are staring back at the UN across the street, and after the longest of moments Bob asks, "You hungry?" She shakes her head, *no*, so he says, "But you need to eat." She nods, *yes*, so Bob smiles and announces, "I know just the place!"

As they walk the three blocks down 43rd to the corner café at Lexington, across from the Chrysler building, they drink in the beauty of the trees, grass streets and cobble stone sidewalks. Here there are no billboards or placards, and after about block, Michal takes Bob's hand with a smile—and in no time she pulls in close.

Beating the lunch crowd, they get Bob's regular table.

Every time Bob is in New York he finds his way here and gets this table, and he's been doing it for 45 years. The SA office occupies three floors in this building, as well as the flight deck on top, and even though the café has changed hands three times in that span of years, the SA does most of their catering from this café so the staff keeps up on who's who with the Annex. Today is truly a momentous occasion because for the first time Bob has brought someone along.

The waitress brings a menu only for Michal, who asks Bob, "You know what you're having?"

"I get the same thing every time."

"I'll take a stab at that too."

"It's beef."

Michal nods then shrugs, "Considering the meeting we just had I'll make an exception." Then to the waitress, "I'll have what he's having."

Bob motions for them both, "Lemonade and fries."

With the waitress gone, seeing the look in his eyes, she asks, "Is this the place you found her?"

"Yea, that little shit zeroed in on me, sat in the chair you're in, we had lunch and...my life changed." He grimaces slightly, "I know that I could pull the memory up but I really want to remember it organically." Bob smiles, "Funny thing is, the second lunch gets here, and I smell that flame-broiled burger, it all comes back in a flash."

Michal ventures to guess, "That day meant a lot to you."

Bob wonders with mock and awe, "What clued you in?"

"I dunno, it just looked obvious, and speaking of reaching into the clue bag of obvious...we're gonna die."

Bob nods, yes, so Michal says, "I figure you already know how they're gonna come at us."

Again Bob nods, yes, so, "We gonna beat 'em to the punch?"

Again, as expected, Bob slow-nods, yes, so Michal asks what is really on her mind, "Am I gonna feel anything?"

Finally he shakes his head, *no*, so Michal jokes, "Just as well, they're threatening to foreclose on my condo come November."

Bob is all kinds of miffed, "God damn it, Mikey! Why didn't you say something, hu? I'm here to help for Christ's sake!"

"It's not your fucking responsibility!" She points to herself, "Me putting everything I had in this wasted effort is my choice."

"Let me guess, you sold off your chip to Vegas³ right?"

"Those funds kept me afloat for the last year."

"I've got ya covered. You're going to the Stone Garden."

Michal is surprised, "You can do that?"

"Seriously, come on, there's no cost involved, and no escrow, and you're you! We get open access to Vegas³ and you'll just love the place I have set up!" Bob then looks at her and leans in with a scowl, "By the way, I already picked out the carpets."

"Da'fuck!" Michal scowls back, "Its tile or you can piss off!"

Nose to nose their scowls morph into a suppressed laughter, and as that laughter dies down their lips start to lightly brush up against each other. They feel and draw in one another's breath in this lingering, almost kiss—which is having such an effect on Michal it's getting hard for her to remember to breathe.

Before they make full contact, Michal confesses, "I love you."

With three light strokes of their lips touching, Bob couldn't resist and says, "I know."

Michal gives him the look, and goes from putty in his hands to a brick of fired-bisque by saying, "Okay, Han!" She sits back and is chuckling quietly, "That was actually funny. Perfect timing!"

Bob asks hopefully, "Can we pick this back up when we get to your place or am I gonna haf'ta beg?"

With the food being delivered, Michal smirks, "I dunno, beg maybe?" Then very quietly, "Or, take a cold shower...asshole."

The second the aroma from the flame-broiled burgers and saucers of balsamic vinegar hits his nose—all the memories from that day, oh so long ago, come rushing back. Bob's eyes blink while he takes a deep breath and whispers to himself, "Wow."

Michal notices that something is up, "You okay?"

Bob nods but says, "No...I offered her the job of managing our security to shut her up, but I spent the last few years trying to talk her out of it. I tried to explain that this day was inevitable."

In her own epiphany, Michal suddenly realizes why Tillsdale is fashionably late for everything, and with this new understanding she thinks out loud, "Nicole has to be there!"

Bob has already resigned himself to this, "Yup."

"You gonna tell her?"

"Nope." With sad eyes Bob looks to Michal, "I can't, now."

"That's fucked up."

"Tell me about it."

58

welcome to raccoon city

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

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

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

Second thing is they set up shop.

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

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

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

was a training facility that looked like a six-sided pinwheel from orbit. Beside the airfield was a small rocky mountain and from that they burrowed out a massive base with offices, R&R facilities, endless tracks of barracks and apartment flats. Not stopping there, since this planet was rich in raw materials, beneath the base they excavated a mining, manufacturing and storage facility that was rivaled by nothing before it or since. Thirty stories of levels were dug out with an endless network of tunnels for prospecting and quarrying spreading out in all directions.

This facility was where most troops spent down time until the Kilosphere was built out at Electra-4, and in spite of the extreme cryogenic conditions on the surface, the troops kind of liked the place. It grew on them, and so much so they pitched in and erected a sign by the main entrance saying, 'Welcome to Raccoon City.'

The SA leadership, having been gamers as kids, left it as is.

With the Kilosphere built they shut down that part of the operation, and after completing the construction of the outer shells for the three massive follow on stations they mothballed the whole base. The site became a glorified storage facility that was a dumping ground for old tech, ships, stores, and millions of tons of raw materials.

In fact, a substantive gold mine in raw materials.

Since the start of the previous war it's become so much easier to grind up an asteroid on the run rather than fetch from Raccoon City. For decades the only activity has been the training taking place from the pinwheel yet late last June, to everyone's surprise, three drop ships landed by the entrance and, for the first time in twenty years, breached the seal to the underground vaults.

Two weeks later they were gone.

Senior Deputy Marshal, Charles 'Coco' Hershey, loves his job running this training facility. He barely remembers his old job, that of Brigadier General in command of the Co-op base out at Theta-2 Taurus. Where the CDF is a bit of a cluster-fuck, with too much politics and ass kissing to get anywhere, the trusted Base Defense Force detachments is where the actual soldiers of the CDF can be found.

The BDF was modeled after the old USAF Security Forces base defense group as part of SOCOM. These people do all the heavy lifting such as special operations (anti-insurgency, interdiction and recon), para-rescue, military police, and they are also so far up the intelligence community's ass that you would think of them as a special branch all to themselves. Then to top that off they'll guard a base or two.

General Hershey was a huge score for the Annex. With him came a tsunami of information—okay, information with no practical application or immediate value, but nice to have just the same.

Hershey has been following reports of BDF intrusion into the Orion Constellation. Still referring to it as a constellation from out here is all kinds of goofy, but everyone's visual orientation is still from the perspective of Earth. Out here they add depth and parse that out by region, zone, layer, cylinder and sector.

Thank God science and commerce long ago forced the galactic grid-coordinate system to switch from the original Earth centric axial hub to a navigationally intelligent Sagittarius-A anchor point, and oh halleluah for that one, but for legal and civics purposes they just can't seem to shake off the old Earth centric system!

Anyway, Vacuum Sandwich One-Eight has been tracking BDF reconnaissance and survey missions over the last few years. Just like how humanity found the Nefer Key's home system, by analyzing and tracing ultra-faint nanoscopic jump and dump gravity signatures, the BDF was using the same techniques out here. Curiously, they don't know what they're actually looking for, it's just that they know they're seeing something that has been getting enough traffic over the years to now pull their focus. It takes a lot of work to get a single linear vector, but once established it's a simple act of following the chalk line and, from this point, things move along really-really fast.

The BDF had to double back to 9-Ori to finally see something pointing in the direction of 58-Ori, and while hopping from system to system along a narrow conical vector they bypass 58-Ori altogether because, seriously, who in their right mind would be stupid enough to set up an operational base there—so why waste time on the obvious?

Frustrated with losing the sent, the head recon team does a quick run out to HIP-28384 where they establish a new vector back towards 58-Ori so, again with the head scratching...

Then the lightbulb!

It was when the BDF first went bouncing past Betelgeuse that Hershey decided to evacuate the base. He had the senior training company, the one closest to graduation, hang back to help police the site before the BDF gets around to figuring it out.

Jesus Zazueta, Master Sergeant and the training company's drill instructor, comes racing up behind Hershey before he steps into his office, "Hey, Coco! Vacuum Sandwich One-Eight just popped into Lagrange-One and flashed us saying that the Reapers finally got their heads out of their ass and will be here real soon."

Hershey turns and, looking at Zazueta, "Ya, I heard. Where did they make the final vector from?"

"I think it was HIP-28384, but don't hold me to that."

Hershey nods, "We gotta evac now."

"Want me to give the order?"

"Order 'em to suit up and stand by." Hershey motions for Zazueta to follow him as he slips through the door, "Then you might as well get in on this in case I get hit by an asteroid."

After broadcasting the orders, Zazueta enters Hershey's office and does a double-take when he faces off with three ghost droids. Not because he was surprised that they were there, he's been around lots of droids before, it's just that under those canopies are the holographic faces of ghosts, digital constructs of troopers who have died, that are old friends he recognizes.

Zazueta goes, "Ozo! Chase! *Órale güey*, motherfuckers!"

The three ghosts cheer in unison, "Zaz!"

Zazueta shakes his head at the head droid, "Fuck me, Griego, when did you cross over?"

"On Arura, last May. Last ship out didn't make it out."

"Sorry 'bout that."

Griego shrugs as best you can as a digital spirit encapsulated in a robot, "I prefer being alive, but this is a kick in the ass!"

Ozo laughs, "*Sí*, we can take crazy risks."

Chase also laughs, "I was gonna say you should join us, but I'm already surrounded by enough Mexicans."

Ozo nudges him, "*Puñal gringo*."

Chase blows him a kiss, "You know you want it!"

"Knock it off!" Griego barks, then huffs, "*Pelado chingas*." He then looks to Hershey and says, "We're ready, Coco."

Hershey thinks about it for a sec and, "Okay, orders are as follows... Stock Pot, Sierra Papa Five-Eight Orion, is now designated, Scream Park. Acknowledge change of mission."

Griego nods, as best you can in a droid, "Acknowledged. Sierra Papa Five-Eight Orion, is now code named, Scream Park. Confirm mission change as Scream Park."

"Scream Park, confirmed." Hershey then smiles, "Give my old crew a hell of a scare, okay?"

Zazueta asks, "What just happened?"

"Raccoon City just became a carnival fun house."

Chase laughs, "Yea, baby!"

Griego elaborates, "We got three squads of droids down there and just activated and updated all the old PacMan drones in storage with this mission profile. We got booby traps and scorpion guns hidden all over the place. Homer can cakewalk right on in, but he ain't gettin' out without taking it up the ass."

Ozo says, "It's gonna be a blast."

Chase laughs again, "You know it!"

Zazueta asks, "Can I get in on this one?"

Hershey nods in agreement, "That's two of us, Zaz."

Griego asks, "Coco, I have orders to burst transmit our status and seal the base by nineteen-hundred zulu on new year's. Do you know what's goin' on 'cause that sounds damned suspicious to me."

Hershey hands Griego a letter-size envelope with the text, 'SP58-ORION OPEN 2318-12-31-18:00' on it, and says, "I don't have a clue but, from the looks of this, you'll know before I do."

"Hu, no shit!" Griego, slips it in the pouch on the mantle of his droid, and, "It'll be me or the last man standing."

Chase goes, "I put money on Simmons!"

Ozo ads, "Ya, Angie, no shit."

Zazueta asks, "Ten Klicks with you guys?"

Greigo laughs, "We have eight spare droids and we already took a vote to let Angie burn through 'em."

Hershey asks, "Who's Angie Simmons?"

Zazueta says, "Angela is a little tea-cup of a blonde that's a psycho in a fight." He points to Chase and Ozo, "You two remember Riker's, right?" Then realizes, "Oh, yea, you probably don't."

Ozo corrects him, "Oh, no, we do remember."

Zazueta turns to Hershey and, "Opening shots, Simmons gets her left arm blown off but she continued into the fight."

Griego adds, "It was hand to hand at the end."

Hershey asks, "With one arm?" They all nod yes, so he quietly says to himself, "Dedication...or psychopath."

Griego asks, "Oh, yea, want us to take down the sign?"

"No, that sign was a replacement. I hear it was swapped out in ninety-five. The original is at the Kilosphere."

Chase asks, "Where? I never saw it."

Hershey goes, "Nobody does. It's on the wall on first level of the wet-deck, by the southern bar. Around the corner from the head."

"Oh, no wonder! I was always at the casino looking to get bent over and fucked silly."

"I know the feeling, I'm always losing my shirt there."

Chase laughs, "Ya, but I'm not gambling."

Ozo shakes his head at Chase, "*Pinche puto*."

Chase puts his hand up to the side of his head and says with sass, "It's *puto jefe* to you! Just slip in here after hours and I love you long time!"

Ozo laughs, "You couldn't handle it."

"Get your brown sugarcane tickling my tonsils and we'll see."

With Hershey and Zazueta trying not to laugh, Griego turns and shouts, "Shut up!"

Zazueta bursts out, "Makes me want to get caulked just to hang out with these fuckers again."

"No you don't." Griego shakes his head, "Hell, I'd shoot 'em both but they'll only respawn."

Just then, the tacnet feed to Hershey and Griego show that a Co-op ship has just popped into the area at thirty au from Betelgeuse and is immediately bearing down on the astronomy facility at 20au.

Hershey looks up, "You see that?"

Griego nods, "Yup. We'll get outta of your hair."

"They've been told to cooperate so we have forty minutes, maybe an hour." Hershey looks to Griego, "Put the burn on 'em." Then to Zazueta, "Suit up and let's get on the hump."

They all scatter with Zazueta running down the corridor while calling out on the tacnet radio, "This not a drill! Get to the staging bay and stand by!"

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It took Zazueta ten minutes to strip and mount his JACC and get topside, where his whole company, all 120 troopers, were already suited and lined up waiting for him. They are wearing a replica of third-gen ACE fighting suit used by the Co-op, but under the skin it's all JACC. Today, instead of the Co-op StG-810 rail gun they trained with, they are all carrying the Annex's older BR1 rail gun that they had a crash course on just three days ago.

Zazueta's training company consists solely of Sikh men and women, and every one of them wear the turbans of their faith but, here in training, they're using the informal and simple two-minute Parna wrap instead of the twenty-minute formal and stylish Paag wrap. Like the Gurkhas these people are dedicated, focused, and an absolute blessing to have as a training company but, as you the reader knows, there is always a fuck up planted amongst them in the ranks.

Zazueta shouts, "We're gonna have to cut through the bullshit so, Sergeant Singh, get your ass up here, front and center!"

Satnam Singh, the Gomer Pile for this cycle, slips out of the back row and jogs up, "Yes, Sergeant! What are your orders, sir!"

"About face!"

If you could tie into the company channel you could hear the troops freaking out that their resident *bewakoof topa*, the dipshit that almost got many of them killed, was a plant this whole time.

Zazueta calls out, "This is Gunnery Sergeant, Satnam Singh! From this moment on he is my right hand, my left hand and my boot in your ass! I do not have time to explain except to say that we are at war and, today, the war has come to us! If you show Sergeant Singh any disrespect, or fail to follow his orders, he is authorized to shoot you with no further provocation! If he fails to shoot you then I will shoot you!" He then shouts, "Do you Punjab's hear me!"

With them shouting, *sir, yes sir*, Hershey has stepped up in his JACC and tells Zazueta quietly, "The charges are set."

Zazueta orders, "Gunny, I'll anchor. You lead 'em out!"

Singh holds up his BR1 and shouts, "Our mission is to get to the evacuation site without being seen and you have these in hand in case we all fuck that up! Just like with the eight-ten you trained with, Sergeant Zazueta loves to have these mylar-strips in your rail guns when we get on the ship! If it's NOT attached to your gun when we mount up..." Singh gets in the face of the three recruits closest to him, "I'm gonna stomp your guts out, strip you of your Parna and strangle you with it! Do you fucken' get me!"

This is not the nice air-head Singh they've spent the last six months with so, in a state of shock, they shout, "Sir, yes sir!"

"Affix helmets, pk-cammo setting. I will take first platoon. Deputy Marshal Hershey will lead second platoon, and D.I. Zazueta will follow with third. You know the drill so don't get spooked and don't fuck up! Do NOT fire your weapon unless ordered too or everybody around you is in a state of dying! You get me?"

Thirty seconds later the bay doors open and they file out.

It's dark with a blustery wind kicking up snow consisting of mostly frozen hydrogen. Everywhere you look the light from a distant sunset refracts red and orange, and blue from the frozen deposits of oxygen mixed in with the nitrogen on the ground. The pink cammo is easy to see up close, but after fifty meters in this light it's like they're invisible. The whole company could be performing the final act of Riverdance and you wouldn't have a clue. The big problem is that in this cryogenic hell, about 10°k (-263.15°C) at the moment, they can't use their holographic cloaking tech because it puts out enough of a thermal signature that at these chilly temperatures they all might as well have neon signs above their heads flashing, *drop bombs here!*

The company has six kilometers to traverse to get to the razorback dropships hidden in the rocky terrain west of the training facility, but about half way there, the tacnet lights up with an alert that HWG83 drop ships, the Javalina ships that were originally developed by the Annex and shared with the Co-op, because they were buddies back then, are now dropping from space from all points of the compass around the base, and look to be converging on the airfield.

That didn't take long.

When the Javalinas are only ten kilometers out, and streaking in while decelerating like mad, first-platoon is already loading up in the Razorbacks, second-platoon is weaving through the rocks only a half a klick away but third-platoon is still two whole kilometers from the evacuation site and in the open terrain just past the airfield.

Zazueta radios, ["Okay, second platoon, hightail it to the ship! Move it! Third platoon, hit the deck and don't move!"]

The troops in third platoon drop and freeze, and when the Javalinas are only three kilometers away, Zazueta fires the charges Deputy Marshal Hershey set in the base. Thirteen cluster bombs, all set for MOAB mode, explode in a three stage sequence. The outer six fire, and a half-second later the next six followed by the final one in the center of the pinwheel facility.

Observing from afar you'd think a nuke went off, but up close the BDF pilots could see that it was demolition charges—and it was intentionally set to go off as they approached, and obviously so.

Zazueta timed it perfectly because the light from the blasts was blinding enough to hide third platoon's thermal signatures and shadows as the drop ships passed overhead.

Zazueta orders, ["Third platoon, move out, double time!"]

With the Javalinas orbiting the wreckage of the base, third platoon make it to the field of rocks before the Co-op thinks to send two ships out to conduct an orbiting survey of the area. The BDF

already knows it was a bot or maybe a small fire team that set it off remotely, and if it were a fire team they would be long gone by now but, either way, sticking to SOP they have to go through the motions and look for traces of Spooky just the same.

Reaching the evacuation site unseen, and as third-platoon loads up, Hershey and Zazueta climb on top of one of the Razorbacks to check out how the BDF landing is going.

Like all JACCs they have binocular telescopes that flip open on opposite sides of the helmet, and with these deployed they can scope out what is going on back at the destroyed base.

Five ships land around the wrecked pinwheel facility—which is actually only about halfway blown up. This crappy demolition job was intentional on their part so as to eat up BDF man hours having them dig and pick through it all. As the two Javalinas expand their orbits in a half-hearted search to the east and the south, the other five ships flair out and put down at the foot of Arklay Mountain, beside the sign where the base entrance is.

That didn't take long at all.

Hershey sighs, ["I'm gonna miss this place."]

Zazueta nods, ["Yea, it grows on ya."] He then asks, ["How long till they breach the entrance you think?"]

["About a week. More like two."] Hershey smiles, ["And all they have to do is to hit the 'open' plate by the blast doors."]

["Really?"]

["Open sesame with the push of a button!"] He elaborates as to what will happen, ["The BDF will survey each level meticulously before going to the next one so they won't remove a thing until this has been done. Griego will probably start in with jump scares around mid-December when they approach the bottom of the facility."]

["Then the killing starts."]

["No, the mission is to scare and maim. Having to rescue screaming wounded is so much more psychologically distressing than dragging out dead guys. Oh, and the annual cease fire will not apply here! It'll be an all-out duck and cover fest when it starts."]

Zazueta nods and, while watching BDF troops milling around in front of the sign at the foot of Arklay Mountain, he quietly says, ["Welcome to Raccoon City, mutherfuckers."]

Hershey smiles, ["Yup, true that."]

Singh alerts them that the troops are all buttoned up so Hershey and Zazueta slide down the side of the Razorback and head

up the ramp into separate ships. The dark and cold cargo bays light up in combat-blue light the second the ramps snap shut.

With Zazueta piloting the first ship, and Singh the second one, Hershey slips into the WSO seat across from Singh and radios, ["Everyone, hold on. We'll pump in warm tropical air and break out the mojitos after we L.O.E. to a safe enough distance."]

The AG-Drive kicks in and they rise by just a few meters as their landing gear retracts. After a few seconds they silently slip out of their hiding place at a smooth quarter-G acceleration to start.

Nice and quiet like.

The two ships were still far from supersonic when they hit the ten kilometer mark and, at that point, they kick up the AG-Drive to a half-G to speed up the acceleration. At forty kilometers they are right on the edge of supersonic, and here they crank it up to one-G while starting their climb out. With all the turbulent helium and snow being picked up and flailed about they leave Cocytus without being seen.

At thirty-five minutes into the flight they've been pulling a constant three-Gs for twenty of those minutes, and at seven-thousand kilometers above the planet they cut the AG-Drive which throws them into freefall. After bracing themselves against the relentless and brutal eyeballs-out acceleration while facing backwards in the racking, the troops can finally breathe without effort. As Zazueta spools up for a jump, Sergeant Singh maneuvers his Razorback around and snuggles it belly to belly with Zazueta's ship.

When the charge is set, a baby-baby black-hole opens wide and swallows them both.

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

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

Cricket can at last enjoy the moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, okay!" Bill stands and collects himself, "We can do this."

As Bill pulls the bag he prepared for her, and starts taking inventory, She asks, "Hand me my robe?"

Cricket slithers out of bed, slips her feet into sandals and while standing up the robe she asked for comes to her airborne and settles on top of her head, so she laughs to herself, "Really?"

Cricket dons the robe and as she waddles towards the door, Bill intercepts her, with bag in hand, and urges, "Let's go, hon!"

Bill is yanking on Cricket's hand but she doesn't budge so he frantically asks, "Wha-wha-what?"

"Hey, slope-tard!"

"What!"

Cricket points to the bag—then over to his side of the bed, "Lose the bag, and...go get some clothes on."

Bill blinks, his head processing this, and agrees, "Oh, okay!"

As he tosses the bag on the bed and scrambles to get dressed, Cricket is almost laughing at him, "I don't mind seeing your chicken-ass running around naked, but nobody else does."

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Hospitals are for people to heal, not get well. Pretty much everyone in the hospital is there because of an injury, an elective something or rather, or when having a baby like Cricket.

Hospital rooms nowadays are like hotel rooms. At the very worst they are nice, and the upscale rooms for VIPs, again like Cricket, are lavishly appointed and tech-decked out. Reason being, patients do so much better when they don't mind being in the hospital.

Like most parents, Cricket and Bill wanted to have their child naturally, with no medical intervention but, as is the standing practice, they're having it here in the hospital because nobody believes in that 'mother earth' having it at home naturally thing is a good thing. Not that there's a law against it, it's just that nowadays people will look at you as if you were stupid. Natural birth is A-Okay, it's just that the responsible parent will CYA at a fully staffed maternity ward.

That said, the doctors tried to warn Cricket but she wouldn't listen. As tall and statuesque as she is she's just too petite in actual structural framework to go at this naturally. Their concerns fell on deaf ears until the child got caught in the birth canal with nowhere to go. Screeching in pain with each harrowing contraction, Cricket could

easily handle that, what she couldn't cope with was watching the fetal monitor drop to zero beats from late-deceleration at the peak of each contraction, and this is when she finally caved in.

So, the choice was presented yet again, go straight for either the C-section, or an episiotomy and extraction with an 80% chance of them having to do the C-section anyway.

Cricket chose the later.

With the child passing through there was an eerily audible and sharp double-crack as Cricket's hips are dislocated.

So, now facing the long and drawn out process of physical therapy to put her back to right, Cricket sends Bill out for food, specifically six tacos, three pairs of steak, chicken and pork, two flan and a strawberry shake, and it's when he gets back that he finds out that the physical therapy they were discussing at length is now over with before it even got scheduled.

With Diego attending to the now fitfully dozing Cricket, in the conference room across the hall Bill is telling Maria, Bob, Scott and Jessica what happened, "With the epidural she didn't feel shit, but when Jade's shoulders passed it sounded like bones cracking and we thought the baby broke it's clavicle's, but it was Cricket."

Maria shakes her head, "Both hips, jeez! I feel kinda bad 'cause with Diego, I sneezed and the lil' fucker comes out like she was shot from a cannon!"

Bill laughs, "Ya, well, Jade didn't wanna come out!"

Jessica nods, "My mom said I didn't want to come out."

It was Bob who asked, "So what happened?"

"Ya'll gonna love this one." Bill smiles big, "While I was out chasing after her strawberry shake, Crick asked for help to take a piss so the charge nurse, this big Georgia-momma named, Sunnie, instead of lookin' at the chart and handin' her a pan or sum'tin, Sunnie reaches up under the sheets and whips her legs around sayin' like 'Honey child, ya'll got'sta get up on your feet is what's ya got'sta do!' and there was a loud snap-snap! Sunnie freaks out thinking she broke Crick, goin' off like 'oh my Lawd' and shit!"

Jessica snorts, "Sunnie reset her hips for her!"

Scott observes, "She saved Cricket a lot of grief."

Bill agrees, "Oh, hell ya! It was hard convincing her, though." Bill then points towards Bob, "Like trying to convince you about what Crick is doin' in the FIS."

Bob nods, "I wasn't gonna bring anything up tonight."

"Bob, it can't wait. The twenty-third is a-comin' and you're gonna haft'a talk to 'er."

"Okay, then, if I can ask, what about the short list to replace Wilkinson, if it comes to that?"

Bill didn't want to say it, "She has her own, shorter list."

Maria pipes up, "She conferred with me and I'm behind her on this one. Paris is the logical choice."

Bob's jaw drops, "Don'cha think this is a little early for the Xhemal? Not to mention that the Co-op replacement representatives wouldn't vote for her. Not a chance!" Bob shifts his body and asks, "And while we're on it, when is she going to reject all those applications? None of them meet the residency requirement, right?"

Maria points out, "First, you are overprotective of the Xhemal. Second, yes, the residency documentation was all falsified. We know this up front because Cricket received a file with dossiers for thousands of people from the Hyades in the conquered territories and everyone who has applied to be new FIS mission reps are in that mix."

"Where did that come from?"

"Nobody is sure, but it's all checking out." Maria puts her hands out to assure him, "We would have found all this out eventually, but the mystery-date files sped up the process."

"If that's the case, why isn't our office rejecting them, hu? They're supposed to take their oath next week and if they do they'll push 44-Tau's residency amendment out of committee and onto the floor for a vote in December! Last I recall we don't want that?"

Scott adds, "Yes, we know if the amendment goes through then that effectively destroys the FIS as we know it."

Maria says, "The registry office has not given the applications to your office yet." Again, she then puts her hands out, "I can tell you it's cool, but you'll have to talk to her. I can't say anything because I'm not supposed to know and this is her thing."

Bob asks, "How do you know what she's up to?"

"We work together, Bob, but I'm not supposed to know."

Bob gives her a long look, and, "That gives me no comfort."

Scott chuckles, "Hell, I get no comfort from this!"

Bob asks, "So...do we know who sent the dossiers?"

Maria shrugs, "I'm not for certain, but I think I know."

He looks to Jessica who shrugs with, "I can't say."

Bob's eyes burrow into Jessica with, "But you know."

With Jessica smiling, tight-lipped, Maria nods, "I get that a lot from her." She leans in towards Jessica, "And it's kind of gettin' old!"

Bob asks Jessica, "Is there anything you can tell me?"

Jessica looks at him and shakes her head, *no*, but paths into his head privately with, "<Vasily cannot undo what he set in motion.">

As Bob nods privately with understanding, Diego's head pokes in and she goes, "Guys, she hears you talkin' about 'er, so she'd rather Bob come over at bitch at her directly before you piss her the fuck off."

Bill quivers, "Oooh, my little Bride of Frankenstein calls!"

Scott and Maria both chuckle at that, and with them following Bill across the hall to see Cricket, Bob looks to Jessica and quietly asks, "You know what's going to happen?"

"Since the beginning." Fighting back tears, Jessica hugs Bob and whispers in his ear, "We have an unexpected ally. Cricket knows what she's doing and...I'll come talk to you after the twenty-third." She gives him a little kiss, "Stick to your guns, *mi tito*."

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In Cricket's room, with everyone fawning over Jade, who is in Bill's arms, Cricket's laughs, "You know what Bill tells Jade when he first held her? First thing he says is that he promises that he's gonna buy 'er-her first Jack and Coke. What kind of father does that?"

Bill says to the newborn, "Best kinda father, I guarantee!"

Scott pats Bill on the back, "Totally agree!"

Maria is in awe, "Guys, she is gorgeous!"

Bob nods, "That she is."

Jessica observes, "Black babies are so beautiful!"

Bill couldn't resist, "And ya'll add just a little gookie monster spunk and this is what you get!"

With everybody laughing Maria shakes her head, "Cricket, he is such a pig! How do you put up with his shit?"

Cricket shrugs, "He's an endearing pig."

"She is gorgeous." Jessica laughs, "I was an ugly newborn!"

Diego shakes her head, "Jessie, I saw those pics! Holy shit, with your little scrunched up face they didn't beat you with the ugly stick! Oh, hell no, they hit you with the whole damned tree!"

Jessica gives Diego the look, "Okay, sis, you were cuter than pig shit when you were born, but when you hit larval stage—"

Diego throws her hands up, "Okay, you're right, I was a squirrely bag of shit when I was little but, you have to admit, Angie did beat me in the psycho toddler department."

Jessica laughs, "Yea, I'll give ya that."

Maria kisses Diego, "You were a hideous little creature and that's why, you understand, the quinceanera is your penance!"

Cricket asks, "That's coming up?"

Diego sighs, "The fitting is two-weeks out."

With a few seconds of silence, Cricket asks, "Bob, I know you got a lot on your mind, and you and Michal had your thing goin' on and I've been handling it all, not a problem, but tonight I'll give you a freebee. What's on your mind?"

Bob thinks about it, "A freebee implies one question."

"Yup, that's what you get."

Bob clears his throat, "Okay, the vote, what are you doing? You are going to reject those applicants, right?"

Cricket smirks, "I want them to schedule the vote." Bob gets this confused look on his face so Cricket elaborates, "Can you say, April Fools, Bob, or are you having a senior moment?"

Bob looks confused then he notices Maria and Bill both nodding at him with a wide-eyed look so he says, "Okay, I'm not getting it? Explain it to me as if I were an idiot."

Cricket shakes her head, "You're not an idiot, but what you're really not is a back-stabbing cunt like myself or Maria."

Bob is confused, "But the vote!"

"I want that vote to be scheduled!" She shakes her head and, "Look, Bob, the vote requires a two-thirds supermajority. They all have to show up for the debate in the morning to be eligible for the vote in the afternoon. Standard SOP, and I'm providing lunch!"

Maria adds, "To get the supermajority, they all have to show."

Bob protests, "By then they would have been sworn in!"

Cricket laughs, "Exactly! If I reject them now they just go shuffle off back where they came from. Bring them in for the vote, after having submitted falsified documents under oath, and..."

Cricket gestures to Maria who goes, "That's ten years for perjury. Taking the oath they are subject to Sapphire statutes."

Cricket then points to Bill and asks, "And mission status?"

Bill nods, "For knowingly submitting ineligible representatives those systems lose mission standing for two assembly cycles."

"That's four years so, you see, Bob, I want the vote to be scheduled. If things go south for you at Thirty-Two Tau, I'll be sitting in *pro tempore*. With the abbreviated quorum count the amendment will get squished and my short list candidate will be a shoe in. That vote will be in February and, by then...nobody is gonna defy me."

Bob is surprised, "Instead of sending them home—"

Cricket does a bad Russian accent, "I send 'em to gulag!"

Maria adds, "We'll cut their time, but they will get convicted."

Bob, with open-mouth astonishment, looks at Cricket, Maria, and back at Cricket and then gives a little round of applause while saying, "As Boxter would say...touché!"

Cricket says, "Don't applaud us, it was Bill's idea."

Bill is handing Jade to Cricket and, "I suggested the recipe, but these two cooked up the whole thing all on their own!"

Cricket looks at Jade and glances up at Bill, "Look at this, I can't believe we did this!" She then huffs a small laugh, "Ya know, everyone on this floor is acting like the heavens split open and, to a chorus of angels, their babies drifted down on rose pedals and shit like that but, for me, I get all ya'll talkin' 'bout gook spunk, Jack Daniels, back stabbin' political intrigue on top of other crazy shit! You know, when you look at it, it just...it ain't normal by a long shot."

Everyone acts a little embarrassed with Bob saying, "Sorry."

"Oh no, dawgs, you misunderstand!" Cricket cracks a smile, "I wouldn't change a God damned thing!"

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

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

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

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

The question is what to do with her?

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

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

Anyway, her stepson, Alex Dimitri, is as shockingly attractive as Josav, or Jacob was when he was in her employ, and Monique finds herself having impure thoughts when this young man is in eye-shot. As for Alex's steady girlfriend, Nikki-29, who now goes by Copper, she's a walking-talking carbon copy of Eight, and Monique absolutely loves her and Cap, so Copper is a definite shoe in around here.

Monique had dozens of under the radar business dealings with Alex's father, the legendary tycoon, Antonio Dimitri, but after his untimely death over two years ago, losing his life during a diving expedition with a U.S. presidential hopeful, his stepmother's on and off again relationship with Jacob has just recently become casually open after having kept it on the down low for so many years.

Speaking of keeping things on the down low, in the media's eye Maria and Victoria Wilson have become 'best friends forever' yet the depth of their real relationship is kept respectively quiet. Victoria has become the most popular British monarch since Elizabeth II, and as much as people relentlessly speculate about these two together, any 'shipping' in public or social media is met with hostility—and this is all because her fans and detractors alike both agree that Victoria has a right to a private life that's actually private.

Where Victoria's sex life is off limits, her public engagement to her old WSO from Nufa, now Major, Alastair Neville, has surprised the shit out of everyone! Victoria had to find someone agreeable to pop children out with and the Nippers was actually open to it. It helps that he's stupidly attractive and knows his place. It also helps that he secured his own VC two years later in Afghanistan by throwing himself into a desperate fight against the Sunni Nuqi-Taliban. Nobody thought this poltroon had it in him, but that's a story for another day.

Now the Xhemal, Caesar and Sheila, always have a standing and open invitation to Monique's, and that's a given, but dinner tonight is in honor of their bestest friends, Bob and Michal.

Tonight's festivities is to celebrate these two heading out to the peace talks tomorrow being held at 32-Tau, talks that Michal pushed hard for and Bob tried desperately to quash from the shadows, and everybody here is here to wish them well—all the well knowing that their respective intel services have good reason to believe they may not make it out alive.

Tonight the risks to them are not something anybody will dare dwell on, and after three toasts to Bob and Michal, Nicole stands to offer one to their longtime friend and confidant, Yaqub Ahmed Mofid, "On behalf of Bob and Michal, I want to thank you all for your well wishes. It is much appreciated, but at this moment I want to thank President Mofid for all his heroic efforts in getting us to this point."

Bob raises his glass and goes, "Here-here!"

That toast was for the benefit of Michal because everyone else there knows that Mofid was working with Bob trying to stop the talks.

Mofid has been called the accidental president. Because of his long service at the U.N. he was chosen as a running mate for the late Bryon Smith—who died in a mini submarine with Antonio Dimitri deep in the Tonga Trench by Pago-Pago. During the livestream the pressure breached a micro-fracture in the hull that manifested itself near crush depth and, well, can you say purée? The nomination was handed over to Mofid who, to the surprise of everybody, actually won!

Mofid has been coined the 'man of little words but big action' and is so nationalistic that it shocked the voting public after him having spent so many years at the United Nations. Mofid is a dyed in the wool 'classical liberal' but what Jane and John Q Public learn during his short time on the campaign trail is that it was because he was at the U.N. for so long—it forged his 'America First' mindset.

And the voters ate that up!

What helped on the stump was that his wife, Esma, and he came as a matched set. As the hottest thing since Dawn Willoughby, who to this day is in a tight second place to Melania Trump, Esma had this wickedly acerbic tongue in contrast and counterpoint to her refined beauty. When the press or the pundits lit into Mofid over made up shit, if they didn't have their ducks in a row then here came Esma with the rhetorical dick-slap to put them in their place. Hands down, Esma triumphed in the battle of wits against the press and their opposition like a boss.

And the voters ate that up too.

Exempli gratia, when the press misrepresented her husband's voting record on the Security Council, after Esma's crotch-shot of a fact check, in their face on a live broadcast, her follow on comeback was to offer the reporters and producers of the show a job mowing the White House lawn, saying it was something they could probably do without fucking it up too bad.

Esma stands and holds her wine glass towards Nicole, "Thank you, Marshal Burke! I finally get to meet you...wow!" She nods and, "Who I want to thank is Madame Ribot for hosting our lil' soirée tonight! It is mucho appreciated." She pulls her wine glass down and, "Ya know, you didn't make it to last year's Whitehouse Christmas party and Tristan had to come all alone, you should have seen his pouty widdle face, but you *are* going to make it this year, yes?" She leans in slightly, "Queen Victoria is scheduled to attend and I hear she's a down to Earth kinda gal! I can't wait to meet her myself!"

Monique looks at du Conde who is pointing at his mock frowny face. She smirks and turns to Victoria next to her, who is sitting hand and hand with Maria, then back to Esma and, "You know, I always wanted to meet...Vicky. We would be delighted to attend!"

With everyone rolling their eyes and snickering, Esma turns to Bob and Michal, "You two, well...what can I say!" She raises her glass to them, "If it doesn't work out, and chances are it won't, if you happen to be looking for something to do?" She looks both ways and, "The Rose Garden could use a good pinch back!"

Now with everybody actually laughing out loud, our Esma innocently shrugs and Victoria speaks up, "What a tosser!" Then to Maria she points and asks, "Are you listening to this?"

Maria goes, "Yea, I know, Vic! She's stiff competition."

Scott nudges Nicole with a grin, "Go on, go on, give it to her!"

With the laughter dying down, Nicole pulls a large-sheathed khukri from under the table and slaps it down in front of Esma, then says, "I hear you wanted this! Hell, I hear everybody wants this thing, but you—you get it!"

Esma sort of recoils and asks, "This the one from New York?"

Nicole nods, "Yup, Karr's blade! Read the engraving."

Esma pulls the huge knife from the sheath and reads, "New York City, twenty-three-oh-nine April one, TOS: 0128, 0769, 0014, SA36-CCMS Burke Nicole..." She squints and says, "Works great!" Laughing big, Esma shakes her head and, "Oh no! I can't take this! This should go to your Jessica!"

Jessica shakes her head towards Esma, "No, I got dozens of those things. I don't need another one."

Esma looks to Nicole and asks, "Seriously? Really?"

"Seriously! Really!" Nicole points to Mofid, "I figure it'll end up at his presidential library. You'll get more use out of it!"

With Esma mouthing the words, *thank you*, Caesar speaks up, "Thinking about your library, the photo op with you two feeding Fido last year was such a hit that we're sending you his skeleton."

Esma asks, "He died?"

"It was sudden!" Caesar grabs his feathered breast, quivers on his ottoman, and his head flops over with his tongue sticking out.

Sheila snorts, "Yup, he was old and heart just gave out! His shit diet finally caught up to him." She then takes a big bite of fatty prime rib, then says, "Wouldn't that look great in the lobby!"

Mofid shakes his head, "That's worth...it's priceless, no!"

"It ain't worth shit!" Caesar laughs, "Ya know, Yaqub, we were going to give the New York Natural History Museum the skeleton of the Chermiera Mountain Cankersaurus, it's dead too, but we could give you that one if you want?"

Sheila nods, "It'd be a bigger draw!"

Caesar twirls his claw at him, "Come on, pick one!"

Mofid was about to protest so Esma kicks him under the table, "Shut up and pick one, ya *beshoor*!"

"*Antareh gav...*" Mofid mutters quietly to her, then gives in, "Okay, I'll take Fido!" He looks to Esma, "That make you happy?"

"Yur durned tootin'! And for that..." Mofid does a facepalm when Esma quietly follows with, and just loud enough for all to hear, "I'll let you mount me on morning prayers for the rest of the week!"

Through the laughter, Sasha, with her heavy accent, offers what everyone there at the table were all thinking, "President Mofid, if you need someone to stand in for you...I am available!"

Mofid huffs a laugh and winks at her with a smile, "Thank you, Sasha, but I got this!"

Sasha nods with a slight frown, "My offer stands!"

Jacob looks at Sasha, "What if I want to offer my services?"

She glances over her shoulder, "Line starts behind me."

Victoria puts up a finger, "I'll queue up next!"

Jacob looks at her, "After me."

Victoria demands, "Ya scrote, ladies first!"

Nicole goes, "In that case I'm next!"

Jessica says, "Forth!"

"You can go before me, honey."

"Thank you, Mom!"

Monique raises her hand and claims, "Fifth here?"

Maria then protests, "Wha? I get sloppy sixth!"

Esma offers, "I'll settle for seventh, Okay!" With all of them giving her a look, she gestures to herself, "Hey, I'd fuck me!"

Alex looks to Copper who is bringing her water glass up to her lips, "You're being inordinately quiet tonight. You gonna get in on this, Copper?"

With Copper taking a sip of water, Esma suddenly grips the edge of the table and pushes back with wide eyes, and after a few short seconds she shudders ever so slightly and blurts, "What the hell! Where'd that come from!"

Maria, Jacob, Bob and Monique give Jessica a look and she goes, "Hey, don't look at me!"

They all turn their faces to Copper who, putting her glass down, sheepishly says, "Sorry, I cut in line."

Esma laughs, "I feel like I've been defiled...do it again!"

With everyone astonished and amazed by this, Maria points to Jessica, "Jessie, since everyone here knows about you, being Scarab and all, can you do that too? I'm curious."

"You're not serious!" Jessica snorts and gives a disinterested look as she scratches her ear, and while acting like she has pulled something out of that ear to inspect it—the rest of the women in the room, including Maria, suddenly perk up and start to shudder just like Esma had. Brushing her fingers off Jessica says, "Easy peasy."

Mofid, looking around table, shakes his head while the ladies catch their breath, "Perfectly immaculate. Ya know, I've been briefed on what you guys can do, but to see this is...this is truly amazing."

Esma laughs, "I'm begging! You two have to come to high tea on twelve-twenty-one! Fuck with the Queen's head!"

Victoria speaks up, "I heard that, love."

Biting her lip, Esma comically looks around and up and down, "I'm hearing voices. Anybody else hear that?"

du Conde speaks up, "Madame, First Lady, as our dear friend Lebedev says, we do live in a world of possibilities."

Jessica squints at Esma, "So, we're party favors then?"

Esma acts like a guilty little kid and nods, "Yea!"

Jessica and Copper look at each other, laugh and high-five while Copper says to Victoria, "It's up to Vic."

Victoria nods towards Maria, "It's up to her, not me!"

Maria thinks about this and, "Okay, but no digging!"

Jessica nods and looks towards Mofid and Esma, "If a skeleton or two pops out of someone's closet we'll share but it cannot come back at us, deal?" She then leans in, "I know you want to know what Lebedev has up his sleeve and his wife is like an open book to us."

Copper adds, "She has a very chaotic mind."

"Vasily thinks she's a clueless social butterfly, she does act the part, but Milanka is actually a walking encyclopedia of what he's up too. She's knows everything." Jessica then paths directly into Mofid's mind with <"But after tomorrow it won't matter.">

Mofid's brow furls and he thinks, *I understand*, then says, "Well, I'm dying to hear what you find out, but confer with Marshal Ramirez first. I would like her in that loop to make those calls."

"It's a deal!" Jessica then again follows up privately to Mofid, <"Just so you know, the Marshal shares all relevant intel with you.">

Maria says to Jessica, "Jess, just tell him what you find out and let me know later, okay?" Then to Mofid, "And, yea, whatever you use it cannot point back at her or Copper."

Esma wonders, "Is it true about Milanka?"

Jessica asks. "That her feet never touch the ground?"

With Esma nodding yes, Copper blurts out, "Yea buddy, she's the slut! And double-yea, Vasily knows."

Esma gives them a look so Jessica adds, "She's his beard."

Maria speaks up, "You can't use that!"

"No! It's just that..." Esma looks to Mofid, "Everything about him makes sense now. You knew that?"

Mofid nods, yes, "I still think of him as my friend."

du Conde throws out, "*Oui!* We still love the man in spite of his many faults and never-ending secrets—layered upon secrets."

Michal points out, "We all had our secrets."

du Conde rolls his eyes with a coy smiles when Bob adds, "Yes, we did, but especially you, Tristan."

Sasha nudges Jacob, "Speaking of loving the man, I need to get you tucked in before too long."

Jacob nods yes as Mofid asks, "Mission tomorrow?"

With Jacob and Sasha making their way around the table, giving hugs and saying their goodbyes, Sasha hangs back with Monique as Jacob moves on towards President Mofid and Esma.

Monique and Sasha give each other a hug and Monique says, "It was my pleasure meeting you, Sasha."

"Madame Ribot, my husband sang your praises for so long that to finally meet you...meh, I was not disappointed! Yet, I feel that we have more in common than you may realize."

With a defensive smile, Monique says, "Curiously, we'll have to do coffee sometime soon. After the first of the year?"

Sasha nods, "Love too, but it may be sooner than you think?" Stealthily she glances around then with zero accent, "Luc says hi!" With Monique blinking, absorbing this tidbit, Sasha continues with a confident smile, "Nine, tomorrow morning sound good for you?"

Like a brick to the head, Monique finally realizes who Sasha really is, "*Mon Dieu!* How about eight?" With Sasha nodding in agreement, Monique points over her own shoulder, "If you want, the Blue Room is available, at the top of the stairs! My home is yours, there's no need to run back to One-Klick."

Sasha's accent returns with shrug, "If you insist?"

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On the top observation deck of the Chateau, Jessica and Seth are sitting watching the Presidential, what's still called a Motorcade, race north for Palmdale, silently clearing the mountainous peaks of the Angeles National Forest, and right after that they sulk as Mac loads Bob, Nicole and Michal into everyone's favorite limo, the Mach-glider.

Bob and Nicole originally set aside two hours after dinner for Jessica and Seth, but these two knew ahead of time that a couple of hours alone with their mother and grandfather would have been gawd awful, so with Jessica and Copper pulling some mental strings the whole party, including President Mofid and Esma, rolled right into the ballroom and everyone had a blast for the next three and a half hours.

With Jacob and Sasha, and little Angela having turned in, they started off with a game of Password, which is popular around here, and after over an hour it morphed into Charades—that is when Caesar opted to give a clue via interpretive dance, which is a running gag for him. With that precedent set, everyone else followed suit.

Where the dinner party was great, this was ridiculously fun, and when it finally broke up everyone was happy and didn't want it to end, but for Bob and Michal the clock was ticking.

For her efforts, Jessica now finds herself indebted to Copper.

As the limo rises a window opens and Nicole blows them both a kiss before it climbs away for the top of the One-Klick tower, which is anchored to the Los Angeles basin far below.

Their silence was broken by Diego stepping up from behind, "Hey, you two! How was the dinner party?"

Jessica asks, "It was great, how was Connie's premier?"

"Hey sis!" Seth reaches up and Diego leans down from behind to hug him, and he asks, "You have fun?"

"Honestly, no, but, like Monique says, Connie has to learn how to manage a flop first." Diego turns and hugs Jessica, then, "Carlos calls it polishing a turd, which he says can net them more return than a blockbuster...well, not on the books that is."

Jessica wonders, "That's so counterintuitive."

"Okay, Connie's project was actually tailored for the Asian market, not the U.S. They planned for it to tank here, so the fire sale will probably be before the end of the year. What's released this summer in that market will be edited way different than what was shown tonight and will end up busting their blocks."

"They planned to flop, intentionally?"

Ten year old Seth expounds, "Jess, it's kinda interesting what they do. Every year or so they manufacture a huge loss by auctioning off a domestic flop, and always to a subsidiary of a company Monique owns. She has five of 'em an' what they make from the international box office and streaming is all stealth revenue and none of it makes it to her books. So, when Carlos has a project they know is gonna clean up here they'll finance it through her shadow corporations..."

Jessica looks up at Diego, "You listening to this?"

"The losses and load, and the interest liability built up during production, that all flattens out the books here locally and fattens her accounts offshore. Funny thing is that it's all above board."

Jessica glances down towards Seth, "T.M.I. little dude."

He looks to Jessica, "I can crunch the numbers for ya, sis!"

Jessica shakes her head, "No, that's okay! You can turn your brain off for tonight, or I'll hard boot it for ya. Your choice!"

Seth chuckles, "By your command—*click*."

Even though it's night and the city is lit up, Diego can see the dot of the limo speeding away in the far distance, "Is that them?"

Jessica nods, "Yup."

Diego breaths deep, knowing what's coming, "I'm sorry."

Tears well up in Seth's eyes, "Yup."

Feeling their sadness, "I'll leave you two be." Diego hugs and kisses them both and makes her way out.

With Diego gone, Seth leans into Jessica, and after the longest of moments he asks her, "Jessie, what's a one-eyed got?"

Confused, Jessica goes, "Hu? A one-eyed what?"

"Scott kept saying that to mother. You were gone a lot, but he'd mumble something and then say that, and he did it all the time. I've always wondered what a *got* was?"

Jessica grins big and, also with tears now in her eyes, tries not to laugh, "There ain't no woman like...the...one...I...got."

Trying not to cry, both are now faced with the Herculean effort of trying not to laugh and, failing that, they both start laughing hysterically with tears streaming down their faces.

After a half-minute of this it starts to die down and Jessica sniffs big and lightly knuckle taps the top of his head, "D'uh."

Seth breaths deep then sighs big, "I'm gonna miss them."

"Yep." Jessica then thinks about it and says, "I think you're going to like Gilroy. For a dumbass, he's a scream."

Seth nods in agreement, "I already do."

Jessica looks down at him and kisses him on top of the head, "We can help him get his PhD. He always wanted to finish that."

Seth thinks about it and says, "We should let them be."

Jessica's gut tells her that Seth knows something, so she asks, "How much time does he have?"

"Enough." He then looks up at her, "You'll like Yoon."

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61

maus in the house

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

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

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

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

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

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

came it repeatedly bounced off the surface of the star like skipping a stone on a pond. Thusly shredded and frazzled, when the poor thing finally fell in it was at such a low energy state that many of the astronomers who were watching it take the final plunge would swear they heard the sucking 'schlorp' as it slipped under the photosphere.

If the orbital models are correct, and they're checking out as rock solid, they expect a chaotic mess in the future with more flings, more schlorps and at least one, more probable than not, head-on smashup between two gas giants.

That said, Sriracha Mu is far enough away from this craziness that it can watch all the action in relative peace. This dwarf has five planets with the one and only habitable planet, Taiji, tidally locked to this tiny star. Sporting an additional slow rotisserie spin, in line with the poles on the orbital plane, with the hot side always hot and the cool side cool, the people who first settled here long ago gave it the nickname of McDLT—and nobody today understands what that means?

On Taiji, the dead-center hot side desert region hovers at 85° Celsius, but the cold side has an ocean that fills an almost planet-wide impact basin that covers 32% of the planet's surface—the side that always faces away from Sriracha Mu. This ocean loops around an ice cap called The Mesa, and the cap, half the size of Antarctica, climbs to all of twelve kilometers above what would be considered planetary sea level—sea level being at least a kilometer above the rest of the planet's surface if that ice cap ever decides to melt.

Because of its extreme altitude the thin ambient air of the cold side Mesa varies from -80°C when facing away from Nyx and rises dramatically to -15°C with Nyx overhead, so when Taiji's ass end, The Mesa, is swept by Nyx the storms will rage over the Aureole Ocean for half of Taiji's twelve week orbital cycle around Sriracha Mu.

This fitful ocean averages two thousand kilometers between the Mesa and the coast, and on the edge of the impact basin, going inland, are tributaries that spider-web all along this circular shoreline.

The habitable region is a three-thousand kilometer wide band that runs from the ocean just into the red dwarf facing side, where the desert starts, with the narrow 'sleeve pleasant' ribbon called the veggie or lettuce belt that spans from the perpetual horizon into the civil twilight zone. With a never ending planet-wide rolling-convection that loops around with the cool air blowing in from The Mesa and hot air returning high above from the desert—clouds, drizzle and light rain persist in harassing the lettuce belt most of the time, and deluge it some of the time, keeping temperatures at even keel, and if ever there were a visitor from Seattle then they would feel right at home here.

A century ago, during the first war in the Hyades, Taiji was

the furthest locale that the fighting actually touched. Being the only readily habitable planet in the Pleiades it was stocked with transplants from the Hyades and back then all of them had strong ties to their original Cooperatives. The bitter fighting here did not stop at wars end and the savage 'Game of Thrones' backstabbing, jockeying of alliances, assassinations and murder sprees that followed came to an abrupt end when the newly formed SA put their foot down—or else.

The remaining five 'dynastic houses' that morphed out of this ungodly mess evolved into interdependent territorial states who are now represented in the FIS separately. The thing to note is that there are no hard feelings between them, they trade openly and get along swimmingly, and where most members of the FIS have deferred military matters and defense to the SA or PADF, here on Taiji...

Each of The Five Houses are armed to the teeth.

Now, back in 2311, with this war looming over the horizon, The Five Houses and the SA planned ahead by handing over apparent control of defense for Taiji to the PADF, but all this was in name only, and with Security Services now sweeping through the Pleiades the PADF had to make their stock chicken-shit show of it by pulling stumps and evacuating both air and armor assets. With spies everywhere they loaded it all up into transports but, instead of actually leaving the system, the ships dropped back down over the arctic region and the equipment was stuffed into caverns that were carved out deep under the ice cap and far away from prying eyes.

Having swept the Pleiades of an apparently weakened Annex, Security Services was spread too thin and, while waiting to consolidate their gains under the BDF and regroup, the CDF decided all on their own to step in and have a go of it. Five days ago they invaded Taiji, and a planet called Ngāti Whā, and right now Hartcourt is working to put the brakes on the CDF before they screw up his desired outcomes.

Jacob and Peña, having parked their fighters at the cavern entrance, hiked the two kilometers to a double wind-trap consisting of two barriers of plastic curtain strips leading into the massive storage area. All along the ice walls and ceiling are thermal spray-on coatings that absorb all infrared radiation, and with three hundred meters of glacial ice above them only the eyes of God can now peer inside.

Jacob and Peña approach General Giáp, who is pointing at the entrance and shouting at some workers while the last pallets from the Annex are carted in by freight handling bots, "Get those bloody thermal barriers and the man-trap back up! Hop to it ya wankers!" He stops and laughs at Jacob, "Oy, 'ellow, Buzz! 'Ow are ya?"

Jacob shakes his hand and bro-hugs him, "Gawd damn it, Zip! It's been fucken' forever!"

Giáp then shakes Peña's hand, "You're that jar-head, Peña!"

Peña laughs, "General Giáp, I've heard all about you, sir!"

Giáp nods, "Well, if those stories are coming from this bald bloke here, then they're all lies!" He turns to Jacob, "How's that chocolate filly of yours? What's 'er name, Cricket?"

Jacob, with a wide-eyed look, "I walked away from that one."

"You dickwit!" He leans in, "She available dare I ask?"

Jacob shakes his head, "Naw, Cowboy 'as been tappin' that, *and* they just had a baby!"

Giáp is surprised, "I didn't know that poofter 'ad it in him! Well, lucky motherfucker! Wish we had time to catch up, but we are in a bit of a crunch here." He then thumbs at the pallets, "So, what'd the lorries wheel in for me?"

"A gift, from Sandoval and Ramirez..." Jacob starts breaking the wrapping and opening the crates while saying, "You are launching in nine-weeks, on the twenty-fifth right?"

"Rightly'o, sixty-three days to go! Shit starts right after Christmas dinner at eighteen-hundred hours..." He turns to Peña and adds, "Zulu time that is. We're the only planet on zulu proper."

Jacob punches open the cover of one of the crates and asks, "Think your people will be able to hold off being pissed-off until then?"

"Today, when you're gone, my minions will simply go home, throw back a pint or ten, watch football, an' we won't lift a finger. The quarter-mil BR1's you supplied us we got stashed underground in lockers along the lettuce belt, so we don't care if those wankers take our old kit!" He then nods, "I want to thank you for all the Wolverines too! They'll come in right handy."

Jacob reminds him, "Those were for signing on to the PADF."

Giáp shrugs, "Those budgerigars...we have little regard."

"They are what we have to work with."

"Knee-highs in blue, not soldiers."

"They fill a niche."

"Like I said."

"Yea, well..." Jacob snorts a laugh, as he starts to reach into the crate, "How you gonna deal with the Mancubus tanks I wonder?"

Curious as to what's in the crate, the contents out of eyeshot, Giáp leans back, "Yes, we got Maus in the house, I read the sitrep."

"As indestructible as they're reported to be, they are actually way over engineered and easy to knock the fight out of 'em." Jacob has pulled a standard micropede missile from the crate and tosses it to him, "And these little numbers will do the trick!"

"You already gave us eighty-thousand of the little buggers. How do we replace them in the stashes?"

"We've smarted the lil' bastards up. It's a software update. Just get one of these within a hundred meters from a stash and they'll all update automatically. Takes just five minutes."

"Oh, how bloody convenient!"

"Now, for armored targets, these micros are geared to hit on top or tickle the soft underbelly. It'll bean 'em, gut 'em or flip 'em!"

Noticing two SA troopers also in JACCs stepping through the plastic strips, Giáp goes, "We still got to get in close to the Maus."

"No, this has to!" Jacob pulls the top two-meter long crate he opened and sets it on the ground in front of Giáp, "This is our new Hydrapede missile. The Hydra is actually a droid, not a missile at all. We've christen them, The Red Shell."

Giáp is curious, "We don't have the fighters to launch these?"

"It's an AG drive with a Xena AI brain. There is enough here for each of your tank platoons to have one of 'em. Just drop it in the basket in the back and the interface is the same as the PacMan drone. They carry eighteen micropedes. They're refillable and reusable."

Giáp is amazed, "Bloody hell! We'll take 'em!"

"Like the Gurkha Regiment, you can't use the Hydras 'till the third of January." With Anthony Gudici and Zach Nelson stepping up, their suits all scratched up and still smoldering, Jacob points to the micropede missile in Giáp's hand, "But you can use these little bastards before then. You just have to get two-kilometer creative." Jacob pats Gudici on the back, "Deputy Marshal Gudici and Chief Nelson, here, they'll get your people up to speed."

Nodding with satisfaction, Giáp snorts big as he looks towards Gudici and Nelson, "Pleased to meet you two again!" Then to Jacob, "I was hoping to tangle with the Squirrels, but...Homer will do."

Peña speaks up, "General, I think you're gonna get a little more excitement with Homer."

Giáp rears back with surprise, "The hell, you say?"

Jacob points out, "The SS and us, well, we've developed a pretty gawd-damned good working relationship this go 'round. They'd land, we'd trade a few punches then we bug out. They also have been

completely backing off the last twenty or so kilometers from our evac point going, *Oh nooooo! They're getting away!*"

Giáp wonders, "Why in bloody balls would they do that?"

"They finally looked at the numbers! Eighty percent of their casualties were always-consistently incurred when closing on us."

Giáp chuckles when Peña adds, "Our battles are as predictable as a shitty chorus line. Ya know, hurl chunks, two-three-kick! Here, ya got ol' Homer spoilin' for an honest fight."

Jacob adds, "The CDF was supposed to hold off 'till March and go the *other* way, into Orion. Sticking their dick in Security Services' buffet, especially here-now, they're seriously fucking themselves over 'cause they're facing you!" Jacob then points towards Giáp, "When this starts, you'll have ten-days with them controlling the air."

Giáp huffs a laugh, "What air? The storms will be raging!" Then he says to Peña, "Predictable, like a shite chorus line." Then to Gudici and Nelson, "So, me mateys, how's the fight goin'?"

Gudici nods as he brushes soot off of Nelson, "Not bad. It's just that I hate doing the command shuffle in the middle of one. They yank our battalion and toss us a Gurka regiment."

Nelson snorts, "Yea, gnarly little psychos."

Giáp smiles, "Boys, we should get ya cleaned up, pop a suds and let these two shove off 'ow 'bout? I think we're gonna have a bloody good time of it come Jan-three!"

||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |||||

Flying in a high wind is not a big deal at altitude. If you go with the flow you'll make pretty good time, when going against it your ground speed will leave a lot to be desired, and in a crosswind you'll be flying with a sideways cant into the wind. The bottom line, high winds are not really that of a big deal—until you get near the ground that is. High winds on the deck are not exactly the intrinsically safe bet.

At low altitude these winds are affected by—everything.

Where there are a lot of terrain features the wind can get blustery, with sheers and eddies that can flip your shit in a split of a second, but here on the downward slope of the Mesa ice cap it's a nice and steady hundred-and-five kph. Now, Jacob and Peña's fighters may look like they're sitting peacefully on the escarpment like landing-pad, outside the cavern entrance, but the reality is that the AI is currently flying the ships while on the deck. Taiji's gravity is only 0.7 that of Earth's and their AG drive is actually pushing the ships into the surface

with about two-gravities of extra force to keep them pinned down, and you wouldn't really know this unless you took the time to notice the fins and air surfaces constantly trimming to keep the ships steady.

Though the back side of Taiji is considered the dark side it sees light from Nyx for about six of its twelve week orbital cycle, giving a dark-gray hue to the storm clouds overhead, and in spite of an arctic like albedo of 0.86 on the surface, with most energy reflected back out into space, just enough is absorbed to create these massive storms.

With their canopies sealed Jacob radios Peña while preparing his Thunderbolt to launch, "Ready to go blow shit up?"

Peña radio's back, ["When am I not ready for blowing shit up? I'm trailing here, want me to lift off first?"]

"Yeppers! Whenever you're ready, Dog. Go for it."

["Here...okay, here we go!"]

The AG units on Peña's Cerberus fighter switches directional flow from two-gravities down to two-gravities up, and with that the ship looks like it hops up into the air. The wind catches the wings and fins and after a few seconds of assent—Peña pulls the canards up and the ship does a backflip. As he rolls and drops towards the ocean, now going with the flow of air, Jacob duplicates the maneuver.

What's interesting to note is that most inhabited tidally locked planets happen to be moons that orbit much larger planetary bodies, like Pripyat or Second Hand, and these planets adopt the standard longitude and latitude orientation with poles matching those of their host planet. By contrast, tidally locked planets going around a dwarf star, such as Taiji, at times have this orientation turned 90° sideways with the Northern pole facing the host star. Conveniently placing the equator along the solar terminator, this arrangement is especially helpful if that planet also happens to be rotating on that polar axial. Point being, the vast majority of navigational products only retain the planetary mappings to systems under license. When one shows up to someplace new the nav-computer will automatically apply a snapshot of a planetary body to a basic longitude and latitude template and then reorient and remap when it's convenient. Pony up the fees and the nav-crew can simply plot and match key geodetic monuments to the planetary mapping—that is if they can procure said mapping and zero in on the monuments which requires some cooperation from the locals.

Something that the CDF has yet to do here.

Jacob and Peña drop below the storm clouds and are now flying over the ocean along this arctic latitude, with the Mesa ice cap to their right. Flying sideways to the wind, just under Mach 2, the violent buffeting and jolts kind of smooth out and makes it feel like they are

actually hitting small potholes in the pavement as they tear through the blustery gusts and downdrafts while over the ocean. Because they're using primarily the AG drive, with a minimal thrust for stability, the thick clouds above them effectively blot out any thermal signature to speak of so it's like they're not even there.

Jacob radios, "Holding at LSALT. One minute to waypoint."

["Roger."] Peña responds, and while mentally scratching his head he finally asks, ["Okay, first time here and I'm having a hard time with Taiji orientation so let me get this straight, we're traveling up but in reality we are moving towards the...east?"]

Jacob blurts a laugh, "Yea! North is towards Sriracha Mu."

["And they already know our breakout is to the south?"]

"Yup!"

["And I see on tactical they're building up forces west of the encirclement but they think it's south. That's actually west, right?"]

"You got it."

["Aaaaand they're falling for it?"]

"Yea, buddy. Like you, they've never been here before."

["You always say that for a ruse to work it doesn't need to be elaborate but, fucken' hell, this is some simple stupid shit."]

Jacob huffs a laugh, "I can guarantee that some nav-dweeb tried to tell 'em and command wouldn't listen. Okay, you lead. Bank north and go to best speed, climb and I'll pace myself with you."

Hitting the waypoint they turn due north, which is around the planet towards the desert side, the point closest to Sriracha Mu, and Peña switches off AG and kicks it up to Mach 4.8. The heat from full thrust would be something easy to spot from space but they have zagged so far from the cavern that it doesn't matter now.

As Peña initiates the zoom climb he realizes, ["This is only gonna work once, ya know."]

"It's a trump card I never thought I'd get to see played."

["From the looks of it, even if by some miracle they figured this out they couldn't move their asses and assets in time."]

"You're blocking those forces so, remember, we want to keep their casualties low but you can dish it out if they threaten to push."

At fifty kilometers altitude they crank it up to a blistering Mach 15. Their flight path would now be damned near impossible to ignore from any vantage point—but ignored they are.

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On today's bill-of-fare is an old school breakout.

Wehrmacht master of encirclement, Oskar Munzel, would be shocked to learn that almost nobody today consumes his writings on that very subject. It's only standing armies with dedicated armored divisions, like the United States and the Russian Republic, who sport commanders versed in these tactics. Then there's the oddball Munzel connoisseur like Jacob Graves and his many disciples. Where fighter pilots still shamelessly memorialize Dicta Boelcke as a doctrine of the gods from up on high—it has lost all relevance centuries ago, and where the works of Munzel have been forever viewed as the quaint zeitgeist for waging wars long past—in about twenty or so minutes his obscure teachings are going to be very relevant going forward.

All five Rapid Reaction teams have just descended from space and are depositing armored units around three Co-op divisions that are encircling an understrength SA division on a tree mottled grassland called Wycombe Pastures. In eyeshot of the city of Perth, in the House of Perth, one could not have picked a better tactical cluster-of-a-fuck to put Munzel's theories on breakouts to task. It also helps that the teams brought with them four-hundred Thunderbolts and Cerberus fighters, which makes the hundred and twenty Djinn that have been controlling the skies over Wycombe skedaddle for the now.

The Annex ditches armor when they can and Security Services does so in like. They both view armor as a platform with a support utility and avoid it as the spearhead. The SA troops here on Taiji were not expecting the CDF, which has an affinity for armor, and this planet, with its relatively smooth landscape and a bazillion hidden dips and defilades, is perfect for armored warfare. The CDF showed up with ten divisions loaded to the gills with their tried and true Revenant tanks, but mixed with them is an assortment of their newest monster tank, the Mancubus. Christened the Maus, which kind of looks like a floating Abrams without tracks, this thing was actually designed by a subsidiary of an Annex owned conglomerate—which built the beast with future SA countermeasures and armored units in mind.

The RRF teams dropping around the Co-op positions have the older Wolverines, which is best compared to the turretless S-Tank, except it also has no tracks and floats. The teams would rather have their new Pazuzu tanks, affectionately called the StuG, which can duke it out with a Maus, David and Goliath style, but that's an eventuality that's not going to happen until after January three. The Wolverines are just going to have to play it safe and keep shootin' an' scootin' and stay out of reach of the Maus.

For the now it's really up to infantry and air.

Kacper Cyzk, known as 'Moidah' by his fellow fighter pilots, almost never sees the inside of a Thunderbolt cockpit anymore. Two days ago he was commanding a regiment on the run out at Ngāti Whā when he got orders to extricate himself and assume command of Nicole Burke's division stuck out here on Taiji. The division's Delta-9, Fred Sargent, has been doing a bang up job while Burke has been gone half the time but now is not the most opportune of times for her to be out snipe-hunting for the elusive 'Big Bird of Peace' with Jackson, so Sargent finally pitched a bitch and Cyzk got called up.

Cyzk has been forever under the gun while working for Burke and her executive, Chief Sargent, and even though Sargent has lit into him and verbally flailed his ass raw more times than he could count, to find himself suddenly elevated to Division commander, with Sargent as his exec, for Cyzk is the oddest feeling in the world. Then to hear that the Chief demanded him over everyone else, and no one else, gave ol' Kacper the creepy crawlies from head to toe.

Cyzk's people were able to keep the sky clear by bustin' skeet on the Co-op micro recon droids, so with the Annex controlling the sky they did not need to clean that up too. Now, with Thunderbolts up high and the Cerberus' hugging the ground, the CDF suddenly realizes that the tables have been turned and they need to keep still and hold their fire or they'll get a bomb or two dropped on top of their heads by the Cerberus fighters. The fastest any of them can move under cloak is 5kph and above that the Thumpers, that is the Cerberus fighters, will spot them. Fact is they can spot them anyway! Quite by accident the Annex AI figured out that while scanning in monochrome if they simply pull focus out—a cloaked object will appear like a molehill from the side, or a dimple from above, and nobody had the heart to clue the CDF in just yet.

Noon, January third, is when all bets are off.

Cyzk gave the evac order a few minutes ago and the troops have been peeling off the perimeter and are at this moment charging in his direction—leaving the bulk of their droids and drones holding the line for now. They've practiced breakouts like this, but here is the first time in combat they'll be doing it for real and the timing is critical.

Cyzk radio's Jacob who is now pulling into an orbit high above the encirclement, "Hey, Buzzard Chow, you ready for this?"

Jacob radio's back, ["Question is, are you ready for this?"]

"As I'll ever be so, be advised, I'm gonna have a stampede tearin' through here in about a minute so that balloon had better burst on time or we'll have a pile up right where I'm standing."

Michelle Kiel calls out to him on this command frequency, ["No worries, Moidah! Twenty seconds and we'll pop that bubble!"]

Noticing the division's exec field company starting to ready themselves around him, Cyzk smiles, "Then let 'er rip, Guns."

Just then, Chief Sargent broadcasts to the entire division with, ["Delta-three-six, here we go! Get ready to pucker your butts."]

For a casual observer it's the sheer violence of a coordinated maneuver, like a Munsel inspired breakout, with today's loadout, that they would find chaotic and frighteningly disturbing. Starting this thing off are forty Warthogs on station over the encirclement, and at the appointed time three groups of ten split off and race towards the northeast, west and south—which to the CDF would be the northwest, south and east. (I know, it's confusing) Each Warthog pickles off over a hundred cluster bombs and in a handful of seconds they shred an eighty meter wide by three kilometer long swath of total destruction through the Co-op lines. Hundreds of Pacman drones pour into the western breach, the expected escape route, so hopefully that'll keep the CDF busy long enough for the division to slither out via the south.

This is one of those really rare occasions where hanging-ten on point is probably the safest place to be. Cyzk, backed up by his company, jets off and leads the division into the southern breach at high speed. Flying through the long gap, close to the ground at over 70kph, they face no resistance. Like dozens of textile rovings spun into a single strand, forty-five hundred troopers, with their dead and wounded intermingled with them, converge on the jumping off point and high-tail it into the breach after them without breaking stride.

Racing through this long gap is surreal to be sure. The CDF units close to them have pulled back because, as expected, the "Thumpers" are now making relentless 23mm cannon attacks parallel to the three runs. As they race through the southern gap Cyzk counted about twenty dead CDF troopers in ACE fighting suits, three destroyed Revenant tanks and one Maus that has been flipped over on its back like a tortoise.

Cyzk and his company exit the gap and instantly drop to the ground to secure an impromptu bridgehead. With that the troopers start to pour through and, spurred on by reaching open ground, they race off towards the evacuation site just twelve kilometers away.

Cyzk radios, "Biggest of Sixes, it looks like the planning and training paid off! I owe you that bottle."

Jacob responds, ["In a few minutes I'll hold you to that."]

Suddenly, the fighting to the west dies off so Cyzk ties into the tacnet and catches his heart with his teeth. The CDF units to the

west have started breaking contact and are initiating a charge towards the south, and while a Centipede-Azul streaks in and blows the ass off a Cerberus overhead that was banking for another attack run along their escape route, Cyzk looks out and notices that his troops, the ones with the Ma-Deuce rail guns in hand, have been getting some target practice in. While passing the flipped Maus they've all been punching eighty-eights into its soft underbelly—and since that crew is not dead they have apparently reported on the abuse.

With a double explosive vortex ripping past, Cyzk looks up and gives a quiet, "Oh shit."

Two IR5s just passed by at high speed and have dumped all their cluster bombs, weapons they use for defense, across the escape route. Cyzk watches as 16 bombs burst apart scattering 640 bomblets over the area with only two of them actually dropping into the run. The bomblets explode, each with the force of a one-thousand kilogram bomb, and the two that went off on the run knocks a handful of troops on their asses—who pick themselves up and keep going.

Over the radio, Jacob snorts, ["Well, that didn't last long."]

Cyzk simply nods, "And everything was going so well."

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With twelve IR5s streaking through the AO, at the last second they passed over the northeast and western runs without dropping on them and only bombed the southern breach—a dead giveaway they now know what was up. On the way in they launched over thirty of their Azul missiles to scatter the Thunderbolt and Cerberus fighters. The Centipede-Azul flies at such a high rate of speed they can't turn on fighters who are at a lower energy and higher maneuverability state. Going low and slow means that the SA pilots can easily get out of the way, but they have to get out of the way, so when a Cerberus got nailed in a lazy left bank that was unexpected.

Twelve seconds after the IR5 pass over the encirclement, six Dips blast through the area and are gaining on them.

Jacob's favorite wingman from back in the day, Kati Connors, was plucked from her "cushy" regimental exec job and pulled into his Mission Oversight group along with Oscar Peña, Michele Kiel and Dante Sergio. Where Peña was given control of CAS (close air support), and Kiel got AAO (air assault operations), she was quietly pissed to the n'th degree that her best friend, Sergio, got FCAP (force combat air patrol) which is basically the coveted escort air dominance roll.

Connors was the better pilot so she got the Dips.

The Cerberus-Dip is a gorgeous ship, and mind-blowingly fast, but nobody wants to fly the thing—least of all Connors. It has one job and one job only, and that is to chase after the IR5.

If pilots were allowed to maybe also fly reconnaissance then they would be open to driving the Dip but, since their mission is so specialized, nobody will volunteer. In fact, Dip pilots resent the fact that the Grigori recon droids even exist, and they're also bitter that the droids have a slight edge on speed and are a smashing success.

What they really resent is having to play footsies with the IR5. Because the Strategic Planning group believes that if they spank it too hard the Co-op might abandon the IR5 replacement, which is currently approaching flight testing, the Dip pilots must self nerf, drop shots, fake overheating, and pretty much let most of them get away.

Even at this low altitude, in the thinner air of Taiji the IR5s are pushing Mach 7, and even though in seventy-five seconds Connors' Dips will be close enough to take a shot with their Centipede missiles, at this speed they have to be within a one-second lag behind them for the missiles to actually catch up and connect. If one could see her face they would see Connors snarling because if they were allowed to take the shot with eighty-eights, via their five-barrel cannons that is, they could hose them down at the three-second lag mark.

Unfortunately, the Dips are expected to play nice for now.

Jacob, with another eighteen Thunderbolts tagging along, are high above covering the Dips. The IR5 pilots know what they're doing and stick to the high speed run without deviation all to force the Dips behind them to cook their engines...which will be in about a minute or two according to their data on Cerberus performance.

With the three flights of four IR5s splitting up in twos a Dip now trails each pair covered by at least three Thunderbolts, who are ready to dive in at a second's notice, Connors is repeatedly chanting 'January third' like some jaded mantra when she is interrupted by Jacob coming over the radio saying, ["Orc-Kestrel, be the Picator!"]

Connors spits back, "Fuck you, Graves!"

He laughs and, ["I'm sorry, Kati. I'll make it up to you."]

"Make it up to me, my ass!"

["My hands are tied."]

"It's times like this your shit don't fly!"

He laughs, ["My shit never flies, you know that!"]

Just then, Peña cuts in, ["Buzz, we got a problem."]

Jacob sighs, ["Let's hear it, Dog."]

["The Raven and Maus units racing south are not stopping for anything! We're bombing the crap out of the ground in front of them with twenty-threes but the shit we're kicking up is giving 'em cover."]

["How soon till they reach Moidah?"]

["In a little more than two minutes the way they're going."]

["And our armor teams are flanking them when?"]

["They'll hit their flank in about ninety seconds."]

["And our people will vacate the encirclement when?"]

["About the time our Wolverine's t-bone their armor the run will be clear and Moidah will bug out with the last of his people."]

You can hear Jacob sigh, ["That's too close."]

["I would agree. There is no wiggle room here."]

Jacob then asks, ["Orc-Kestrel, how soon till you engage?"]

Connors says, "Sixty seconds! We're reeling 'em in but by then I'll have to pull off according to the cunt-licking chart."

Jacob grunts, ["God-damn it!"]

Connors laughs, "Okay, I'm calling bullshit on Ramirez and Strategic Planning's *ruse de guerre*! Right now is not the time for this motherfuckery and you know it!"

Jacob mumbles on the radio, ["Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckety fuck, fuck-it I'm done!"] He then downshifts with, ["Peña...stomp their shit. When our Wolves are about to hit their flank you rain shit on their parade—and don't let up. Kill everything heading south."]

There is a pause and Peña asks, ["Use the thirty's?"]

["By all means, you are weapons free. Release the thirties!"]

Peña cheers, ["Oh, halle-fucken-luiah! I'm out!"]

Connors wonders, "What about me, boss man?"

Jacob almost laughs, ["Connors, I like you, but it pains me to say that I can only let you cull their heard by half."]

Connors is surprised, "Fucken hell! No shit?"

["No shit! If they WEP past max then let 'em go, but I think it's time to let your people take a bite."]

"Eighty-eights?"

["I insist! It's a go for guns."]

Connors laughs, "You are sooo on my Christmas list!"

["Happy hunting! Out."]

Connors switches over to the Dip channel, "People, you're not going to believe this but...fuck the nerf. You've each been given a tag to bag one Kali." When the gleeful cheers subside, they cheer again when she adds, "You are also authorized to go for guns."

Connors accesses the tactical overview map and follows with, "Okay, watch for them to drop a blue shell in about twenty seconds. You know what to do. Burn one and let the other WEP out."

Flying the IR5 and the Dip only a couple of hundred meters off the ground at high Mach, around 7.21 and 7.23 respectively, would be considered an act of insanity by most pilots. Driving these ships like this requires a lot of cooperation and trust between the pilots and their AI who is constantly monitoring systems to prevent the pilot from spiking the ship into the ground or clipping obstacles. Sometimes it's a tug of war between the two because pilots tend to take risks that the AI doesn't find agreeable, but in combat it's all about taking risks.

Now flying over the desert region, Connors drops her ship dangerously close to the deck. She can feel the vortices from the two IR5 in front of her wind around her ship like they're conspiring to swat hers into the ground. At this speed she'll need a hundred meter clearance to launch a Centipede and the IR5 pilots are watching for that, and as she approaches the five-second lag point, the distance between the IR5 and her that she could cover in five seconds, both IR5s eject a Centipede-Azul missile backwards.

That's the beauty of the Thunderbolt missile launchers that the Co-op adopted for the IR5. Even though they have fewer moving parts than a normal trap-door launcher, they are complex, expensive and they can do crazy things like nonchalantly flick a one ton missile back at you. A tube missile launch is exactly like shooting a gun, and the recoil by 'firing' a missile backwards gives the IR5s a short lived half-second speed boost. On the tacnet Connors is made aware that all the IR5s did the same thing, and she has complete confidence in her pilots to neutralize the threat.

The idea is to throw a missile into a position to torpedo into you sideways, or chase after you, and to the Dip pilots this is only a speed bump of an annoyance. To the IR5 pilots this has always worked in the past to scatter the Dips, but the Dip pilots today have a new game plan.

On all SA fighters the Micropede defensive missile cartridges are slung on the underside of the ships but for the Dips, flying so low to the ground, this will not do. Since last summer they added fourteen cartridges along the spine of the Dip between the cockpit and the dorsal gun—which is their last ditch defense against missile threats so,

just like all the Dips, Connors pickles off eight Micropede missiles that flip back and split into two groups of four that spiral and wiggle their way for the Azul missiles that have just shot past and are now behind them. As the Azuls light up to attack the Micropedes smash into them.

Connors can focus on the shot at hand. Here the auto-sweep setting is not used because the Dip pilots must actually perform an affirmative-intentional action such as squeezing a trigger, and when hitting the three second lag she cuts loose a half a second burst from a Gatling style gun called the 88 originally from the Thunderbolt. The rounds spray out of the gun like a laser beam and because the Cerberus airframe is so light it imparts a slight bump of deceleration akin to tapping the breaks of a speeding automobile. It takes all of one and a quarter seconds for them to traverse the seven and a half kilometers to target and at this velocity, which boosts the already extreme atmospheric resistance, one would think that these 8.80mm rail gun rounds should sputter out half-way there but these bolts are stretched to 60mm with powerful rocket motors that will burn for a solid count of three seconds giving them 17,400 meters of extra unimpeded travel before the high-g slowing starts in earnest.

In air combat it's still called a "bullet convergence" but, since it's a single gun, it's technically a spread. The Dips AI preprograms the flight path of each eighty-eight as it enters the gun. Point being is that you can get some interesting and downright fancy-ass patterns at the receiving end, but for today the AI has selected a simple letterbox that covers the left engine nacelle and central fuselage.

Here it's the trailing IR5 that gets it.

The eighty-eights are tipped with a high-explosive warhead that either blows up on contact or, when designated as armor piercing, will hit and push through peek resistance/drop-off before detonation. It's all up to the AI to inform the rounds what they will be at the point where the target and their flightpaths intersect. The lethal spray of hyper-velocity bolts slams into the tail of the IR5 and, as if hosed down by a GAU-8 cannon from an ancient A-10, the left engine and central fuselage are shredded into spiraling tatters.

With the critical central trim fin blown away, this doomed IR5 suddenly rears its nose up, and as it starts to climb the WEP injection tank dumps its cryogenics into the undamaged engine—forcing the ship to violently corkscrew out of control. As the leading IR5 shoots away the cockpit detaches from the ship that's now flying apart.

Connors will find out later that this pilot died from the severe g-forces hammering the cockpit as it separated, a very common occurrence nowadays, but upon hearing the news relayed to her by General Giáp's people she will simply shrug with indifference.

As for right now she must let the other one get away so, through pursed lips, Connors quietly says to the IR5 making tracks downrange, "That's just a taste of things to come, mutherfucker."

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Weapons development for something like armored systems is all about choices and tradeoffs and the history of said development can be a fascinating one. *Id est*, in the twenty-first century the rail gun technology developed by the United States Navy ended up being an absolute waste of their time but, on the other hand, what they learned was quite useful for kicking things up a magical techno-notch or two in the twenty-second century for, let's say, tanks since they're topical!

By the time the twenty-third century came around they solved the quantum-particle power generation and flash capacitor problems, dramatically shrank the size of the guns and the ammunition, pushed the rate of fire back up to a useful six shots per minute or better, increased the accuracy and lethality of hyper-kinetic penetrators by at least three fold—and therein lies the problem! To compensate, armor had to get a lot better and from this started an arms race that dwarfed everything else before it. This was also the genesis of the small arms railgun revolution, but we'll cover that elsewhere.

The measure for measure dick-fight that followed resulted in two tippy-top of the heap competitors, those being the Wolverine and the Revenant tanks, developed by the Russian Republic and the United States respectively, which are both radically different in design but were actually nuts-on evenly matched. Where the scales tilted in favor of the Annex was with their better cloaking tech and the just recently developed arc-penetrator, a smart sabot-dart who's programmable on the fly trajectory can drop back down during its flight and easily defeat the Revenant's extremely sloped armor.

In response, the CDF pushed back with the Mancubus.

In turn, the SA's response to the Mancubus, or the Maus, was to license the small-fast and thick skinned Ben-Gal tank from IMI and make it their own by up-gunning it, improving on the arc-penetrator to breach the Maus, and if that wasn't enough they're also adding a micro-nuke, critical-density bomb plugin that adapts the same device used in their 23mm shells and Micropede missiles. The Co-op has no idea that any of this has happened except that they are expecting to face the SA's new Pazuzu with a sense of confidence. What's funny is that Security Services already know about the 'StuG' and they really don't care because they rely on ground troops and airpower to deal with tanks—so when the SS comes up with something to whack the StuG they know the SA will respond accordingly, and so it goes...

Now, back to current events, the Maus is heavy enough that the CDF Revenant tanks, what the SA calls Ravens, have to slow down and not leave the Maus behind, and this gives the SA's RRF teams the time they need for their armored units to consolidate and position their Wolverine tanks for an impromptu flanking maneuver.

In combat the easiest thing to exploit is your opponent's aggression, especially when they smell blood or believe there are easy pickings to be had, and with the Maus and Ravens crashing through the tree lined windbreaks of the Wycombe Pastures, which is now blown to hell, the threat from the Cerberus fighters that are assembling above them has encouraged these units to push even harder. With the Cerberus fighters stacking up above and Warthog gunships orbiting low to suppress anti-air, and with the Wolverines racing in on the deck to hit the CDF's flank, in about fifteen seconds, Peña rolls his ship over to initiate the first attack run.

Peña calls out, "Okay, people, Disney Swish is for the Maus!"

There is a lot of commonality in weapon systems between the Co-op and the Annex, and the 23mm rocket assisted cannon shells, with the micronuke bomb inside, is pretty much their universal weapon extraordinaire. The damned thing was a shrunken knock off of the 30mm "nuklet" developed for the US Marine Corps Bulldog, but the Marines stuck to their standard 'Macer' explosive shells and never used the nuklets in combat. Where the implosion device for the 23mm shell is a nuclear spark-plug that produces an explosive yield compared to that of an old school Mk84 1,000kg bomb (about 2,000 lbs in yield) the 30mm shell has a greater than 2,000kg yield similar to the famed 'Disney Swish' bomb from WWII, so that name kind of stuck.

Peña fires his 23mm single-barreled cannon and nails three Ravens in quick succession, their armored hulls are cracked open by the explosions, and it was when he was about to pull up that a Maus draws his focus. For the first time ever a single 30mm nuklet exits its gun with a comical 'bloop' accompanying it. Its rocket lights up and Peña watches as the bomb loops over and then jackhammers straight down onto the nose of the Maus. The massive explosion punches the tank into the ground, and with mud and debris flying up in a cascading arc the Maus ploughs a deep furrow and comes to rest on what used to be a seventh fairway only five days ago.

The Maus is not dead, but it has been effectively knocked out of service for the now. Its main weapon is a variable geometry gun that is amazingly lethal, surprisingly versatile yet shockingly fragile, and with Peña banking his ship around he notices the shattered gun falling away from the turret.

With the next Cerberus waiting for clearance, the Wolverines

appear on cue and set to work. They leave the Maus tanks alone and focus on the Revenants, and what Peña finds actually bone-chilling to hear is that for every Raven that gets fatally skewered by a Wolverine penetrator, the tanks gunner calls out on the radio, "Nevermore."

It must be a tanker thing, thinks Peña, and as the division channel is flooded with that haunting three-syllable call, Peña switches over to the close air support channel, "Let's focus on the Maus, guys. They don't need our help scrapping the Revs. Jericho-One-Seven, on one-eight-zero south."

The next pilot in queue calls out, ["One-Seven standing by."]

"Jericho-One-Seven, you are cleared hot."

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Standing on a small rise, Cyzk has a straight line of sight to the battle raging sixteen kilometers away. The binocular scopes on his helmet masks out the glare of Sriracha Mu, that hangs for perpetuity three degrees high on the horizon, and this gives him a fantastic view of the fighting going on. He can clearly see Peña zipping around the AO directing other ships on their attack runs, and he can easily distinguish the flashes from the tank on tank fire-fight to the Cerberus fighters dropping 30mm nuklet after nuklet on the Maus below.

The strangest thing about the moment is that Cyzk can see the explosions but he can't really hear them. The evacuation point is in an acoustic dead zone which is a strange phenomenon where the sound will vault over an area and drop back down behind it. The residents of the city of Perth, twenty kilometers further to the south, can hear it as clear as day but can't see a thing. Cyzk is watching it but all he can hear is the almost imperceptible rumble of the 30mm bombs and that sound is actually coming up from the ground. From this distance it would take 46 seconds for the sound to get to you through the air but in the dense rock and soil of Taiji it's half that time.

Jacob, Michelle Kiel and Fred Sargent step up beside Cyzk to also watch the spectacle while, behind them, the division elements are scrambling to load up onto Kiel's drop ships as they touch down.

After a short pause, with ships full of troops taking off behind them, Jacob quietly comments, "Oh noooz! They're getting away!"

As the others smile and nod, Sargent speaks up, "Cyzk, you got 'em all out. I made the right call. You did good."

Cyzk just shakes his head slightly and looks at Sargent with, "Eighteen percent casualties...six percent dead." He looks back out towards the fight and, "Fuck doing good."

Sargent adds, "Heads up, these people already love the shit outta you. At this point they will do anything you ask of them."

"I have no idea why?" After a few seconds Cyzk looks to Jacob, "Burke is now listed as MIA, and so is Jackson, what gives?"

Jacob huffs, "Heated words I guess? They didn't make it."

"That was a diplomatic mission, right?"

"You'd think."

Suddenly, the Cerberus fighters flying over the distant AO scatter and with the four of them watching this, and wondering why, the filter in their canopies flash dark as a rapid succession of eight, one kiloton nuclear bombs go off—followed by an alert on the tacnet to them indicating that the attack wiped out all of the Wolverine tanks. They all know the Wolverines are now manned by ghost droids so they don't react as one would if actual lives were snuffed out.

They also knew the CDF would lash out if they got desperate, and when the Wolverines pushed Homer did not disappoint.

As the filters fade, and the mushroom clouds start to silently climb in the distance, Sargent says of the Maus, "Those gawd-damned things are going to be a pain."

Kiel then wonders out loud, "You know, we don't need three plasma nodes on the Warts. Do you think Sandavol would be opposed to swapping out the one on the underside for maybe the Pazuzu gun in a small turret? Think she'd go for it?"

The other three all look at each other with surprise and nod in big agreement as Jacob says, "Write it up. I'll endorse it."

Sargent gets an alert that the ships have evacuated all the troops except one so, as the shockwave from the nukes reverberates up from the ground he says, "Well, I'm on the last slick out and my chariot awaits. It's been fun! We should do this again soon."

Cyzk taps knuckles with Sargent and turns to Jacob with a scowl, "I still have a regiment on Ngāti Whā that belongs to this division and I want to get them out—now."

Jacob nods in agreement, "Funny you should mention that." He turns to Kiel, "Guns, what do we got available for our Deputy Field Marshal, here? We're gonna go get the last of his people."

Kiel smiles, "All taken care of. I got the equivalent of three mixed RRF teams I can scratch up. We'll regroup and drop in, in about an hour and fifteen...hour and twenty at the latest." She looks to Jacob and asks, "Can you get the gummy bears we talked about up and running by then? We'll need the diversion."

As the sound from the eight bombs pushes through the dead zone, more like a muffled burp instead of the huge blasts one would expect, Jacob agrees, "We'll have that done inside a half hour."

Cyzk asks, "What are gummy bears?"

Just then, Sargent stops walking away and calls out to them while pointing up to the sky, "Oh, their Claymore and two rapiers just shot out of the system and jumped. They seemed to be in a hurry."

Jacob wonders, "Which way did they go?"

"From the looks of it they made a beeline to Seventeen-Tau."

Jacob glances at Cyzk and Kiel and says back to Sargent, "Why the fuck would they go there?" Sargent shrugs, and as he walks away towards his drop ship Jacob looks to Cyzk, "Unless we hear from Ramirez, your regiment is priority one."

Cyzk insists, "Can we go now?"

"We go now." As Jacob motions for Cyzk to follow him to his Thunderbolt he says to Kiel, "See you at the party!"

Kiel laughs, "Ever so fashionably late!"

As they trudge down the hill to his fighter, Cyzk again asks, "What the fuck is a gummy bear anyway?"

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62

zombie mod

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

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

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

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

01000100-01001111-01000001

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

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

translate as both the number four as well as leaf, and in this instance its dual meaning is acceptable either way.

This ocean planet is far enough from Ngāti that it has a wide temperate zone that loops around the planet and is capped on top and bottom by arctic regions dominated by continent sized ice sheets. It has a large iron moon named Po that's half the size of Kirin, but also half the distance, with an eleven day orbit clawing at the fourteen hour rotation of Ngāti Whā. The planet is spinning so fast that it's not at all spherical, and being geologically active all along the equatorial basin hundreds of islands have pushed up from a buckling ocean floor.

Equally as young as Sapphire, but where Sapphire was sterile when humans showed up, this planet has somehow acquired life at an extremely early stage of development—which kind of vindicates the hotly contested transposition theory surrounding the planet Dedede. Most organisms here are a benign bacterial plant-life that has dumped ridiculous amounts of oxygen into the ocean and atmosphere, but several varieties of protozoa have evolved to eat the plants and compost and utilize that oxygen however, the second humans arrived and exposed this primordial/elementary biome to Earthly microscopic flora and fauna, the evolutionary rocket ship blasted off.

What torques the botanists crank is that the islands happen to be overgrown with lush foliage consisting mostly of grasses and ferns, but here the ferns, an alien botanical class of NW-Polypodiopsida, has gone absolutely haywire in diversity and stature with some growing to the size of trees in the 0.8 gravity of Ngāti Whā.

At face value the consensus is—these islands are gorgeous.

Because of the stable weather and rich soil agriculture is thriving with the top cash crops being tobacco, hemp and grapes, and where the wineries are the huge draw for the tourist dollar, surfing tops everything else. With mammoth lazy curls everywhere this place is a tube-rider's paradise, which works out well for the recreational component of the hemp market, yet the tides also have this weird harmonic where every third orbit of Po around Ngāti Whā brings a tsunami of massive rouge waves that crash into the islands from east to west—which is why all human habitats here are either on cliffs or high ground at least sixty meters above sea-level, or many kilometers away from the coast and that distance all depends on the terrain and the tidal flows.

The big island, Te Aka Kāi, is the principal agricultural center and is the size of Papua-New Guinea. The Co-op dropped six divisions of troops, split by regimentals and battalions landing on key islands, with half a division ending up here. The Annex had a mixed bag of four regiments from different battle groups but, instead of getting into

a fight, they were ordered to pull out so Cyzk volunteered his regiment to run interference while the others evacuated. When it was time for Regiment 3603 to boogie things went totally ass up for them when the CDF took exception to them leaving.

Two days ago, when Cyzk got called out to Taiji, his regiment was holding its own but they had to constantly move or get cornered. When he left there were fifty-three dead and they had to leave them all behind in the hemp fields and fern forests or die alongside them. Since he's been gone the Co-op has dropped another division and perfectly deployed its elements in strategic locations to lay ambushes and tighten the nose, but Regiment 3603, known as *Mook Maddness*, kept frustrating the CDF by slipping through their fingers.

They'd rather take the dead along with them but, considering the *Trophies Moratorium Agreement* between the SA and the Co-op, when bodies are left behind the losing side can come collect them 24 hours after a battle concludes. In spite of both the BDF and SS having agreed to honor this the CDF has quietly thumbed their nose at it, and even though 3603 has no choice but to leave their fallen behind or join them, they booby-trapped the dead's fighting suits just for giggles.

Mia Koenig, the exec for 3603 under Cyzk, has secured a drop zone in a grape vineyard five clicks behind the fighting. She and her control squad have just finished distributing the last of the ammo to the regiment. The SA drops it on pallets with each one holding dozens of man-sized bricks that, when burst, will rehydrate an entire platoon with ready to use, plug-and-play universal magazines loaded with the new 5.77mm and 4.16mm rail gun bolts, as well as 23mm grenade tubes and micropedes. As an afterthought the 8.80mm bolts for the Ma Deuce are distributed separately because they don't fit in the current brick layout. They are stacked and wrapped on top so you just have to remember to grab some of those too.

Koenig is standing by a row of their dead, still encased in their JACC fighting suits. Most of the troopers were parked here amongst the grapevines three days ago, that is before 3603 got pushed out, but yesterday they broke through the ragged CDF line and are now fighting the other way—covering the same ground back towards the fern forest and hemp fields along the east coast where this fight first started.

Kristi Venkatesh, the recently promoted commander of 3603, with her command squad in tow, drops down and lands by the row of bodies, and while they append the row with three more dead they pulled out of the fighting, she looks towards Koenig and informs her that, "Babe, they are now three clicks out."

Koenig grunts, "Fuck!" Then points at the last brick on the pallet, "I saved one for you guys."

As her squad breaks down the brick of ammo, Venkatesh grabs the lone pouch of eighty-eights, "How 'bout a hot meal, hu? Think for once they'd be able to drop one of those?"

Koenig rolls her eyes, "Or some sleep. maybe?"

Venkatesh is punchy, "A hot and a cot, yea buddy!"

Koenig thumbs back at the fern trees behind them, "What I wouldn't give for a glass of fresh water and some eye-lid time under those ferns. The jolt switch is losing its edge."

Venkatesh agrees, "The simple things."

Just then, the command frequency cracks with Cyzk's voice asking, ["Where's Amelung?"]

Venkatesh realizes her old Regimental commander is here and looks up into the sky, "Kacper, is that you?"

["I'm with Buzzard in the jump seat, where is Mike?"]

"While flanking yesterday he got hit by a wonton, and instead of letting us carry him, when I wasn't looking he ate my eighty-eight."

["God, mutherfucking damn it!"]

Noticing a spot of his blood on her rail gun, she scrapes it off while apologizing, "Sorry. I should have known better."

["No, I would have done what he did. How many dead?"]

Venkatesh huffs big, "Right now, four-hundred and twelve." The tacnet updates and her shoulders drop, "Make that four-fifteen."

["Okay, give me a sec."]

After a few seconds of silence Venkatesh and Koenig look at each other, with Koenig transmitting, "Hey, Moidah, what's the plan?"

["Stand by..."] Another few seconds pass then, ["Pull your people back eight clicks to the Kore Forest and make your way to the south end. It's the most defensible position on the island."]

Koenig offers, "Ah, the sea would be to our back?"

Venkatesh protests, "There's no way out of there!"

["Just do it! I'm firing up the gummy bear utility."]

Koenig asks, "Dude, what the fuck is a gummy bear?"

["You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Guns has three react teams dropping in about forty minutes, so you gotta move now!"]

Venkatesh nods big, "Okay...okay, we're on the move!"

Koenig asks her off channel, "Gummy bears?"

01000010-01101111-01101011-01101111-01100010

Jacob and Cyzk exit their jump and have dropped under the Co-op spiders before they could react, and now breaking one hundred kilometers in altitude, Cyzk is in the back jump seat asking, "Venk, do you need another pallet drop of ammo?"

["Naw, we are doubled up on ammo, but if you want to kick one out loaded with hot brats and cold brew we would be thrilled!"]

Cyzk can see on the tacnet that the order to fall back to the forest has already been sent, and as a thousand troops extricate themselves and pull out the thing that he finds amazing is how his people can keep a sense of humor, "On my tab when this is over."

Venkatesh then says, ["I'm holding you to that. Out."]

Jacob informs Cyzk, "We'll have their spiders cleared out by our own spiders in about fifteen minutes, long before Guns drops in. Do you have the Regimental interface up yet?"

Cyzk says, "Linking up now." The Regimental window comes up in his view and he mentally clicks on the *Casualties* tab, "Okay, I got the *Casualty* window open and I already hit *Activate Orders*."

Jacob asks, "See the options field? Scroll down and select *Ghost Mode interface*, then check off the *ALL KIA* option."

"Okay, done. The count is four-fifteen."

"On the *Rendezvous Point* field you paste the orders as text and go down and check *Begin Emergency Recovery* then hit *Launch*."

Cyzk copies the text and pastes it into the field:

```
ALERT*ALERT*ALERT
23181023:10:30:56ZULU FOLLOWS AS:
BPXMSN: 36FM, SANDOVAL, SANDRA
REPORT: 3603 ON NGATI WHA NEAR CI STATE WITH
        RISING CASUALTY COUNT.
ORDERS: 36DFM-LAUNCH GMI-BER UTIL FOR RELIEF
        PENDING 3603 EXTRACT.
ORDERS: GMI BER-MAYHEM*MAYHEM*MAYHEM.
ORDERS: RRF ALL-EVAC 3603 POST TAIJI OP.
BPNOTE: GET THEM OUT...
END OF MESSAGE
```

Cyzk does this and as he hovers over the launch button he hesitates, "I can't believe we're doing this."

"Just do it."

With the orders broadcasting out over the tacnet to the local area of operation, Cyzk asks, "This ever been done before?"

"Forty-four Tau. We launched two squads of these things as kind of a test and the results were spectacular."

"So, that's what happened there, Jesus!" He then wonders, "But, why didn't Security Services protest us doing that?"

"They were impressed!" Jacob laughs, "They shut the fuck up because they adopted the protocol for themselves. It's a situational, niche option so, honestly, we know when to expect it."

"And the CDF is clueless."

"You got it!"

After a few seconds of silence, Cyzk reflects, "Back when I became a Battalion commander, Burke said she was going to beat the 'company man' out of me. We locked horns all the time but, to be fair, she did beat it the fuck out of me. How do you cope?"

"With the feels?" Jacob levels out the dive while evaluating their air power consisting of thirty Djinn orbiting the battle but steering clear because the hand held Ma Deuce with the 8.80mm bolts, with all of fifteen kilometers in reach, scare them just a tad, "Kacper, you have to put that shit out of your mind 'cause you have a job to do."

Cyzk nods while viewing the same display, then looks outside, "Maybe you should've picked someone who doesn't give a shit?"

"You don't get it, it's because you give a shit you were picked for upward mobility." He then looks outside along with Cyzk, "Truth be told, I feel for everyone who dies on my watch and dies by my hand. You know they're not numbers, but you carry on because it's the job."

Cyzk realizes, "The higher you go the worse it gets."

Jacob nods, "Ain't that the truth."

00110001-01010101-01010000

Venkatesh and Koenig, with their two squads, are holding the position while the last elements of the regiment rips past them and race for the forest eight kilometers back. Venkatesh and five others have a Ma Deuce rail gun up and ready, scanning the sky looking for any sign of a drone, droid or a sneaky Djinn in the distance. They have five Ghost Droids and thirty PacMan drones left and those are staged behind them, so when the last of their people pass, and they follow, these units will bring up the rear as anchor.

They know the CDF will not instantly race after them because

that is *verboden* according to their doctrine. They will, however, eat up the clock by methodically parsing the area of operation square kilometer by square kilometer and leave nothing to chance—which is the problem with the CDF today. They're green and don't know when it's the right time to roll the dice or not.

With the last platoon a kilometer out and coming at them at high speed, in a ragged string, Koenig hears some rustling and movement to their right. Venkatesh heard it too but with Koenig's squad raising their weapons to take on whatever this is, Venkatesh now pulls her Ma Deuce around.

Koenig spreads both her chain guns out wide and spins up her scorpion gun while saying, "Ready up! Let's do this!"

Suddenly they hear a male-Mexican voice go, "*No maches!* Venk! Mia! How the hell are ya! It's been forever!"

Venkatesh and Koenig look at each other and mouth the word 'Griego' and looking back out Venkatesh says, "Angel, is that you?"

All the dead are face down so that their boom mounted guns can fend off Co-op troops messing with them, and from that a hand raises up while he says, "*Orale! Mi lil' mortenaa* Venk gets the cigar!"

Suddenly a tacnet data frame is superimposed over each of the dead starting off with the header, GMI BER UTILITY, and below that is the name of a ghost that is now operating the suit, and as Griego pushes himself up and stands all their weapons now point at him so Griego puts his hands out, "Hey, chill pill me girls!"

In the canopy of the suit is the head of a female trooper that was detached from a bombing attack and is rolling around in the helmet with spots of blood and gore so, shaking the helmet, Griego laughs, "Aaah shit! This is not right, I know this *chica caliente!*"

With the final platoon flying past, Venkatesh puts her finger up and says, "Give me a minute." She then opens the command channel and asks, "Cyzk, what the fuck is going on here?"

On the radio, Cyzk urges, ["Get the fuck out of there!"]

As more of the bodies stand, Venkatesh shakes her head and transmits, "Are you serious! We need a diversion but this?"

Angela Simmons, in a JACC containing the remains of Mike Amelung, steps up to her and says, "Ain't no law against it, sugar."

Venkatesh looks at the JACC with Simmons piloting it and wonders out loud, "Angie?"

Simmons points at the dead face of her old buddy, Mike, and asks, "What happened to Mike? He cap himself?"

Over the channel Jacob steps in and says, ["Venk, you need a diversion so you're getting a diversion! Simmons, you got this?"]

Simmons nods, "Just like Forty-Four Tau. We got this!"

Jacob orders, ["Fuck 'em up and don't let up."]

"Scare the shit outta them?"

["Put the fear of god in them. Out."]

Simmons turns to the others and says, "You heard right!"

As the dead whoop and holler, Simmons points to Venkatesh's rail gun in hand and asks, "Can we have a couple of those?"

Venkatesh hands her Ma Deuce and ammo over, "Sure."

Koenig orders the command and control squads, "Give 'em a full loadout. They have priority."

As the squads hand over bandoleers of ammo, bombs, rockets and three more of the M2 guns, Angela says quietly to Venkatesh, "You know you and Mia are not supposed to be within one-hundred meters of each other."

Venkatesh snarls, "For once we don't give a shit."

Simmons nods, "I can understand." She then speaks up to all the living troops, "Thank you, everybody, but you should go now."

"You want the droids?"

"You need them, but we'll take a half of those PacMan if you can spare those?" With twenty of the PacMan drones taking guard positions around her newly respawned-dead troops, Angela says to Venkatesh and Koenig with a nod, "Yup, Kristi, Mia, gummy bears. What we got here is a genuine, honest to god, zombie mod!"

Maggie Prather steps up and, while flexing her arms and legs with loud-eerie pops emanating from the suit, she says, "Rigor set in." She then thumbs back to the crew and says, "We're ready, boss."

Simmons again looks to Venkatesh and Koenig, "This is such a beautiful island. Too bad we're gonna trash it."

As Simmons and the dead troops move out towards the Co-op positions it is obvious that Simmons is on the tacnet organizing and splitting them into teams based upon their available weapons.

Looking at the tactical display of the island, Koenig nudges Venkatesh and informs her that, "Hey, Kris, our KIA from all over the island are ambulatory and are now moving on Homer."

"Well, mind-fuck me runnin'..." Venkatesh shaking her head slowly, then nods behind them with, "Let's jet."

00111000-00111000-00111000-00111000-0011101-00110001-00110001

CDF Colonel, MacKenzie Corbyn, is standing up through the commander's cupola of her Revenant tank. The interior is so tight they can't wear the ACE suits like they could in the Mancubus tanks. Without the ACE they are guaranteed to end up as a crispy critter if one of those newfangled arc-penetrators hit and sprays the inside with superheated molten uranium. Hell, they're just as toasty dead if a regular uranium sabot penetrator punches through the Raven's armor.

One does stand a 75% chance of survival if a 23mm shell, grenade, cluster bomb or a micropede hits. Those weapons will, more likely than not, crack the armor and damage the loader, but at least there is nothing inside that will burn or blow up as a result. If one hits on the side it will knock the Revenant out, and landing on top may kill a crewmember, but blowing up underneath will kill everybody.

Which is why these things tend to hug the ground.

Originally, they used to have a crew of three but, like the SA Wolverines, it's only a functional crew of one or two depending on the mission. They leave the commander's station open for moments like this when their Big-6, *id est* Corbyn, is in the field.

Corbyn hates being in the damned thing and would rather be in an ACE fighting suit and humping it alongside the tank over sitting in this infernal machine dressed in simple field BDUs. The Revenant's are a micro-magnet and, without tanks, *Mook Maddness* has managed to wipe out eighteen of her thirty available Revenants while on the run. This is why she said 'to hell with doctrine' and pulled them back and let the infantry do their job because when on the line, no matter how much cover they had or defilades they raced from and too, the bombs always ended up finding them.

The regiment's Sergeant-Major has stepped up and Corbyn asks, "Sergeant-Major, it appears our quarry has made tracks, yes?"

He nods with a half a frown, "Yes mum, and I'd rather be hard on their tails than wasting our time beating brush like this."

"We understand, Sergeant-Major, and I have to agree! Yet, we lost contact and if we push on carelessly, and things go south, we'd be standing tall for it. I full well know this is not the time for being methodical, but I can only defy doctrine to a point." She smiles, "Make contact and we will, as the Yanks say, tear-ass after them."

"Five by five, mum!"

She reflects as she looks out, "I have to say I have no cause to break knuckles with these people, but here we are."

He looks up with, "We did train for the jungles of Saiph."

She nods, "And yet, here we are! So, off we go tally-ho at a bumbles gait. Again, sorry for being troublesome, Sergeant-Major." Her nose twitches and she asks, "By the way, do you smell that?"

He pops his canopy and takes a whiff, "Yup, dead Spooky."

"Did we miss tagging some bodies I reckon?"

"We just had a scuffle, mum."

"True, however they wouldn't be quite-ripe just yet." Corbyn then orders, "I want them found and flagged before we move forward to make more of them, and urge our people keep a respectful distance. We are adhering to the TMA even though command rejects it."

"Especially since they booby-trapped the bodies."

She smiles, "And therein lies our incentive."

As Corbyn pulls up a set of binoculars and starts to survey ahead the Sergeant-Major says, "Mum, we are downwind from the sent so I would consider scouting behind us first."

She nods in agreement, "I didn't see any coming this way but that would be a stellar idea. Let us be thorough then."

With shots in the far distance a dozen reports come up in the Co-op neuronet, so the Sergeant-Major says, "Colonel, we're getting alerts of contact on the periphery...as well as behind us even?"

Corbyn nods, "Well, if they decided to scatter and go guerrilla on us then that changes things doesn't it. Let's hold and secure our positions. Order the recall of all armor units and have my ACE suit and gear brought up." And then with a telltale smirk of glee, "This may have turned into a dirty fight!"

She pulls a squad level rail gun out of the tank and hops down, and when she cycles the weapon into battery in the distance they hear someone say an almost barely audible, "brains."

They look at each other and when they hear it again, Corbyn says with a nod as he slaps his canopy on, "Sappers, they're close!"

When she turns to move she takes two steps and bounces off the cloaked Griego who snatches the rail gun from her, and as she flies back and tumbles onto the ground he laughs, "*Estas bien buena güera*, baby! Where you goin'?"

The Sergeant-Major is gunned down. Bolts rip through his legs and as he spins around his boom mounted plasma cannon swings out to fire. Maggie grabs it from behind and rips it from his suit.

Dropping to the ground the Sergeant-Major shouts, "Shit!"

Maggie mockingly swats him over the helmet and canopy with it and scolds him, "You gotta be careful! You could hurt someone!"

Corbyn grunts, "Bloody hell!"

Firing erupts around them and in a few seconds all the CDF troops in close proximity have been traumatically wounded, and while they shout and moan more GMi BER troops appear around the tank.

Maggie pulls Corbyn's side arm from its holster and says, "Thank you, hot stuff!" She hops up and hammers on top of the Revenant while shouting, "Hey, gunner boy! Open up!"

Griego, standing over Corbyn, knocks the top of it as well, "Hey, homie! Now is not the time to catch the stupids! You best listen to her or ol' Maggie will frag your ass!"

The hatch opens and the soldier slowly stands so Maggie, in her suit with the dead face in the canopy, with ooze running out of it, laughs, "Ain't he a cutie pie!" She leans in and, "You know somethin' stud muffin, I'm gonna hate to do this to ya."

Without warning she shoots the young soldier five times in his crotch, groin and legs followed by, "Make sure you tell 'em how big it was and lie your ass off! All ya'll lie anyway!"

With the young man dropping back into the tank, crying out and cussing, Maggie admires the pistol while asking Corbyn, "This the ten millimeter Breezeblock, yea?"

Corbyn nods, "Yes, love, it is. You can keep it!"

"Naw, that's okay." Maggie flips it around, catches it by the muzzle and tosses it back to her, "Appreciate you letting me use it!"

"Anytime!"

With the shooting around them now far away, the suit with Mike Amelung's shattered face steps around the Revenant tank with Simmons' voice emitting from it, and quietly singing, "In this town we call home, everyone hails to the pumpkin song!"

As Simmons approaches going 'La la la la-la' Corbyn looks at her and with wide-eyed surprise, "Simmons? Angie, is that you?"

Simmons touches her chest and laughs, "Ding-ding-ding-ding! You got that on the first try! How's Porter?"

"I talk to him by and by. He's actually doing well in—"

Simmons finishes with, "Security Services, I know. I've been keeping tabs on him. He's done quiet well and climbed that ladder. You should have followed him there but you chose the command path, and now that you're a Colonel how's that working for you?"

Corbyn shrugs, "Until a minute or so ago quite well thank you! Oh, and how is your daughter?"

"Word is, I hear, she's can be a bit of a handful." Simmons nods introspectively as best you can in a fighting suit with a corpse inside it, "I wish we had time to chat but we've got work to do."

Corbyn blinks, "Oh, well, it's best we get this over with then."

"Oh no-no-no-no-no you misunderstand! Colonel, MacKenzie Corbyn, you are in luck because the word for the day is...mayhem!"

"Come again?"

In Simmon's left hand she has the M2 gun, but along her right forearm is a five barreled penta gun that spools and fires—chopping both of the Colonel's legs off above the knee.

Corbyn shouts, "Bollocks, woman! Bloody fucken' bollocks!"

"That's the spirit!" Simmons crouches down and, "Insist on the Glazewell splint, the transparent one, and before you grow the skin make sure you're doing range of motion religiously, twice daily."

Corbyn hisses, "Thanks for the advice, love!"

"Trust me, I've been there too many times. If you unbag 'em without doing that you'll hate yourself for being a lazy fucktard."

"Range of motion, yes!"

"Good girl!"

01000100-0110010-01100001-0110101-01100111-0110010

Real world cloaking technology is not at all what it's cracked up to be in movies and gaming. Like everything it's a mixed bag of tradeoffs between one useful thing for another. Take communications and real time data links for a comparison. In urban environments it's now a breeze to mask with encryption and scattering throughout the very busy civil microwave and radio bands. Your intel-AI will be pulling its virtual hair out trying to differentiate civil from military data packets and as for decryption, well, you can forget about it. Then in a rural setting one can bouncy ball across the spectrums in nanosecond timed pulses that makes it absolutely impossible to triangulate.

You know someone is there but you don't have a clue where?

Now, the very-very thin slice of the EM scale known as the visual spectrum is easy to disappear in but it puts severe limitations on you as it relates to movement because you got to go at it slow to stay out of sight. In counterpoint, a way to defeat it has been blundered into so in a few weeks the current generation of holo-cloak tech will be

rendered useless yet again until another photomechanic is developed. As for the skin of ships and fighting suits one can, like an octopus, change colors and patterns without any telltale emissions, which is really-really handy, but to this day the two things that hamstring the soldier and stumps the technologists are infrared and sonar.

With infrared you are always struggling with a constant heat output. At rest the average human body puts out 350kJ per hour, and if you add strenuous activity to that, like maybe combat, the output will skyrocket. The JACC and ACE suits deal with this problem by heatsinking it and performing periodic 'pulling the finger' heat dumps, or by ratcheting up the IR photons and releasing them throughout the broad EM spectrum. Both have good and bad points and neither are 100% in the best of conditions, but the one thing that holds true to this day about infrared and heat—you have to offload it.

Sonar, sound and echolocation, is a tough one to overcome at close range. It's that going at it slow thing again. Locomotion is the obvious problem but, even inside a JACC or an ACE suit, given ideal ambient conditions like here on Te Aka Kāi, a heartbeat can be sensed as far away as ninety meters and zeroed in on at thirty.

And, like the ghost droids, here is where the GMi BERs shine.

Butter Hewlett, one time SA-PFC who died at Riker's Island, hops out from behind a fern tree and shouts, "Oooooga booga booga!"

Half the squad of startled CDF troopers scatter, half drop to the ground, and one opens up on her. The 4.54mm miniballs rip across her midsection as she thrashes about, all the while laughing.

When he stops firing Hewlett looks up, and with fluid and gore oozing out of the holes he made in her she goes, "Hey, that tickles!"

The trooper is astonished, "Bloody hell!"

"Here's back at'cha!" From behind her JACC a boom mounted flail gun swings around to fire and, with a sharp electrical screeching bump, a plasma pulse flashes and lights the place up.

For a hundred meters out flames roll up into the sky with the ferns and grasses now swirling ashes. The shooter, in an ACE suit, dove for the ground in her direction and did not get hit but the others didn't make out so well. Five of the squad that first dove for cover, and were in standard field kit, instantly burst into powdery embers and charred bones. The one in an ACE suit that was facing her, his head exploded in the canopy, but the three in suits facing away fared better with only the hair on their heads singed and smoldering.

Mahko Ozo steps out and laughingly scolds her, "Butter, baby, that's a little excessive! Let's not do that."

If a dead person in a fighting suit could physically cringe then Hewlett did just that with, "Sorry, Mahko! My bad."

Ozo squats down in front of the shooter, "We're supposed to put the hurt on 'em, not kill 'em!" He prods the shooter, "Hey, Homer, where do ya want it?"

The trooper says, "You didn't pop on the bloody sensors!"

"Yea, ain't that a kick!" Ozo shoots his arm and leg off with his chain gun, and stands, "Better than dyin', homie."

Hewlett is standing over the three who have pulled off their canopies from their ACE suits to put out their hair. They look up and what flips their lids is, not only the dead faces in the fighting suits, marbled and blotched with lividity, or the smell, but that they also hear in the distance several GMi BERs crying out "brains" followed by crazy and maniacal laughter. As railgun shots ring out from that direction, Ozo steps up to Hewlett and looks down at the CDF troopers.

"*Un putero mericone.*" Ozo nods and gestures towards them, "*Órale!* Butter, what are you waitin' for?"

"Miso sowwy!" Hewlett snarks and, with lightning precision, she shoots out all of their knees.

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At the south end of the Kore forest, with the sea to their backs, Venkatesh and Koenig are both sitting in the shade enjoying a CWR-RAT packet of spaghetti and meat sauce. They've been here for about a half an hour, and ten minutes ago two pallets of these things were dropped out of the ass end of a warthog as it ripped past overhead at low altitude—which is a fascinating thing to watch.

After a chute extracts the pallet a huge balloon-loop assembly inflates around it and, instead of bouncing, the balloons squash out and partially rupture, allowing the pallet to stick it without breaking apart on impact. Many times the pallets will end up laying sideways but that doesn't matter because their people will always burst the wrapping and grab the materials where they land.

The interesting thing to note is that the troopers of the Annex vocally resent having to eat these rations to help cycle the stock but, after today, of the 998 surviving members of 3603 none of them will ever bitch about eating them again.

Over the command channel, Cyzk radios, ["Sorry about the poor selection, but it was the best I could do on short notice."]

Koenig laughs, "They're all spaghetti!"

[“Like I said, Mia, I’m sorry ‘bout that.”]

Venkatesh snorts as she takes a bite, “Kacper, after five days of sucking on nutra-gel, this is a God-damned feast.” She smacks her lips and, “I used to hate this packet but now it’s my favorite.”

Koenig nods big, “That’s two of us.”

As a Jorge Montaña steps around the pallet of RATs and past the other troops, approaching Venkatesh directly, she asks Cyzk on channel, “So, when is this brass-tastic ass supposed to show?”

Cyzk says, [“He’s almost there. Three minutes maybe?”]

“You guys told ‘im to get bent or talk to me directly, right?”

Jacob comes on line, [“Venk, after what you all went through? This is your deal. Whatever you decide to do we’re all in and I’m not blowin’ smoke. Channel your inner Ramirez ‘cause we got your back. Cyzk and I are gonna watch on Koenig’s feed.”]

And as she pops another packet of spaghetti, “Righty’o! Out.”

Montaña is standing there holding out to Venkatesh his packet with a look—wordlessly asking her to pop it for him. She looks at his missing right arm then pulls the spork from her mouth, jabs it in the one she just opened and exchanges it for the one in his hand.

Mouthing the words, *thank you*, he sits on the rock next to her and asks, “Venk, you’re from here, what was that war cry shit they did for you before Homer dropped on Friday?”

Venkatesh points to the bindi mark on her forehead and laughs, “I’m a push start. My husband is Maori, not me.”

Montaña slurps a bite of spaghetti and, “Yea, so, what was that crazy shit about? Been meaning to ask but now’s good!”

“Crazy shit is what I thought it was when I first came here but, when you get to know these people and what it’s about...it’s the most beautiful thing in the God-damned universe.”

He sucks in a strand of pasta then, “Yea, they be screaming maniacs, wagging their tongues out like *loco mofo*!”

Koenig says to him, “It’s a Haka, you dumb fuck.” Then to her she adds, “Beautiful, *U-e*?”

Venkatesh nods, “*Aue hī*, yes indeed.” She then looks at him and chuckles, “And, for being such a dumb ass you get First Battalion.”

His shoulders drop and he protests, “Awe, shit, come on! Let me keep my company!”

“It’s where I need ya, Jorge. So, fuck the buck up!”

With another mouthful he laughs, "Venk, I hate you."

Koenig huffs, "The love in the air, it's palpable."

He looks at her, "Hey, blonde lab-rat, eat shit."

Koenig smiles while holding up her CWR-RATs packet and, "I'm way ahead of ya."

He shakes his head and looks at Venkatesh while he gestures towards Koenig, "So I have to go through Knockout to get to you!"

Venkatesh smiles, "Yea, pretty much."

Montaña laughs, "I'm in trouble deep now."

Koenig snorts, "I'd say balls deep, my friend!"

Venkatesh notices three Co-op officers a hundred meters out being escorted by one of her people and heading their way, so she links up to Koenig and Montaña through the tacnet, <"So, lookie here, we get their Lieutenant General. We get their big gun.">

Koenig scowls, <"Looks like his tail is between his legs.">

Montaña agrees, <"Venk, if so I get this weird vibe we got 'em spooked, so if you choose to go back out and finish this fight then you can count me in. Right, KO?">

Koenig smiles, <"My grandpa always said to never start a fight, but you damned well had better finish it. I'm in.">

<"We got itchy trigger fingers, Venk.">

Venkatesh nods, <"Well, I may have to play that card.">

<"Just say the word and once more into the breach we go.">

Koenig agrees, <"Preach it, brother!"> She then looks at the Co-op general stepping up with a Colonel and Sergeant-Major hanging back by two steps, so she says with daggers in her eyes, "Hey, LG."

The SA escort's gesture is vague, not pointing to any one of the three so he looks to them and, "I'm Lieutenant-General Alcock. I'm here to make the acquaintance of your commander, Venkatesh."

Having just taken a bite of from her packet, she looks both ways to Koenig and Montaña, then nods her head and raises a finger, "That'd be me, LG."

Looking at her with a slight surprise in his eyes, a runway model beauty and just a tad frazzled after five days of fighting, so he nods, "Right, since you are the equivalent to a Brigadier we thought it would be fitting for us to chat directly."

Venkatesh huffs and leans towards Koenig, "I'm a Brigadier,

I'm a Brigadier! That makes you a Colonel."

Koenig chuckles, "I'm a Colonel! I'm a Colonel!"

Montaña, Marines up with a comical salute, "What does that make me, Brigadier General, Venk, Sir?"

Venkatesh gruffs, "The jury is out on your ass."

As Montaña nods big, Alcock realizes that these three are actually taking this way more seriously than they are letting on, "Right. To the heart of the matter, these things you let off the leash out there, we consider them a little unsportsman like."

"Unsportsman like? Unsportsman like!" Venkatesh, with a shake of her head, points towards Montaña and says, "Our Lieutenant Colonel equivalent, newly promoted Chief Deputy Marshal, Montaña, would have an interesting perspective on that. Share with us, please!"

Montaña licks his spork and, "See, LG, in an urban setting grenades are like a pillow fight so there we'd have you by the balls, but out here the ROEs are different. You had nine-to-one on us and a bunch of them noob-tubers be spammin' nades at two-hundred, five and a thousand KGE like crazy. See, LG, your green-ies tend to shoot and keep shootin' an that's a little spastic, sure, but your people saw my arm get blown off and that means I...am...down but, instead of following the ROEs, they followed it with a five wonton chaser."

Alcock nods, "Sorry 'bout that my good man."

"Let me illustrate, LG, boom...boom-boom...boom...boom! My face, ears, eyes, nose didn't stop bleeding till five hours ago so, my good man, next time how about, instead of squading up a bunch of skittish chicken-shits, how 'bout you try fielding soldiers?"

Alcock assures him, "I will look into this." He turns to Venkatesh and, "But, there is the matter of those...things. You are aware we will protest the use of Ghosts in combat droids."

Venkatesh nods, "Sure about that? First off it'd be hard to prove. Second, we like to program our droids with personality! Then again, third, we don't fall under the purview of the United Nations, the DPKO, nor do we fall under the Geneva...what is it now, Fourteen?"

"Fifteen."

"So, for the now, we're gonna enjoy the breeze, catch some rays, maybe a little shut-eye, one or two REMs, and get back to work." She wiggles her fingers at him, "Nice meetin' ya!"

Koenig rubs her hands, "Trigger time, yea buddy, and, LG, you should consider supplying your people better. They ran out of wontons about an hour ago." She then coyly says, "Ooopsy!"

Alcock stupidly shows his hand when he says, "Madame, we would like to propose that if you shut those things down we'll let you leave unaccosted. We see that you have a reaction team entering the system so that will make it easy for you to evacuate."

Venkatesh shrugs with a frown, like she's considering it, then, "I like your word usage...let." She nods, "Let, like you're gonna let us leave, like it's your choice." Then with big eyes she smiles, "Thank you for being so generous, but...bye-bye!"

Alcock is shocked by her abrupt response. He looks over his shoulder and, while on their neuronet communicating with his Colonel and the Sergeant-Major who are both shaking their heads, he nods.

He looks back and, "Please, Commander...please leave."

Scrutinizing Alcock, knowing that was very difficult for him, Venkatesh agrees, "Since you put it that way, sure!" She then stabs a finger up into the air, "But! We will send the order for them to stand down only after we leave." She then puts a hand out, "And that is not negotiable. I'll send you the order and freqs before we jump, and you transmit it yourself. We'll also be back tomorrow at thirteen-hundred hours zulu to collect our dead."

In shock the General replies, "Madame, that is unacceptable."

"Hey, Alcock, that is...not negotiable. I suggest your people circle the wagons until we bug out. Okie dokie!"

Put in his place, Alcock looks like he's going to blow a gasket but all he could do is quietly say, "okay."

From humbled to humiliated, Alcock stomps away, and as the three fade in the distance, Venkatesh starts to deflate by taking long steady breaths to smooth her hackles.

Montaña nods with, "Damn, Venk, even my balls jumped up in my throat with that level of badassery."

With wide eyes, Koenig agrees, "Amen."

Jacob radios her, ["Venk, you did good. Proud of ya."]

Powerful emotions sweep over Venkatesh to the point that her eyes water and her bottom lip quivers slightly—but with a deep breath and gritting her teeth she buries them, "Mook Madness...oorah."

In chorus, Koenig and Montaña go, "Ooorah."

"Let's get outta here."

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

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

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

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

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

Two industries that thrive here are refining and sport fishing.

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

by treehuggers over these industries, pretty much everywhere, the harsh reality is that there are no trees on Fjalar to hug and the pollution is contained and doesn't hurt a damned thing.

The inhabited region, the side closest to Mead, the side with liquid water, has been christened Svalbard, not New Svalbard, so if anyone ever talks of Svalbard then chances are they are talking about the one on Fjalar and not the one at the Earthly crossroads where the Arctic Ocean meets the Barents, Norwegian and Greenland Seas.

Svalbard here is the inverse of Svalbard there, and here the waters are encircled by ice sheets and mountains. Also, the sea in this here Svalbard is dangerous, not because hypothermia would kill you in minutes, it will, but because the local fish are large and would love a human popsicle while it was still bobbing like a cork. The apex aquatic predatory critter in this ocean is a smart water-breathing killer whale like fish the size of a 737 so if you're out to catch one of these things your boat will need to be the equivalent of a Zumwalt class destroyer.

Fishing here is a very-rich man's sport and people will pay a cool million to man a harpoon cannon for a week—all to bag a fish that tastes exactly like vertically farmed prime rib at a millionth the cost.

One of the few cottage industries that has sprouted up locally is international diplomacy, and over a thousand kilometers away from everything else, and thirty more away from the shoreline, is a very stylish convention-sized complex called Ny Hopen.

This Hopen, as opposed to the Earth Hopen, has long ago taken the place of Reykjavik as mankind's one-stop diplomacy shop. The locals built and maintain the facility but when you want to lease it they'll simply hand the keys over to you and leave—you provide your own catering and support staff. More isolated than secluded, for total security it can't be beat!

Three hours ago, and ten minutes ahead of schedule, Annex Chief Master Sergeant, Chang, set their Razorback down on the airfield about a half a klick from the Ny Hopen complex near Lebedev's Trident Star Clipper that landed just minutes before. Where Nicole has been head of security for this effort she was always focused on protecting her father, Robert Jackson. Chang is the lead for the revolving team that's been shadowing Michal Pitney.

Because they were ferrying FIS Secretary General Wilkinson, a handful of his advisors as well as Michal, they were able to sign out the executive coach from the Spike without any trouble. It was what these things were built for. After both of their ships were inspected inch by inch by Tillsdale's people who were looking for anything amiss, specifically nukes, they get a clean bill of health before Tillsdale was notified of the results.

Once Tillsdale was assured that it was Nicole Burke's face and voice on camera during the inspection of the Razorback, he and his entourage dropped right on in, and predictably so, an hour late. With his ship landing on the other side of the Ny Hopen complex, and out of sight of Nicole and Chang, they enter the facility at 9:58zulu—just as the umbra of Mead started to blot out Kvasir.

Nicole, in her JACC fighting suit, exits the building and steps up to Chang, and while popping her canopy, "Hey-hey, Master Chief! Three years and they're finally face to face. Any word from Top Side?"

Chang nods his head ever so slightly, "The Grigori just sent us an alert an' I'm wonderin' if you really want to hear this or not?"

With a grim smile, Nicole shakes her head, *no*...

As part of security, everybody is restricted to an archaic and forgotten WiFi in the ISM 2.4-GHz band which has an extremely short range even when boosted. This limits the feed they are getting from Jackson in the meeting to only his visual cortex as video-point-of-view as well as audio. It's not exactly the rich-dynamic interface they would prefer but at least it's something. During the talks nothing is allowed to transmit in real time from Ny Hopen but, as is the way of the Annex, the Razorback is in a 2-way connection with a fire team of three ghost-droids on top a mountain peak some twenty-three kilometers away.

All around Ny Hopen they have thousands of laser diodes that flash the site in a consecutive sequence every second in the exact same NeHe green-light at 520nm. Not in a direct beam but in a sweeping-flat dispersion looking for scattering or a break in the light. Get to within three or four clicks of Ny Hopen and you are going to be spotted cloaked or not. Taking advantage of this admittedly primitive but effective tech, the Razorback has its own green diode that is shooting at the mountain peak and sending all of Jackson's and their own real time live feed—which is then relayed to the droid's Razor parked on the ice another thirty clicks downrange.

When the ghost droids have something to convey back to them they flash the Razorback's skin with a laser in a slightly different 523nm frequency, anywhere in a narrow convergence, and since the Razor's skin will absorb both these light impulses the message will be received loud and clear without anyone the wiser.

Chang hands her a cigar, "Red, they said...six geese a-layin'."

Blinking her eyes, Nicole takes the cigar and, while looking at it she huffs, "Six of 'em...six. Fucking kOri assholes."

Chang bobs his head up, motioning for her to present him the end of the cigar, and as he lights it with a spotting laser in burn mode he adds, "Kuzma's Mother was authorized."

"*Mat' Kuz'ma.*" Sighs Nicole as she puffs then, in turn, lights Chang's and asks him, "Send Crackerjack the unlock?"

"Waiting for you. Just say the word."

As they both puff on their stogies, she notices the Trident pilot stepping out of his ship with a mug of hot coffee in hand, and as he waves to them and she waves back, "Relay it to the device."

After a few quick minutes of them enjoying their cigars and watching Kvasir fade away, sliding in behind Mead, Chang looks at her and says, "Baby Ivan is spooling up...we got ninety."

Both close out their view of Jackson's feed as it continues to transmit with theirs to the droids on the mountain top.

Nicole puffs on the cigar then tries to suppress a laugh and fails, "How did you remain a Chief for sooo damn long? Chang, of all people, you should have been a Field Marshal for fuck's sake."

Chang chuckles, "Sometimes it pays to be the least achieving in a world of over-achievers." With Nicole now laughing, he goes on, "Trust me, it was hard to do! If I could have gotten myself busted to squad leader I would have in a heartbeat." And with another puff he adds, "I was gonna retread after the first of the year anyway."

Nicole shares, "I endeared myself to my superiors by pissin' 'em off at every turn, and still got promoted. I'm glad Sandy ended up with the Thirty-Six. I would have hated that job."

"I hear ya, sista..." Chang smiles big, "How 'bout I buy ya a tall cold one when we're pushin' polygons."

"Lookin' forward to it!"

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"So, that's it. Three and a half years of your shit and you are gonna walk in here and throw out an olive branch like it's a Yule Log, just like that." Bob slightly snarls at Tillsdale, "Try again."

"Come on, mate! Why so suspicious?"

"Check your numbers, mate." Bob stabs his finger at the document in his hand, "You mean you are going to pull out all troops from the Pleiades if they, in turn, honor the expired mining patents your cooperative still lays claim too—for more than a century?"

Tillsdale gives him a boyish smile and a shrug, "Bob, out here the letter of the law only applies in spirit, and it's not like we're pushin' 'em out. We're offerin' a three percent gross or fifteen percent net to the current stake holders, whichever is higher! And, of course, think of the fiver we're droppin' on the local guvs!"

"Of course."

Wilkinson speaks up, "You know Tilly, babe, if you would have offered this years ago we wouldn't be sitting here now."

Michal adds, "Why the change of heart?"

Tillsdale looks at them, "Michal an' Stewie, we've been looking at the numbers. War is a tad bit expensive, and now that we've had time to evaluate your ops, the local golliwogs 'ave been only picking the low 'anging fruit. They've barely scratched the surface and there is so much more to be 'ad! Now, if they let the pros in those gollis will make way more ka-ching than they ever could on their own."

Wilkinson says, "We call 'em Wildcats, out of respect."

Tillsdale smiles, "Drillin' or scratchin' sod, it's all the same."

Michal asks, "So, as a condition, the Hyades will join the FIS?"

"With the TPZ treaty there's nothing holding us to the UN! All Stewie needs to do is to grease the skids for us and we're in!"

She looks to Lebedev and he adds, "Da, Michal, I can see your concern. My job here is to see peaceful end to this conflict. If that means losing Hyades to FIS then so be it. They are outside Thirty Parsec Zone and our plate is full inside it as it is."

Wilkinson asks, "What about those wildcatters who don't opt for this? What if they stick to principal and tell ya to shove off?"

"Those who fold we give 'em a tidy bonus and pull the troops. As for the others, well...they'll lose anyway and, believe you me, principal always bows to money in the end."

Bob's eyes bore through Tillsdale as he quietly parrots him, "Principal always bow's to money. Sure 'bout that?"

"Oh yea, mister white-hat here. You would be the exception."

Lebedev interjects, "Marshal Jackson, I believe we can find a way to bury hatchet between you and Security Services."

Tillsdale offers up, "As a sign of good faith we'll immediately stand down our forces on Taiji and Ngāti Whā. It ends now." And with a smile and pump of a fist he goes, "Waddya say, mateys? We're here to make the magic happen, not fuck spiders ya know."

Lebedev nods, "Da, I believe we can find copasetic end to hostilities. You know it would be nice to come witness treaties signing at FIS Assembly inside your Spike."

Wilkinson glances at Bob and Michal and then back to Tillsdale with a nod. "I don't see a problem. I'll put it up to a vote."

Tillsdale hops up and offers his hand to Wilkinson who stands to shake it, "Then we have an accord! Smashing!"

With Lebedev shaking Wilkinson's hand, Tillsdale turns to offer his hand to Michal and Bob who just look at him, so he prods her with, "Come on, Mikey! I'm not all that bad...well, not like they say!"

Michal, sitting like a rock next to Bob, shakes her head and asks, "Who were you going to pin it on exactly? I'm curious."

Tillsdale pulls back with a surprised look, "Come again, love?"

Lebedev looks at them and nods with a slight smile, realizing there is no reason to deny what they already know, "We paid the locals for information on our meeting, all under table but documented well. We knew the right party and we knew their price."

Bob looks at Tillsdale, "The kOri's have it out for Michal but won't go after her in a neutral territory, but here collateral damage will be minimal and your indignation would be felt by the entire Hyades and, from stumpy to garbo, they'll do anything you ask of 'em."

Michal adds, "This would allow you to move on Orion."

Bob nods in agreement, "The cascading effect means you'd take the whole region and, I have to say, it was well played!"

Tillsdale shrugs, "The kOri do need to be put down."

Bob nods in turn, "In due time but, instead of us half-stepping it out to get a face of super-nuke..." He points to Lebedev, "They have six, count 'em, six cobalt bluer waitin' for us up there." As Lebedev chews on that Bob turns back to Tillsdale and, in an app-window in his visual cortex he clicks on *Device Spool Unlock*, and says while looking at the confused Tillsdale, "Passcode set...diet of worms."

"Come again, mate?"

"*Dee-et der vorms.*" Says Bob in a crappy German accent, then he huffs a laugh, "But for us here it's more of a Jan Hus moment than a Martin Luther one, but ya got to be a student of history to know the significance of it all. Right, Vasily?"

Lebedev remembers out loud, "*Ya pomnya*, as many devils as there are tiles on its roofs, I would enter...and so you have, Bob."

"Tilly, we don't got a lot of time to explain but let's just say we'd thought it'd be advantageous for us to demonstrate and share with you a spooling-to-cascade event." Bob reaches out, "Something never done before in the wild! Let's experiment, shall we?"

Bob sets a miniature quantum-particle generator on the table and spins it like a dreidel. A small tear-drop shaped generator the size of a kiwi fruit, it spirals for a few seconds then falls over, taking long

and heavy rolling loops around the point where he spun it. It hits a napkin and this stops its movement.

Bob smiles, "We were saving this for a special occasion."

Tillsdale recoils, "Bloody blue-balls! It's spokes are missing!"

As Tillsdale bolts out of the meeting room at a dead run, with his entourage struggling to grab their stuff to follow, Wilkinson looks at the generator in horror, "Fuck-me-dead!"

Lebedev laughs and asks Bob, "What is output?"

"Bye Stewie! It's been fun!" Bob waves to Wilkinson as he races out the door following the others, then to Lebedev with a shrug, "Eeeeh, about two-oh-nine...two-twelve? It depends."

Lebedev pulls out an ice tray that was in the chair next to him, it has frozen vodka shots he was saving to celebrate them closing the talks, while asking Bob, "In pet-i-jewels of course?"

"Petajoules, of course."

Bob and Michal stand and step round the table to face Lebedev, and as they each take a shot glass in hand Lebedev asks, "We don't have much time I take it, yes?"

"Not much at all."

"You two must come visit me in Vegas³ soon and talk turkey for a spell." And as they raise their glasses Lebedev gives the toast, "It's been my honor to know you, my comrades."

After they down the shots, Michal cheers, "*Nostrovial!*"

"See you soon, my friend." Bob says to Lebedev, and turning to Michal he pulls in close to her and quietly declares, "I love you."

With a sly smile, Michal gets him back with, "I know."

And as their lips touch...

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Quantum particle generators are as ubiquitous as double-AA batteries were centuries before. These things are everywhere and are as safe as safe can be. At the size of a grape they power children's toys and at the size of a skyscraper they are used to drive space stations as large as the Carrie Nation.

The kiwi generators are used almost exclusively to power military tech, and with triple redundancy three are used in the JACC. These things have so many failsafe mechanisms that nobody thinks of them as dangerous—until now.

The universal kiwi design has two output spokes that cross over in the generator to restrain how the unit splits virtual particles, converting them into unstable-orphaned quantum particles, and to prevent a buildup however, these features are missing here.

Quantum particles like these are way overpowered, and this generator has now spooled up about a nanogram, one-billionth of a gram, where the containment tops off. With no place to go the excess cascades out and interacts with actual matter, and this happens just when Tillsdale is about half-way across the tarmac to his ship.

The blast was fifty-plus megatons in equivalency.

The droid's Razorback, the one sitting on the ice fifty-three kilometers away from ground zero, launches and zooms straight up and over the shock wave that takes two and a half minutes to reach it. Flying around the stem of the mushroom cloud, that is still hot to the touch, the ship fights violent updrafts as it dumps tons of dust and gravel out of the back of the ships hold. Consisting mostly of charred iron and diamond meteorite, with these updrafts and crazy winds the debris will be scattered far and wide.

When the hold is empty the Razorback picks up the fire team and high tails it out of the area without being seen.

With the mushroom cloud reaching all of seventy kilometers in altitude, and Ny Hopen now a massive crater filling with water, the kOri pack up their cobalt bluer bombs and make tracks for Saiph.

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all your base are belong to us

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

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

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

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

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

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

at the tail end of Scab, for two weeks out of every month.

The Annex hasn't used it in 3 decades so why not?

See, back during the previous war old Security Services was referred to as the Mercenary Club but over the last twenty-three years they've been taking new hires mostly from the BDF and this is for three reasons. First off they have weeded out the sociopaths from the not so good old days and second, they've been luring the best and the brightest away from the CDF and third, for purely budgetary reasons, this eliminates the need for basic training and mitigates most advanced training to 'while on the clock.' With bonuses in mind the SS rank and file is squarely on the cost consciousness train—not exactly pinching pennies per se, but definitely on the lookout for efficiencies.

Now, the Annex leasing out their old gunnery range is one thing but, truth be known, in the night clubs in New Darwin and the Church Key where the SS and SA mingle, because they do, the SA operatives who've been studying the SS training on Black Stump have been secretly critiquing their efforts under the table. Yes, Maria has actively encouraged this and, yes, the SA analysts are mostly pointing out obvious deficiencies, but it has helped spawn an air of respect and comradery between these combatants instead of the animosity one would expect.

So, on to current events...

The SS-RRF team stationed here has never launched for a real combat mission simply because over the last few years they had no reason to—the SS has been winning this fight. They'd like to think like the CDF brass, believing the SA is on the ropes, but the SS knows that the Annex has been giving up territory a little too easily. Then the published casualties and losses by the SA do not jive with the SS tally sheets but, hey, their bonus numbers definitely synch up.

A big time winner in the BDF troopers jumping ship for the SS effort is good-old Porter Macquarie. Here in Security Services he was accepted into pilot training and he has made quite a killing shooting down SA fighters and droids—ending up as one of their top aces. Unfortunately all good things must come to an end and today he is now a Major at the New Darwin base commanding one of the rotating RRF battalions, and by sheer-stupid coincidence he's commanding the battalion currently on active-station for today.

When Major Macquarie got the mission orders directly from Boxter Hartcourt he was, as he says, gobsmacked with a brick, and when he sends out the alert for them to 'saddle up' his team load and launch in record time. In the twenty minutes it takes for them to race down the thirteen-hundred kilometer coast of Scab to the Church Key, Macquarie relays to his troops their orders and mission details.

Orders and a mission that did not surprise his people one bit.

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Maroochy Dan, Major General of the CDF, is striking to look at and when anyone sees her for the first time, not knowing who she is, they'll think—in a heartbeat! Then when they see her in uniform and find out who she really is they will make themselves scarce and fast. Dan is a mix of Aboriginal, Scandinavian and Scottish blood with a dash of Maori that, when whipped up, gives her a sinewy-athletic build, unique ethnic features, dark coffee-n-cream skin with a shock of dirty blond hair that looks totally out of place. Then when you take the time to think about it none of this should work, but for her it really does.

She has been coined the 'Black Swan' and that is not from her history and colorful reputation, command style or anything more than that's what the name, Maroochy, translates to in Yuggera Aborigine so, like her looks, this handle really works wonders for her too.

While in uniform she never smiles, and though her curt and humorless façade may convey the abrupt air of a Berlin dominatrix, her reputation and combat antics are clearly a mixed style reminiscent to the British SAS with a touch of Rhodesian ZIPRA guerilla. Bold, unconventional and notably brutal the 'this girl doesn't play' rep was almost shattered when DFM Cyzk, an SA commander she has studied and admires, managed to slip through their fingers today. On the post battle debrief on the way to Sapphire she had to suppress her laughter and applause with a scowl fitting to her station.

A lowly CIC technician tried in vain to warn command about longitude and latitude orientation on Taiji but he was brushed off by his superiors as an annoying little gnat—which confirms two things. One is that command needs to de-stratify themselves and really listen to their people because, just maybe, they're right. Two is that their intelligence source has been compromised because obvious subterfuge is obvious. Their mole in the SA should have noted the orientation of Taiji and for obvious reasons.

Her report to senior command will address these issues and more with her patented flame-thrower of a tongue.

Dan's superior and corps commander, and all round political knob-gobbler, Lieutenant General, Lionel Bristol, has to rely on people like her and yet fails to listen to people like her. He climbed the ranks by playing the game instead of doing the job at hand and today is a prime example of him not being able to do that job. In her mind this guy couldn't run a dock crew, let alone command an army, and yes they took Taiji but Cyzk got away just the same.

Another thing that pisses Dan off to no end, on top of her division being held in reserve during the Taiji operation, is that it took them an hour to jump and drop into New Sydney. If they would have been training their people, instead of channeling everything they had into the Polaris-B "fondue pot" then they could have cut that down to thirty or maybe even twenty-five minutes.

Descending onto the Church Key they find out that Security Services out of New Darwin is already sitting on the deck outside the Spike and the Kilosphere. With eighty of their Djinn fighters orbiting the site, in command of the air, sixteen of their Javalina drop ships are spaced in a cluttered array allowing for only one of his ships to land just outside the spike. Rubbing his hands in glee, Bristol orders his squadron of Condor fighters to orbit at a hundred kilometers and the regiment sized assault team to set down eight kilometers northeast on the civil airfield while he lands among the Security Services ships.

With a battalion of SS troops in ACE fighting suits surrounding the Spike and their Djinn fighters buzzing around the place at high speed, Bristol thinks this mission is in the bag, but in Dan's mind this set up has red flags written all over it.

Its 11:45zulu and the second his Javalina drop ship touches down his command company races out and file into two close order parade formations facing the Security Services troops who are scattered lazily about the grounds. From between the formations Bristol and Dan step through, followed by the company commander, a Major, four platoon leaders and their division Sergeant Major in tow.

In Bristol's mind the Security Services troops scattered before him and lounging about are undisciplined sods with zero respect for authority, but in Dan's mind these people are perfectly at ease in perfectly placed positions to provide a perfectly murderous cross-fire and it's obvious. Where Bristol's arrogance and incompetence blinds him to what's before him, the little signals-man in Dan's head is waving that red flag like a bloody hopping maniac.

Bristol stops in front of a handful of SS troops whose backs are towards him, and frustrated that the troops who see him have not jumped to attention he nods to the Sergeant Major who shouts out, "Lieutenant-General Bristol is on the deck. Atten-hut!"

Macquarie turns with a purposefully surprised look, and while giving a single index-finger salute his sing-song Irish accent mocks him, "Well now, Lieutenant General, sir! Top of the morning to ye!"

Bristol is shocked that this soldier did not wait for him to return the salute, so he snorts through his nose and, "Major—"

"Macquarie, sir!"

Bristol is on the edge of fuming, "Major, I'd like to speak to your Lieutenant Colonel. Can you bring him forward."

"Love to sir, but because of budgetary cuts we don't have a Lieutenant Colonel for you to chat up. In fact we've done away with superfluous ranks like Second Lieutenant and Lieutenant General! Beggin' your pardon, Lieutenant General, no mean for disrespect, sir."

While Bristol's nostrils flair out, bristling at the contemptuous insubordination, Dan sends an SCC neuronet text to her assault forces putting down at the civil airstrips telling them to not disembark and to button up—and to leave if they lose contact with her.

Bristol has only dealt with a handful of attaché from Security Services but never the lowly grunts, and since this is a PMC instead of blowing up he offers, "I want to thank you for securing the site for us, but your services will not be needed going forward."

"We have orders to stand fast, sir."

"And I'm ordering you to stand aside, Major."

Macquarie smiles, "Well now...we have ourselves a stand off!"

"Major, I have orders from the office of the Chancellor to take the Church Key as soon as Taiji was secured."

"Do tell, and what else will they have you do?"

"We are to arrest Marshal Ramirez and all the members of the Steel Annex we find so, will you be so kind as to step aside."

"Love to, General, but we won't be doing that today..."

"Why you insolent Paddy-bastard!"

"You see, General, we also have orders from the Chancellor's office, and ours are for us to prevent you from fulfilling your orders. Also, our orders came from the Chancellor only a half-an hour ago so, on that note, have a nice shove off, General, sir!"

Dan can only shake her head ever so slightly as Bristol gestures for the Second Lieutenant at the end to, "Lieutenant Warsaw, step forward and disarm this soldier."

Bristol is pointing towards a Sergeant two meters to the right of Macquarie, and before he moves, Macquarie puts a hand up to the young man, "I wouldn't be doing that, my little butterbar!" He looks at Bristol and sweeps that hand between them, "General, imagine this, an imaginary line between us. Anyone who steps across it and, well, we will shoot 'em. Consider it fair warning, Sir."

Bristol, staring into the eyes of Macquarie, says with a slight snarl, "You have your orders, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant takes five steps forward and stops in front of the soldier, and as he starts to bark a command, Macquarie, without breaking eye contact with Bristol, whips out a pistol from a cross-draw holster and snap fires a 10mm breezeblock round into the temple of the Lieutenant who crumples to the ground dead. As that shot rings out all of Security Services raise their weapons and ready themselves to mow Bristol's people down—all the while dozens of five-story tall SA turret defense towers silently rise up from behind hidden portals in the ground, all over the peninsula, and target everything in sight.

Without blinking Macquarie says to Bristol, "Poor bastard, but I suspect you be goin' through second lieutenants like jars of Vegemite which I find surprising 'cause that squidge taste like arse."

This whole time, Vossler has been approaching them from the Kilosphere with two flat boxes in hand, and as he comes up from behind Macquarie he opens the top one and holds them out between him and Bristol saying, "Care for a donut, anybody?"

"Morning Chief!" Then with a surprised look Macquarie pulls a twist from the box, "Yank cakes! Don't mind if I do!" He then asks with a smile and a wink, "Love the towers, Chief! I guess you got yur ghosty-bots on line as well no doubt?"

Vossler nods, "They're all lit up."

"Don't be shootin' us now!"

"Then I would suggest you guys duck!" Vossler, noticing that Jacob's Thunderbolt has dropped in and is circling the Spike in close formation with the Djinn, looking to put down, closes the donut box and says to them, "Marshal Ramirez will see you two now. You can each bring three of your people and follow me."

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Almost two kilometers up near the top of the Spike, in the lobby of the Steel Annex, Lieutenant General Bristol is standing next to Major Macquarie, and where Macquarie made practical choices, bringing with him two of his sergeants and a corporal, Bristol has dragged along Dan, the Major and the Sergeant Major—leaving not one experienced commander with the company.

In Dan's mind they deserve to get whacked now.

Vossler, after offering a donut to the receptionist, steps through the door into 'the office' while the receptionist asks them all while nosing away, "Gentlemen, lady, anyone up for coffee?"

Bristol gives a subtle shake of the head, no.

Macquarie, however, puts a finger up, "Thank you, love! We'll take four of 'em, black." He then looks to Bristol and, "How 'bout you General. Wanna get in on this?" Bristol turns his head towards him with a look of hatred, so Macquarie then glances at Dan with a smile, "How 'bout you Dan? It's been a long time, sweetheart!"

Dan actually likes Macquarie, but she has to put up a front by growling under her breath, "I should have shot you twenty years ago."

"Yea, but you didn't, love! And here we are!"

As a CIC tech brings out the cups of coffee for the four from Security Services, in the far end of the elevator lobby a door silently slides open and out steps Jacob and Cyzk with their weapons held up and ready. While they quietly approach, the receptionist motions for the two to lower their weapons.

The SS Corporal in the back goes, "Ay, Major, we got a couple of camp followers on our six."

Macquarie turns and grins big, "Well now, Marshals Graves and Cyzk! No doubt a fine morning!" Nodding towards Cyzk he goes, "Cyz' I have to say you did a fine job at Taiji, a real ripsnorter of a get away! You deserve a hand, but we'd spill our coffee."

Suddenly, Maria steps in through a side door, "Good morning everybody! Actually, it's zulu afternoon now. Anyway, you caught me at a bad time and my hands are busy fricken' full..." Stopping by the receptionists desk she looks at Macquarie, "Hey, Porter!"

"Great to see ya again, Mar!"

Maria then asks Bristol, "What can I do ya for, General?"

Bristol huffs slightly then, "Marshal Ramirez, let's be civil about this. It's over with, the Steel Annex has lost. I've been ordered by the Chancellor to take control of the Church Key and place you and your people under arrest."

"Really..." Maria bobs her head introspectively, "And what is it that we lost? That kinda went, whoosh, right over my head."

"Madame, you lost the Pleiades. Your forces are scattered. There is no sane reason to continue this charade."

"Again, General, I'm not quite sure what we lost exactly?"

Macquarie adds, "Yes, General, I myself am kinda lost as to what Marshal Ramirez has lost? Can you elaborate, sir?"

Bristol gives Macquarie a looks with daggers, then turns back to Maria with a smirk, "Since a professional decorum is lacking around here let me put it in a way you'll understand."

Maria bats her eyes, "I'm like bubblin' with anticipation!"

"All your base are belong to us." Bristol shrugs with a smile, "I always wanted to say that as a kid and here I get to say it for real. Funny how things turn out, isn't it?"

Maria gives a long-comedic look and, "Oooo-kay, and that's your mouth sayin' what your ass don't have!" She then taps her lips with her a finger and, "Ya know, buck'o, there was something I always wanted to say too! Let's share the love, wanna hear it?"

Bristol shakes his head, "I am all ears."

Maria points to him with a grin...

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

"Plata o plomo."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mr Hartcourt, my orders stand."

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

"Sir? The war is over."

"You don't say!" Boxter's face turns sour, "Unfortunately, unless we have an admission of defeat by the Annex then, no, it is not over. This makes you in violation of the ROEs! Let's take inventory, shall we? Today we have perpetrated acts of aggression including, but not exclusive too, armed intervention into a neutral territory, incursion onto an embassy grounds, violence instigated resulting in unnecessary death, and an attempt to detain a recognized *chargé d'affaires*, herself an acting sovereign official who enjoys diplomatic immunity."

Bristol is indignant, "Sir, this can't be!"

"Oh no, it very much will be, so...make like a good fellow and scamper along or, if not, General Dan will have the Sergeant Major take you into custody. Isn't that correct, General Dan?"

Dan looks up at the screen, "Just received the orders, Sir."

"The choice is clear, General Bristol, you can either take the promotion to Army Commander I'm planning to give you on Friday for the fabulous success on Taiji, or...be taken outside and, since this is a time of armed conflict, get shot for a laundry list of capital offenses." Boxter, rubbing his hands says, "The clock...is ticking."

Bristol says through clinched teeth, "I'll be on my way, sir."

With both hands, Boxter makes a shooing motion towards Bristol while saying, "Let's get a move on. Make haste!"

It has not been a good day for Lieutenant Generals and Bristol looks like he is about to blow his top. The indignity of a slap down and dismissal like this is beyond what he can bear, but to voice a protest now means he would face a firing squad on the spot so, in a tight-lipped wide-eyed rage, he pivots around in a perfectly executed about face and stomps off towards the elevator lobby.

The company commander and the Sergeant Major follow him smartly, but Dan turns and looks at Cyzk for just a second—trying her best to suppress the approving smile. She does gives him a subtle nod and follows the rest into a waiting elevator.

With them gone, Maria looks to Cyzk, in his tattered fighting suit, and says, "Kacper, you look a little worse for wear."

Cyzk shrugs, "Nothing that a bottle of scotch, a brunette and a couple of days rack time couldn't fix."

"I want to see you and Venk on Friday, noon, for lunch. I'll send you that bottle." With Cyzk nodding okay, Maria points towards the lobby, "Get the fuck outta here already!"

With Cyzk turning to leave, Jacob says, "Did good, man."

Cyzk snorts a laugh, "Bite my ass."

Laughing, Jacob pats Cyzk on the shoulder as he leaves, and himself steps into the SA lobby while Macquarie goes, "Well now, I guess you won't be needing us. It has been a craic of a good time! Thanks again for the coffee! We'll show ourselves out."

Boxter says, "If you please, I'm not through with you, Porter."

"What'll be your pleasure, sir?"

"Since the CDF will be taking over offensive operations going forward we've had some changes in our organization. I'm looking for a new base commander for New Darwin and I was wondering if you'd be up to it...Colonel?"

"I've only been time in grade for two years, sir."

"Like that matters?" Boxter's eye twitches, "Mr Jones is now on my exec staff and suggested you! Make me proud. And now that Security Services will be doing actual security work your people will have time on their hands, and I dare say they deserve...a holiday."

"Come again, sir?"

Maria steps in, "It's a slow time here and I got a thousand empty hotel rooms for the next five weeks so Mr Hartcourt and I thought it would be nice to comp you SS peeps two nights each."

Boxter adds, "I understand that morning crisps come with the rooms so I'll pick up chips and evening...chow is it? We will cycle the rest of Security Services after the first of the year."

Macquarie is dumbfounded, "On behalf of our people that's right charitable of you sir, and mum!"

Boxter gives a genuine smile, "It was well earned."

Maria adds, "Porter, you may want to schedule yourself for the thirty-first. This place is crazy fun during Halloween."

Macquarie grins big, "I be lookin' forward to it, Mar!"

Boxter clasps his hands together, "Now if you please, Colonel. The Marshal and I have a few issues to discuss privately."

With Macquarie and his people stepping out, Jacob points towards the doors to the large conference room, by the lobby where Maria came from, "I'm gonna go see the girls and let you two be."

With all of them now gone, Maria says, "Just so you know, Venkatesh has sent the stand down order. Sorry about that one."

"Oh tosh my dear...unfortunately for our General Alcock, that message is being held up by IT security protocol for analysis."

"Are you shitting me?"

"Who knows what it may contain considering the nature of the source?" Boxter drops the innocent act with a sly grin, "Then again, I'm enjoying this way too much to let it...end so soon."

Maria knows it costs the CDF over 150k to train a soldier but, with padded medical expenses the way they are in the Hyades, it's five times that to grow a new arm or leg. Maria had the GMi BER protocol always default to the 'mayhem' option because the Co-op would be contractually obligated to pay for regenerations.

Maria is surprised, "This is gonna hit their budget!"

Boxter agrees, "Deeeep into the red, yes."

Maria dares to ask, "I'm curious, why didn't you go into Taiji and Ngāti Whā with Security Services?"

"Oh, that." Boxter looks like a little kid caught with his hands in the cookie jar, "We had no legal claim to Ngāti Whā and, as for Taiji, truth be known is that the five houses bought out the patent claims over eighty years ago."

"You told them?"

"Most definitely!"

"And they chose not to listen."

"Surprised? If Giáp doesn't prevail on the field you can be assured that the houses will roundly defeat them in the courts."

Maria is confused, "Doesn't explain why you didn't go?"

"Oh that, my choice to avoid those operations was based upon principal. I found them to be...morally repugnant."

"Ya know, I'm gonna miss this. What we got goin' here."

"I beg to differ, Security Services may be out for the duration but you do not get rid of me that easily. Always remember that when God closes one door he always opens another."

Maria nods big, "Yea, but his hallways are a motherfucker." As Boxter laughs with delight she asks, "I'm curious, who you got in mind for replacing Tillsdale?"

He looks right and then left, "Well, there is a whole list of incompetence to choose from but...I was thinking of giving the young Wanganui a shot at it. With ol' Shep gone he'd be a lost little ship for me to ballast in the treacherous seas of state."

Maria just shakes her head, totally blown away by how much they think alike, and points towards the conference room doors saying, "The girls are here. I think they'd like to say hi!"

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Diego is standing on a raised dais by the window overlooking the Kilosphere and the flight line far below. The windows have been darkened to blot out the light with the center panel switched to mirror mode. Littered about is her sister Jessica, the clones Copper, Eight, Cap, Peanuts, her grandmother Ophelia and great aunt Adolphina.

Diego is in a tight green screen corset and leggings, with the dressmaker's changing room application tied into her visual cortex but, instead of flipping through the dresses she is looking down at little Angela whose been staring up at her, so Diego asks in a curt, "What?"

"Pfth'so..." Angela spits—then with a perfect adult inflection, "If a tortoise ate a snail and...died...it would be faster than you!"

Diego is already frustrated going through endless holographic dresses, but this little fart always manages to push her buttons so she snarls, "Okay, six-two-six, get away from me before I strangle—"

Angela throws her hands out, "Allright, Sian! Just sayin' what everyone else is thinkin' but, keep in mind, this you're doin' is between me and my French Fries, okay? Think of the children!"

Angela notices Jacob standing right there in his fighting suit, with his hand held out to her, so she grabs it and climbs up into his arms giving him a big kiss while squeaking, "Hey-hey, Uncle J!"

Jacob asks, "You being good?"

"Me? I'm always good!"

Diego has leaned out to give her father a quick kiss, "You're a rancid little dog turd, that's what you are!" She gives Jacob a kiss and as she pulls away she gives Angela a little cat like hiss, then, "Sorry, father, this shit is driving me outta my God damned mind."

Jacob points out the obvious guy solution, "How 'bout you pick the one that makes you hurl the least?"

"Really, like it's that simple? Here's the Disney Princess roll call, let's sound off..." Diego, through the dress app, with each flick of her hand in the air a dress is superimposed over her as if it was really there, and as she flips through them, "We got Belle, and here's Elsa, the Mulan rouge, the Tiana cake topper!" She gives a two-thumbs up, "That's a beaute and, oh shit, my favorite, the Ariel toilet brush!"

Jacob is trying not to laugh when Ophelia jumps up and says, "You look beautiful in that one *mi mija!* Perfect for *quinceañera!*"

Diego looks up and sobs, "I don't wanna be a toilet brush!"

Adolphina, points out, "I like the cake topper."

Across the room Maria just came in, with Boxter on the wall screen behind her, just in time to see this so Boxter clears his throat quietly to get the attention of the dress designer sitting in front of them, "Excuse me mum, you from Braziers?"

The designer turns and, "Out of Los Angeles, Yes."

"Madame haberdasher, would you be so kind as to entreat an old busy body for an opinion?"

She shakes her head, "I'm at the end of my rope so, sure!"

"You familiar with the Louisiana...French-Dip?"

"It's a cut from the Stumps, yea."

"Specifically, the strapless one with the plunging V-corset that accentuates the hips. Give that one a whirl if you please."

She looks at him and asks, "Would you suggest a color?"

Boxter cocks his head to the side and, "Considering her hair and temperament I would try a...deep dusty rose...matte, preferable." He then points up, "Oh, and as for accents I would do charcoal?"

With her clicking she goes, "Sir that requires the quick release band for the skirt, and that liquid metal tech ain't cheap."

"Well, when one must micturate." Boxter shrugs and, "I have about twenty of them in storage with you in New Brisbane. We should be able to adapt one for this purpose."

"You have an account sir?"

"Hartcourt."

"Hartcourt? That's the biggest account on the stumps!"

Boxter painfully nods, "Yes...I have five daughters."

On the Dias, Diego is finally fed up, "Okay, I'm about done with this shit! You guys pick one and I'll go around with a sack over my fucking head! I'd rather wear jeans and a t-shirt but if I gotta look stupid..." Suddenly the dress Boxter suggests pops up on her and everyone is visibly startled, so Diego shouts, "What! You act like I'm gonna jump out at ya and claw your eyes out!"

Jessica and the clones stand up from the couches, stunned by what they see, as Adolphina says, "Turn around."

"Turn around, what?"

"Look!" Cap says while she spins her finger in the air then at the mirror where, in a fit, Diego does the same but flips Cap the bird.

Jacob huffs and firmly, "Turn the fuck...around."

Diego does so and when she sees the reflection of herself in this dress her mouth drops in total astonishment. She squints, not believing what she sees and, not knowing what to say, tears well up and start to run down her cheeks.

Jacob adds, "I don't think this one will induce nausea."

Diego starts to wipe the tears from her cheeks while saying quietly to them, "Yea, okay, I think...I think...I can do this."

Adolphina agrees, "*Ay chihua*, Diego, that's smokin'."

Angela asks Jacob, "Do I gotta say nice stuff now?"

Jacob puts her on the dias and, "No, but it would be nice."

Angela takes Diego's hand and looks up at her, "I think...oh shit I got a hairball!"

With Angela acting like she's gonna puke, Diego almost cracks up saying, "Out with it, sis!"

"Uuuuu...uuUUu..." Angela, bending over Diego's feet, pukes up the words, "Looks great!" She shakes her head with a deep breath, "Wow, that was hard to get out!"

Diego yanks her in close and Angela shrieks with laughter as Diego starts tickling her, "You little...fricken...chigger!"

Maria is leaning over the couch to get the clones attention, while thumbing back, "Hey, ladies, lookie here!"

Eight turns first and shouts, "Boxter!"

Jessica gives Boxter a little wave as the clones mob him, and as Maria steps up to her, Jessica goes, "He'll be at his Times Square suite on New Years and, since Piper knows everything, he was wondering if Piper could come with?"

Maria asks, "She's cool?"

"Yea, way cool."

"Okay, let 'im know. What about the party for Cloé?"

"Box wants to extend the invite to Diego, Angela and Copper."

"If you're chaperon then yes. What about Scott and Angie?"

"The condo is mine now but nothing changes. They're family and it's their home too."

Maria points out, "You're Angela's mom now."

"Yikes...I never thought about that."

"Have fun with it."

"Little Klicks can be a hand full."

"She's gonna take Nicole's death hard."

Jessica shrugs, "Not when I'm through with her."

"You and Seth gonna be okay?"

"We've had a lot of time to acclimate to this."

Maria looks at Jessica then dares to ask, "You know how they say that big doors swing on little hinges? I have to ask...was there anything you and Seth could have done to save Nicole?"

Jessica looks at her with her father's icy chill, "Flapping our little butterfly wings just to save mother would have been catastrophic. We looked at this from every angle and, honestly, it was the only way to bag Tillsdale...and, one more thing!"

"What's that?"

In the tacnet, Jessica drags and drops a communication queue into Maria's inbox and smiles at her, "Grandfather wants to talk to you. He's waiting on line."

"That was fast!"

"He and Michal compiled yesterday. Mother is tonight."

Maria nods towards Diego, "Come on. Let's see your sister."

As they step up Diego asks the two of them, "Waddya think?"

Maria smiles, "You're giving Jessie a run for the money."

Jessica bobs her head to her, "You look great a-a-and I have to say that dress helps maybe...just a tad."

Diego points to her, "You give people boners walking around in God damned baggies. Just think what you'd do in this dress."

"Naw, I don't think so."

Diego puts her hands on her hips and, "Forest green with crème accents. Think about that?"

Jessica recoils, "You mean Merida!"

Diego leans down, and in Jessica's face, "Merida is a badass an' don't you forget it!"

Maria says to Jessica, "Merida is cool."

Angela asks them all, "Which princess am I?"

Diego, Jessica and Maria all say in unison, "Maleficent!"

Angela thrusts her fists into the air, "Yea baby—me be evil!"

Angela wasn't fast enough, and with both Diego and Jessica jumping in and tickling her, Angela shrieks with laughter.

Maria taps Jacob's shoulder, and while pointing to her ear, "Can we talk before you go? I gotta take this first."

Jacob says to her, "You were right about splitting my teams. Things would've gotten out of hand if we did."

"But, they didn't. I wanna knock around a few ideas on how to stick it to homer between now and Polaris." Maria pats him on the back, "Thank you for getting them out."

Before she turns away, Jacob says, "Pallet extraction."

Maria wonders, "Of what?"

"Loaded down with Pacman and a handful of droids."

Maria thinks about it and smiles, "That would keep 'em busy, now wouldn't it!" She heads for the lobby, "Give me a minute."

Jacob calls out to her, "I want back in the shit."

With a laugh, Maria says without turning back, "I know, that's what we're gonna talk about."

While entering the lobby Maria clicks on the queue and, within a few short seconds, Bob answers, ["About time..."]

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"Then again, I got all the time in the world now."

Stone Garden, run by the Steel Annex, is as gorgeous as any other hosting world but with so few permanent residents it has been optimized to run in real time and it's the only ghost host world in existence that does so. All commercial worlds lag terribly and Vegas³ itself has recently upgraded to 45% of real time and that's considered a premium selling point if you can believe it.

As a ghost if you were to get a call from the outside world the network is forced to overclock you to compensate for the lag, and this processor push makes your surroundings matrixy slow.

Proper etiquette at most of these worlds is for one to step out to a private spot before amping up, but in the Garden it's exceedingly common for the residents to get outside calls—all because most everyone is now operating combat tech in the real world. Funny thing is that it's not at all unheard of for someone to get rung up by a copy of them self out on a mission, which can get comical to say the least.

Unlike most ghost hosts, specifically Vegas³ again, the Garden does not have dozens upon dozens of instances of the same map overlaid on top of each other. Real estate here is a one shot deal and, because this is Bob, he gets to score a beachfront lot.

A new resident stepping out into the Garden, that is after dying and compiling, is greeted by a guide looking to set them up with a residence, as well as resolving outstanding estate issues, but Bob knew this was coming so he was already prepared for today.

With their glass-tastic beach chalet behind them, Michal is transfixed by a tacnet memory of his, one that she is actually standing in and watching in the third-person. On the beach before her is eight year old Nicole, naked and playing in the surf with Snoopy when he was a juvenile raptor. It took a lot of editing to seamlessly model and merge this memory with the beach outside his property but, because Michal is enthralled by it, he realizes that it was worth the effort.

Maria says over the link, ["Sorry, Bob, I'm spread thin!"]

Bob laughs, "Yea, but for once I don't give a shit."

["I guess that zero fucks given must go hand-n-hand with being dead! I'm curious, do you feel it?"]

"Feel what?"

["Most people say they feel something is missing when they cross over to the hosting worlds. Do you feel that?"]

Bob thinks about it and, "No...but they say I didn't have a soul to begin with so that's probably why I don't?"

Maria laughs and, ["Okay...so, wazzup?"]

"I'm watching Michal watching my forty-five year old memory of Nicole playing in the surf on Second Hand with Snoopy."

["Well, we're walking down memory lane first thing."] Maria then realizes, ["Wait a minute! You're half your age now, right?"]

"Yea, so is Michal, it's kinda weird and cool, but for the first time in years I can think clearly."

["Hey, you got a new CPU!"]

"It's shocking to realize how much advanced age can actually cloud your thinking."

["You were only eighty!"]

"Yea, but this is like I got a tune-up."

Maria laughs again, ["Okay, so...what's on your mind?"]

"Clarity."

["That's three syllables. I'm willing to hear this out."]

"There were things I heard and things I saw, and I didn't add them up when I should have. See, when Cricket had Jade, Jessica said something to me that should have set off alarms but it didn't."

["That was probably Jessie's doing."]

"I figured that, but it was the unknown divisor to a formula that was staring me in the face. She said we had an unexpected ally."

["Boxter?"]

"She didn't say and, when I pressed her she wouldn't say, but I can hedge my bets that we're not supposed to know."

["I will say this, Boxter has got something up his sleeve but it ain't about us. My gut says he's got somethin' else going on."]

"Nobody in the FIS and the greater intel community believe in our reported losses. Boxter should be turning over every rock looking for U-Turn, but he's not. It's like he knows what we're doing, and he wants us to hit Polaris. It's like he's serving it up on a silver platter."

["Okay...gimme something to chew on."]

"Tariffs."

["That's two syllables. You can do better, dude."]

He laughs, "Okay, I heard that he's flipping investments like crazy. Get this, he was the controlling shareholder to the company that was importing from Ngāti Whā, and it was directly responsible for pushing that attack, but he offloaded the last of his shares days ago."

["I don't get it?"]

"Okay, hemp products, paper and textiles, tobacco and wine are imported by that company and the tariffs are astronomical. If they make Ngāti Whā a protectorate the tariffs go away—but the market is already used to paying these prices so they'll keep it jacked up."

["And the punchline is?"]

"It's all about how they budget ops! See, they're bettin' on the come. Co-op business interests put up the budget for a mission and, in turn, they directly reap those benefits but, if things go ass up, its they who have to offset that variance out of pocket, and a loss here is something they cannot walk away from. The question is, where is all the capital for this coming from? Who the fuck knows?"

["That would be Nigel Kiel."]

"The Mountain Troll?"

["Yea, Michelle told me, but he's not tugging any strings."]

"Is he betting against them?"

["Oh, fuck yea! He'll profit if they win, sure, but if they lose he'll make off like a bandit however, he won't do anything overt to trip them up directly. It's gotta be someone else though."]

"Why is that?"

["Nigel cut them off months ago, so my question is...who had the funds to pony up for Taiji and Ngāti Whā?"]

"Well, it's time I share, Boxter sold off all his capital interest in the Co-op and he's diversified into God knows what? Reports are that his tentacles are in everything now. He's the only one on the Stumps not strapped for cash and the only one, other than Nigel, with that kind of handy scratch."

["Okay, for you, just today, Boxter pulled Security Services from all offensive operations. The CDF is swingin' their own dick from here on out, so if he did front that loan to finance those ops—then he would be betting against them."]

"Yup, but Jessica won't say who it is."

["Look, if we find out that Lebedev was full of shit then it's imperative that we do not deviate from Polaris."]

"Yea, but if Vasily was right, Box would want us to hit Polaris."

["We got ourselves a bastard of a paradox here. Look, Bob, I appreciate the heads up but I can't put time into wishful thinking right now. I got a war to fight and a *quinceañera* to plan for."]

Bob laughs and, "You mean the quinceanera to fight for."

["Ain't that the God's honest truth! At least she's not puttin' up the fuss we thought she would."]

"Michal wanted to be there."

["We'll figure something out."]

"Okay, you go unfuck the world an' we'll chat later!"

With Maria gone, Bob slowly slithers up beside Michal and takes her hand, and while they watch the real to life 3D Nicole and Snoopy splash, play and chase each other, Michal squeezes Bob's hand, "This was an important moment for you."

Bob thinks about it, "We were very much alike, Nicole and I. Bad childhoods, ya know. But, this moment for us, it was the very first time we both felt actual happiness."

Michal gnaws on that and throws out, "And all the time you spent with me before this-here?"

Bob's shoulders sag, "You know what I mean."

She looks at him and grins, "Yeaaaa! Had ya goin'!"

"Oh, before I forget! Jessie is gonna bring Nicole over in the morning after her mother compiles."

"She can do that? She's not SA."

"You'd be surprised what she does for us." Bob looks at her and nods back to the chalet, "Wanna check the place out? You can pick out the first room we christen."

Michal grins big, "Sure! I feel a carpet burn a-comin' on!"

Bob shakes his head, "Seriously?"

She gives him a quick kiss, "Just giving you shit."

As they walk-in-arm slowly towards the chalet Bob smiles, "Hey, on Ny Hopen, you got me back, and good!"

Michal pulls in close, "I know."

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non compost mentis

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

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

So, hats off to Wernher von Kerman they say!

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

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

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

Point being, these two items came together swimmingly here on Imi when he modded the old NASA mod in KSP to reflect the two red dwarfs of apón-Pup and the orbital dynamics of the binary planets of Dolphin Reel, that being Sashi and Imi—and here the modeling of Pluto and Charon came in handy. Since day one on Imi, Charles was already anticipating what the Nefer Key would ask of him so when they posed the question, that being ‘if humans were to invade from Earth, what would it take to get his troops to Sashi?’ he had it all mapped out on KSP and ready to present to them.

Since it would take the Nefer Key’s big transport saucers all of twelve hours to do a turn around and get the troops back to Sashi, Charles showed how he could do that in half that time with the older sub-orbital shuttle transports they use on Imi. Luc was so impressed that Charles had his blessing to run with it, but what bothered Charles was the last question Luc asked in passing.

A question Charles already anticipated.

One thing at a time they say so, focusing on the project at hand, Charles was able to put that off to get this done, and here today we have Luc, Lilith, Marcus and Rachel in Charles’ office to review it all in detail now that it has been tested and proven viable.

Yesterday’s first manned live fire test was a shuttle-booster assembly consisting of four massive solid rockets to launch the shuttle into a direct rendezvous vector with Sashi. Once these boosters were spent on the ascent they were staged separated preceding the coasting phase, and when approaching Sashi an additional two breaking rockets would slow the shuttle to a dead stop over the planet. Surprisingly there was no need for air-breaking like on an orbital reentry, the shuttle simply dumped the spent rockets and dropped into a glide path without any heatshields or tiles.

They then went into the weeds going over glycol engines and fuels and ullage and pyrotechnics and maintenance schedules and after three hours Charles sits back, “So, that pretty much covers it.”

Luc thinks about it and smiles, “Well...I’m impressed!”

“Right now, with one launcher we can get a whole company on the deck and ready to fight anywhere on Sashi, inside six hours. We’re planning twelve of these launchers and we’ll be able to throw that many companies into the fight until you bring your saucers over for the rest of the troops.”

“All there is left to do is to implement it.”

With what Luc said, Rachel and Marcus look at each other, then at Luc with Marcus speaking up, “About that.”

Lilith rolls her eyes as Luc asks, "About what?"

Rachel says to Luc, "We already implemented it."

Luc is confused, "Hu?"

Charles actually enjoys the fact that he has Luc over a barrel by saying, "When you gave us the green light, well, we ran with it."

"You mean, ran with it like...you are starting to build them?"

Charles takes a deep breath and, "Kinda more like we built them, in the past tense. See, you already approved it so we went ahead and we now have eight of 'em live and ready to launch at a moment's notice. We are assembling the last four as we speak."

"Yesterday was only the second test, and you built them?"

"We knew it would all work with the first test."

Luc is visibly startled, "Well, I have to say I'm surprised that you took the initiative! We didn't see you building them."

"If you could see us putting them up then...well, out of sight out of mind." Charles' eyes drill into Luc's, "We're not like you, Luc. Once that ball is rolling there is no reason to stop, otherwise shit doesn't get done! Right now, right now we have eight companies ready at a moment's notice to come bail your ass out."

"Thank you, but—"

"This is what we thought you wanted, right?"

"Yes, but we didn't expect you to run away with it."

"You picked me 'cause I don't fiddle-fuck around."

"We were hoping to discuss other options."

Rachel points out, "Like what? Like you were going to give us your saucer tech? Like that was going to happen?"

Luc huffs a laugh, "Well, Rachel, ya got me there!"

Charles leans forward, "What other option would there be? Do you know why you green-lit this project when you did? It was because it was all low tech. Like, really ancient tech so you didn't feel threatened by it at all, but the problem facing us here is you didn't think this through!" Charles sits back again, "What you should have done was to park six of your saucers here and have your people drive them exclusively. See, that would've been the smart option when considering your mindset because now we have the ability to push a button on our own and that was not what you wanted, right?"

"We wanted...some control."

Rachel notes, "And that would have defeated the purpose of all this. If we can't launch on our own initiative then, if you are prevented from giving that go ahead, then we'd be stuck here."

Luc throws out, "We thought you'd incorporate a mechanism to bypass that authorization. Behind our backs of course."

Rachel adds, "And therein lies the problem, trust in parity."

Charles shrugs, "See, you trust us only as far as you think you have us under your control, and that is a significant problem. We know about your *Fâcherie S'arrêter*, or as Jason calls *fecale s'arrêter*, and hearing about that 'shit stopper' gun you rely upon gave us cause for pause."

Luc nods then asks, "It does the job. What's the code name?"

"Designation is Fox Sierra, we're calling it the Fly Swatter."

Luc looks at Lilith and they both nod with approval, so Luc looks back and, "That's so apropos, I like it!"

"We thought you'd like that!" Charles then shifts gears, "The funny thing is, and you're gonna love this, we know where it is, since you are riding around in it everywhere you go..." Luc gives a shocked look so Charles says, "Come on! Obviously it's Delta Echo, well the lower decks that nobody seems to be able to access. Everything else you fly is either a saucer, or a cylinder, or some spherical or elliptical blob of some kind. Delta Echo stands out like a sore thumb, and the best thing yet is that the weapon is now pretty much neutralized!"

"How's that? You can't access it."

"We don't need too, point being..." Charles pushes a button and on the screen behind him, running at 10,000x speed, multiple simulations run in sequence showing Delta Echo approaching Imi and the eight launchers from Imi blasting off for Sashi from the far side, "Don't ask for what you don't wanna know."

"You have a lot of sayings where you're from."

"Yea, and there's a reason for it. You asked the one question that I was hoping you would not ask, and behind me is the answer to that probing question because for us it was a game changer..."

Luc, watching the simulations run one after another, listens as Charles continues, "For your edification, your normal ships don't stand a chance against the shuttles. Sure, you got plasma cannons on board but they're utilitarian, short range and not military grade, so if you do sic 'em on the transports, which are armed to the teeth and have a long reach, can you say bad plan? And your Fly Swatter needs, what, twenty to thirty minutes to spool up to take a shot, and you can't fly

and spool at the same time so that really puts the fuck to your options because the launchers are scattered. Oh yea, then to top that off the Fly Swatter, more likely than not, has a set convergence, that is you don't have a variable aperture so, my guess is that you have to be pretty close to take a shot. I'd say from twenty to fifty thousand clicks or maybe a hundred? The thing is, we can see it comin'."

Luc thinks about it, then, "Sorry I asked that question but, since we are discussing it, for my edification, how many troops would it take to, in lack of better terms, conquer my people on Sashi?"

Charles nods, "I'm sorry you asked that question too but, to be honest, considering you have no weapons, no defenses planet side, and no skills or abilities whatsoever...do you really want me to say it?"

Realizing that there are 150 of their armed troops on Sashi running maneuvers, Luc insists, "The question stands, how many?"

"One company should about do it." As Luc absorbs this, Charles reaches for his keyboard and asks, "Any questions?"

Blinking, Luc glances at Lilith and says, "No."

In a few seconds a voice comes over the speakers from Sashi, ["General Washington, what can we do for you, sir."]

Charles asks, "Captain Maat, how did maneuvers go?"

["Very well, sir. Awaiting your orders."]

Staring at Luc, who is obviously shocked by this, Charles then says, "When their saucer comes to bring you back...load and return."

["Confirm your status, sir."]

"*Semper fidelis.*"

["Glad to hear, sir. Load and return, confirmed. Out."]

After a few seconds of silence, Charles drives it home, "Luc, if you were looking to light a fire under these people, I want to thank you for the help. It made all the difference."

Luc chirps, "You're welcome?"

Marcus adds, "You have a real army now. A modern army."

Charles is proud to say, "I would put these people up against anything Earth could possibly throw at us, now."

Luc points out, "You know, I haven't seen your people march or drill or parade for the longest time."

"Why? That's a colossal waste of effort. Combat is chaos, and these people, with all their life experience, now thrive off of that. Where credit is due—they're smart and they are quick studies."

Rachel throws out, "We can teach you if you want."

Luc looks to Lilith who nods yes, so he says, "I think it would be in our best interest to take you up on that."

Charles asks, "Since the ratio of female to male is now, what, forty or fifty to one?"

"Pushing sixty to one. Fifty-eight to be exact."

Charles snorts a laugh, "Must be nice."

Rachel swats Charles' arm as Luc smiles slightly, "It's a job."

"I suspect you will not be risking any males so, offhand, since you are gone all the time, I believe that Lilith would be best suited to take the reins on this one."

Lilith jumps at that, "Yes...yes, I will."

Charles says to Lilith, "Volunteers, only."

Luc, thinking deep, looks at Charles with a smile, "Good job!" He then turns to Marcus and, "I guess you are free to go, Marcus."

Marcus nods in gratitude, "Thank you."

The meeting breaks up and Lilith wordlessly accompanies Luc to his ship where, upon reaching it, Luc turns to her, "You were right."

Lilith shakes her head, "When are you going to listen to me?"

"From here on out." Luc shrugs, "You were right all along."

"They just proved that they *are* in league with us."

"Yea, but...we got our ass handed back to us."

"There is no way to spin it, grandfather. We deserved it."

"It's just that it's so damned unnerving."

"You'll get over it." Lilith gives him a little kiss, "I did."

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From his hillside villa, overlooking the coastal city of Ipet Hah, Marcus is standing there with Rachel and Lilith. The three are each enjoying a glass of wine while watching the sunset of the red dwarfs, *Rouge Deux* and the far distant *Gros Rouge*, over the bay. On the other hand, behind them, Charles and Jason are like two little kids as they sort through Marcus' Centurion armor and weapons they just pulled out from its nitrogen display case in his living room.

Even though the display cabinet was oxygen free, Marcus still had to refurbish and replace all the fabrics, leather and wooden parts

many times over the last twenty-one hundred years he has been here on Imi. The one thing that did not survive these two millennia, no matter what he tried, was his cherished Centurion *vitis virgam*.

His vine-wood whipping staff crumbled away long ago.

Compared to Marcus, who stands just an inch taller than the Nefer Key at five feet and five inches, Jason was considered imposing when he first came here. Jason was tall for the mid-sixteenth century, coming in at five-nine, but he was originally from a well-fed blue-blood stock before being captured and pressed into a pirate crew at sixteen. Charles, however, is gargantuan by comparison at just a smidge under six-four, which is the maximum height for an astronaut.

Point being, these two lug-nuts both tried to put on Marcus' *galea*, his centurion helmet, which was way too small for Charles, but a tight squeeze on Jason's head, and with the helmet on and fondling the pilum spear, Jason says, "All this shit is like new!"

Charles, holding the torso *lorica segmentata* armor against his chest, laughs, "Damn, Mark, this looks bigger in the display!"

The doorbell chimes as Jason goes, "Marcus, can you imagine what Goliath here would look like in this shit?"

Marcus steps in the room and laughs, "Can you imagine what Chuck would look like in the arena?"

Jason pulls the helmet off, "Murmillo!"

"Exactly! He'd be unstoppable."

Charles grins, "You two are blade guys. I don't do blades but I'll happily go into the arena with my forty-five."

Laughing, Marcus steps through the room and when he opens his front door, finding the delivery guy with a pizza cozy in hand, but instead of greeting him Marcus is surprised, "Captain Maat?"

Maat is an olive skinned Egyptian and the oldest living human resident on Imi, going on four-thousand years, and like Marcus looking all of maybe thirty something, "I was at my wife's shop. I saw this and thought I'd bring it." He pulls the pizzas out from the cozy and asks, "Is it true, dude? They lettin' you cash out?"

"Word gets around fast..." Marcus takes the three pizzas and wonders, "I never did ask you, but how are you dealing with Chuck being in charge? I mean you were a general under me."

"I resented him at first, flattening it all out, but what he did was the right thing to do. Oh, when I got back this afternoon he bumped me up and gave me a Battalion!"

Marcus smiles, "*Homo sum humani a me nihil alienum puto.*"

"Ain't that the truth, brother." Maat snorts a laugh, then he gives Marcus a Roman salute, "Journey well, my friend."

"Thank you my general." As Maat walks away he laughs big when Marcus adds, "And soon to be a general again!"

Marcus steps back inside and enters the living room where Lilith snatches the pizzas from him chirping, "Thanks, babe!"

With Jason and Lilith opening the three boxes, looking for their pizza, Charles laughs, "Pineapple! Uuuugh, I can smell it. I almost forgot you and Robert ate the shit outta that."

Lilith smiles, "It's heavenly."

"Thank you, hon!" Jason gives Lilith a little kiss as she hands him a slice, then to Charles, "Cowabunga, star dude!" He struggles taking a bite as he says, "Ya know, when I was a kid, a pineapple was worth a king's ransom where I was from, but to find it on pizza?" He takes a few chews and, "I'm eatin' the motherfucker on pizza!"

Rachel steps up to the boxes while scolding Charles, "I can live with the green olives, but it's your anchovies. We can thank our lucky stars Maat's Pies doesn't carry those evil things!"

Marcus speaks up, "I like anchovies!"

She turns and hands Charles a slice of his current favorite of olive, bacon and basil, "At least she carries bacon." She then turns to Marcus, "Remind me not to swap spit with you if you eat those things."

"My wife loved them too."

As Rachel shudders at that, Charles goes, "You should have seen Rachel's face when I made a peanut butter and tuna sandwich when we got married. I thought she was going to divorce my ass!"

Rachel gives him a quick kiss, "That's still on the table."

Marcus laughs and thumbs towards the patio, "Let me go get my wine, okay. Give me a minute."

Marcus steps outside to collect his glass of wine, and as he looks up he is suddenly captivated by the two red dwarf stars as they make their final plunge below the horizon. With the starlight reflected from Sashi above, in contrast to these setting stars, it makes for a very romantic setting. He remembers the countless evenings he spent with his wife in his arms at this very moment on Imi, and he longs for those moments again.

Raising the glass, Marcus says, "Be with you soon, love."

This intimate-memory moment of his was suddenly shattered by Jason bumping up against the rail of the patio, "So, got a sec?"

"Do I got a choice?"

Jason grins as he spins Marcus' gladius in the air, then twirls it around and holds it up to Marcus all the while asking, "Let me get this straight, dude. You're gonna put all that shit on in there...then you're throw yourself on this? That about sum it up?"

Marcus nods with a smile, "It is the Roman way."

"Really...I say you're *non compost mentis*, asshole."

"You mean, *compos*?"

"No, I meant what I said. You're not a shit for brains! Where I'm from whacking yourself is a mortal sin, so I just can't stand by and let you do that. In good conscience I really can't let you do that."

"When the Nefer tech is filtered out of my body, I really don't want to wait decades for it. Like four or five decades."

"Oh no, no-no-no, I got a better idea."

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Acknowledgements...

The author would like to thank the following people for their love, friendship, and contributions to this work:

Nedka Petrovova for bouncing ideas and keeping me on track!

Bruce Wylie "I can do that without a fish" (RIP)

/pol/ it was a hell of a year for you guys!

Misty Vincent thanks for the feedback!

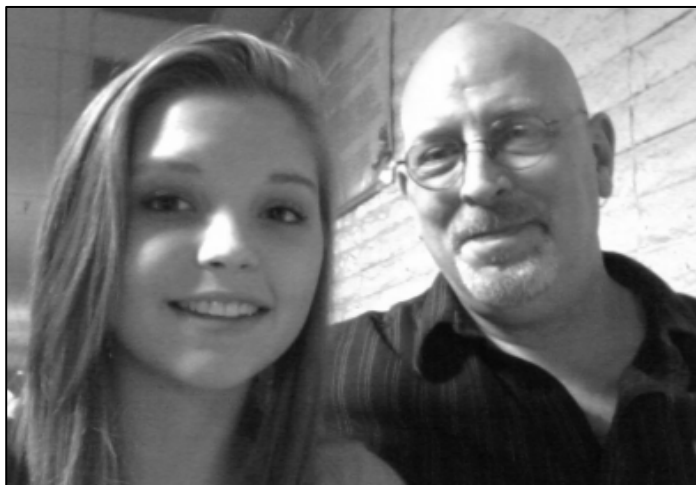
Jacob Baum for your "brains" yet again!

Arleta Okerson every time you open your mouth I'm there jotting shit down or texting myself with it...

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 now writing full time. Monstre Deux (above) is all grown up now, and the other two have a long way to go!

So, it's back to work...

come at me bro



03 diet of worms

Nicole Burke, on the lam at eight, her deliverance was by a slim chance encounter with Robert Jackson, a Deputy Marshal from the Steel Annex. Raising her as his own when Nicole comes of age she joins the SA looking for payback—and it takes all of thirty-six years before she gets to dish it out in full.

Heads rolled, people died...in all it was a good day!

With her children, Jessica and Seth, old enough to fend for themselves, and looking to cut ties with Jacob and Maria out of self-preservation, Nicole finally finds a sense of belonging with the most unlikely of people, Scott Rutledge.

Now, with this new war in full swing the Annex is purposefully losing ground to spread the forces of the Co-op thin. Problem is that the media is actually covering it this time, and with all the nations pushing to bring this conflict to a swift end the last thing anyone in the know wants is peace. A negotiated peace will only put off the inevitable, which is war, and seeking peace against the tide is suicide.



more: jaccinthebox.com

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