

until peace and then

nicholas ralph baum

jacc in the box

JNTB PART
06



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PART 06

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DEDICATED TO
MY GRANDMOTHERS:

Celesta Giudici-Baum
(perfect Italian gmaw)

Donas Knatzer-Irelan
(the smartest evah)

Maley Smith-Irelan
(the nicest evah)

Retha Breshers-Cripe
(best cook evah)

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The greatest way to avenge your enemy is by
learning to forgive

— Takashi Tanemori

112

locusts of control

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

delegates to each Earth delegation in order of importance.

Nancy timed it so that they would approach the United States last, leading into the New Year's rollover followed by good cheers from the crowd. With sparkling mead in hand, the toasts made by Nancy then President Mofid were well received, but during his toast, Jessica steps out of the portal at the top of the mid-point ramp.

Encased in an armed JACC this did not go unnoticed, and she looks doubly menacing with a BR1-M2 in hand, where she paths into Mofid's mind after the toast, <"Oi, *ya amar*. How ya doin' babe?">

Mofid smiles slightly as he thinks, <"I can't wait to see this! Is that you in the JACC at the top of the ramp?">

<"The only way I can hide out in plain sight."> Jessica steps to the side and adds, <"Twelve minutes, so look surprised, dude!">

With Jessica out of the pathway, Snoopy and Mooch emerge from the dark portal, and with their colorful plumage flowing around them they start down the ramp. Maria and Scott then exit the portal and follow those two towards the stadium floor below.

At the bottom of the ramp Mooch grabs a couple of glasses from the mead table, and as Maria and Scott step past them he hands one over to Snoopy. They raise their glasses to the crowd in salute, then slam back their drinks.

Mooch hands Snoopy another glass, "More glug, babe!"

Snoopy smiles, saying, "Oooh, don't mind if I do!"

Now stepping out to the middle of the stadium, Maria looks around while saying, "I wanna thank you all for coming today!"

Mofid shrugs, "It was the only way to get everyone here."

Maria nods, "Without raising suspicions, yes."

Next to Mofid, Luc is snacking on wasabi peas when he says, "We're here for that demonstration."

Maria points out, "Partially, true. There's more to it."

"I fear I'm to blame for this, correct?"

Maria smiles, "We are direct, aren't we."

Luc smiles back, "I learned from the best."

"Well, Mister de Prima, you're the—"

Luc cuts her off, "Isn't tonight on a first name basis?"

Maria admires Luc because he is a fast learner, so while trying not to laugh she says, "Luc, the Nefer Key was simply the catalyst."

Mofid shrugs, "What's going on was...inevitable."

Luc nods and asks, "Then I'm not to blame?"

Maria goes, "Luc, everybody here blames you, it's just that there is so much blame to go around we all get to bask in it!"

Luc looks long and hard at her, then asks, "So, this is not about me testing the Fly Swatter?"

Maria gives a low chuckle, "No, this is very much about you testing your *fecale s'arrêter*. You did twenty-seven test shots!"

Scott adds, "Twenty on a nebula behind M46, and seven on asteroids and comets inside the cluster."

Maria points out, "Testing a choke mechanism?"

Luc nods, "Yes, for particle convergence. We toyed with it for some time and now we finally installed it and shot tested—"

Maria cuts him off, "Twenty-seven shots. Not two or three, which I would expect after our meeting, then holstering it back up! No, you did twenty-seven, and I knew it was to test the choke, which needed to be tested and all, but...it got us ta thinking."

Luc nods big, saying, "So, you made your own quantum particle cannon. I was half expecting that, but this was quick!"

"We don't fuck around, Luc." Maria holds her hands up, gesturing to the ship around them, "See, we had the components in hand here, but we had to figure out how to make that magic happen!" She motions for Mooch and Snoopy to step forward as the massive tacnet holo-display fades in above with a model of the Carrie Nation, "I'll let these two give ya a run down on what they did!"

Snoopy steps up and puts his claws out to grab onto the virtual controls, as Maria says, "This is Master-Sergeant, Snoopy!"

Snoopy waves, "Hey, everyone!"

"And this is Gunnery-Sergeant, Mooch!" With Mooch bowing his head to the attendees, Maria adds, "As the project designer and manager, I'll have Mooch take the floor!"

Snoopy runs the display while Mooch addresses the crowd, "Like Marshal Ramirez said, we had all the tools in place. We simply needed to repurpose them!" He thumbs above himself, saying, "This is one of our battle stations, the Carrie Nation, aka, Hippo-One." Snoopy points things out like a game show hostess as Mooch continues with, "As you can see, we're at the bottom of the dish side, that little cavity there is the stadium we're currently in, and the floor is transparent to the outside, as you will see in just a few minutes."

Mofid knew about the Carrie Nation, so as planned he asks, "How big is this ship we're standing in?"

"Mister President, sir, it's diameter is six-point-nine kilometers across and two-point-two-five vertically, from center top to bottom."

The hush that comes over the crowd is noticeable as Mooch continues, "On the top of the station, what Snoopy is now pointing at, in the middle of the dome side, we had a plasma gun for the longest time that was kind of useless, that is until we got our claws on it. The spooling drum is four-hundred meters tall by four-hundred across, with the gun cylinder running through the middle of it. Reconfiguring the drum and gun from a plasma pulse mechanism to quantum particles was surprisingly easy, considering."

Mofid asks, "Considering what, Sergeant?"

"We had a huge budget and free rein over the project!"

Snoopy points to the massive magnetic variable aperture in center of the dish side, while saying, "A budget we barely touched."

Mooch nods in agreement, "Yes, a lot of the conversion was simply programing and recalibrating the drum, barrel, and the choke."

Luc asks Mooch, "You and Snoopy did most of the work?"

"No, sir, we did all of it."

Luc is humbled by that news, then asks, "What does it fire?"

"In terms of quantum particle mass?"

Luc nods, yes, saying, "It's size is, well it's big, sooo?"

Mooch turns to Maria who says, "Yours spools anywhere from zero-point-four-two, to maybe a half a gram. That correct?"

Luc holds up a wasabi pea, "About this much mass!"

She asks, "Were we close in our estimate?"

"Yes, point-four-eight grams."

"For today's demo we kinda wanted to go big!" Maria has already reached around the mead table and pulled a fired clay brick out, where she now tosses it onto the floor at Luc's feet. The thing tumbles, hangs on edge, then falls back with a resonate thud.

In visible shock, Luc blurts out, "You're kidding!"

Maria goes, "This is visually representative. The actual mass we spooled and launched, over thirty-seven hours ago, is a quarter of the size more than the brick at your feet, but ch'ya get the idea!"

Mooch adds, "Fourteen-hundred and forty-one grams."

Luc's jaw visibly drops, where he overcomes his shock to ask, "What's your gun's cascade to failure?"

Mooch asks, "Yours was, what, point-five-six or five-eight?"

Luc says, "Zero-point-five-eight."

"Ours is five-thousand, six-hundred and fifteen...grams. Our safe spooling limit is forty-eight hundred grams. Fifty-two hundred is allowed if we think we need to push it."

Mofid asks, "But your shot was fourteen-forty-one."

"Affirmative, sir."

Mofid shakes his head while quietly saying, "Jesus."

"Yes sir, the QP-Gun we ended up with is more...way more than a little on the excessive side."

"What did you shoot at with fourteen-hundred grams?"

"What did we shoot at?" Maria quietly wonders, then asks, "Guys, can you put up the tactical grid for everyone?"

Above the stadium the holographic tactical display goes up that shows the scale in astral units. All 125au from where they are to the star, the just over 3au from the surface to the point of impact at 0.5au short of the core, and another scale showing a smidge over 128au all the way back to the starting point—where they are now.

With the animation of the shot sequence sped up, Mooch goes, "The shot sequence was twenty-minutes and fifty-three seconds, which included both the nebula and coronal burns as well as the excavation cut to deliver nine-hundred and sixty grams to the target zone, a half an AU short of the core. We originally calculated and settled on six-hundred and forty grams to blow the target star, but we were asked to boost it by half...just for giggles."

Maria points out, "I wanted to make sure it got done."

Mofid asks, "What star are we talking about?"

"We had to go big! If we would have shot a brown or red dwarf there was no way of hiding it. If we blasted a red giant that's on its last leg then everyone would shrug and go about their day!"

Boxter speaks up, while looking down at the red giant that is appearing under their feet, "I believe we're talking 'bout, Betelgeuse?"

"Give that man a cigar!" Maria laughs, then points at him while asking, "By the way, how 're you and Piper doin'?"

Boxter snorts a laugh, saying, "With all the long faces and the White Star champagne, we're having a bloody good time of it!"

Maria smiles, "We appreciate ya comin'! Try the mead yet?"

Boxter smiles, "Oh, we'll get to that shortly!"

Piper adds, "We be 'avin' a-ripper of a good time, Mar!"

Confused, the British Prime Minister asks, "We're going to watch you shoot the bloody thing off?"

Mofid tells him, "No, they already fired it."

Mooch says, "At ten-thirty hours, on the thirtieth."

Luc asks, "How many of these ships did you say you have?"

Maria goes, "We have a second one in this class. We also have three more that are twice the size and...all of their guns, plasma for these two and gamma for the other three stations, have already been converted to the Q-P configuration."

Hearing this just now, Mofid's shoulders sag, "My god."

"But wait, there's more!" Maria nods up towards the display, where it switches over to the Iron Maiden and she points up to it, "Always busy, we've been building replacement platforms and, like the quad-pod engines in the back of the Iron Maiden, they can switch back and forth from thrusters to QP-Guns all with the flip of a switch."

Mofid asks, "All of these ships will be given this feature?"

Maria cringes slightly, "Well...they already got it."

Luc asks, "What's their mass output?"

Maria looks to Mooch who says, "Twelve grams...per engine."

Luc realizes, "And four engines per ship."

"Yes, that's max, not the cascade. Four engines, combined, is a hundred times more than what Delta Echo can put out."

Maria looks towards Boxter, and with a smile she asks him, "You didn't hear any of that, right Boxxy?"

Boxter is snickering as he fights to control the actual laughter in him, "I have...no...no idea what you're talking about, madame!"

Piper adds with wide-eyes, "Not a bloody clue!"

Nancy quietly tells Maria, "Ninety-up!"

With a minute and a half to go, Maria points to the display above that's now showing Betelgeuse blowing up from the inside.

Maria goes, "This is a real time data-model we captured over seventeen hours ago with a tool called WormTrac, but we synched the display here with the star that's about to blow so you can see what's

going on inside without the nebula in the way."

Mooch goes on to say, "And it's about to pop."

Snoopy quietly adds to that with, "Enjoy the show!"

After a few seconds of silence, with everyone switching their gaze between the display above them and the image of alpha-Orion below their feet, Maria has a moment to think about things.

She looks towards Luc and says with a nod and a tight smile, "Ya know, Luc, when it comes to dick waving contests it's always about the size that you're swinging around. Now, from personal experience, the fact is it's how you use it that really matters. In the end, one's locus of control is of all importance."

Luc continues to look at the display above, wondering how they did this, seeing the inside of the star as it's exploding, so he asks Maria while pointing at the display, "This was captured in real time?"

"Yea, crazy hu?"

Luc then looks down at the red giant below their feet, and after a few seconds of gnawing on what Maria said he looks up at her and smiles, "Ya know Maria, by the looks of it, from where we're all sitting, to us, you guys in the Annex are the locusts of control."

Maria glows with delight by the insult, "I like that!"

Luc recoils slightly, "You're welcome?"

"I gotta make it a plaque for my desk!" Maria wags her finger at him, saying, "You got a way with words, Luc! We need to rub elbows a lot more than what we've been doin'."

Luc shrugs, "Okay?"

It was at that moment the star on the far side blows out and, like a bursting bubble on millisecond bullet-time, it pops with the explosive energy hitting the corona, and a massive-scorching volume of light bouncing off the nebula as it burns it away.

In the stadium the glow from the nova event is in a boxing match with the filter built within the floor. As the radiance increases the filter overcompensates and via this yo-yo effect the dying star is winning this contest—with it getting brighter inside the stadium each passing second. The only sound anyone here makes, in the short minute watching this, is Boxter and Piper cracking up with laughter and applause as Betelgeuse is being ripped apart.

At the one-minute mark, Maria turns to Nancy and tells her, "It's approaching nineteen minutes after the hour, babe."

Nancy nods in agreement, "Yep, it's time we boogie!"

Maria sighs, "Or, our shoes will start melting onto the deck."

With the edges of the star starting to shred, Nancy nods big while saying, "Ya got that right!"

Through the tacnet, Nancy sends the command to withdraw.

Suddenly, the view below their feet goes into reverse and the star reconstitutes then shrinks away into a tiny dot in the distance as the MDDSH engines of the station take them far away. With the filter in the stadium floor having been switched off, Betelgeuse is now just another red blip in the star field of white and yellow blips.

Seconds later, this view is wiped as a new star field appears...

000001110000

113

all it takes is all you got

LCTN: SOL-3 GLENDALE, ARIZONA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-FEBRUARY-23-FRIDAY
TIME: 19:10zulu (local 11:10pst)

In the Cactus League, the Camelback Ranch of today is the third build of this spring training facility. The Dodgers bailed on it 200 years ago for another locale out in Scottsdale, then they moved to Chandler, then to the Salt River Pima res when that land went private, but when Monique bought the team five years ago she had the site out at Camelback Ranch rebuilt. Here today is the inaugural game at this new facility for the first 2323 preseason game.

Today the Dodgers play the Giants!

This is a rivalry that goes back to the 1889 World Series, that was officially locked in on the following year when the "Bridegrooms" joined the National League. The animosity between the teams is still going strong after 433 years, but now it's all in good fun. When the Dodgers meet the Giants this coming April for a regular season game it will be the 8,369th time they'll face off.

Over the last three centuries, MLB farm teams have come and gone, swapped hands and moved many times. Diego was signed up with a Double-A team, the Albuquerque Trash Pandas, but when the Dodgers needed a shortstop Monique warned the General Manager that if they bring Diego up to the majors, only she can send her back down.

So, they brought her up.

Everyone thinks that bringing Diego up into the Majors was a gimmick but the truth is, as a shortstop, the girl is fast, can pronk into the air like a springbok, catch and throw like a champ, but the real reason they brought her up is that she can get on base. Diego can't hit big, but batting .455 on her first season with the Panda's caught everyone's rapt attention. Yes, she rarely gets past first base on a hit but who cares? It's a base—and she can run like the wind on a steal!

Ever since the quinceañera, Diego has made it her mission to sample everything life has to offer, and one of those little things she thought was a kick to do was fashion modeling. Posing in swim and underwear for Victoria's Secret on the side was fun for two years, but when she turned 18 she refused to do the lingerie shoots because she said it looked stupid. No doubt they canned her, but now that she made it to the Dodger's lineup girls from all over, both young and old, got all jacked up over this development and are buying every ticket they can get their hands on and, because of that, Victoria's Secret has plastered her image up everywhere they can!

Sian Diego popping up ten-meters tall on the side banner of the Jumbotron every half-hour with her raven hair, olive skin and sultry pout, in a forest green bandeaukini, may be distracting, sure, but it's the kind of distraction that works wonders.

Very few women have made it to the big leagues, and since this non-controversy has boosted traffic and sales for Victoria's Secret, the company is paying big for the high dollar double-stacked vertical banners at Camelback Ranch—and every stadium on the days the Dodgers are playing. Since advertising is managed by a third party both Monique and the stadium's Main Office has pushed back against the General Manager who wanted those adds cut. Diego is filling seats and their coffers, yes, but watching their Head Coach lose his shit over this is the most fun she's had since she bought the team.

So, if this isn't a gimmick it's paying off like one!

Pretty much half of everyone that matters to Diego is here! From Diego's perspective, having your mother and her wife, Sasha, and your "brother" Alexander, along with his betrothed, Copper, was a given. Then your father with his wife, Michelle, along with your newly discovered sister, Brie, and stepbrother, David (i.e. Nigel three sticks), was a given too! Then your lil' brother, Seth, with Peanuts, Eight and Cap tagging along was expected. Then her sister, Jessica, with her intended, Samantha, was a given, but Sam's father and his fiancée, Boxter and Sally, was a welcome surprise. Then showing up at the last minute is Scott, Nancy and Angela.

Now, Diego is still trying to figure out who Nigel is, and she thinks he's a scream, but the guy is boinking her aunt, Lucia, so he's doubly welcome! Then we have Adolphina here with her husband, Benjamin Cartwright, and why his name makes some people laugh is beyond her, but it is said he looks the part...whatever that means?

The two women she grew up with, Cricket and Glados, are here. Cricket came with her husband Bill and their daughter Jade, and Glados is now seeing Oscar Peña who Diego has known for as long as she can remember. Now, none of these people are blood, but to her

they're all family and that's what counts.

Then there's Monique, with her beau Tristen du Conde, who Diego adores, and with them are the La Cañada crew consisting of Carlos, Jordan, Mini-Mon, Connie, and Josav with his wife, Cloé.

Conspicuously missing are Ophelia and Léon, Agatha and Mac, then Peter and Nordi. All of them have tickets for the opening regular season game in April—which will be kind of useless since they'll end up in the executive skybox at Dodger Stadium with Monique.

Green, Stark and Sargent also have opening day tickets, and Maria has arranged for them to be invited to the skybox as well...

Rounding things off we have Esma, Victoria and the Nefer Key ambassadors for the FIS and CXi, those being Lilith and Zora. These four are the very reason that security for today is in the extreme to the n'th degree, but where Junior has become an integral component of the *décor de Herrero*, even helpful to the security attachments over these many years, the problem the Secret Service and RaSP have today is Reggie who is tagging along with the aliens.

Growing up in the *Corviale* district in Rome, *Reginaldo Bruno* had a rap sheet as long as your arm but, with the charitable IPM, our bear hug of a Reggie today has a PhD in theoretical physics. Still, the RaSP detail assigns their top agent to watch him like a hawk...

Then, as an 'oh shit' of a last second afterthought, Maria had the Secret Service hunt down Clementine Ozo, who now goes by Moen, and had them escort her up here to the skybox, above home plate.

Entering the executive suite, she is guided towards Monique who puts out a hand, "Madame Moen, thank you for coming!"

The confusion on Clem's face gives way to her realizing it is, "Monique Ribot?" Now shaking her hand, "José has mentioned you."

"Since we had José at many a family gathering, we thought it would be apropos to have you come join us as well!"

Before Clem could say anything, Maria steps up beside her and laughs, "So, ya gonna be stayin', Clem?"

"Mar!" Clem gives her a hug, asking, "How the hell are ya!"

"If I wasn't for this shooting war it'd be a lot better! So, you gonna stay and slam 'em back 'till we get stupid?"

Clem looks at Monique and asks, "It's okay?"

Monique smiles big and nods, "Your José is family to us so, *ma collègue tigresse*, that pegs you as family in our eyes!"

Maria pulls her along, "Let's go get you that drink!"

Overly chatty when nerved up, Clementine tells Maria how she wants to open a pair of satellite storefronts on both the Church Key and in New Darwin, and a full-blown restaurant in New Brisbane like the one she has in New Sydney, but she's forever been waiting on the contract. Laughing it up with beers in hand, they approach the tables behind two rows of seats along the edge of the skybox—where it's like someone hits Clem's mute button when she is offered the primo seat smack-dab next too Monique, Victoria, Esma and Michelle.

Maria makes a quick introduction of Clem while plopping down in the seat beside her and, with the rest of the ladies yucking it up as they start to grab seats around them, Michelle leans in towards Clem, "Has the Corporations Commission gotten back to you yet?"

Clem's eyes blink, "No, I haven't heard back."

"Now, I hear they're tryin' to do an end-run around ya, but nobody from Home Base will work with 'em. You have a hand in that?"

Clem smiles big, "You bet I did."

Maria asks, "What's happenin' there?"

Michelle shrugs, "The Stumpies can't get hard woods in for smoking bumble, and they can't find any distribution channels for finished product going back. Nobody will work with 'em." She then looks to Clem, "How'd you do that? Don't you guys hate each other!"

"Superficially, in the public's eye, we sure do, but behind the scenes we've locked arms." Clem shifts her weight and says to her, "My industry controls most of the woodland stands, cattle ranches and beef processors. As it is the scrap, which are historically prime cuts, they go straight to market to offset load, but I can produce both smoking and scrap cuts where, on your plate, you wouldn't know the difference! So, I cut a deal with the bar-b-que alliance. They'll phase out livestock while I supply their needs at a fraction of the cost over old school ranches and processors."

Maria adds, "Profits will skyrocket!"

Clem nods, yes, "When their costs plummet."

Michelle leans in, "How do ya do it? The marbling, that is."

"Well, everybody tries to infuse fat into the final product, but I grow the marbling first. We build a collagen web with the fat already in place, stretch the sheet out and *then* coax the muscle to grow between the gaps." She points to Michelle, "But my R-n-D peeps have been busy! We can grow a bolt of round that you'd swear to God was prime rib, and if we don't stress it I guarantee you'd bet the farm it was Wagyu." Clem grins big, "That thousand-dollar A-Five strip steak on your plate costs me only fifteen to get to the table."

Maria asks, "You haven't patented the process...why?"

Clem goes, "I have, it's just that with the backlog it takes seven to eight years to grant, but under the PLTIA I can keep refiling utility updates that restart that clock. Point is, if it's granted—then it's published and the open season countdown starts."

As an assistant approaches Esma, Michelle asks, "You'll have to increase your vertical production by, what, three-fold? Four?"

"Five, and then to move prime cuts to market I'll have to fold it all again one more time. As it is I'm struggling with the financing."

Michelle turns to Monique, "You hearing this? Want in on it?"

Esma stands and says to Clem, "I've been listening in! You're gonna have'ta fill me in when I get back!"

Monique looks to Clem, "Financing to expand production will be a load that will impact your margins, but offering a slice of the pie, shares have you, that will help boost your bottom line."

Clem cringes slightly, "No offence, but...I don't need partners up my ass while I'm trying to get shit done."

"Oh, *non-non-non ma chérie*, might I suggest equity shares? I know you know what you are doing!" Monique turns to Michelle, "Sound good to you, *mon oisillon*?"

"Can I get a slice of that?" Maria asks, and when they look at her she adds, "I got a ton of Herrero money sittin' around doin' nothin' so I might as well throw it at something?"

Clem's brow scrunches, "Equity shares?"

Maria goes, "We'll have no voice and, since we'll be in no rush to see a return, then you'll not hear a peep from us!"

Monique smiles as she turns towards Clem, "Madame, I make investments like this only if I'm prepared to write them off as a loss. With no dividends coming in I'll only be hit if I sell!"

Michelle nods, "That's two of us!"

"I am curious, what's the cost per head for bumble?"

"We're being overrun by them. Clem can take as many as she wants as long as they harvest, process and smoke locally."

Monique nods with understanding, "Local labor."

"Exactly! And, they feed the stock ponds."

Victoria asks, "Stock ponds?"

"Yabby!"

Clem points out, "We're obligated to put fifty-percent of each carcas into the ponds to feed those lil' monsters."

Maria asks, "Can you distribute the Chawdads too?"

"Tails only. FDA won't approve of a live catch on the chain."

Michelle adds, "As an invasive species they'd be a nightmare."

Clem elaborates, "So, if I close the deal with the Commission, this leaves me with no dead legs in my distribution circuit. We'll drop the smoked bumble in Atlanta, Dallas and Vegas, where I'm planning to expand production, and it'll go into the circuit back out to Prypiat!" She points out, "Look, once the smoke ring is set we wrap the cuts so, instead of finishing the cook on site, my porta-packs continue the cook while in transit! That gives me a lot of flexibility and fresh product rolling out onto the docks. We got the timing down pat!"

Monique wonders, "Transports?"

"Cast off forty-ones."

"Do you not want something more up to date?"

Victoria laughs while saying, "Crikey no! Those bloody things are stupidly overpowered and reliable as hell."

Clem adds, "I got only one on distribution duty, but I have twelve more in reserve doin' contract jobs on the side." Everyone looks at her so she goes, "Oz, he twisted my arm to pick 'em up on a receivership and it was the smartest thing we ever did! Flight hour maintenance with them is measured in minutes."

Jacob was stepping up, so as the stadium announces the National Anthem he asks, "Can I throw some green at this?"

With everyone standing, Michelle grins, "Got that covered!"

"Cool!" Jacob says as he offers his arm to Victoria.

Victoria struggles to get to her feet because she is now showing at eight-months, so she laughs, "Bugger all, bein' prego!"

As they walk to the ballistic window beside the two rows of seats, Jacob asks, "Vic, where's tha Nippers?"

"Tasmanian Open. It's great fun since it queues up along with the DanceSport event! Golf in the day and whirling dervishes at night! You should come with!" Now standing at the window, Victoria adds, "But, honestly, it's dreadful without me bubbly."

After two USAF Cerberus on security patrol do a flyover, Jacob and Victoria pop up on the Jumbotron as the stadium's announcer adds, ["In honor of our special guest, Queen Victoria, we have the Phoenix Pipe and Drum Band here to play the UK national anthem!"]

That said, two bagpipe bands step out onto the field.

The bands hold back as their drum majors approach Esma and the announcer who are behind home plate. With them facing off, the announcer asks one then the other, "You are?"

The American says, "The Phoenix Pipe Band...from Phoenix."

The mic is now held to the Brit who smiles big while saying, "Phoenix Pipe and Drum, from over the pond out of Norfolk."

The American drum major nods big and goes, "That may be, mate, but you're far from home and this is my city."

The British drum major nods big in return while saying, "Well now, that may be but...that is our queen!"

Esma works out that they'll play the anthem together, and as the bands perform 'God Save the Queen' Victoria smiles and applauds while stealthfully saying to Jacob, "This is all so nonsensically stupid."

Jacob points out, "Everyone is having a good time with it."

She nods with little lip movement, "It's part of the job."

"I'll give ya that, I can see where this can get old."

"Well, love, I shouldn't ever complain. My people love their queen, and for the life of me I've no clue as to why?"

Jacob thinks about it and quietly says, "What would the British people be without tradition? What you do may be tedious, sure, but you represent the very best of your country. Someone has to do it so try to think of it as a blessing an' not an ordeal?"

As the anthem ends, Victoria waves to the cheering crowd, "Thank you for reminding me, good sir!"

With Esma stepping out to throw the first pitch, she stops halfway to home base. As she starts to wind up, the Yank bagpipers punch out the "Baseball Charge" fanfare. With the first lady laughing at that, she steps out farther to the pitcher's mound and right as she's about to wind up the Brit pipers blow the "Cavalry Charge" bugle call.

While this is going on, Victoria asks, "Is Eazy gonna run?"

Jacob nods, "I hear she'll be announcing in April."

Victoria smiles big, "Piper would love it!"

"The pundits think she's a shoe in."

"If she can soft sell the CXi I believe you'd be right!"

"There's push back to that, but the voters want it real bad."

"Most everybody desires a purpose in life. The conglomerates

tend to overlook that the people are not their consumer vassals."

"Well, I command a Trung. The CXi complicates my life."

"I was under the impression that you supported the CXi?"

"I do support it, I just don't want to be 'in-support' of it."

"A wise man recently told me that I should consider my lot as a blessing and not as an ordeal! Sound words to live by, no?"

Jacob nods and goes, "Well, ya got me there, Vic!"

With the whole stadium cracking up over the bagpipes, Esma nods at the catcher and what catches everyone off guard is when she suddenly lunges forward and almost does the splits as her arm whips around—launching the baseball in a wickedly fast softball pitch. The ball seems to rise as it slaps into the glove of the catcher.

The crowd comes unglued, cheering the First Lady.

Not expecting that, the announcer is laughing as he says over the PA, ["That clocked in at seventy-eight miles an hour!"]

With Jacob and Victoria applauding and waving towards Esma, who is waving back to them, Victoria asks through clinched teeth, "That enough smiles and wavy hands for the crowd?"

Jacob laughs, and, "Yea, that'll do!"

When the Jumbotron cuts over to Esma glad-handing the officials by home base, Victoria turns and waddles for the bathroom, saying, "Smashing, 'cause I gotta take me the mickey!"

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The players for both sides are announced as the Dodgers take to the field, but the cheers for Diego are noticeably loud and long. Unlike most sports, baseball has no coin toss or face off, it simply starts when defense is in position and the umpire says, "Play ball!"

The first Giant at bat strikes out, and the second gets on first base after a two-strike and two-ball count, but the third batter hits and the ball bounces off the ground in the infield—where Diego leaps straight up and snatches it out of the air. Before she touches the ground, Diego has already tossed it over to Second Base, who then relays it to First for a double play.

The defensive team for the Dodgers file into the dugout, and inside a minute the first up to bat is Diego. Stepping out and heading towards home plate, she ignores the whoops and hollers of the mostly new baseball fans in attendance. This, right now, is why they brought her up from the minors. Her job is to get on base, and that alone, but

in doing so she needs to get past their pitcher.

The first pitch to her was a four-seam fastball that spirals in towards her left arm. It's like Diego already knew where the thing was going and, where most players would have bodily twisted away in a panic, like they should, she simply raises both her arms and the ball almost grazes her chest as it shoots past into the catcher's mitt.

Obviously that pitch was a brushback, all to intimidate her and intentionally so, so as the umpire motions for the Giants manager to come chat with him Diego says to the catcher, who signaled that pitch, "Ya know, if my tits were any bigger I'd be taking a base."

As the catcher rolls his eyes at that, the umpire pulls the coach to the side and says, "This is how we're gonna play it?"

The coach nonchalantly shrugs, "It got away from him."

"Ramirez wasn't crowding the plate, that brushback wasn't called for." The umpire thumbs towards the pitcher, "Look, you tighten that leash or I'll eject both you and the pitcher. Get me?"

Without saying a word, the coach nods then looks to the pitcher and subtly shakes his head, *no*, while he turns for the dugout.

Taking his position behind the catcher, the umpire says to him, "Let's try this again, shall we?"

Knowing that this pitcher relies on the slider, when the ball is released Diego was ready for it to go from her ten-to-four o'clock as it starts the drop—where it meets her bat with a woody crack. The ball is lobbed out of reach over the second baseman's head, and Diego is already on First before the center fielder scoops it up.

With Diego tossing her elbow and face guard to their batboy the first baseman smiles at Diego, saying, "Lil' miss big league starts off battin' a thousand!"

She huffs, "Kiss my ass, southpaw."

He laughs big with, "That an offer, toots?"

Taking a short lead, not making it obvious that she's going to steal second, she snorts, "Only if you can keep up!"

"I got no problem keepin' it up."

Diego just shakes her head at the comment while she feigns standing there relaxed with her short lead, and with the pitcher paying her no mind he throws another slider to the batter—where Diego blasts off for a second base steal. Diego is already sliding for the plate by the time the catcher shoots it off to the second baseman.

To the cheers of the crowd Diego gets up, and while taking off

her shin guard she looks over at José who is covering third for the Giants, so she asks the second base umpire, "Time?"

When the official calls time, instead of heading towards first to drop the guard off, Diego steps over to third and throws it past the startled face of José, and with a *what the fuck* look on hers, she goes, "All it takes is all you got, so...waddya got?"

"Make a grab for it and see for yourself!"

"I haven't heard from you, so what's with that?"

José throws it back with, "Coms do work both ways."

Diego pokes him in the chest with both hands, while saying, "I'm the girl, that's my fucking line!"

The third base umpire points towards Diego and calls out, "That's a thousand dollar fine!"

Diego looks at him and, "Really, okay, what'll this get me?"

She grabs José and pulls him in and plants a big wet kiss on his lips right there at third base, where the umpire shouts over the crowd going wild in the stands, "That's ten thousand!"

Diego breaks the kiss and pushes José back while turning towards the umpire, "What if I grab his junk?"

"I'll eject you from the game!"

Diego flicks her ponytail back and, "Nope, we're good there!"

He thrusts his hand back towards second, "Take your base."

With Diego stepping back towards the base, José says over the cheering crowd, "You can grab it after the game if you want!"

She turns and points at him with a smile...

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Maria is standing at the ballistic window, next to Jessica and Seth, and while looking out over the field as Diego readies to take a stab at third base, Maria quietly asks, "So...that's that, hu?"

Jessica nods, "Yup...that was that."

Clem steps up and asks, "What just happened?"

Jessica tries not to smile, "José and Sian is what happened."

Blinking with confusion, Clem asks, "They're an item now?"

Maria turns towards her, "Welcome to the family, Clem."

Clem points towards the field, "That fast?"

Jessica snorts a laugh, "Ya can't argue with results!"

As Clem shrugs, not knowing what to say, Seth goes, "We'll not keep them long after the game. They've got a lot of catchin' up."

Jessica leans in towards Seth and quietly says to him, "Like you said, Ortiz is comin' up! Sure you don't need a feather here?"

Seth shakes his head, "Naw, this will require a brick."

The General Manager, Chet Ortiz, stomps into the skybox and Monique was waiting for him in the back beside the food table, so out of earshot of the others he jabs his finger at the screen on the wall that's showing what's on the Jumbotron—which includes Diego smiling big in a floral one-piece, "This is becoming a problem!"

Picking through the *hors d'oeuvres*, Monique chirps, "*Oui!*"

"I can't manage what is unmanageable!"

"We warned you, good sir. We told you not to bring her up." Monique then coyly asks, "But...did she not get on base?"

"She stole second when the coach did not signal for it!"

With the next batter getting on first, Diego advances to third, and with another batter stepping up Monique asks, "*Monsieur*, I am curious, how am I as an owner now? After our many *le corps à corps* all these years, it leaves me wondering if I have made any mistakes, in spite of your endless vocal protests? Be honest!"

Ortiz gnashes his teeth, wanting to shout at her, but looks to his right then down at his feet while exhaling big, so Monique dares to say to him, "That's what I thought."

He looks up at her and, "You've been lucky."

"No...I've been coached." Monique smirks, "And since I trust only in family, who in my family knows baseball?"

Ortiz blinks his eyes and points over his shoulder towards the field and suggests, "She's my replacement?"

"Don't think for one minute I bought this team for *moi!*"

His mouth clamps shut when he says, "Then how 'bout you—"

Ortiz's nearly explosive response is cut short by Seth who, yet again, was standing there next to both of them—unseen in plain sight, "Mr Ortiz! Have you tried the *poblano de leche* cheese wraps?"

Ortiz is shocked that this teenager appeared out of nowhere where Monique smiles warmly at him, "Hello, Seth."

He smiles back, "Hello, auntie!"

Now six feet tall and gangly, only four months short of fifteen, Seth towers over Ortiz when standing next to him, and while nodding at the window overlooking the field, "You should look outside."

With his mouth released, Ortiz asks, "Is she gonna steal?"

"Home, yes." Seth points to the Jumbotron monitor and says, "You can watch it from here if you want..."

On this pitch the runner on first was taking too long of a lead, so right as the catcher throws to second Diego streaks in for a score, where the crowd goes wild—and all this time Seth never looks up as he surveys the culinary choices, "You've had fifty years in the Majors and a storied carrier at that! Seventeen as a catcher, five as a batting coach, twenty as the Cub's Field Manager, and now your eighth year as the Dodgers General Manager." Seth stops eyeing the *hors d'oeuvres* and looks up at Ortiz just long enough to emphasize this dig, "And with that elusive ring so close yet...always out of reach."

Diego just stole home, so Ortiz scowls, "I'm listening."

"Oooh, yea!" Seth reaches for the hot-dogs wrapped in bacon while continuing, "In a few seconds your Field Manager will be bitching Diego out for stealing without being signaled. The result being that on the fourth inning, she'll be told to do so and they, José Ozo, my future brother-in-law, will easily tag her out." He looks up to say, "She didn't feel it so, going forward, your Field Manager will realize that a signal for her to steal a base will be a suggestion at best. The point is today, at the bottom of the ninth, on her own initiative, instead of a solid base hit my sister will sacrifice bunt to bring in the winning run."

As Ortiz looks at Seth with suspicion, "Keep talking."

Seth hands Ortiz a small gift card while saying, "This October, bottom of the ninth, with one out and a runner on third she'll do it again and...well, you'll finally get that ring you so crave."

Ortiz holds up the card, "What's this?"

"It's an answer to a question!"

With him looking confused, Monique asks, "It's crunch time, so when would you like to start coaching her in prep for next year?"

"While as a player? The commission won't allow it!"

"A GM on the roster is not without precedent." Monique leans towards him while saying, "And nobody tells me...no."

"Double my bonus and I'll give it a shot."

"Done!" Monique smiles, "Leave the commission to me."

Ortiz thinks about it, "How 'bout during the All Stars break?"

Seth points at the card, "Now's a perfect time to open that."

As Ortiz does he huffs a laugh when he sees hand drawn stars scribbled all over it, so he asks, "How do you know these things?"

Monique gnarls, "Nobody talks about Seth so...don't ask."

Ortiz nods and points out the obvious, "The players won't like this one bit. The push back from them will be severe."

Seth nods, "Yes, we know. We're counting on it. Next year when she's announced in February they will...recoil in horror."

"So, you know they're gonna resent the shit outta her."

"Indubitably!" Seth again starts looking over the food items while he adds, "As a GM-player she'll cull a few, send some down and trade a handful, but right after the Midsummer, while covering second on a shift to right field, quite by accident the runner will spike her shin open to the bone. The torque fracture of the tibia will become so much worse when she hobbles off the field under her own power."

Ortiz realizes that, "The team would rally."

"Exactly, an' after a very difficult and contentious start, they'll make the playoffs just under the wire." Seth points up to emphasize, "Yes, this is decidedly an ass backwards method of team building however, you won't be here during next year's playoffs when they lose in the first round."

"So, if you know she's gonna get spiked you can stop it!"

"It gets old to hear people say that."

"Say what?"

"You can stop it." Seth sighs, "Buuut, ask yourself, how many players leave baseball with their heads held high? When the magic is gone a player will inevitably get washed out or sent down for someone else to cut. Sian, when she is injured, will walk off the field a hero in the eyes of both players and fans alike. She'll be out of the game but her place as General Manager will never be questioned again. Looking at all the possible outcomes, this is the best for her...and you."

With him trying to digest this, Monique adds, "We'll retain you next year as a consultant, at your current salary, all to help you continue to mold our Sian into you but, *à mon désespoir*, we will not be able to keep you past the end of the season."

Seth picks this up, "The miracle you're going to be asked to pull off will cut your consultancy short."

"Doing what exactly?"

"MLB going international had a lot of hiccups in the process, a lot of pain points to negotiate, but moving it into off-world venues with expansion teams will prove to be surprisingly effortless with you at the steady helm...commissioner."

"The owners hate my guts!"

Monique starts chuckling, "I know!"

"Yes, but they want results!" Seth smiles, "Your management style has always been the crotchety old bastard with a soft spot for the impossible underdog, and working with my sister will speak volumes to the owners when they unanimously vote you in."

Monique adds, "You'll get your retirement bungalow on Maui, but you'll have to wait another decade to enjoy it."

Ortiz nods, yes, when Seth asks, "You game?"

Monique smiles, "I only ask one favor, dear sir."

Ortiz goes, "Okay, shoot."

"I'm calling an all hands with management right before our regular season starts, and you'll really need to be there." Before he voices a protests, Monique urges, "You'll want to be at this one."

"Why?"

Seth grins big, "Well, the Sports Illustrated cover for May will be released during this meeting and, out of curiosity, Monique will pull it up for everyone to see!"

Ortiz's shoulders sag as he fights the laughter percolating up, "You're shitting me, the swimsuit issue!"

"*Oui!*" Monique snickers right along with him, "Our beloved Field Manager will have an aneurysm over this one!"

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number one on my personal spank bank

LCTN: SOL-3 GOOSE HUNT, VIRGINIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-MARCH-28-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 11:45zulu (local 06:45est)

It is nuts to see Diego dressed nice and ready to go this early!

Dawn heralds the first day of a two-day break before the MLB regular season starts this Friday, but yesterday afternoon, while her team celebrated the last preseason win, Diego was hotfooting it out for the mail run in from One-Klick that just landed at the Padre's facility.

Dropping Diego off here at Goose Hunt just made sense.

The Steel Annex has a fenced in quarter square-kilometer of the airdrome, what everyone here calls the freight yard, east of and butted up to the Willoughby Spaceport. A quarter of that is the service center to support ships coming in and out of Home Base.

For a facility with a civil bent to it, the SA has a surprisingly high volume of missiles and bombs and bullets stored here. They also have a shitload of CWR-RAT food packets sitting on the pallet racking that they cycle out through the Annex facilities here on Earth, but half of those pallets actually have ghost droids cocooned inside. With those the Annex has a tightly packed, kami-origami bundle of six droids, a whole squad, so if the signal goes out they can burst, unravel and hit the deck shooting inside eight-seconds.

These pallets are also rotated through their facilities, and they have anywhere from four or five companies of these evil things up on the racking at any given time.

For Diego, the geezer squad of six retreads that run this place were a blast and a half to hang out with. Between the bar-b-que and pool table, the hot-tub and 37 hands of Texas Holdem, Diego surprised herself when she actually got her ass out of bed in time to shit-shower and dress with a half-hour to spare! Any other morning her tail would

be dragging but she wanted to have coffee with the crew before Maria showed up. The cherry on top was when Chuck, the crew leader here, braided her long black hair with ribbons entwined just like he used to do with his granddaughters when they were little.

Chuck and the crew really wanted nothing to do with Diego when they heard the big cheese's daughter was getting dumped in their laps, but her bringing in steaks and spuds was a surprise—and by the time they hit the sack at 2am they were her biggest fans.

Guess who's buying tickets to the National's next month?

Anyway, Maria is piloting Sasha's brand-new suborbital glider with Alexander and Copper riding along. Tagged as an SA admin-flight the ATC ignores them as they drop into Northern Virginia to a service altitude at or below 100 feet AGL, and way below the commercial flight paths coming into the Willoughby Spaceport from the south. Now above the Oatlands, they swing to the north and then west to skim over the top of the Hogback to land at the Annex partition located at the far southeast corner of the Freight Yard.

The Annex has their own east/west landing strip they share with the United States Air Force, who has a very similar facility across the apron, and when coming in from the east they can land without ATC involvement. Now operating like a normal floater, Maria turns right and drifts into the open hanger doors that cover the western side of the facility. Pulling up to the office and apartment complex built in the northwest corner of the warehouse, the four pile out of the glider and enter the door to the first floor.

Where the exterior of this facility looks utilitarian and Spartan, even the gas grill outside appears secondhand, the inside of this living section is shockingly gorgeous. Over the years the retread crews put some serious effort sprucing the interior up.

Maria walks in, gawking, "Who the fuck took a gargantuan southwest contemporary dump in this place, hu?"

As the other three step in and around Maria, also impressed by the sharp, stylish and clean décor, Chuck huffs a laugh while nearing the end of Diego's braid, "Who the fuck is asking?"

Maria smirks, "Your Über Führer, that's who the fuck!"

Diego laughs, "Be nice, mom!"

"I am being nice!" Maria protests, then looks towards Chuck, "How've ya been, Chief?"

Having tied the bow at the end of the braid, he pats Diego on the shoulder, "There babe!" Then smiles at Maria, "It's corporal now. I'd rather go back to bein' a PFC5. There's a lot more stroke to it."

Maria shrugs, "Well, you'll always be a chief to me!"

He shrugs, "An' you'll always be a maggot to me!"

"Last time I laid eyes on you was when, dude?"

"They were packing your ass off to law school, and what the fuck that was all about was beyond me. Like you were gonna make something of yourself? Fat fuckin' chance there!"

"This guy..." Maria drops into the seat in front of Diego and points to Chuck sitting behind her, "This guy here was our regimental chief. While I was gone they shipped him out to the Pandemonium."

Chuck finishes with, "Yea, and after the war I ended up as the Command Chief for the Iron Man."

"When did you retread?"

"A year before they wasted the ol' bastard out at Dedede. Broke my heart when it got nebulized."

Maria nods, "Yup, that was a damned good ship."

Chuck stresses, "It was the best damned ship."

Maria shakes her head, "Sorry 'bout that."

"I understand why ya did it, I just don' have to like it."

One of Chuck's crewmembers adds, "Never in a million years would anybody ever believe that we would intentionally do that."

Maria goes, "They still don't believe it."

Chuck leans in towards Maria, "True, the ploy worked, but you'll get no forgiveness from me." He then pats Diego on the arm, "But havin' your little thigh sprout here made up for it!"

Maria asks Diego, "So you've been makin' friends?"

Diego throws it back at her, "The best damned friends!"

Chuck goes, "We're gonna go watch her play the Nationals."

"For that, let me hook ya up!" She then motions for Diego to, "Wanna make the intros?" Diego hops up and makes the introductions for everybody, and when done, Maria goes, "We gotta get goin'."

Chuck volunteers, "You know, if I drive ya I can get you there faster by cuttin' through the thirty and fifteen-naut rings."

"I don't want to put you out any more than I already have."

"Well, I'm headin' out to Oceana anyway. Takin' the squids a QP-generator for a Cerberus that arrived DOA."

Maria's eyes squint, asking, "What are you getting in barter?"

"Monday their engi-squids are bringing in backhoes to rip up the asphalt and dig us a pool out back!"

"Seriously, for a generator?"

"Well, for them it's five-mill, US, but for us it cost nothin' and I got dozens of 'em collecting dust up on the racking."

A crewmate says, "Comes with a ground level hot tub."

Another nods with, "Schedule-eighty plumbing."

Another adds, "A Granite bar with fridge!"

The lady crewmate laughs with, "And their C.O. says he'll be springing for the Tiki-torches out of his own pocket!"

Maria wonders, "Isn't it a warranty item?"

She goes on to say, "Yea, but with production in Palmdale shootin' up for export contracts it will take at least six-months to get one kicked off on their dock. I checked."

Chuck grins, "But I'm coming through for 'em today."

Maria gives an approving nod, saying, "Fair trade I say."

He then thumbs back to their garage, "Send your floaty back to Austin and let's load 'em up! M'kay, boss lady?"

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Metric may be a universal standard, sure, but for navigation in and around Earth both altitude and distance are still expressed in feet and nautical miles. Only military flights, or pilots with the proper licensing and certifications, can enter the progressively restrictive tiered zones of airspace that encircle Washington DC.

Commercial pilots are allowed to navigate the 30nm SFRA without much trouble, but to enter the 15nm FRZ ring they'll need security clearances, permits, and an approved flight plan or they'll be intercepted and escorted out of the zone by fighters. Then, turn away from an approved flight path towards the P-56 "oh, hell no" zones in central DC and you may get shot down. Well, P-56B you may get a warning first, but for P-56A they'll just give you the trigger.

NORAD oversees this air space, and select US military units have free reign over both the 15nm ring and P-56 zones, but the one exception to this are pilots on the 'hot list' for the Steel Annex. Over seventy pilots flying the trash, mail, beer and red-eye runs coming in and out of Earth are authorized for the 30nm ring, but there's a short list of select pilots that have been cleared "hot" and this includes the geezer crew out at Goose Hunt. These guys are on alert and scramble

their fighters with the US Air Force air crews from across the apron at Willoughby, as well as a rotating ANG squadron always standing by at Andrews Air Force Base on the other side of DC. Those also on the hot-list include Maria, Zamboni, Vossler and Jessica who have all landed on the south lawn under the call sign, Air-Force-One.

Chuck radios local ATC, "Reagan, ACC-SA-Six."

["Reagan, go ahead SA-Six."]

"SA-Six, advising Reagan we'll be taking the CON-R approved VFR route from Goose Hunt to Andrews. You copy?"

["Reagan, SA-Six, we see your transponder. You are clear with a twenty-minute window. Eighty-AGL on leg three. Please advise if you stray from the corridor. Reagan out."]

The Annex six-seat glider drifts out to the apron and taxis towards the runway. Once there they lift off, straight up, then head due east towards Lowes Island on the Potomac river.

It's a hands-on flight under VFR rules, so when they hit Lowes they turn right 37° for the next nav-point, Theodore Roosevelt Island, and as the Potomac snakes back and forth under them, Maria asks, "How often do you guys scramble hot with the Zoomies?"

Chuck shrugs with, "'Bout once every week or so?"

"Orbit the fifteen-mile loop at eighteen-thousand?"

"Yup! We just sit an' spin while covering them. The hundred and thirteenth has been runnin' an active CAP when the zones are busy, so the calls to scramble are down considerably."

"That's good to hear."

After a few seconds of silence, Diego asks, "Chuck, the thing is coming up on the right, right?"

Last night they were talking about the memorial statue to Claudia Willoughby, at the entrance to Arlington Cemetery, so Chuck snorts a laugh, "Right when we turn into the next leg."

Sasha shakes her head, "Let's not."

Alexander goes, "No, I wanna see this!"

Sasha protests, "Seriously, do we have ta?"

Both Diego and Alexander laugh at her, "Yea!"

Maria looks at Chuck and says, "If we can stop for a minute?" He nods his head over his shoulder, towards Sasha, so she then says, "Yea, ah, make it a half-a-minute."

The Annex glider drops to eighty-feet and slows down while it

approaches Roosevelt Island. Flat turning right by 15° Chuck brings the glider to a stop over Arlington Memorial Bridge.

Only Chuck doesn't know that Sasha, seated behind Maria, who is to his right, is *the* Claudia Willoughby. That is the very person represented by the twenty-meter tall bronze statue that is mounted to a ten-meter tall granite pedestal in the middle of the roundabout at the entrance to the Arlington National Cemetery.

The figure before them is that of the late President, in what appears to be a sheer, form-fitting, floor length peignoir-wrap that blends seamlessly into the pedestal. With eyes closed, her arms are outstretched as if she were in a swan-dive, but here that dive has her soaring up into the heavens. Because this president has been so shamelessly fetishized over the centuries, it's been argued that this monument is the most beautiful bronze sculpture ever made—on top of being the largest single-cast successfully attempted.

With the light from a sun that is low over the eastern horizon, enhancing the contours of this surprisingly erotic sculpture, Alexander, Copper and Diego can only gasp when they see it for real.

After a few seconds, Chuck says, "Ya know, Sasha, you look like President Willoughby...when she was young." As the glider now continues for Andrews, he glances back at her, "You don't sound anything like her, but you sure as shit look like 'er!"

With her broken slav accent, Sasha says, "I get that a lot."

Diego volunteers, "Chuck sent me his PBDi avatar of her."

Maria snorts a laugh as she asks, "The interactive one?"

Diego grins big, "What would be the point if it wasn't?"

Maria nudges chuck, "I gotta know, is it any good?"

Chuck shrugs, "If you must know I've had it since I was a kid, and it's still number one on my personal spank bank."

With Alexander, Copper and Diego suppressing their laughter, and Sasha shaking her head, Maria nods, "Ya got good taste, Chief!"

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After three centuries the 89th Airlift Wing is still in service and doing what they do best—which is hauling shit around. They handle an esoteric assortment of aircraft not common in Air Force inventories, but the only reason they've survived the many organizational changes that regularly redefine the United States military is that they have been the one Presidential Airlift Group for as long as anyone could remember. So, with the PAG and Special Air Mission groups combined

they get tasked with hauling VIP shit around in style! Their parent unit designation has changed a handful of times over the years, but they've always come back as the 89th when times are good—and times have been really good under President Mofid.

Experto crede they say, and for the 89th that really matters.

It was only 40nm between Goose Hunt and Andrews, and the very second they touch down Chuck kicks them all out on the tarmac in front of the hanger doors to this latest build of the massive PAG facility at the southwest corner of the air base. Chuck then zips off laser straight towards the Naval Air Station at Oceana some 230 klicks away, or 125 nautical miles per local navigational standards.

The Air Services guards and Secret Service know who these people are and didn't bat an eye when they piled out. They were scheduled to show up and, since they are around a lot, they're treated better than the extended members of the first family. Fact is, since the Steel Annex supplies the United States with HWG99's at cost, and ghost droids under the table, more importantly Maria and everyone from "spooky town" are treated as equals.

Marine One, VA70x, a pimped out version of the armored AA70d assault transport, drops in and puts down at the exec landing pad at the PAG facility. After a few seconds a Marine in dress uniform opens the armored door to the craft where President Mofid and the First Lady step out of the ship, followed by an assortment of the usual White House staff toadies.

Mofid returns the salute to the Marine...

This president has this weird, almost visceral respect for their men and women in uniform and it shows. When returning a salute he tries hard to make that all-important eye contact with the rank-n-file troops tasked with guarding him. This admirable behavior, however, is counterbalanced by a strange and, one could say, eerie suspicion of the officer corps...well, specifically O8 and above that is.

What pisses the high-brass off is that all presidential security details are infused with a shaker full of Delta and Air Service types in the mix where, behind closed doors, Mofid makes a point to hear what they have to say. Point being is that from them he hears what he needs to hear and not what the general staff wants him to hear.

Anyway, it's 7:25am and the silhouettes of two charcoal black Razorbacks are silently approaching them from the taxiway. Mofid steps up to the brass salad consisting of the Air Force member to the Joint Chiefs, the CO to the 316th Wing that commands Joint Base Andrews, and then the Colonel commanding the 89th Wing along with his XO. The lead here today is the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the

Presidential Airlift Group, his XO as well as their E9—who sits on the right hand side of god around these parts.

When the Annex offered Mofid a brand new VC, Air Force One that is, at cost, the Air Force leadership was vehemently opposed to it. Since the current VC85, Boeing Trident Star Clippers in Super Guppy “party barge” configurations, cost the taxpayers over 38-billion for the two ships—the VC88 Razorbacks, like the big one sitting behind them right now, was only 123-million out of pocket. All the Air Force had to cough up for was components, kit and fluff that the SA couldn’t source out of an asteroid for the interior layout of the hold.

Now, Esma ran with this project for her husband, and what tickled her pink was that, with these numbers, the brass and the GAO couldn’t come up with one substantive argument against it.

While Mofid has to give a few minutes to the generals, Esma gravitates towards the PAG crew and says, “I wanna thank you all for keeping this thing with these new ships on the down low. When we go to Geneva next week the Euro-trash will be pissing themselves!”

The LC nods, “You get your wish, Madame! This’ll do it.”

With the staired-ladders down on both Razorbacks, Cricket Washington and Beth Sandoval exits the larger one and approach from behind as Esma turns to Maria, “Great to see ya, Mar!”

Maria smiles, “Lookin’ forward to getting’ your hands on ‘em?”

“First, let me get my hands on sum hugs!”

Esma hugs Maria, then the others, and while pulling away from Diego she goes, “Now, where are my toys?”

Mofid didn’t notice Cricket and Beth behind them when he turns for Maria and the others, “Mar, Sasha, Alex, Copper, Sian, great seeing ya’ll today! Are the new ships here?”

Maria points past him and Esma, “Right behind ya, Moot!”

Mofid hasn’t been called that since Bob was around, so he smiles as he turns—and his eyes light up when he sees Cricket and Beth, where Cricket says, “Hello, Mister President!”

“Cricket, Beth!” He nods to Beth then says to Cricket, “You’re a head of state now, so you can knock that shit off when the press ain’t around!” He then points to the two ships behind them, and like all of the HWG series—in full on sunlight they look like massive black holes sitting on the tarmac, “That them?”

Cricket motions to Beth who says, “Sir, the larger HWG99e, tail number 99-echo-0002, is VC-88 code named Sasquatch. The next ship is a HWG101a4, tail number 91-alpha-40032, and is SC-92 code

named Soccer Mom. The other Air Force One and Two replacements will be delivered this afternoon...Sir."

Maria adds, "Hope you like 'em, dude!"

Mofid rears back slightly, "I thought they were supposed to be painted already? What happened to that?"

The exterior of the large one changes as Beth goes, "It's a dial up, sir. There's matte, glossy-black, pixelated gray camo, and a whole variety of blues to choose from. Then this is our favorite pink camo, that's for those sneaky dawn or dusk incursions, and—"

"Where's our livery?"

Esma prods her husband with an elbow, "How's this?"

The skin of the VC88 suddenly goes into an animated video that covers the entire ship. With "Stars and Stripes Forever" blasting away we see an American flag waving across the skin. This is followed by fireworks, marching minutemen and bald eagles zooming about.

With more fireworks, and a piccolo dominating the melody, the head of a monster screaming eagle shrieks on the nose of the ship while Esma gives him a big hug, with an excited, "Do ya like it, hon?"

President Mofid slowly turns his head towards her, "Let's not."

Esma is about to burst out laughing, where she snorts a big laugh and hits him with, "How 'bout this!"

The skin of the new Air Force One switches over to the retro, baby-blue and effeminate *Loewy Livery* scheme, where Mofid does a double take and almost shouts, "Oh, hell fuckin' no!"

Esma explodes with laughter, then asks, "Okay, how's this?"

The ship switches over to what is still, to this day, referred to as the *Trump Livery* so Mofid goes, "Now THAT's a keeper!"

With the proper livery dialed in, Maria goes, "We need to get going here. We'll do the walk through under way."

Everybody remains in the front half of the ship and strap in, with Esma in the VIP section alongside Sasha and the kids, where their E9 escorts President Mofid, Maria and Beth to his office in the back.

Entering the office, Mofid asks, "My ass is in the aft...why?"

Beth goes, "We sim'd the shit out of this. The bulkhead here, outside your office and through the rear of the fuselage, is hardened, so if we end up flying into the side of a mountain at six-hundred Knots this reinforced space has survived that smashup every time!"

Maria adds, "None of your people got a vote."

"Easy mentioned it but I forgot." As they all grab a seat and belt in, Mofid asks, "Chief, they wouldn't send you back here alone unless they wanted you to tell me something so...what is it, son?"

The E9 nods and flatly points out, "Sir, you have this uncanny ability of thumbing your nose at the rules. All the rules."

"It got me ta where I am today."

"That it has, Mister President, but now we have a rule for you that we're not gonna yield or bend in the slightest. Ya wanna hear it?"

Mofid nods with a smile, "Okay, puke it out, Chief!"

"This thing hauls ass, so at thirty-thousand feet or fifteen minutes away from docking you are to find your way back here and strap in where, with all due respect, at twenty-thousand or ten minutes to dock we'll come escort you...to...your...seat, Sir."

Mofid chuckles, "You're not gonna give an inch?"

With the ship rolling, the E9 is not kidding when he huffs and, "I don't give a fuck if you've got a worm-hole channel to Allah himself on your prayer rug! Thumb your nose at my crew at twenty or ten and they'll hogtie ya and handcuff your ass to that seat...Sir."

With a laugh, Mofid goes, "Okay, Chief! I will comply."

The E9 nods back, "Good to hear, sir! Have a pleasant flight."

With him turning away to exit the office, Mofid calls him back, "I got a hypothetical question, Chief!"

The E9 turns around and says, "I don't do hypothetical, Sir."

"Humor me anyway!" With the E9 nodding, yes, Mofid goes, "So, what if I had the First Lady on all fours an' she's screaming for me to give it to her, and we've hit the ten-minute window. Waddya do?"

"In all honesty, sir?"

"I wouldn't be askin'!"

The E9 shrugs, "Drag your ass away and, if the First Lady is still beggin' for it, well...with only eight weeks left on my 14-11, and to protect my people, I'll take the bullet for the team, Sir!"

With Maria and Beth cracking up, Maria goes, "Yea, he'll do!"

The E9's eyes squint, "Do for what, Marshal Ramirez?"

"Chief Zajic, on the CXi side of the house I got me a shit-ton mish-mash of disperit American units comin' together, and if they're gonna take over for SA personnel I gotta get someone ta box their ears so they'll be towing *our* line! You'll be leaving with me this afternoon and I'll have you back on a beer run this Friday."

The E9 asks, "This a job offer, Madame?"

"You come highly recommended, but from here on out it's Maria or Mar, m'kay?" With him nodding, yes, she adds, "The short of it is, after six-weeks in our Annex retread program, you'll transfer to the CXi as a Command Chief, the equivalent to a Major General here. And, that little divot cut in the star surrounded by all those stripes and rockers means that the shit comin' out of your mouth—will be comin' from me. You'll be speaking for me, Chief."

The E9 asks pointedly, "I answer to you...alone?"

"Only to me." Maria nods, then, "And if you know of ten or so people who you'd want to work for you, workin' for me, then hand that list to the Barkeeper, directly. Nobody else, *capiche?*"

Mofid adds, "A variety of experienced people from across the silos would be preferred. Our involvement with the CXi needs to succeed and, well, you're it if you want the job."

The E9 nods and salutes Mofid, "I won't disappoint ya, Sir."

Mofid returns it, then, "Worry about her, not me! If you're makin' Tigger happy, it makes me happy!"

The Chief turns to her and dares to ask, "Even if on all fours?"

Laughing big, Maria says, "It's all in or nothin', Chief!"

He nods, "Everything is a joke with you, hu?"

"Got me ta where I am today!"

00111000-00110110

They have 90 minutes scheduled to get to the Carrie Nation, but it'll take this AF1 only 36 minutes from wheels up on 01-Left, transit 1,048.73 light years—and hit the dish side flight deck of the station in orbit around the red dwarf One-Eighty, 1,800au from the binary-primary star, U-Turn. Logging this very first VC88 flight cycle will be a revelation for the Lieutenant Colonel in command of the PAG. Both the flight and maintenance crews told him that the thing flies like *Speed Racer*, but this little ride along changes all their SAM planning charts and scheduling going forward.

Because their tour of this new ship got cut short they decided to pick it back up on the way home, and with the extra time, and very few showing up for today's christening, they decided instead to take a quick tour of the Claudia Willoughby, CX102-US.

On the United States Naval books as CX102.

See, the CXi made a point to have the operating countries use

a secondary designation with their two-character country code as an operational prefix. The Air Force wanted "US" as said prefix but the prefix "CX" works perfectly for the Naval ship designation schema. The problem is that the Navy will be running the ship, and the Air Force will be running the aircrews, and the Army will be providing the troops and armor, but none of them see things the same nor do they speak the same language. Then you have the United States Marine Corps, and these guys figured this shit out long ago, but nobody wants to talk to them and nobody wants to give an inch.

The United Kingdom, Russia, France and the Nefer Key will all experience similar growing pains while adapting to their Trungs on this go round, and the Annex will be running these ships and guiding them along the way. Then when you toss into the mix the science dweebs, and Security Services coming in after the war—for the United States this will all be doubly painful.

Rolling out of the air lock and onto the main flight deck of the Carrie Nation, they disembark Sasquatch and load up onto a handful of eight-man wheeled golf carts. They hit the utility elevators and ride up to the midpoint of the central hub. When they all exit the lifts, the five carts race off down a tunnel towards what the Air Force generals here insist on calling US102.

Point is, last Thursday was the christening of the Enterprise, with the designation of CX101, interchangeable with US101, and it was a media circus. This gala was the first christening of a CXi Trung, as well as the first ship named Enterprise in quite some time! With over a thousand dignitaries, and a hundred reporters on hand, the biggest celebrity draw was the cast from the eighth reboot of Star Trek taking center stage—with the actress playing Nyota Uhura smashing the bottle of White Star champagne over the center kiosk on deck eighteen in the stack. All the while the ship's SYLNb clone, derived from the DNA that actress secretly volunteered, applauding from the sidelines!

That was huge, but today will be a quiet affair by comparison.

Streaking along a nine-meter wide tunnel, when the color of the walls at 700 meters change from blue to a dark-gray, this indicates that they have entered the aft portion of CX102, in the tunnel nestled in the center of the quad-pod. That being the four quantum particle engines that are rarely ever used. Exactly 400 meters later they enter a massive dark cavity that is 55 meters wide by 105 meters deep. The lights above their heads are 120-meters up, and below them it's all of 110 meters down. They are now zipping across a 100+meter long beam-support ramp that connects the tunnel on both sides when this space is not in use. The ramp is smackdab/dead-center of a platform elevator shaft that connects all four of the flight decks in the ship, with two above in the dome side and two below in the dish side.

Reentering the tunnel, that here balloons to thirteen meters in width, they rip past an elevator bank, hundreds of utility hatches and bulkheads, and 200 meters later they slow to a crawl while passing another elevator bank right before entering the atrium in the stack.

Everyone at the christening last week, or watched the stream of it, was floored when they laid eyes on the stack of the Enterprise. Twenty-five beautifully appointed and spacious structural decks are in the sail, each with an added secondary riser deck in between. With all the transparent walkways and guardrails, along with planters filled with ivies and dwarf trees everywhere you turn, for a military ship this was not at all expected and shocking to see for the first time.

Mofid and the gang, rolling into the spacious atrium on the 18th deck of the Willoughby, didn't bat an eye because what they see here was expected, and they were not disappointed.

Since VC88 landed 52 minutes early, and everyone is already here, they decide to push the christening and commissioning ceremony of CX102 up an hour. They only had enough time to see the bridge and CIC where they learned that, unless they were duking it out in an actual dogfight, and the Iron Maiden has, it's actually the CIC where all the real action takes place—not the bridge.

At 14:55zulu, for them 9:55est, with a modest three-hundred in attendance, and only seven reporters, when Maria enters the atrium with Mofid and Esma she can hear a Secret Service agent say to his wrist, "Barkeep, Bouncer and Tigger have entered."

It was at that moment Maria realizes that the Secret Service could use their own secure instance of the Annex tacnet.

With Mofid and Esma taking their seats, Maria steps up to the lectern, by the central kiosk mount, and says, "I wanna thank you all for coming. I know this is a big chunk out of your day, and I don't think you want to hear me ramble on about stuff. I'm gonna let Lloyd Wyandotte and President Mofid do that to ya!" With everyone there chuckling, Maria cuts it short, "I know these guys are gonna bang on about cooperation. You know, inspiring words about us joining hands, workin' together and Kumbaya. An' that means the Jabbers, Xhemal, Nefer Key and humans together. It's what they're supposed to say, it's what we need but, the fact is...we don't know what's out there. Haven't got a clue, so...we're gonna go find out."

Before she can step down a reporter asks, "How many of these platforms are you building for the CXi?"

Maria shrugs, "Hundreds? There's a lot to explore out there." She then motions for Wyandotte, "Lloyd."

The reporter couldn't resist, and asks a follow on question,

"The Annex has the smaller Mbande and you're not making any more. We were told they were 'right-sized' for their mission, but that doesn't tell us anything. What edge do they have over the Trungs?"

Maria wonders if she should answer that, but with Wyandotte stepping up she thinks why not, "'Bout half a second!"

With Wyandotte starting his speech, and Maria tying into the tacnet to chat with Cricket, Esma, Michelle, Sasha and Jessica, and with Diego, Alexander and Copper quietly cracking jokes to each other, Mofid ties into Jacob's mind via the tacnet and asks, <"So, you're the captain of one of these things?">

<"Well, Mister President—">

Mofid rolls his eyes and, <"Knock that off here!">

Jacob smiles, <"But, you happen to be—">

<"After six years, that shit gets real old. I'm still Moot.">

<"I'm not the captain per se, I'm a Field Marshal, which is the mission commander. I figure out where we go and the shit we do when we get there. The Deputy Field Marshal commands the division, and their exec, a Command Chief, they run the division.">

<"Who runs the ship then?">

<"That would be another Command Chief who has a crew outside of the divisional table of organization. They drive the ship.">

<"Aren't you the commanding officer with the final word?">

Jacob's face scrunches up slightly when he goes, <"Yea, 'bout that, we don't have an officer corps. Not a one, so when you ask who the captain of the ship is and who has the final word it's...kinda the wrong question?"> Mofid looks confused so Jacob goes, <"Look, the chief has final say if we do something risky with the ship. If we wanna do a 'random walk' he gets to overrule us. Okay, here's an example of why we're different...everybody flies! There is not one of our people who cannot pilot a Razorback. We can all do it! Because of this we do not have a division between an air element as opposed to the ground element. For any mission each regiment or battalion will select the aircrews from within their T.O. for the type of mission planned. Then, if you can believe this, ninety-five percent-plus of our fighter pilots are PFC-Two and PFC-Three in rank. Again, we don't have officers.">

Mofid is taken aback by this, <"None, seriously!">

<"That's a no-shit, big guy! Only two at my level are fighter pilots, and that's Field Marshal Cyzk and myself. See, driving a Trung is like piloting a Razorback. Some of the time it's point and click, sure, but you've got a stick at your right, a throttle on your left and peddles

for yaw control, so when the shit hits—it's a barnstormer!">

Mofid wonders, <"Then anyone can step in?">

<"Yup, old school stick and rudder!">

<"You know, I've been made aware of a huge problem.">

<"What problem could that be?">

<"Efficiencies, we're terrible at that.">

Jacob huffs a laugh, <"Moot, dude, we're not gonna realize any efficiencies out of the mix of countries coming to us, with all their unique cultures, and that's especially true for you guys. You've got competing branches, with hostile divisions and jealously protected responsibilities, and skill sets, then ya toss in the constantly rotating crews, and endless training...our goal here is to establish effectiveness across the silos. When it hits the fan what matters is effectiveness and not efficiencies. Yea, there are a few things we gotta unfuck here, but let my people take care of that for you. Leave it to us.">

<"Maybe we should model after you?">

<"Oh, hell no! Don't dick with what you got! In spite of all your organizational inefficiencies, and the unrelenting mutherfucking infighting, what you have is perfect for what you need. Don't you change anything! Again, let us do it!"> With Mofid stewing on that, Jacob adds, <"Maybe in the not so distant future your military branches will see the light—but *they* have to approach you! Do not impose it upon them. THAT would be a disaster.">

Mofid asks, <"I'm up now, can we chat later?">

<"Sure!"> Jacob turns to him and smiles, <"You're a friend to Maria, and with ol' Bob, so that makes you a friend of mine.">

Mofid stands while saying, <"I don't have a lot of friends.">

Jacob nods with understanding, <"That's two of us.">

After a few minutes on the virtues of cooperation, Mofid turns to Claudia Willoughby, "There's very little we can say about President Willoughby that hasn't been said a million times over. Two centuries of countless books, movies and documentaries have laid her life bare in vivid detail, but this one little thing has never gotten out until just now. If you can believe this, on her first run the Secret Service called her Barbie, but in 2100 they changed it to Phoenix when she swept all the primaries. Now, as president, I have to say my favorite moment was when she bulldozed the United Nations in New York. Sure, she paid to rebuild it, but she got her point across. After that...yea, even now that makes her a real tough act to follow!" Mofid gestures to the bottle of champagne beside the lectern and calls out, "Jessica!"

From the back of the atrium, Jessica steps forward in a tight body-contour dress that's the same color as her red hair. With a high neckline, long sleeves and skirt just past her knees, this dress reveals nothing except a knockout figure. With a provocative walk, she steps past the reporters and says to all of them via her eerie mind link, <"Remember, you guys say anything...it won't be a social visit.">

Jessica picks up the bottle of champagne, and as she turns towards Maria she asks, <"You really want this done, babe?">

Maria's eyes close, in pain, where she then opens them with a zen-like clarity of mind sweeping over her, <"Yes...do it.">

<"Okay!"> Jessica throws back at Maria, then turns to Sasha, saying, "Stepmother, Sasha Zinovenko-Demitri-Ramirez, please step forward. I require your assistance." With Sasha giving her a panicked shake of the head, Jessica rolls her eyes and says to her, "Look, Sash, everyone here knows it's you so, fuck it! Get up here!"

Yes, everyone in attendance knows it is her...

To the sound of a slow clapping that builds up into a rolling applause, spiked with heartfelt cheering, Sasha is handed the bottle by Jessica, where Mofid leans in and gives her a little peck on the cheek, "This is for you, hon. The USS Claudia H. Willoughby."

The crowd goes quiet for the few seconds it takes for Sasha to proclaim the ship's name and smash the bottle over the solid steel kiosk at the edge of the deck. With champagne spraying all over both hers and Jessica's dresses, and to a standing ovation by the crowd, she has a smile and tears streaming down her face as the ship's SYLNb clone of Claudia steps in and gives her a joyful hug.

For Sasha, Claudia that is, it feels good to finally be outed, but for Zora du Laret, Nefer Key ambassador to the CXi, in cadence with the crowd gives a light but reserved applause.

Claudia has now been fully compromised.

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accademia all'assassina

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-APRIL-21-SATURDAY
TIME: 22:12zulu (local 25:20mst)

Back in 2275, Jacob, Cricket and Maria were sent in different directions with the hope they could be salvaged after the events out at Saiph-6B. In an attempt to keep things quiet they were code named after the three wise monkeys, that being *Kikazaru*, *Mizaru* and *Iwazaru* (*id est*, hear, see and speak no evil) so that if anything got out about them then it would be hard to link it back to the three.

It got out and everybody knew it was them.

The rank-and-file viewed these three monkeys more as tragic figures rather than heroic. Jacob wouldn't listen to his handlers and yet he survived because he didn't subscribe to their training. Cricket couldn't cope with the visions of death Jacob left in his wake when she went to collect their fallen. Maria, for the first time, wouldn't say shit if she had a mouthful, fact is she was rendered speechless by these events, but if you were to say anything off-color about Jacob or Cricket now she would claw your face from your skull. With that said, no one was surprised when she ultimately nailed the bastard who ambushed Jacob then wiped out their platoon days later.

Saiph-6B bound the three in a way no one could comprehend.

So, to review, each training cycle from Cue Ball goes on to deploy as an operational company for at least half-a-year before being broken up, that is if they are to be broken up, and keeping with tradition, fifty-years after Cue Ball they are all scrounged up wherever and sent to the Church Key for a *lil' fēste*.

Here tonight in the western banquet room on floor 210 of the Spike, we have five of "the split six" who were shuffled off to Bob's old company attached to the Marauder—where the balance of the training cycle was sent to the Sawney Beane. Over the years, the six kept in

touch but this is the very first time they have seen anybody from their old training company since 2274 and, as expected, everyone, except four of them, have been retreads for quite some time now.

Most training companies have one or maybe two who rise to company or battalion command, but rarely above that. Here we have five who made it to Deputy Field Marshal or better...

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Jacob, Maria and Cricket have kissed their spouses, Michelle, Sasha and Bill, and where these three are now trailing behind the attendees heading for the elevators to leave—two of those people are approaching the head table, while Jacob throws out, "Hey, Yu!"

A Cambodian male, with a heavy Bostonian accent tosses it back at him with, "That's Phoc Yu ta you!"

Maria smiles and asks, "Phoc who?"

Phoc offers a hand to her, "Phoc Yu, at your service!"

Cricket just shakes her head, "That ever get old?"

Jacob and Phoc both look at her, "no."

After the palm slap and fist bump, Maria also looks at Cricket and chuckles, "Old? Yea, it does, kinda, but its tradition."

"That so, eh?" Phoc points to them, "What we got 'ere are a couple of stiff-necked, Brookline douche poodles!"

Cricket rolls her eyes, "Fifty years and I still, to this day, haven't got a clue what that shit means?"

The other guy, Lennard 'Leeroy' Jenkins, better known in intel circles as Blackjack 1108, who could pass as Scott's older brother, is laughing big as he bumps into Phoc while saying, "You never let up!" He knuckle-taps Maria and Jacob, then turns towards Léon as he walks in with their doggie bags, "Hey, Lay-on, that was some killer chowders! What the hell you call it, again?"

Léon shrugs, "*Pasta all'assassina?*"

With him blinking in confusion, Maria goes, "Killer pasta!"

Jenkins nods, "Yea, it was, but what—"

"It means killer pasta, quite literally."

Léon adds, "From the *Bari academia all'assassina.*"

Maria throws out, "With a Church Key twist!"

Jacob goes, "You could teach them a thing or two!"

"*Oui!*" He hands Maria a bag with, "The yabby featured a citrus reduction..." Then to Jenkins and Jacob each a bag while saying, "The loin of bumble was charred with a suet based cacao mole."

Cricket adds, "Most of the time us peeps get DuPont chicken at these events. Tonight I saw a chef get a standing ovation!"

Léon hands one to Phoc then Cricket, "It was a team effort." He gives Maria a peck on the cheek, and as he turns to leave he says, "These are double servings in the bags! Enjoy your meeting, *ciao!*"

As Léon steps out, Phoc asks Maria, "This is your stepdad?"

"*Oui!*" She then turns to Cricket as she is preparing to leave, "You ain't goin' nowhere, Crick."

She wonders, "I thought this meeting is about Rho Tau?"

Maria nods, "Yes, but now you're in the need-to-know loop."

Phoc rubs his eyes, "Let's make this quick. I'm on zulu time."

"First off, Phoc, I want to thank you for taking charge and getting Hippo-Six up to operational speed!"

"Yea, fine, so now I go back to the Iron Man, right?"

"It's the O'Malley, and...no. Current command has a rhythmic groove goin' and Scott's not gonna crowbar ya back in. Sorry dude!" With Phoc snarling at the news, Maria adds, "So, after Pee Towel you'll be looking for work, but we're not going to retread ya."

"What'll it be then?"

"Hippo-Seven."

"That's CXi."

"Titus-CnC will always be SA."

"Regardless of who's driving, how 'bout ya fuck off?"

"Doubly-sorry FM, you're now a GM!"

With Jenkins trying not to laugh, he asks, "What about me?"

Cricket perks up, "You're in Planning, dude, why is that?"

"After Polaris I got branded as Spooky."

"All the Simon pilots are Spooky!"

Maria points out, "The CDF was lookin' to knock 'im off."

Jenkins smiles, "And here I am! So, what about it, Mar?"

She looks at him and exhales big, "Hippo-Eight."

His face scrunches in pain, "Oh fuck."

"Civ-X needs to navigate! It's either you or Kati but—"

"Orc is a silverback!"

"That may be, but with Kati I'll need to move her up to DFM for a half a year before I can put her over a station. Scott doesn't have a slot open for that so you're movin' on up, Group Marshal!"

Jacob adds, "You won't be bored!"

Jenkins asks, "Who got Hippos three, four and five?"

Maria nods, "Yea, we've been keepin' tight lipped about that. It'll be Yoon, Stark and Sargent."

"An old school crew!"

"And when the new yo-yos stand up we add Phoc an' you!"

Phoc asks, "Why me?"

Maria goes, "You know combat drops better than anybody?"

"The CXi is a civilian op."

Jacob points out, "True, but the service divisions don't know shit, so you're gonna teach 'em. Bring them up to our standards!"

Phoc realizes, "So, *that's* my side job."

Maria throws out, "Speaking of which, where we at with Rho?"

"You read the report. We're at fifteen seconds."

Maria nods, "That's pretty tight."

"A leading edge drop is nuckin futs, but I made it fast-n-safe."

Jacob speaks up, "That ya did, but we wanna make it edgier."

Phoc shrugs and says, "Your dump over Arda is already in the worse possible conditions possible! You asked for that, an' you have to jump inside a ninety-second window to pull it off."

"July second, at seven-thirty-seven zulu."

Phoc squints, "What do ya mean, edgier?"

"We added two regiments. Mook and Raven." Phoc gestures for more, so Jacob elaborates, "Aaaas...Jumping JACCs."

Phoc shakes his head and, "For twenty, what-eight years? People have been waiting to see us do that and...now? Mordor?"

Jacob nods, "I just sent you the updated profile and the string of code we want you to append to the transitional-shift script. We also need to adjust the angle of attack towards the northern topic."

"That'll be Udún. Up front, this'll triple the loiter time."

Jacob then throws out, "Since JACCs can't accelerate for shit in microgravity, to spice things up we want the equivalent of a Mach-5 approach towards the tropic on the dump. It's in the string"

Phoc starts to laugh while adding, "Dude, you...you do realize they'll be hitting the upper atmosphere before they can get clear?"

"Perform a gravity-pull, yank the deck out from under 'em."

Maria asks, "Waddya think, A-Duck, all that doable?"

Phoc ponders this then says, "If we can do the pull I can get it down to maybe...twenty, twenty-two seconds?" He looks at Jacob and asks, "You sim'd the shit out of this, didn't you?"

Jacob nods and, "Best I could get was twenty-six seconds."

Maria goes, "Ya gotta find a way of shaving five or six off."

Phoc gives her that look, "That's a double-blind d'uh!"

Jacob adds, "Problem I had was that I don't know what the station g-limits would be, nor what you can get on the reverse flow?"

Phoc nods, "On a side note, it's gonna take...four, maybe five weeks to survey the ships and I'll need a half day to batten down the important shit before we jump for real, but still we're—"

Jenkins snorts, "You're gonna break some dishes, dude!"

"Ya think?" Phoc looks to Jacob, "Can I see your sim?"

Jacob nods towards him, "It's in the profile."

"Can I go over it with ya tomorrow?"

"I'll be here all day waiting to hear from you!"

"Let's meet for lunch, I'll need you for the afternoon."

"That's why I'll be here!"

"Doesn't the ninety-six have a mission tomorrow?"

"It's a side op. They don't need me for it."

"Your DFM is Venk, right?"

"Yup!"

Phoc snorts, "Your right, they don't need ya!"

This whole time Cricket has set up five shot glasses and filled them with Rye, so with her handing them out, "Here, guys."

As they gather round for a toast, Maria goes, "How 'bout all ya'll come to my place for that lunch. I'll spring for the rib-eyes!"

Jenkins volunteers loudly, "I'll be grillin' 'um!"

Phoc asks, "Legend has it she fucked up your dinner party?"

"After Polaris, when I got pulled back into Planning, yea."

Jacob laughs, "She had to flip the menu on the fly by chopping those burnt-ass steaks into—an exquisite carne asada!"

Maria adds, "Léon heard about it and, when I showed him what I did, this is how he does it for *olá* now."

Phoc smiles at Jenkins, "Maybe you should let her fuck it up?"

Jenkins shakes his head, "Naw, she owes me a steak-steak!"

Cricket says, "Guys, let's wrap this up so I can go see my little one!" They all raise their shot glasses with Cricket, who says, "Here's to Chang, and I do know the Chief is fucken' an' killin' it!"

They knock back their shots, where Maria coughs and asks Jacob, "You know who Chinky teamed up with, don'chya?"

Jacob nods, yes, so Cricket asks, "Who?"

Jacob says, "Burke."

"No shit! You're okay with that?"

"Yea, they're both aloof assholes. It's a good fit!"

Maria announces, "Eleven, my place in the City. We can run the sim together—open the floor while knockin' back some brewskies!"

Phoc ponders and goes, "Ya know, for all the stations I figure I can get a three-g pull and reverse flow by the grav-pods. Maybe a two to two-point-five range between the axial core and the periphery, however, the CA-rings will end up a mess."

"What kind of mess?"

"A three-g mess." Phoc nods, "Spring it on the sci-dweebs at the last minute it's gonna take weeks for 'em to clean up."

Maria thinks about it, "I can give a five-hour heads-up, max. Let's pick this up tomorrow. See you guys then, okay?"

She motions for Jacob to hang back as the rest of them make their goodbyes and step out.

Now out of earshot, Jacob asks, "What'll it be, not my boss?"

Maria smiles at that, "Where is Guns off too?"

"Fifty-Four Tau. The Commission is directing the cleanup."

"How'r you and Shell getting along?"

"On top of being gorgeous, she actually likes me! Can't figure that out?" He shakes his head, "I don't deserve her."

Maria's face scrunches up a tad, "She's bat-shit crazy-nuts 'bout you! You're gonna fuck it all up with that shit perspective."

Jacob nods, "Five-by-five, but that's not on your mind."

"Babs reached out and was askin' about you?"

Jacob's shoulders sag, "Shit."

"Weren't you gonna cut that off?"

"Was, but Shell wanted to meet her—where I find out that she has an affinity for red-heads."

"Shit git weird?"

"You could say that."

"Was it fun?"

"Yeeeee, kinda?"

"Shest?"

"When I'm not around. It keeps her occupied!" Jacob points at Maria, saying, "An I ain't gonna open that door!"

"Michelle will, so you might as well git-r-done!" Maria grins with, "My Fifty-Two, Nickel, she told me they had a side pot on who was going to jump you. Looks like Shest stands to win!"

Jacob sighs, "I don't want it, but my gut says Shelly does—"

"Get it behind you." With Jacob shaking his head and rolling his eyes, Maria asks, "You're staying at Red's old house?"

"Yea, after the RRF I gave up my flat here to Peña."

She points down, "Doesn't Jessie have a room for ya?"

"With Scott and Nancy now on three-sixty-three, she opened his old room up for me, but I don't want to be a bother."

"Well, sixty-six is free for ya!" Maria pokes him in the chest, "If you're gonna see her why don'cha take my penthouse tonight? It's only in use when Mofid is in town so...have at it!"

"I really don't want to be a bother."

"Twisting your arm is a bother!"

"You're okay with this?"

"Less lag, babe!" She then smiles, "An' don't worry if you spoooge all over my sheets, I'll be having the place fumigated after you leave so...whatever goes!"

Jacob starts laughing, "Fuckin' assbat!"

"Would you have me any other way?"

She smiles as he gives her a friendly kiss, and as he steps off, Maria goes, "Ya know, Diego was right. We had to get a divorce, and a decade between us for you an' I to get along."

Jacob turns with wide-eyes, "Don't forget you switchin' jobs!"

She nods while huffing a laugh, "You'd be right about that!"

Jacob wonders, "Where you gettin' it now? Zam's bony?"

Maria shrugs, "When Sash an' Lynn are not around."

"Is 'e any good?"

Maria blinks introspectively, "It'll do!"

Jacob smiles and turns away with, "Good to hear!"

Maria takes a deep breath as she watches Jacob make his way for the elevators. A thousand emotions race through her mind, but the one thought that overrides them all is the joy she feels because they get along so well nowadays. She has always secretly wished things were different between them but now, today, she wouldn't have it any other way—where the moment is interrupted by a beep in her ears and a tacnet audio link-icon bouncing in her field of view...

Maria opens it and, "*Que pasa, Roja?*"

Jessica asks, ["Waddya doin'?""]

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116

not exactly a pickle surprise

DATE: 2323ce-APRIL-22-SUNDAY
TIME: 00:23zulu (local 27:27mst)

Babette sighs, "*Tu me manques.*"

Ninety minutes have passed without them saying an actual word to each other. There was a lot of heavy breathing, a few grunts, then the occasional crying out by her to punctuate a heated moment, but words were not exchanged until just now.

Many have tried to have a relationship like theirs but it is simply not sustainable. A few months at best for most, but nine and a half years is totally unheard of. Pacing was key for Jacob and Babs, sometimes they were many months apart, one time by as much as twenty-five while he was recuperating at Monique's—because pinching exclusive tunnel-time on a secure wormhole was next to impossible with the war hogging every byte of their bandwidth.

Then with Michelle maneuvering herself into a prime position to "volunteer" for Jessica's Mission Oversight flights into Los Angeles, this made it easy-breezy for Guns to slither on into Jacob's bed when there was so many hours to kill between their meetings...

And compiling drop simulations gave them ample downtime!

Now, everybody has something on the side to pass the time, be it live or digital or dead it does not matter, but where Michelle didn't mind Maria or Asajj in the slightest, Babs was something altogether different! See, Guns kept in touch with her old gunnery instructor for the Warthog, that'd be Bud, and she knew about Babette and Jacob for years, but when Michelle actually met Babs, well, curiosity ended up getting the better of her—and they became regular too! Small world, yes, but Shelly can partial sum on the fly where most people suck at it.

Point being, Jacob also sucks at basic math, "Missed you too."

Babs nods slightly, and then slips out of bed with a smug grin.

In the kitchen she pops a bottle of wine, pours two glasses, and stepping back in she hands one to Jacob, "It's been too long."

Jacob ponders that while Babs slips back into bed with him, "How you greeted me at the door, that was one for the books!"

Babs leans against Jacob while saying, "*Mon loup*, what choice did we have? When you walked in I...*jette mes vêtements!*"

Having just sipped from the glass of wine she handed him, Jacob grins big, "Yea, in seconds."

She swirls her free hand in the air, "Like a trebuchet!"

He chuckles, "Nothing needed to be said."

"*Oui!*" Babs sips from her wine and then takes a deep breath, "Sorry 'bout December last."

"No, that's okay! Didn't know you and Shell were a thing."

"Our impromptu tryst with your betrothed, she wanted to surprise you!" Babs then wonders, "Did it make a mess of things?"

"Surprisingly, no."

"I haven't heard from her?"

"She's kinda spread thin. You will."

"With your vanilla sensibilities, what was your take away?"

Jacob nods with wide eyes, "Surprisingly, fun."

"*Bon à savoir*, your performance was...one for the books!"

Jacob smiles at that, "Not my cup of tea, but for Michelle—"

She cuts him off, "What about your cup of tea?"

He thinks about it, "Not to say you an' I were getting stale, but a change of pace...this change of pace has a high replay value."

"Like you've said, arms and legs in the coaster are optional!"

Jacob nods slightly as he huffs a little laugh at that, but then a thought crosses his mind, so he dares to ask, "Bud said the last time you and he spent any time together was last New Year's?"

"At Jay's, on the beach!" She waggles his head and tries a lame imitation of the Field Marshal, "Like, cowabunga, dood!"

And then it dawns on him, so with tight lips he says to her, "Hands and feet inside the coaster is optional, makes me wonder where you picked up on that...Aroha Mai?" He looks at Babs and adds, "Me thinks you can drop the façade now?"

"ah." Babs quietly nods, then says, "Guess I've been outted."

Having confirmed it, Jacob looks away, "You got careless."

"We've been careless before, but this time you were listening. Then again, in our defense, an' you have to admit, we never lied."

He looks at her, "A woman would say you lied."

"*Vraie*, however an omission does not a lie make!"

Jacob almost laughs, "That's a guy talking!"

"No, that is us maintaining cerebral objectivity."

"Us? In this instance I'd agree with a women's point of view."

"How convenient of you!" Babs then protests with wide eyes, "But, you never asked, *mon bon Monsieur!*"

"I wondered at times but, okay, in your defense, I didn't ask."

She gives a conceited, "*Ça alors, quod erat demonstrandum!*"

Jacob snorts, "You can knock off the accent you know."

Babs now speaks with Bud's vocal patterns, but two octaves higher, "It's not that simple." She turns towards him and, "Your early months with my aunt was all her, but with so few wolves and otters available here in the Garden, and myself green as green can be of my aunt's popularity here, we came up with an arrangement. When Babs had to go back I sprang for a family member chip and, after copying my core instance onto it I then uploaded her. Not as an avatar, but a fully integrated wrap to maintain her demeanor." Babs' unique French accent takes over, "Where *moi* happens to be in the driver's seat!"

Jacob grasps that, "No wonder you never broke character."

"*Oui!*" Then with Bud's voice, "Here I'm an FO. The only time I am Bud is when we're staging or on a mission." Babs' voice returns, "With this revelation, I pray we do not lose what we have."

Jacob thinks about it and asks pointedly, "Sophia, Maggie and Paleo? I know you've been...involved with them, so to speak."

Babs nods, "Among others. It's a small yet intimate clique."

"I'll bet." Jacob ponders this, then, "What happened here stays here, and Michelle must never know I know. That's part one."

"Oh, most assuredly!" Jacob sits there and doesn't elaborate on part two, so to prod him along she asks, "*Deuxième partie?*"

Jacob bodily turns to Babette, and as his eyes stab into hers, "You never want to be Bud again, I take it."

Babs answers, "*Non-non-non, plus jamais!*"

"I want to hear it from Bud."

Bud speaks, "Never again, we've merged completely and..."
As Babs, "It's so seamless I don't even know who Bud was anymore?"

Jacob's shakes his head with understanding, "Then, my friend, I never want to hear from *you* again." Babs rears back slightly as Jacob lays it out, "On July second, Rho Tau, whose voice I hear booting up as my co-pilot will tell me everything I need to know."

Bud as Babs realizes, "I'll...have to requalify for everything!"

"You have just a smidge over two months." Jacob stands and softly caresses her face with a hand, "Let's see what you're made of?"

And he vanishes from sight...

01000110-01001111-01001110-01010011-01001001

"Not what I expected."

Here in Jessica's prime southern corner apartment, on floor 100 of the Spike, she and Maria have decoupled from Stone Garden where Jessica had them linked into Jacob and Babette's encounter.

Jessica blinks, and, "That's two of us."

Maria shrugs, "I was hoping for something, ya know, funnier!"

Jessica's face scrunches up with, "You mean slapstick?"

Maria laughs, "I wasn't expecting him to leap out of the bed, shrieking, 'holy shit, I've been munching on your ass!' but, sumthin' a little bit more animated? Am'I right?"

"That...yea, that would have been hilarious!"

"Thank you for seeing it my way, love, but I guess it looks like your father has changed for the better!"

"Father hasn't changed one iota."

"No?" Maria points at her, "If it wasn't for Diego, Michal, the Herrero's and Paula, then I believe we'd'uv gotten a livelier reaction!"

Jessica thinks about it, "Okay, I'll give you that, but this here was a banana smoothie instead of the pumpkin-spice latte we wanted!"

Maria points to her own head, "You got access, did he know?"

"No, but in the back of his mind he did suspect something was *maybe* amiss? Suspicious even? Father avoided the question because he needed this diversion a lot more than rocking a boat."

Maria kids, "And I thought he was a man of principle!"

Jessica wonders, "Would you risk blowing this up, seriously?"

"No, I wouldn't!" Maria then begrudgingly admits, "With what we just sat through, truth be told, I'd be goin' way far out of my way to not rock that boat! Satisfied?"

"Yea, it was a hell of a show, an' he did give 'er a way back!"

"Uh-uh, that's an almost impossible task he gave Babs."

"I beg to differ, that should be a cakewalk!"

"The regimen takes from three to four months to get through, all because of the heavy queue. She's got two. He knew exactly what he was asking of her."

"Which was what?"

"How bad do you want it?"

"Uuuh, maybe you can help her?"

"I'm over here now. Only if I'm asked."

Jessica points to herself, "I'm asking."

"For her or your father?"

Jessica ponders, "I'll have to get back to ya on that one."

"By the way, how 'r you and Sammi getting along?"

"We're good?"

"Do you do your mental whack-a-vooodoo shit on 'er?"

"In the sack, that's about it." Jessica then picks up on Maria's thoughts, so her shoulders sag as she elaborates, "Since you insist, I model it after my father's junk and technique, okay? She loses her shit whenever I do it to her and...it's pretty cool!"

"Without the benefit of the N2."

"Yea, wha'?"

"That'll put a whole new twist on scissors."

Jessica's face scrunches up, "Really? You had to go there?"

Maria throws her hands out, "I gotta be me!"

Jessica shakes her head, "Stick with what ya know!"

"Every intention too!" Maria laughs, then asks, "By the way, have you given Samael any second thoughts?"

"Not after I talked to Seth." Maria gives a confused look, so Jessica elaborates, "He showed me the alternatives going forward and I realize that Sammi uncomplicates my life."

"How so?"

"Guys being controlling assholes?"

"When is a guy being a guy not an asshole!"

"You have a really distorted view of the world." Maria grins big while gesturing to herself, so Jessica goes, "Seth pointed out that actual tough and confident guys are chill and easy going where weak fucks are prying and controlling—and women like us, specifically you and me, we have a hard time spotting the sheep in wolves clothing."

Maria shakes her head and admits that, "Your father was one of the few tough and chill guys, and I fucked that up royally."

"Twice, an' ya wonder who the controlling assbat was?"

Maria huffs, "You are never gonna let me live that down."

"You never let up on 'im!" Jessica then suddenly remembers, "And, speaking of controlling jackasses, Seth said your ploy worked but the Nefers are gonna be taking their sweet time to evac Sasha."

"Those gray pricks take for-fucken-ever to do anything."

Jessica points out, "She'll never be coming back!"

Maria is surprised, and asks her, "Ever?"

"That bridge has been burned." With Maria giving a satisfied nod, and standing to leave, Jessica adds, "They're gonna make it look like an accident. Just like last time!"

Maria asks, "They're not gonna actually whack her are they?"

"No!" Jessica shakes her head, "No, she and Rachel will be switching jobs. Management is going to be Claudia's punishment."

"What does Rachel do?"

"I'm not sure?" Jessica then points to her hallway with the extra rooms, "You know, you can stay if you want, and we can do breakfast just like the old days!"

"Love to, but I'll have to take a rain check on that. Got the exec crew comin' by for lunch to go over the Arda drop." Maria then wonders, "Don't you and Scott got that shoot to go to tomorrow?"

Jessica stands to see her out, "And wrap party afterwards."

"Angela has gotten crazy popular." Maria then shifts gears, "Oh shit, before I forget, there's a video going out tomorrow through Carlos' media group with Angela on it."

"Scott told me, but 'e didn't say what it's about."

"He tossed it in my court all because it's her with that new retread chief from the USAF."

Jessica's face turns to dread, asking, "Wa'd she do this time?"

With tight lips Maria asks, "You really want to hear this?"

Jessica nods, "I didn't give a shit, but now I do!"

"On the thirtieth, I took the chief out to the mail run for DC, as Scott was walking Diego and Angela out to the trash run for LA."

"The day of her first regular season game!"

"Yea, that Friday!" Maria shifts her weight and gestures with, "So, here we are making introductions and the Chief, Zajic, asks her 'You're that Newt-Angela everyone is talking about!' Angela gets this look on her face, so she asks him, 'An' you that zoomie-chief everyone here is talkin' 'bout, right?' All this while she's scoping him out—"

Jessica wonders, "Maybe I don't what to hear this?"

"Oh, no, you are going to hear this!" Maria laughs and then continues with, "So, here she is, sizing the guy up and down, where she steps into his bubble and starts poking his belly through his shirt. Then, she starts patting his abs with the flat of her hand and shouts, 'Damn, Sian, you got to get in on this! Da guy 'as got a six-pack!'"

Jessica is trying not to laugh while asking, "There's more?"

"And here's where it gets good when Angie looks up at him and laughs, 'Gawd-damn you is a frickin hottie for a salt-n-pepper!' And while walking away she thumbs back at 'im while saying to Diego, 'I gotta wait me eight-years before I can git a bite of that!' And with those two heading for the ship, my guy is hanging on Scott, in tears, while laughing his guts out! Everyone was laughing their guts out."

Jessica is cross-armed face-palmed while trying to suppress her own laughter, "There's no end to this! Tell me I'm wrong."

Maria leans in, "Would you have her any other way?"

Jessica lifts her head and shakes it, *no*.

0111100-0101111-0111100

Maria's penthouse takes up all of the 366th floor of the Spike, at 1,832 meters up in the air, and where each of the three equilateral sides at the base of this building span 500 meters, up here, just four floors from the top, the three exterior walls are 45 meters wide. If this were New York City the footprint here would fetch thirty-million USD, easy, but this place is free digs for Marshal Ramirez.

Maria actually lives in a large upscale 6-bedroom at the end of a cul-de-sac in the City of New Sydney, but this penthouse is being held for her regardless, so she threw in a few personal items for

atmosphere and uses it for high-value VIPs like President Mofid.

About once a month Maria will entertain guests here but, as it is, it's usually empty so she stocks the place with products that she can rotate out to keep things fresh.

Jacob slips out of the bed in the master bedroom, steps into the living room and stops at the floor-to-ceiling windows to look out over New Sydney all of 120 kilometers to the north. After a minute of gormlessly staring at its distant glow, he huffs a breath then meanders into the kitchen. Stepping past a chef's island, he opens an overhead liquor cabinet to pull out a bottle of rye and a shot glass.

At just that moment, he hears someone clearing their throat.

Jacob doesn't have to look back, he knows who this is, so he pulls another shot glass out of the cabinet and turns towards the island, and where no one was sitting just twelve-seconds before here we have the soon to be fifteen-year-old, Seth, giving him a genuinely warm smile while saying, "Hello...father."

Jacob just now realizes that he is standing there buck-naked, and just as he is about to react with some embarrassment, like he's supposed too, Seth offers him a robe, "Sorry 'bout the intrusion."

"Thanks." Jacob sets the bottle and glasses down, takes the robe and dons it while saying, "I guess it's important?"

"It's more of a timeliness issue rather than importance? The next available...moment for me to reach out is all of five weeks away so you'll be getting me now."

Jacob pours them both a shot while saying, "I know you can't turn it off but...well, it'd be nice to have a little privacy?"

"You are constantly streaming in my head, and I can ignore or block it out most of the time, but tonight was an exception!"

Jacob pushes a shot to him, "Tonight was an eye opener."

Seth smirks, "Not exactly a pickle surprise but...yea!"

"And you've known about this for...what, ever?"

Seth raises his shot and, "Purdy much!"

They slam these shots back, and as Jacob pours them another Seth goes on to say, "This is pretty good, but I'd rather have a soda."

Jacob snorts a little laugh, "That stuff is bad for you."

Seth points to the rye and, "And this isn't?"

"In good company." Jacob mutters, then, "You know all about me but I know dick about you, and I have always wondered—"

Seth throws out, "How I've meddled in your life?"

"Purdy much!" Jacob then asks, "Michelle?"

"Little bit?" Seth flashes pinched fingers for just a second, "Not pulling strings but clearing away...artifacts."

"Should I be thanking you for that?"

"You and Michelle is all you and Michelle! Well actually, it was all Michelle's doing." Seth then announces, "Where my future wife and I have a direct...unitized trajectory."

"She already knows?"

"Sure 'nuff does!"

"Who is she?"

Seth stares at him then, "It's funny how many sons get all jealous and shit of their father—'cause he can get a leg over on their mother when she's out of their puberty addled reach. Well, big daddy, that never was the case for me because, quite frankly, our Nicole was too much of a psychotropic wreck for my discernable palate."

Jacob laughs big with, "Thank you for clearing the air!"

"You're welcome!" And with Jacob pulling it together, Seth goes on to say, "But seriously...to stand in your shadow? For a normal son, of you specifically, that would be a soul crushing experience."

"Seriously!"

"You don't get it, father. Everyone, I mean every guy out there would give their right-nut and twenty years off the top of their life to be you for just one, three-day weekend!"

"Seriously."

"You..." He leans in with, "You are the super-daemonic sigma male of alpha-males. It is hysterical how they all fantasize being you! The women you've been with, the power they think you wield, cutting to the chase, in their eyes you are a walkin'-n-talkin' demigod."

Jacob deflates, "seriously."

"ooh, to stand in your shadow." Seth sits back while saying, "Rest be assured, father, that I'll be spending my entire life hidden by *my own* shadow, totally unencumbered by yours."

Jacob nods, "Hidden in plain sight."

Seth nods in like, "Exactly where I'm supposed to be."

"I wanted better for you."

"You don't get it, any other path would be fatally disastrous."

"Okay...okay." Jacob nods with understanding because this is telling him to drop it, where he then asks, "So, who is this lucky gal?"

Seth leers, "Really wanna know?"

"I wouldn't be asking!"

"A one...Lilith."

Jacob wonders, "de Prima?" Seth taps his nose with his finger so Jacob goes, "Holy shit, now *I'm* jealous! How does that happen?"

"Uuuu, I've known about her since I was five, and she found out about us last January!"

"She wants this?"

"Oh yea, after I showed her what's what, and it is surreal as hell to watch this come to fruition but, first, let's chat 'bout business!"

"Rho Tau?"

"How'd ya guess!"

Jacob huffs, "I dunno, intuition?"

Seth nods and, "Even with the best troops, kit and doctrine, defense has this weird tendency of becoming a losing proposition."

Jacob exhales big, "Mordor."

"Things...unseen are going to go ass-up for Montaña."

Jacob points out, "Who is a fantastic field commander!"

"That he is, but this doesn't change the fact that—"

Jacob throws out, "Doctrine will get us in a jam."

Seth chuckles, "Papa-J, is on a roll!"

"So, what's the plan?"

"There is no plan, there can't be one!" Seth then stresses, "Look, what I see is set in stone, an' even though it's all based upon potentiality for once I can't fiddle with that. So, what we're doin' here, *mi padre*..." He points to Jacob's lap, "Is rearranging those stones."

"It's confusing 'cause you...don't want me to shift resources."

"I know this gives you no comfort but you're at your best when you shoot from the hip so, no, there'll be no plan. All I can say is that you'll stick the landing an' turn it around—if you keep your eyes peeled."

117

pee towel

LCTN: 44-TAURUS (rho-Tauri)
 CORD: SAO-76485.6A (63pc from SOL)
 DATE: 2323ce-JULY-2-MONDAY
 TIME: 07:07zulu (local 04:40mst)

At 92au the Annex has rendered the dump zone on a jump to a measly 3-kilometer radii from the point of aim—which is kind of like punching the eye out of a fly at ten-thousand statute miles with an old Red Ryder BB-gun. It took the compiled data-points from millions of jumps to hone the projection algorithms, as well as the now third-gen WormTrac in service, to accurize their navigational system to this level of incomprehensible scifi sorcery. Then again, based upon the anchor point on a Trung, that being the RFID chip in the kiosk on deck-18 in the stack, one could argue that the dump zone is in actuality around 300 meters in radii, or maybe even less, however there is no way one could actually peg that since both the point of aim and the exit point post jump always end up inside said Trung, so 3-klicks stand as is!

With the new CXi navigational repository, SANDi, being added to the universal Sagittarius-A Navigational Databank, the Annex may very well be able to tighten that target radii considerably.

And yet, never to publish those results.

Anyway, the point of aim on a jump always...a/ways...dumps along the trailing edge of a celestial body, and where in deep space the transitional shift is an industry standard, 1,023 kilometers per second towards the gravity corridor that lies beyond the Zone of Avoidance, when the point of aim is in proximity to a star one has to also account for Rotational Drift and the Lateral Rise off the galactic orbital plane. If the target is a planet or its moon then they also have to work in those orbital mechanics ta boot!

So, the sixth planet that is spinning around Vása, *id est* pTau, is the gas giant, Nazgûl, and our target for today is its habitable moon, Arda, and if you haven't guessed it by now—the naming convention for

more to come...