

26

murder board

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

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

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

So, they voted to go along with it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bob asks, "That simple?"

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

Vossler protests, "By letting 'em in!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bob protests, "She's a kid!"

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

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

"No idea, never met her."

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

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

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

"Surprised?"

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

0110010-0110101-01100111-0110010-01100001-0110100

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

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

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

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

"Ya, sure."

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

Vossler laughs, "What was that?"

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

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

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

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

Jessica feigns embarrassment, "Oh! Okay."

"You're a funny kid."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The bad guys."

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

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

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

"You could say that."

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

"It depends on who you ask."

"You, chief, what do you think?"

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

Jessica interrupts, "Lofty ideals."

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

01000100-01100001-01100101-01101101-01101111-01101110

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

Vossler looks at Maria, "Surprisingly, no."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vossler chuckles, "Watch out for them asteroids."

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

Maria interjects, “Her true power is her anonymity.”

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

Vossler is surprised, “What! How does this happen?”

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

Vossler is startled, “I don’t want it!”

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

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

“Sayin’ I’m an asshole? Look in a mirror!”

Maria smiles, “I learned from the best.”

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

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

Maria then says, “Ya, and you don’t have to worry about him.”

“Flush ‘im out of an air-lock?”

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

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

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

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

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

Bob shrugs, "That pretty much covers it."

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

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

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

"Come again?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Today was full of surprises."

"Yup."

"What now?"

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

Bob himself nods, "We wait."

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