

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

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

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

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

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

Shit has got to hit the fan first.

Maria is trying to watch the game from the bleachers and is flanked by Jessica on one side and Nikki-8 on the other who is busy drawing Diego with the pencils given to her last May, and if it wasn't for this noob reporter, Daniel Opie, on his externship with the local news outlet, Maria could maybe enjoy the action, "Bottom line, like I asked, don't post my name. This is about Diego, okay? What you can do is drop these names in your article. I've already contacted both of them and they're waiting to hear from you."

Looking at the slip with contact information for Michal Pitney and Lucia Herrero, Opie yammers on, "For human interest stories like this showing support from the family is important and..." Looking up Opie asks, "How do you know these people?"

"If it helps, Lucia is my cousin and Michal and I go back a ways. Look, our family is one-thousand percent behind Diego but keep my name out. Don't draw the focus away from my child."

"Mam, I know what makes for a good article."

"You're like what, twelve?" Maria leans forward and gestures for him to lean in, "Listen up, Danny Boy, from Brigham Young like your shirt says, right?" Opie nods yes, "If you cross me your editor is gonna send you packin' back to BYU. Your very first go-pro article, fresh outta collage, should not get your ass fired! Follow?"

"You're with the SA? They warned us about you."

"The threads didn't clue you in?" Maria sits back with a huff, "Okay, Wonderbread, I'm just a little cog, an itty-bitty curmudgeon in that SA they warned you about, but one you don't wanna fuck with."

"Okay, point made, but I do have one last question." Maria motions for him to spit it out, "I get this weird vibe. Everyone says they're supportive of Sian, but on a sunny day like today they act like there's this gloomy-dark cloud overhead. I don't get it?"

Maria glances at Jessica and asks Opie, "Sian?"

He grimaces, "Oh, my bad, sorry."

Jessica spells it out, "As in S-I-A-N?"

"Ya, the Welsh spelling. She wanted it to be a surprise."

"Oh, we're surprised, alright!" Maria then throws her hands out for Opie not to worry, "I'm glad that slipped out, so we'll act surprised like everybody else when your article is posted."

Opie is a little nervous, "Is this bad?"

"Let's say there were different expectations." Maria then nods, "As for your question, ever since Diego was little everyone thought that *he* had a shot at the Majors."

“Only a handful of women have made it to the Majors.”

“That’s right, everyone was hoping for Diego to represent. It’s that expectation thingy, ya know. With this metamorphosis that kinda puts a damper on all their enthusiasm.”

“Was that your expectation?”

“The family and I are rooting for Diego to do what Diego needs to do for Diego. Everything else, all other hopes, dreams or wishful thinking can go to hell. Notice I didn’t say *everyone else*, but either way don’t quote me on that.”

The batter grounds to second for a double play as Opie says, “Okay, Ms. Ramirez, I think we’re done here then.”

“Maybe your camera gal should stay and take extra video.”

“They’re walking her, we have enough footage of that.”

“She’s gettin’ pissed. I think she’s gonna pull a fast one.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, I’m a little rusty on baseball, but isn’t getting walked a good thing?”

Watching Diego toss her fielders glove in the dugout and look for her batting glove, Maria shakes her head, “Not if you’re ten.”

As Opie wanders off to shoot, Nicole steps up with Seth and bags of food for everyone. Passing them out she hands a chili-cheese fry to Nikki who glances at Nicole with this puzzled look and then looks down with her hand covering her eyes that are tearing up.

Noticing this, Nicole sets Seth down with his fries and asks, “What’s the matter, Hon?”

Nikki blurts out, “I don’t know? You asked everybody what they wanted and I didn’t say anything, and you come back and bring me what I really wanted. I don’t understand! I push your and Marshal Ramirez’s buttons at every turn and it’s this that confuses me.”

“You wanted them, right?”

“That’s the point! It’s these little expressions of generosity that confuse me. I don’t get it?”

Overhearing, Maria weighs in, “You’re a kid, d’uh!”

Nicole touches her shoulder, “You’re the closest thing I have to actual blood and we shouldn’t be at odds with each other but we are. So, excuse me for giving a shit.”

Maria waves Nicole off who kisses Nikki on top of the head and goes to sit with Seth as Maria, trying to figure out what to say, looks to Jessica and nets, <“You see this coming?”>

Jessica nods, <"Yep, Nikki's been unraveling a bit, but I didn't think she was gonna snap this soon.">

At first they impressed two or three of the Nikki clones in all their family gatherings and social events thinking it was going to have a positive affect on the whole. This meticulous effort of inclusion was to give the 'collective her' a sense of belonging and chip away at the memories—the horrors of her first eight years, or sixteen for the Beta pair. The hope being they can tame the monster inside and let her off the leash, but the problem Maria has been faced with is losing her objectivity and becoming attached to them which she has. Where Nicole is a kindred spirit, like a sister, Maria has resigned herself to the role of being a mother figure to Fifty-Two.

Maria asks, <"You were going to share this when?">

In wide-eyed repartee, Jessica smiles, <"When your plate was not so full?">

Maria sighs and puts an arm around Nikki, "Babe, the rage you felt when you first came here was, wow, smothering to be around. You didn't have a childhood. What you had were people who fed you and watered you and fucked you over and over and over and I can't fix that. I can't make that hurt go away but I will say this...I really wish our relationship was one of nurturing instead of adversarial."

Nikki's voice shudders, "I think you may get your wish."

"Is this you talking or the collective you?"

"Both."

Absorbing this, Maria frowns, "Talk about a turn of events!"

Nikki apologizes, "I know this is a bad day for you."

"Ya think!" Maria smiles and gives her a little warm squeeze, "I need you to pull it together until the dust settles after today. You do have Jessie to go to if you need to talk."

"Jessie's been nice lately."

"Well, what the hell got into her!"

Nikki snorts a chuckle, "Ya, who'duv thought that possible?"

Maria points to the drawing, "By the way, this is really good but don'cha think you got Diego's butt a bit too skinny, here?"

"She's ten. All ten year olds have skinny butts!"

Jessica nets to Maria, <"We got ourselves a butterfly.">

Maria again squeezes Nikki who rests her head on her shoulder for just a second, <"Let's say I'm holding my breath.">

Just then Diego steps up, "Hey mom!" She leans over Nikki and gives Maria a kiss, "You seem preoccupied?"

"Just a tad."

"Making the world a safer place."

Maria avoids responding to that, "So, if you don't mind me asking, how'd the interview go?"

Looking at the drawing, Diego says, "I think it went well, and if it wasn't for this pitcher walking me they'd get better video."

"What do you think of their pitcher, Kim Jhang is it?"

"Ya, little slant-eyed fucker is good."

Maria calls her on that, "Watch your mouth!"

"Okay...the little Korean fucker is good."

Jessie, Nikki and Nicole all start cracking up as Maria just shakes her head, "Does he have a weakness, ya think?"

"Ya." Diego turns her head away and with a *fizz* she spits a thin stream from between her front teeth, "He throws like a girl."

"Hu? He's one of the best pitchers I've ever seen!"

"When pitching he's nuts on, but when he's just throwing he throws like a girl. The two times he walked me he threw meat-balls high—just outside the strike zone. Big fat lazy meat-balls."

The first batter just hit and gets on second base so Maria asks, "Waddya gonna do?"

"I ain't gonna walk." And as Diego trots off to get on deck she turns around and says, "Hey, Nikki, love the picture, it looks great but you drew me with a scrawny ass!"

Nikki looks up at Maria, "No-no-no-no!"

Maria smiles and make a curving motion with her hand, "Round it off ju-ju-just a hair!"

With Nikki rolling her eyes and setting to work to give Diego a hairs-breath more plumpness to her hip, Maria realizes that this day is a perfect day. With the second batter striking out here in the bottom of the inning, Maria has lost all track of time which is what she wanted. It's now Diego's turn at bat, or in this case walk. Diego usually warms up on the deck before batting, but she didn't this time around because with a guy on second it's obvious that they're going to walk her again. Even the opposing players know it and, instead of getting set and ready to spring into action, they just stand there waiting for the pitcher and catcher to go through the motions.

After two balls Diego points the bat to right field which is good for a laugh because they are intentionally walking her. She can't hit a wide pitch from inside the batter's box but Diego has never been known to accept limitations or stick with convention.

Jessica reaches around Maria and nudges Nikki with her fingers who looks up as Jessica says, "She's gonna do it!"

Just then the pitch is thrown, predictably wide and high, and as it starts to drop Diego leans forward and pushes off hard with her toes—taking a swing at the ball while in midair and vaulting it over the first baseman's head with a sharp crack.

Diego hits the dirt and is up and scrambling for first base before the outfield reacts. The time it took for the right fielder to get the ball the base runner from second was already rounding third for home, and instead of throwing it to second to cut Diego off he threw it home where it was two seconds too late to stop the run. Diego ended up on second base for that effort.

The coach for the other team shouts, "What was that!"

The umpire knows what he's talking about, "Her feet did *not* touch the ground, so it's good!"

He shouts back, "What! Waddya mean? That's un-sportsman like conduct! We were walking her!"

"What's un-sportsman like is your team taking advantage of a technicality and walking her incessantly..."

As the argument heats up Diego shrugs and slowly meanders over to third base where she stops, and when the other coach sees her there he flips, "Why is she on third now? Why is she stealing a base!"

"Can it or I'll eject you from the game!" The umpire turns to Diego and asks with his hands on his hips, "Why did you advance?"

Diego says matter of fact, "Aaah, you didn't call time?"

Grimacing to keep from laughing he asks, "That means you stole a base. Do you have anything to say before I call you out?"

"Well..." Diego then flicks her mustang like ponytail and says, "That base stealing rule was made to prevent me from injuring myself, but what I did was simply *walk* over to third base and, the way I see it, I advanced to third within the spirit of that rule."

"Let me guess, your mother or father is a lawyer, right?" With Diego nodding yes the umpire shouts, "Play ball!"

With the next batter coming up the kid covering third base turns to Diego, "Well, little miss clean-up got the RBI. You're the shit!"

Knowing what's coming up Jessica puts her arm around Maria and gives her a quick hug. Patting Jessica on the knee she looks up in time to see the next player strike out. Fighting the emotions, her eyes tear up as the children play—oblivious to what's looming over the near horizon. Maria knows she and Nicole are being watched and they both need to react as if they were caught off-guard.

Maria can feel that it's close and as the seconds tick away she mumbles to herself a passage she remembers from catechism, "Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and...tear you to pieces."

Without turning back Jessica asks, "Wha'?"

Maria composes herself, "Nothing, it's nothing."

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Between the Pleiades and the Hyades is a partition of systems that were hotly contested during the last go round. By treaty the Annex has continued to patrol these systems and, much to the dismay of the Co-op, those systems were thrilled with this arrangement. Also per the treaty for twenty-seven of the busiest ones the Co-op has been maintaining a space station in geocentric orbit around the primary inhabited planet or moon as a weigh point for shipping and trading.

What few people know is that on each station a whole platoon of Security Services personnel have been on hand to track and report on the movements of the Annex and to constantly maintain a targeting solution on all their battle platforms in orbit. As it is the magic number is seven, and the second the Command and Control center in New Brisbane has a clear fix on seven of the platforms the go-code will be transmitted.

Khumalo has the teams conducting at least one surprise drill a day. During an armed conflict they know they have anywhere from four to twelve seconds to respond to an SA platform coming out of a dash or a jump and racing out again, but this is peacetime and they've since learned that they have a minimum of ninety seconds when that magical seventh ship appears.

Khumalo was getting ready to step out to lunch with the local Colonel overseeing this operation when at 11:37:43zulu they get two situational reports blowing into the command center alerting them that battle platforms just appeared at 69-Tau and HIP-19504, and follow up reports indicating that those ships along with the SA platforms they were tracking at 95-Tau, HIP-21459, 67-Tau, 51-Tau, HIP-18735 and Hip 18170 all launched a combat drop consisting of six Razorbacks and eight fighters—a drill that has become all too commonplace.

Khumalo is absolutely thrilled to death because even with him and the Colonel standing there the crew ignores them completely. They immediately confirm the count and transmit the go-code to release their Zodiac missiles inside fifteen seconds as they were drilled over and over to do. If all goes well it will take another six seconds for the command to 'launch the weapons' to reach the space stations and another twelve to fourteen for them to send the 50-megaton tipped missiles on their merry way.

In a post mission briefing Khumalo and the Colonel will go over the after action report with Hartcourt. From first appearance to launch they had a goal of fifty-five seconds, and with the daily drilling they were shaving many seconds off that clock. All but two of the missiles were shot at the thirty-nine second mark which far exceeded their expectations. The crews out at 95-Tau and HIP-21459 were clearly behind the curve at forty seconds.

Harcourt's only comment about that was, "Slackers."