

43

double-u eighty-eight

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Charles Washington, for the umpteenth bazillionth time, is on the net and watching the fiery streaks of MK-5 and MK-12a reentry vehicles burst through the clouds in clusters of ten and slam into the desert floor at the Yuma Proving Ground. This project is called Castle Dome but the devices are actually dropping smack dab in the middle of the Cibola Range at the site.

This is the second shipment from asteroid 433-Eros in as many months and the international community is up in arms over it. Not so much that they are dropping tons of gold and platinum from orbit in vehicles designed to carry nuclear warheads, no, nothing that petulantly infantile, they are pissed as Judy because they don't have a piece of that nutso-lucrative action.

The United States, the principal member of the consortium that holds dominion over the patents for the new FTL drive, is pleased as Punch that they will maintain that control for at least another eight years and three months. In fact, at that point they don't even have to share the technology if they don't want to because they simply don't, and the consortium as a whole has decided to license the tech only to the space agencies of the key members.

Which means in ninety-nine months the UK, Russia, France and China will be in competition as they say.

Castle Dome was Charles Washington's last hurrah and it is a huge success. It's been said that everything he touches has turned to gold and for once that's not an expressive adage. The United States has secretly squirreled reentry vehicles into orbit for themselves and their "competitors" and, working together to mine 433-Eros, here's the aurum-mana poetically dropping from the heavens.

The recovery teams just have to dig it out now.

Thinking of his new status, being that of a common consumer, Brigadier General, Charles Washington, USMC, Retired can't stand that last item on his new personal letterhead. *Id est*, retired.

Of the twelve and a half billion people on the Earth, only about 370 million or so actually hold a job. That's less than 3% of the people have a purpose other than collecting their weekly stipend and spending it as they see fit. Yes, the Earth has become a world of leisure and indulgence but the dirty little hidden-dark secret is that most people really don't like it. Most would rather junk the bots and hold down a real job but business is business and for business, business is good the way it is! Profits are in the stratosphere and nobody has a substantive reason to bitch about it so, as the CEOs say, 'Shut up and enjoy your stupidly overpriced latte on the cheap!'

Strange how capitalism can cater to the free market socialist abstract when it's only prices that are actually controlled. In a world where drawing a paycheck at a place like In-n-Out, which still employs actual humans to flip-burgers, makes them the envy of all. Go fig?

Go meat-bags, w00t!

Charles Washington happens to be a Brigadier General of all things. Charles Washington is an astronaut who walked on Mars of all places. Charles Washington had a hand in breaking the light barrier and this Charles Washington does not flip fucking burgers! And, if it wasn't for what's about to happen tomorrow, this very same Charles Washington would be thrilled to death to slap that meat on a grill if that was all there was to look forward to!

Packing for this trip, and packing lite, of all the wonderful objects and mementos from NASA and the Marine Corps that Charles has collected over the years it's his Kerbal Space Program actions figures that sort of meandered their way into his bag. He wasn't about to leave Jebediah and friends behind. No way in hell.

When stepping out on Mars, Jebediah here was with him.

"Personally, I prefer Valentina. She's hot." Said the voice.

Charles looks up and at the door is the young Secret Service agent, the one Claudia shags on a regular basis, who's going with them on the flight tomorrow. Which is fine by Charles because the kid started life as a Recon-Marine and they can connect.

Charles laughs as he hands him a small pistol sleeve, "Hey, Zach, since you'll be packing here's my Ruger we talked about."

Agent Zach opens the bag, pulls a Ruger 1911 out and clears it while going, "Wow, sir, ancient history here."

"You can use it as a club but I'd rather pull the trigger."

"May I speak freely, sir." Zach really didn't have to ask but Charles shakes his head *no* with a smile, so Zach says, "It'll put a motherfucker down!"

Just then Claudia Willoughby steps through the door, "Hey, Agent Smith, can you give me and the General a minute."

Zach says, "Yes, Madam President."

She snorts, "Ya, well, that's only for five more months."

Under his breath, Charles says, "Or eighteen hours."

On screen, with another batch of reentry vehicles streaking in Claudia says, "Oh, look, it's a double-u eighty-eight!"

Charles turns and gives her that *fuck you* look so she smiles, "Honestly, Chuck, I hate it when they get that shit wrong too."

"Only NPR got it right."

Claudia laughs, "That's gotta kill ya because you hate those tree-huggy fuckers."

"So do you."

"Ya, I always wanted to call an air-strike on 'em."

"You can still do that, ya know!"

Claudia rolls her eyes, "Ooooh, choices."

Chuck gestures towards the door, "That's your boy?"

Claudia slithers in close, "Looky here, Somalia Slew. You get to bring your pussy so I get to bring mine!"

"Oh, no problem here! I was going to say, good choice."

Claudia snarks, "I don't know if he swings that way, but—"

Charles shakes his head, "Let's not find out."

"I dunno..." Claudia shrugs with disappointment, "I'm always up for a good show. You've seen me and Rachel at it! Anyway, she's waiting for me in the hot tub so, duty calls!"

"And the first lady?"

"She's meeting us at Ironwood in the morning." Stepping out the door Claudia turns and nods, "Marriage of convenience, and now a separation for convenience. And even though I hate Dawn's fucking guts I have to say we had a good time of it." She then remembers, "Oh, ya! Almost forgot, the Russians get theirs when?"

"Kura Range, this Thursday."

Claudia slips out with, "Awesomeness! You did good, Chuck."

Thinking of the agents, knowing full well that Claudia and his Rachel making out is like watching super-hot twins going at it, Chuck mutters to himself as he zips his bag up, "Give 'em a good show!"

Charles steps out and runs into Jason Kay and Robert Graves in the kitchen, "Jason, you ready for launch?"

"Ready?" Jason smiles, "You're darned tootin' Star-man!"

Robert complains, "The only reason he's going back—"

Jason talks over him, "Dude, I got shit to do!"

Charles snorts, "Ya, his wife."

Robert nods, "Okay, tappin' that...there's somethin' to do."

Jason verbally twists the knife in, "Can't fault me there. bro. Those little gray shits are primo tail riders. Like, totally gnarlatious!"

Robert's nostrils flair as he thumbs back at Jacqui, from Delta Echo, in the family room surrounded by Secret Service agents who don't know what to do with her because she doesn't have any ID yet, "Okay, but do you have to leave that behind."

Jason sighs, "I know, Jacqui takes some getting used to."

Charles wonders, "What's your problem, she's...stunning."

Robert protests, "That may be, Chuck, but she's got typical French bitchaholic written all over her."

Jason assures him, "You two will hit it off...soon enough."

Robert rears his head back, "Please."

Charles laughs, "You'll find a mutual groove!" He then nods at Robert while talking to Jason, "I need to talk to our boy here."

Charles leads Robert to the one garage that nobody but Chuck and the boys ever go into. Before them is an old 2016 Viper ACR in virtually new condition. Called the 'last of the super-sticks' this was in error because the Corvette motored on with the manual option for quite some time, but nobody remembers and few people care.

Robert, in his odd position as Earth's sole contact with the Nefer Key, has enough wealth now that he could buy whole fleets of hyper-cars, but it's this ninety-two year old black on black Viper before him that is the only car he has ever drooled over. Over the years they've helped Charles tinker with it and polish it and both have driven it around the block a few times.

Charles hits the button to the garage door and says to Robert, "Get in. We're goin' for a drive."

Pulling out of the garage, Charles tells the Secret Service agent at the end of the driveway, "Back in an hour."

With a sporadic overcast, it's unusually cool today at 118° on the Fahrenheit scale. Still useful in the United States, 118 sounds way more dramatic when reporting on the weather rather than 47.7° on the Celsius scale which sounds kind of wimpy. In silence...that is, not talking while enveloped by the guttural roar of the V10 engine and the rowing of gears down to the loop 101. Jumping onto a freeway devoid of rush hour traffic, and heading eastbound then south after only a few kilometers, Charles then turns the AC on and closes the windows for a quick chat. The air conditioning helps cool the face, but the heat from the exhaust radiating from the floorboards is inescapable.

Chuck asks, "You on board, son?"

Robert reminds him, "Like I've said, and I'll say it again, I'm Switzerland here. I am neutral and will not take sides."

"I can count on that then."

"What's your angle, Chuck?" With evil eyes Robert asks, "Obviously you got CI-this and MI-that, or i-spy whatever riding your coattails. What do you want from me?"

"That you remain Switzerland."

"I don't get it?"

"Look, they got us over a barrel and my job is to level the playing field. Marcus is behind this."

"I figured as much." Robert then shares, "I'm all for an equilibrium between the two, but I have a job to do."

"I just want an assurance you will continue to do that job."

"You can count on that."

The windows open and they enjoy the wind blowing through the cab, and even though that wind is hot it tends to mitigate the heat cooking their respective hindquarters. Riding in a Viper, surrounded by all the noise and heat assaulting your senses, is the most viscerally old-school driving experience one could ever hope for.

With Charles exiting onto Power Road, and turning north to Robert's home at Red Mountain, Robert is a little confused by this heading but doesn't say anything until Charles pulls into his driveway and kills the engine, "What gives, Chuck?"

Charles nods, "Be Switzerland."

Robert shares his little tidbit of realization, "They think we're fish in a barrel. That's their one failing."

Charles asks, "Their overconfidence?"

Robert stares at him, "Arrogance, their arrogance."

Charles nods with approval. "Here, she's yours." He slaps the keys in Roberts hand and points to them, "You'll need to change out the fob battery, and the signed pink is in the glove box."

Referring to the personalized plate in the back of the Viper, Robert asks, "You're giving me TACGNOL?"

"I can't take it with me!"

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Ironwood, Arizona (AFE/AZFe) is the largest spaceport in the nation and yet it's the least busiest of all, and since its security is so tight it's also the bestest place ever for both military and government space-plane launches. Lying deep in the scrub of the high Sonoran desert, between Phoenix and Tucson, and so far removed from the public eye that if you were driving there you could miss the turn off at Picacho Peak if you simply blinked at the wrong time. Because the drive sucks most VIPs coming to Ironwood will grab a helicopter from Sky Harbor, Luke or Davis Monthan to catch a ride going up.

Today, Marine-1 and its escorts choppered their way down from the Carefree airport and landed outside the must-see lounge called the Pig Sanctuary which is a mind blow because they have cute as shit miniature pigs running freely about the place. Not being a commercial operation, and in spite of all the high tech littering the hangers and maintenance bays, the facilities have more the feel of some run down air force base converted to a Podunk regional airport with too many flannel shirted hayseeds running around.

Surrounded by fewer Secret Service agents than usual, President, Claudia Willoughby steps into the Pig Sanctuary and sees the First Lady, seated at the bar with a sour-apple martini in front of her, "Hey, Dawn, glad you could make it!"

Giving her a polite little hug, Claudia motions for the barkeep while Dawn spits contempt with a smile, "Three days and two nights at Chucky's Baller Boutique. Hell, I'm surprised to see you still walking."

"Well, glad to see you too!" Claudia smiles back, "But, do ya have to be a stone-coat bitch every time we get together?"

"I don't see anyone else around?" Dawn snarls, "Don't worry, I'll continue to be your arm candy until your lame duck dynasty is up."

"You still need me for that congressional seat."

"I know but, it's moments like these I cherish."

"Reminding me of the frigid cunt you are."

Dawns pouts slightly, "By all means, frigid to you!"

Claudia wants to stomp the living shit out of Dawn once and for all. This smoking mix of Cherokee and Scotts-Irish knew right out of the chute that politics was going to eat up their quality time, and Claudia felt so damned betrayed because Dawn was having affair after affair behind her back for decades. Staying together for public image had a positive twist because Claudia made up for that betrayal and made up for it in spades. So much so that Dawn actually reaps the sympathy vote from the in-the-know DC social circuit.

"Remember, bitch, we've got Reykjavik in October, Brussels in November and the Inauguration Ball in January. Tow the fucken' line and I'll get you your motherfucking seat."

Dawn leans in, "Let's get this trip over with."

Claudia reminds her, "Smiles!"

There are all-in-one spaceplanes that are the go-to systems nowadays, but this is the President going up to International Space Station Five before being handed off to the Enterprise. The spaceplane they were using is an ultra-reliable double redundancy system called the Delta-Dart. The first stage is an autonomous flying delta wing with the spaceplane orbiter riding on top. The idea here is to save fuel and use the Delta wing to get the Dart orbiter up high enough so that when it zooms up to space, and then ejects its external tank, it has pretty much a full load of fuel to play with.

It's been likened to wearing a condom over a condom but it is the President so they intend to take no chances.

The Delta-Dart heads due east and climbs to thirty-thousand feet over the White Sands Range in New Mexico. At that point it turns towards the south east, pulls its nose up to a steep forty degree angle and kick in the booster rockets.

The Delta releases the Dart orbiter at one-hundred thousand feet and the orbiter continues on its own power into space. At eighty miles altitude it drops its empty fuel tank and throttles back to coast for seven minutes until it initiates the insertion burn. If they don't do the burn on time the dart will then start to drop and with this trajectory, and no course corrections, it will drop way too steep and burn up on reentry. Like that's gonna happen...

With one minute to go until the insertion burn the telemetry from the ship goes totally haywire—and cuts out.

Houston flags the event at: 2108/08/08:19:28 zulu.

Minutes later people living on the islands of the Caribbean, from Havana to San Juan, watch as a spiraling streak of flame make its way high across the sky. When asked, believing it was a meteoroid burning up, all they could think of was...how beautiful.

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The Dart orbiter was piloted by Charles Washington. He's flown these a dozen times into space and it is second nature to him. There is really no need for a co-pilot because the pilot himself is considered superfluous. They're really just monitoring systems here.

Charles himself has been the only astronaut to actually fly the Dart orbiter manually in an emergency launch-abort-and-return to ground situation so, because of that, everybody felt that the President of the United States was in good hands.

Because Jason Kay is now a real pilot and studied the Dart flight systems he sat in the co-pilot seat. Claudia and Dawn were behind them, and Rachel and Agent Zach were in the far back seats. Because of the nature of this flight, the first sitting President to go into space, Houston wanted extra medical telemetry from all those on board so a special encoded patch was given to each passenger.

It was uneventful launching this designated Air Force One into space. Nobody really talked much and simply listened to Charles as he monitored the systems and called out maneuvers to Houston that were actually automatic and required no assistance from him.

At the throttle back they had to wait only twenty-seconds before there was a loud clanking sound from the hatch above.

With a sigh, the hatch opens out and Marcus, from the Delta Echo, sticks his head through, "You guys ready? Let's roll!"

In the zero-G all of them move fast with Claudia and Rachel going up through the hatch first and Agent Zach tossing their bags to Jason who pushes them on through. When all their luggage was clear, Agent Zach scrambles up next.

Looking at Dawn, still strapped in her seat and unconscious, Charles asks Jason, "She's out, right?"

Jason nods, "Star-dude, you know I slipped the Mickey in the patch. Bitch is in a coma that she's not coming out of."

"Let's go..." Charles motions for Jason to move, "*Poyekhali!*"

After they slip into the Nefer Key saucer that was attached to the Dart, Marcus closes the hatch, snaps closed their own double portal hatches and breaks the seal with a, "We're clear!"



Just then, Luc pops his head out from the deck above with a big grin, "Welcome aboard! Glad you could make it!"

Marcus advises, "Luc, plasma cannon is primed."

"We have..." Luc has to think about it, "A minute and a half before that scheduled burn. Unless you have any objections we'll take the shot now if you don't mind."

It was Claudia that says, "Please."

The Nefer Key's saucer pulls away and, as if from a sweep of the hand, a plasma burst punches a hole into the crew compartment of the Dart. The force of that shot pushes the ship into a steeper dive and with the escaping gas it starts to tumble.