

45

new year old

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both equally unagreeable results.

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

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

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

Anyway...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ignoring the cameras they also drag their heels for Monique.

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

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

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

And how ridiculous is that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My dad told me not to be obvious."

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

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

Jessica corrects her, "Except for Rufus."

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

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

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

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

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

stepped up, "Hey, guys!"

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

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

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

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

Cloé is confused, "Hu?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria cringes a little, "I know."

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

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

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

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

Jessica quips, “Guess everyone’s gettin’ some tonight.”

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

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

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

“Sorry ‘bout us puttin’ the break’s on your project.”

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

Glados speaks up, “In actuality, I’m a cybernetic.”

Jacob adds, “An AI brain in a human body.”

Jordon asks, “Is that legal?”

Glados nods, “It’s sorta fuzzy. I was grown, not harvested.”

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

Jacob sheepishly apologizes, “Sorry, we can’t talk about it.” Then to Diego, “Hey, Sian!”

“Arrakis...” Diego then snarls with, “You’re an asshole.”

Jacob shrugs, “It’s my job.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, physiologically, this body is fifteen."

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

"Oh! Seven months and eleven days."



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

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

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

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

“Physical therapy! Post-surgery cavity dilation, duh?”

Jacob asks, “I thought you were into girls?”

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

With Diego stepping away, Jacob realizes, “She likes you!”

Glados is astonished, “Sian is just like her mother.”

“Worse!” Jacob then mumbles, “Far worse.”

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

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

“Scott’s good...” Rutledge then remembers, “Vic!”

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

“Ah, well, word gets around fast.”

Nicole adds, “Originally, Scott was an Ashanti warrior.”

Victoria is amazed, “It’s an honor to meet you, Sir.”

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

“I would love to hear more—”

Maria interrupts, “Hate to be rude but business first.”

Diego playfully bumps into Victoria as Jessica says to her,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria agrees, "Yea, pretty much!"

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

Jacob also goes, "Ya, purdy much."

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

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

Jacob is surprised, "Really!"

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

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

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

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

Hence, the stylish conference rooms...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria asks, "He got greedy?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Explain."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Resources?"

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

"Overkill works for me!"

"That's the idea."

"Launch window?"

"Five minutes."

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

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

Jacob nods in agreement, "M'kay."

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

"Yea...we good!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It can wait."

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

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

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

"Exactly what we were worried about."

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

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

Maria wonders, "Is the lizard brain overpowering?"

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

"Like?"

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



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

“Coping mechanisms?”

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

“Like an animal, howling?”

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

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

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

“It’s honest.”

“It is unreasonable!”

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

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

It was Monique who made him a super star.

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

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

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

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

"I love the shit outta you!"

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

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

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

"I know!"

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

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

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

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

Victoria smiles, "You look great!"

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

Victoria smiles, "I plan to keep it."

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

"Cloé Khumalo."

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

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

"Humanities? Drama? Wha'?"

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

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

Cloé laughs, "You're an asshole!"

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

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

Diego says, "Mine was admin rights."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria chuckles, "Other priorities."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monique huffs, "Okay, deal."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You like 'im?"

"Just curious."

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

"You mean, he's very French."

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

"Like Americans, you work too hard."

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

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

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

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

The family members in-residence go first.

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

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

Jacob asks, "When am I ever right?"

Maria nods towards Monique, "Morticia Noir."

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

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

"And to think I was tapping that nightly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria laughs, "So...how?"

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

Maria starts to ask, "Does Monique—"

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

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

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

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

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

Maria is startled, "No shit!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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