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DATE: 2318ce-FEBRUARY-21-THURSDAY
TIME: 12:40zulu (local 35:53mst)

"My God, is that a sight..."

At the foot of the Spike, Jessica and Maria are looking out over the ocean past the Kilosphere and Orb-West, so Jessica turns to Maria and thumbs in the direction of the outdoor patio lounge by the cliffs, "Change of venue for my meeting!"

Maria thinks about it, "Why not?"

Operationally it may be past zulu-noon, but here on Sapphire it's almost midnight. On the Earth it can get impossibly dark without a moon reflecting sunlight back, but here there are so many stars you end up with a steady drizzle of lumens at night. That is until tomorrow morning when Kirin becomes an IAU accredited moon.

After eighty years of gravity tugs and massive bombs, Kirin, a free roaming rogue planet the size of Mercury, has been bumped and dragged into a crazy spirographic orbit around Sapphire. With one last cobalt-bluer device popping twelve hours from now, 20-gigatons at just the right altitude, should be the cushy right-cross that'll finally nudge it into a circular orbit out around 470,000 kilometers.

So far Kirin has stabilized Sapphire's axial wobble and brought desperately needed ocean tides as well as the now reasonable weather conditions. This nuke is expected to put Kirin in a position to ensure predictable tides and promote steady ocean currents because the next introduction of fauna from Earth will need it to thrive. If another shot is required to fine tune that orbit then they have a fifty-plus megaton warhead being offered by the Steel Annex, which would do nicely.

Maria, noticing Kirin starting to peek over the eastern horizon, gasps at the sight, "No, we are definitely doing this! Let's go."

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PFC5, Stiller, the head of the Steel Annex's legal division, code named Paper Cuts, lays it out, "The Hague threw the petition out because of lack of jurisdictional authority, so these shlemiels from Amnesty International filed downstairs in the proper venue. Now, to review, Article Seven, Part One, Subsection-E does apply directly to Fifty-Two as a current condition but it was ultimately quashed because, as the aggrieved party, she, as a collective, via one of the Beta pair, filed a brief in protest which started to unravel Amnesty's standing."

Bob asks, "If under Rome Statutes, wouldn't any statement by an aggrieved party be suspect?"

"If in protest, counter the petition, yes, it would automatically be considered suspect or submitted under duress, but Uno walked into the court with Cap and Eight, here, and filed it personally. Then, to top it off, she certified her protest under oath to the court, *ex parte*, without our input and, what caught the attention of the court is that she came in to do this on her way to work."

Bob then asks, "Why would that matter?"

"Got job? No cell? What imprisonment?" Stiller then points in the air, "She did verify that she is restricted to the planet, but she has complete liberty of movement on Sapphire." He then looks at Eight, "Found out from the judge, we golf together, that he would have kicked it to the curb for ya after you talked in chambers but, this being a Common Law house out here, he had to have you file a motion to quash and set that hearing. Now, if I may ask, for our edification, what exactly was said in chambers?"

Eight nods and smiles, "Attorney-client privilege."

"Why did I know you were going to say that? Hum, anyway, unlike the Beta pair you're not of-the-majority until July and your guardian ad litem, Marshal Ramirez, would like to know!"

She shrugs, "Well, sir, you will have to ask, Uno. It was her filing and Cap and I were there for moral support."

Stiller's eyes drill through her, "You drafted that brief."

Eight rolls her eyes and cringes, "Guilty?" She then leans towards Maria and says, "You've rubbed off on me and Cap. We both intend to go into law. I think I'm getting a hankering for torts."

Stiller asks, "I'm curious, what does Uno do for work?"

"She's an artisan Barista and a popular one."

"At least you have ambition."

"Ambition, well that's relative. Deuce, the second Beta, is in the middle of her fourth year of medical school. Peanuts, a cherub, wants to do porn! See, we all kind of want to do our own thing and share the love. From Deuce I know how to lasso a burst cerebral arteriole with a neuro-microbot, and from Uno I can steam up a caramel pumpkin-seed latte that will make you cream your shorts."

"At this point I wouldn't be surprised."

"For your edification, Mr. Stiller, the latte is harder to pull off."

"Like your brief." Stiller chuckles, "Kid, that was brilliantly played because it made a colossal mess of things."

Maria agrees, "It was like a circus clown car after that."

Stiller nods big as he looks at some papers, "No shit!"

Bob was curious, "Well, what happened?"

Stiller points to Eight, "Before her brief, an alphabet soup of organizations filed as friends of the court in support of Amnesty, but Colonel Ribot went to go have a chat with the UN-OHCHR and..." Stiller looks at Jacob, "Does your son know that it was his girlfriend who blew the whistle?"

Jacob is a little embarrassed, "No, he does not."

du Conde asks, "The DPKO intern? Doo-koo-zoo whatever?"

Jacob takes a stab at it, "Duku-zumu-remyi. Yea, her."

Bob goes, "Seriously?"

Maria adds, "She's a keeper! She got a guy in Rwanda to get a guy in the Ukraine to hack in so it wouldn't look like an inside job. He slithered in on a deep-net proxy and was untraceable. The news outlets shied away from it until Amnesty held a press conference."

Jacob asks, "If deep proxy how did they trace it?"

Maria nods, "Oh, yea, that...the US Government actually runs the dark net. Users think it's a cobweb torrent based interface but it's actually a three-acer server farm in Maryland."

"Nice!" Stiller continues, "To get her out of the DPKO we got the OHCHR to offer her a job she couldn't refuse, and everybody still thinks du Conde was the leak. Did you know about her, Abel?"

du Conde laughs in character, "No, I did not know it was her! We had a meeting with the High Commissioner and Colonel Ribot explained why they needed to shut the fuck up. It was glorious! She did not know her Peter was working on that mission and was squirming in her seat when Pete said he will, as he put it, kill the son-of-a-bitch that hacked them." du Conde asks Stiller, "Why the OHCHR?"

"It was either kill the leak or kill the leaker? I'm not opposed to whistle blowing but she's a busy body. With the High Commissioner she learned the whole truth about Fifty-Two and has to shut up and bow to management. The one concession you gave, three allowed off world at any given time, which we already do, helped a lot."

Jacob says, "Duku's intentions were good."

Bob asks, "He still seeing her?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know we know and I do like her."

Eight shrugs, "Lucky Duck, Pete's a superb lay." They all look at her with a stunned silence so she says, "It was once! With Uno, four years ago when they had one too many. It was intentional on our part because we were curious. From our perspective it's a non-issue but...he is a credit to his gender. A repeat performance would be in order yet he says I look too much like his sister. Oh well, my loss."

Jessica nods yes when Maria asks, "You knew about this?"

Stiller rubs his eyes, "Okay, we never heard that. It was only one time so it shouldn't be problematic...God, I hate that word!" He looks at Bob and, "So, the High Commissioner withdrew their brief and got everyone else to withdraw. They all then filed in support of the quash—which is unheard of. Even the Human Rights Watch withdrew." He then looks at Eight, "Why did you do that?"

Eight shrugs, "I, we, made a deal with Marshal Ramirez and we stick to our word. We also see the Annex as the moral high-ground and in that you gained our loyalty. It was the least I could do."

"New mindset? Now that you're out of the shadows?"

"No, healthier outlook. I do apologize being such a bother."

du Conde speaks for all, "*Ma petite cinquante deux*, in our endeavors all roads wind back to you, but a bother it is not."

Stiller nods in agreement, "Well, if this outlook continues, when this conflict is over I'll see to it that you go to the law school of your choice. Now for the real issue. Abel, the floor is yours."

du Conde picks up, "The question 'round the water cooler at the Security Council in the last week is 'who is Scarab?' See, they and the Co-op knew about Fifty-Two and Scarab, thinking maybe it was the tracking and kill-switch, cupcake525, but in the hacked data was a meeting attendance note that referred to Scarab in the first person. The Security Council is curious, yes, but with the Co-op, well..."

du Conde gestures to Maria who looks at Jessica and goes, "You've been outed. Your mother, Bill and Scott are outside so they might as well join us for the rest of this."

With Jacob stepping out to fetch the three, Jessica, elbows on the table, is rubbing both eyes while vacillating between screaming, crying or laughing, "Fuck me, this is surreal."

Maria asks through the net, <"You didn't see that coming?">

<"No...it said I'd be pleasantly surprised by the outcome. The Alter wouldn't elaborate and now I know why."> Jessica sits up and, <"Annoying little fucker, hu?">

<"It didn't elaborate for a reason. Let it go.">

As everyone enters, Nicole, now the DFM for the Iron Maiden, notices her daughter and asks, "Honey, what are you doing here?"

Jessica looks up with a nervous smile, "Remember all those times you bitched at me to do something with my life?"

"Yea, but why are you here?"

Bob speaks up, "Nicole, our Jessica, my granddaughter, has been working for us for...well, for quite some time in fact!"

Nicole looks at Jessica, "Doing what?"

Jessica winces, "Stuff?"

"Waddya mean, stuff?"

"Didn't have time for college, my plate was full kinda stuff?"

"Out with it!"

Maria asks, "You've heard about Scarab, right?"

Nicole shakes her head, "Scarab is a fable. A spook story."

Bob runs his fingers through his hair while saying, "Nicole, hon, it's not a spook story. Jessie is Scarab."

"You gotta be shitting me!" She turns to Jessica, "And why haven't you told me, hu? Why was this kept from me?"

Jessica quietly says, "You weren't supposed to know, d'uh!"

"Why am I finding out now? Who knew?"

Jessica sheepishly says, "Everyone here but you?"

"So why the fuck now!"

Bob informs her, "Hon, the Co-op just found out about her."

Nicole shouts, "Then it ends now! She's no longer doin' it!"

Jessica counters with, "Mom, it's my choice."

Nicole stares at her and, "That's where I get those strange, God-damned dreams, hu? That's your doing!"

Jessica squirms a bit saying, "Maybe?"

"You little shit."

"Mom, you never talk, but when you do you don't shut up!"

"Wait a minute!" Jacob, understanding the bigger picture, points at her, "Wait a frickin minute! That means you drop her! That means you take control and knock her out. Tell me I'm wrong?"

With Maria shaking her head, not expecting this, Jessica's heart sinks as she reads her father's mind and says, "Thirty-some."

Jacob smiles, "Thirty-some thirty, or thirty-some pushing forty? Which is it 'cause I'm kinda curious."

"Thirty...eight, best I can recollect."

"I thought you were just dicking with me while I was asleep?"

Jessica mouths the word, *sorry*.

Bob, seeing the shocked faces of Bill, Scott, du Conde, Stiller and Vossler, then noticing that both Eight and Glados have not reacted in like to the news, asks, "Maria, since obviously by their faces, Eight and Glados have known about this, who else knows that Jessica is a Puppet Master? We kinda need to know."

She sighs and, "Impetus."

"Why him?"

"We communicate through his daughter's and Jessica's social pages and I had to get him on board. They're connected and when either of us post to our girls pages, well, everyone sees it."

"That's really...smart!"

Everyone nods as Vossler says, "And in plain sight."

Maria breaths deep, and, "I know all ya'll are worried about Jessie's safety but Hartcourt has agreed that all the prohibitions on Fifty-Two apply to her without exception. He's been formally briefed that a hit on her would violate the ROEs, and would mean us launching Sherman's March on their ass..."

Sierra Mike Tau-V, code named Sherman's March, is the one contingency in Maria's Plan-B that Hartcourt is aware of that scares both him and his general staff. Like its operational namesake this plan targets Hyades infrastructure *id est* power, water, fuels, transportation and communication—distributed utilities being something the worlds outside the Hyades Cluster have not adopted and the Earth has been meticulously dismantling over the last century. The gravy train from chargeable services they've enjoyed now comes back to bite them in the ass because if Sherman's March were to be launched there are no

like targets in the Pleiades to counter-strike. Fifty-five thousand targets, twelve-hundred capital targets with an abbreviated list of three hundred on both 83-Tau and 54-Tau that would throw 80% of their population into a twenty-fourth century Dark Ages that could last for weeks—or years, depending on who wins in the end that is.

And this is just one of many options! There are other notable opportunities available in Plan-B for Maria, Scott and Bill to choose from with population centers being the last to go, but maybe a simple demonstration would get the right results? Anyway...

Maria drives the point home, "As long as everybody plays nice, and they don't fuck up, they'll avoid it. Now, to cut to the chase, Boxter would like to enlist help from Jessica and two clones."

The stirred reaction of *uh-uh*, *hell-no* and *no fucken way* from everybody was expected, so Maria puts her hand out to quiet them down, "Hear me out, Boxter's end game is to ultimately unify Security Services with us, under the SA banner, to give his forces legitimacy. He thinks he has us painted in a corner so he wants to establish a working relationship with us as soon as possible. Now, you know he knows he's been compromised by Fifty-Two and Scarab does not change that, no surprise there, but they have reports that some people in their government and corporate helm may be looking to fire up the Geisha Huts again and we want to stamp it out."

Nicole asks, with some surprise, "We? Ah, are you fucking kidding me! What makes you think you can trust Hartcourt, hu? What shit have you been smoking?"

Jessica speaks up, "Mother, none of you really understand who we're dealing with. Hartcourt and Maria are peas in a pod. They both operate on incorruptible moral principle and, to be clear, principals that require no moral juggling act or mental gymnastics. They both have zero doubt about what they are doing."

Nicole looks at Eight who agrees, "Peas in a pod!"

Maria continues, "The current threat comes from both Tillsdale and Lebedev and Box has got them both on a tight leash. We know Tillsdale wants to wipe out the FIS and the SA, but he is forced to short-stroke Lebedev who wants to take over the FIS, rub us out, then extricate the Hyades from the United Nations and, if you haven't figured it out, this was why he was agreeable to the TPZ treaty."

Nicole asks, "How do you know about Hartcourt's end game?"

Eight speaks up, "We're conversational now."

Maria adds, "He didn't say it, verbalize it specifically, but he did allude to it through his...connections with Eight."

"He delights in our interactions."

With open-mouth astonishment, Nicole looks at each of the shocked faces around the table, with Bob saying, "Yea, hon, that's a mind screw, ain't it!"

Nicole looks at Bob, "You're okay with this?"

Bob shrugs, "No, not really, but it's not my call."

Maria throws out, "Nicole, Boxtter is looking to ally with us and ultimately go against the Co-op. He hasn't said it exactly but I know he'll bring it up and, trust me, it's tempting. To drop everything and *tack hard to lee*, as Bob would say, is very tempting."

Nicole is about to shout but her mouth is clamped shut so, startled by this she looks a Jessica who says, "Listen to her, okay?"

Actually witnessing Jessica do this to her mother surprises everybody so as they start to react, Jessica clamps their mouths shut too, "Guys, this is like a parlor trick for me, okay. Listen to Maria, okay? I can take care of myself."

Maria blinks her eyes with surprise and, "I should bring you to my meetings more often!"

"You'll get shit done for once."

As Jessica releases all of them Maria nods, "The short story, our end game...Boxtter is gonna get what he wants it's just that he'll get it on our terms. We'll give 'em the Pleiades and that'll pull resources away from Polaris according to plan. We stick to the plan."

Nicole, rubbing her jaw, asks, "Didn't your Impetus report that this is a possibility, what we're doing? Didn't he spell it out?"

"Yea, an' they're not listening. According to plan."

Jacob nods, "This is all very Machiavellian of you."

"I wouldn't know. Never read 'im." Maria then turns to Nicole, "So, to assure you, they won't touch the girls at all, especially in the four neutral territories, and think of the good it will do?"

Nicole, now deflated, looks at Jessica, "There's no talking you out of this, is there?"

Jessica and Eight both say, "No."

Then Eight adds, "There's more children out there. I can feel them. I be damned if I won't do anything."

Nicole asks Jessica, "You really want to do this?"

Jessica smiles, "I think Box and I will hit it off."

"Well, fuck me."

Bob adds, "Nicole, hon, ya, Hartcourt may be an evil bastard but he's the reason we're not in a total war. Something Tillsdale and the Co-op have been pushing hard for."

"They're that stupid?"

"Oh, ya. They are."

Maria states the obvious, "Just so ya guys know, I can knock out all three-hundred of the priority targets with just one—just one platform, and Box knows it. The others are stupid enough to actually believe their layered defenses can protect land-locked targets."

With the dead pause that followed, Bob asks, "Scott and Bill, we ready for next Thursday?"

Scott goes, "As we'll ever be. Vacuum Sandwich Zero-Three has indicated that we already have a squad of three cruisers lying in wait. Security Services is gonna bite."

"Bill, how is Cricket?"

Bill nods, "She's doing well. It's gonna be a girl."

Everybody cheers, so Bob adds, "It's imperative that she not know anything we talked about today except the peace talk crap we're gonna talk about now so, Eight, Glados, Jessica, Maria, thank you for..." Bob shakes his head while looking at his granddaughter, "Hell, I'm still digesting this. A Puppet Master? Jesus!"

Jessica has come around and gives Bob a hug, "Sorry *tito*."

"No! That's okay." Bob suddenly realizes, "Now that I think about it...we, your mother and I, don't have to worry 'bout you."

Bob nods yes as Jessica says, "Just stay off the radar."

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Water planets are surprisingly common but they usually do not remain in a liquid state. Planets like Sapphire and Earth are rare, ones like Europa and Led Myach are common enough as moons with solid ice balls such as Cocytus being the norm. Kirin was once a liquid water planet but now it's an arid-rocky lump and no one can figure out why because it's not from around these parts. When first captured and jockeyed into a screwy-looping orbital track around Sapphire it was an iron silicate core covered with a layer of calcified salts making it appear bright white. After popping over sixty cobalt-bluer bombs, the tortured face of this dead rock has been scoured clean leaving only deposits in a massive network of fissures and rifts that encircle and crisscross the

surface. From one angle it looks like an Oreo Cookie, and from another it looks like a huge 'Z' slashed across it. The most popular quarter looks like a zebra's triangular pattern while waxing, and when the light shifts it looks like a dragon's head while waning, and none of this was expected when they started setting off the bombs. To preserve these esthetics it's been the Oreo Cookie side that has taken on the brunt of the nukes and it's believed that today's shot will wipe out the streak that provides the creamy center. With that deep crack running across the charcoal-black surface, and it's single pristine impact crater, when this side turns towards Sapphire it will mimic the Mimas 'Death Star' look but it will be much cleaner by comparison.

Kirin is five days from reaching its apogee but the cobalt-bluer bomb will pop eleven hours from now. When it does it will push the planetoid sideways and give it a slight speed boost which is expected to put it in a predictably stable orbit—give or take a couple thousand kilometers. In the end they are calculating about twenty-six lunar months per Sapphire year which is almost exactly 130 Earth weeks, or five earth weeks per Kirin lunar month. The Sapphire week-day-month combos are never going to synch up to Kirin's in anyone's lifetime, and if they do it will be millions of years in the future and, from the look of things, far past anyone giving a shit.

Then to consider that the residents only have about 800,000 years of this temperate climate when Electra will begin to crank the heat up and, like Earth, the oceans will start to boil away less than two million years from now.

Earth has maybe a billion-five to go before the boil.

Jessica ordered a pair of Murder Boards for her and Maria. Through Maria she acquired a mature taste for alcohol over the sweet and fruity cocktails preferred by the vast majority of young women, as well as acquiring an appreciation for this bitter stout-ale and dark-rum boilermaker concoction. When she finally turned twenty-one Nicole and Maria took her to the Kilosphere for her first 'legal' drink and run at the casino and both were proud that her first drink was a Murder Board and she didn't try to clean the house out when she could have easily.

With Jessica and Maria both dropping their shots of rum into pints of stout, Maria asks, "Kinda blindsided today, hu?"

Jessica rolls her eyes, "Yea and no. Little fucker surprised me though, but for you he asks me to be direct."

"Let's hear what the Alter has to say before I get pissed and go beat it outta him straight up."

"Keep the forty-seven in service."

"Seriously?"

"The Thunderbolt is still, hands down, the top fighter by far and, yea, the Djinn is a pain in the ass, but this new plan to replace all the forty-sevens with the new seventy-four is short sighted."

Maria huffs, saying, "This is an odd one. I was about to pull my hair and shout 'what the fuck do you know' but...you got my attention."

"Look, the sixty-one you were developing was gorgeous!" Jessica takes a sip and, "Way over-engineered, dumb-as-fuck overkill gorgeous. When the Co-op came out with the Djinn you dropped it like a hot-potato and went with Paleo's idea for the seventy-four and, one has to admit, it is a brilliant design he pulled out of his ass."

"With sixty percent of the components from the forty-seven, you could say we're committed to it."

"No doubt! Fifteen months from concept to production is unheard of but your original plan for it to complement the forty-seven was the right idea. Stick to the original plan."

"The new plan is in line with what we got goin' on now—"

Jessica jumps on that, "Now, being the operative word. See, if you mothball the forty-seven you'll be in a mad scramble to get it back into service before this is all over. The Alter suggests you to look into integrating the wings and sling-shot MDDSH from the sixty-one into a new block of forty-sevens. He says it'll knock your socks off and allow you to off-load the Dip."

Maria protests, "We just built three-hundred of those things! We're about to deploy them!"

"And nobody wants to fly 'em!" Jessica smiles slightly as Maria's lips curl, not knowing what to say, "The Dip has too specific of a mission for our pilots to want to fly it. When the time comes trade them to the PADF for a bigger footprint on the church key. They'll gladly eat your ass out to get their hands on 'em."

"They love the three-eighty, but they also want interceptors."

"Your forty-sevens with the sixty-one wings and the butterfly update will give you Mach-eight at a thousand millibars."

Maria is about to choke on her drink, "Seriously?"

"Yea, and the new dash will give you five-fold jump capability. You'll want those long legs after this is over. You'll need those legs. The seventy-four will replace the forty-seven, yes, but the forty-seven will become a completely different beast. You'll be able to retrofit the wings and butterflies to the bisE blocks and pinch the Dips."

Maria thinks, "And we won't get push back from our pilots."

"Funny you should say that!" Jessica takes a sip and then, "My father, he'll be vocally hostile to the baby-bolt but, after Polaris, you won't be able to get his ass out of the thing." Jessica then shifts gears with, "Now, the second item on today's laundry list is a little message the Alter wanted me to convey to you—what Bob and Michal decide to do to be proactive you need to support them."

Maria rears her head, "That's a given!"

"No, it's not, but now it is."

Maria thinks about it, "I don't like the sound of this."

Jessica, with tight lips, "That's all I can say."

"Have you two considered all—"

Jessica cuts her off, "All the possible alternatives? Endlessly."

"Ask no questions and you'll tell me no lies." Maria then realizes Nicole is in charge of their security, "What about your mom?"

Jessica puts her hand up to silence Maria, looks away for a second then turns back while saying, "Let it go."

Maria's shoulders sag, realizing the negative outcomes, then asks, "So, given yet another pebble to flick and a cryptic fucked up fortune cookie. When am I gonna get a brick to throw, hu?"

"Funny you should ask because today I got a brick for ya!"

"Really?" Maria perks up, "It took four God-damned years!"

"I asked Mooch and Snoopy to join us and you need to make a decision before they get here and...that's in about two minutes."

Maria almost snarls, "You're giving me no wiggle room."

"That's the idea. You need to think fast."

Maria huffs, "Okay, let's hear it."

"Mooch's demo you got comin' up before the first of the year, we need you to settle on a target of our choosing. Option-58."

"Okay, a little red-dwarf that's out of the way. Fair enough!"

"That's on paper, your real target needs to be 58-Orion."

Maria's mouth drops open, astonished, "Okay, wouldn't that be a little excessive? You realize that would require a full-on test?"

"It would be the test, and yes, we know what we're asking."

Maria nods big, "Enlighten me, why?"

"You need to go big!" Jessica twists her glass of ale around, looking at the shot glass clanking around in it, and, "A universal truth about gray-matter is that they don' understand subtlety. Busting off a whole gram on a red dwarf, even though it is twice their capability, is not going to have the desired effect. Their response will be to counter it and build up. You need to slap 'em down by making the demo overwhelming." She takes a little sip, "And while you're at it, spill your guts about the other four stations with identical guns and, also, don't hold back about the gun conversions on our new platforms."

"That's showing all our cards!"

"That's the idea! Look, if you pop that red dwarf everybody is going to be asking about it and when, not if, but when it gets out how it got zapped you will not hear the end of it."

"We've been wondering about that?"

"Alpha-Orion is gonna blow. It's just that some think it'll be maybe a thousand years, or fifty-five hundred years, or a million years or it could blow tomorrow for all we know!"

"We know the iron content."

"Ah, helioseismology, *not* an exact science. We really don't know shit except that it going boom is inevitable!" Jessica smiles, "Now, if you invite everyone for the shot, the core Security Council, the FIS, and I would suggest you sneak Hartcourt to the demo."

"Boxter?"

"He knows about the stations and, trust me, it's better for us if he sees this instead of hearing about it."

"The Co-op would want to build one."

"Not after you give everyone your thoughts on a post-war 'sharing of ideas.' They'll all be happy to sweep what they just saw under the rug. Even Box."

"What about the Gray's after the shot?"

"They will ask for terms."

"We're not at war."

"In their minds we always have been! Offer them a full-equal partnership. Ask them to join the FIS. The big reveal on that will be one of mutual friendship and kumbaya and keep it quiet about them threatening to stomp our shit up for the last two centuries." With Maria thinking about it, Jessica adds. "We've surpassed them by leaps and bounds. I don't think they'd be opposed to teaming up?"

Maria then wonders, "Boxter?"

"I can't say anything, just make sure he shows up for it."

Jessica waves to Mooch and Snoopy, who are approaching them, while Maria asks, "Who knows 'bout this targeting change?"

"Right now you, me and Glados. We add Mooch and Snoopy and that's it until we take the shot." Jessica then blinks her eyes and, "Oh, by the way, even though Que Ball is set to evac at a moment's notice that will be taken care of long before the demo."

"Wanna fill me in?"

"Nope! Just sit back and watch the fireworks."

Mooch and Snoopy give joyful whistles and clicks as they trot up to Jessica who has already stood and sounds off with three clicks in response. Both giving Jessica huge hugs, they turn and nod to Maria.

Maria motions for them to have a seat, "Sergeant Snoop, Sergeant Mooch, how are ya? Glad you could make it!"

Mooch nods his head up and down slightly, "Doing good, Marshal. Everything is on schedule!"

Jessica asks Snoopy, "Uncle Snoop, it's been forever! I hear you've been farmed out for the Kirin shot?"

Snoopy is obviously proud of his work, "For the last three, yes. Tomorrows shot is my baby!"

Jessica knows Snoopy is excited about this event so she asks, "Lensing? I haven't been keeping up on things."

Maria adds, "Jessie has been jumping through hoops for us."

Snoopy grins, "We're using a shit load of nukes for this one. The comet, Everlast, it'll be popping up in about an hour, we have six nukes dug deep inside, from twenty to four-hundred and fifty kilotons, and sixty-eight, five-megaton in a ring around the circumference."

Jessica asks, "The cobalt?"

"Ah, Jinx and Gwascious are on the drive team, with Kiel and Glados, they'll be piloting it up to five clicks above the surface for the event. The imbedded bombs go off first to shatter the interior, the ring goes off three-microseconds later to coral the debris."

"That's the lensing?"

"Exactly! Then the cobalt goes off a millisecond after that!"

"Some are calling it the upper-cut, and others a right-cross."

Snoopy shrugs, "Depends on your orientation. Either way, Everlast lives up to its name!"

Maria smirks, "Goodbye Oreo cookie, hello Death Star!"

Snoopy snorts, "Yea, as you say, purdy much!"

With the waitress dropping off beakers of wine for Mooch and Snoopy, Mooch asks Maria, "I was wondering, nothing personal Jessie, but if this is a business meeting...why is Jessie here?"

Snoopy adds, "We were wondering why she called it?"

"Ah, about that." Maria nods and takes a sip of her drink, "Jessie is not part of the Annex, yes, but she does intel for us. What she does keeps her outside of our organization."

Mooch and Snoopy look at each other, shrug, and Mooch asks, "How much does she know?"

Jessica wonders, "What would you say, everything?"

Maria agrees, "Yea, you could say that." She then looks to the Xhemal and says, "In fact, she knows way more than I do."

Snoopy asks, "So, we can speak freely then?"

"I insist." Maria looks to Jessica, "Wanna fill `em in?"

Jessica takes a sip and smacks her lips and, "Well, guys, Marshal Ramirez and I have been talking and we've settled on a target for the up and coming demo."

Mooch rolls his eyes, "Finally!"

Maria points out, "It's not what ya think, Mooch. We need to have you kick it up a notch. In fact, we're gonna go big!"

With Mooch nodding, realizing there is a new target on the table, Jessica smiles, "You're gonna love this..."

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