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non compost mentis

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)  
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)  
DATE: 2119ce-APRIL-21-FRIDAY  
TIME: 13:03zulu (local 17:10mst)

The original developer, Squad, in their wildest dreams would not believe that their baby, *Kerbal Space Program*, has been around now for over a century and is still limping right along. The core app continues to generate revenue and it has been folded and spindled with mod after mod since the beginning. Even NASA and the ESA has gotten in on this by sponsoring a model of the solar system in exact detail with a library of real world boosters and physics and always with the understanding that Jebediah and his crew flew...

So, hats off to Wernher von Kerman they say!

Anyway, this was the game that inspired Charles Washington to want to be an astronaut since he was a little kid, and instead of going into science he opted for aviation, specifically US Naval Aviation. Going to collage on the government's tab was a smart idea, and opting to become a Marine aviator guaranteed him a seat on a fighter aircraft because by then most everyone was in the process of dumping fighters for robotic drones, but the Marine Corps would not hear of it.

Yes, Charles Washington was a shameless overachiever all for the one goal in mind and that was to open doors, and boy-howdy did they open for him. From his lower middle-class upbringing he worked his ass off to get his pilot's license for single prop by the time he was thirteen, double prop by fifteen, turboprop at sixteen and certification for two popular corporate jet airframes before his eighteenth birthday.

He was a shoe in for Annapolis, got the red carpet as an NFO, and after two tours of blowing shit up in the middle-east they begged the now, Major Washington, to become a test pilot, and when NASA announced they were looking to hire on people to pilot a new series of Lunar missions he didn't have to apply—they came gunning after him.

Point being, these two items came together swimmingly here on Imi when he modded the old NASA mod in KSP to reflect the two red dwarfs of apón-Pup and the orbital dynamics of the binary planets of Dolphin Reel, that being Sashi and Imi—and here the modeling of Pluto and Charon came in handy. Since day one on Imi, Charles was already anticipating what the Nefer Key would ask of him so when they posed the question, that being ‘if humans were to invade from Earth, what would it take to get his troops to Sashi?’ he had it all mapped out on KSP and ready to present to them.

Since it would take the Nefer Key’s big transport saucers all of twelve hours to do a turn around and get the troops back to Sashi, Charles showed how he could do that in half that time with the older sub-orbital shuttle transports they use on Imi. Luc was so impressed that Charles had his blessing to run with it, but what bothered Charles was the last question Luc asked in passing.

A question Charles already anticipated.

One thing at a time they say so, focusing on the project at hand, Charles was able to put that off to get this done, and here today we have Luc, Lilith, Marcus and Rachel in Charles’ office to review it all in detail now that it has been tested and proven viable.

Yesterday’s first manned live fire test was a shuttle-booster assembly consisting of four massive solid rockets to launch the shuttle into a direct rendezvous vector with Sashi. Once these boosters were spent on the ascent they were staged separated preceding the coasting phase, and when approaching Sashi an additional two breaking rockets would slow the shuttle to a dead stop over the planet. Surprisingly there was no need for air-breaking like on an orbital reentry, the shuttle simply dumped the spent rockets and dropped into a glide path without any heatshields or tiles.

They then went into the weeds going over glycol engines and fuels and ullage and pyrotechnics and maintenance schedules and after three hours Charles sits back, “So, that pretty much covers it.”

Luc thinks about it and smiles, “Well...I’m impressed!”

“Right now, with one launcher we can get a whole company on the deck and ready to fight anywhere on Sashi, inside six hours. We’re planning twelve of these launchers and we’ll be able to throw that many companies into the fight until you bring your saucers over for the rest of the troops.”

“All there is left to do is to implement it.”

With what Luc said, Rachel and Marcus look at each other, then at Luc with Marcus speaking up, “About that.”

Lilith rolls her eyes as Luc asks, "About what?"

Rachel says to Luc, "We already implemented it."

Luc is confused, "Hu?"

Charles actually enjoys the fact that he has Luc over a barrel by saying, "When you gave us the green light, well, we ran with it."

"You mean, ran with it like...you are starting to build them?"

Charles takes a deep breath and, "Kinda more like we built them, in the past tense. See, you already approved it so we went ahead and we now have eight of 'em live and ready to launch at a moment's notice. We are assembling the last four as we speak."

"Yesterday was only the second test, and you built them?"

"We knew it would all work with the first test."

Luc is visibly startled, "Well, I have to say I'm surprised that you took the initiative! We didn't see you building them."

"If you could see us putting them up then...well, out of sight out of mind." Charles' eyes drill into Luc's, "We're not like you, Luc. Once that ball is rolling there is no reason to stop, otherwise shit doesn't get done! Right now, right now we have eight companies ready at a moment's notice to come bail your ass out."

"Thank you, but—"

"This is what we thought you wanted, right?"

"Yes, but we didn't expect you to run away with it."

"You picked me 'cause I don't fiddle-fuck around."

"We were hoping to discuss other options."

Rachel points out, "Like what? Like you were going to give us your saucer tech? Like that was going to happen?"

Luc huffs a laugh, "Well, Rachel, ya got me there!"

Charles leans forward, "What other option would there be? Do you know why you green-lit this project when you did? It was because it was all low tech. Like, really ancient tech so you didn't feel threatened by it at all, but the problem facing us here is you didn't think this through!" Charles sits back again, "What you should have done was to park six of your saucers here and have your people drive them exclusively. See, that would've been the smart option when considering your mindset because now we have the ability to push a button on our own and that was not what you wanted, right?"

"We wanted...some control."

Rachel notes, "And that would have defeated the purpose of all this. If we can't launch on our own initiative then, if you are prevented from giving that go ahead, then we'd be stuck here."

Luc throws out, "We thought you'd incorporate a mechanism to bypass that authorization. Behind our backs of course."

Rachel adds, "And therein lies the problem, trust in parity."

Charles shrugs, "See, you trust us only as far as you think you have us under your control, and that is a significant problem. We know about your *Fâcherie S'arrêter*, or as Jason calls *fecale s'arrêter*, and hearing about that 'shit stopper' gun you rely upon gave us cause for pause."

Luc nods then asks, "It does the job. What's the code name?"

"Designation is Fox Sierra, we're calling it the Fly Swatter."

Luc looks at Lilith and they both nod with approval, so Luc looks back and, "That's so apropos, I like it!"

"We thought you'd like that!" Charles then shifts gears, "The funny thing is, and you're gonna love this, we know where it is, since you are riding around in it everywhere you go..." Luc gives a shocked look so Charles says, "Come on! Obviously it's Delta Echo, well the lower decks that nobody seems to be able to access. Everything else you fly is either a saucer, or a cylinder, or some spherical or elliptical blob of some kind. Delta Echo stands out like a sore thumb, and the best thing yet is that the weapon is now pretty much neutralized!"

"How's that? You can't access it."

"We don't need too, point being..." Charles pushes a button and on the screen behind him, running at 100x speed, multiple simulations run in sequence showing Delta Echo approaching Imi and the eight launchers from Imi blasting off for Sashi from the far side, "Don't ask for what you don't wanna know."

"You have a lot of sayings where you're from."

"Yea, and there's a reason for it. You asked the one question that I was hoping you would not ask, and behind me is the answer to that probing question because for us it was a game changer..."

Luc, watching the simulations run one after another, listens as Charles continues, "For your edification, your normal ships don't stand a chance against the shuttles. Sure, you got plasma cannons on board but they're utilitarian, short range and not military grade, so if you sic 'em on the transports, which are armed to the teeth and have a long reach, can you say bad plan? And your Fly Swatter needs, what, twenty to thirty minutes to spool up to take a shot, and you can't fly

and spool at the same time so that really puts the fuck to your options because the launchers are scattered. Oh yea, then to top that off the Fly Swatter, more likely than not, has a set convergence, that is you don't have a variable aperture so, my guess is that you have to be pretty close to take a shot. I'd say from twenty to fifty thousand clicks or maybe a hundred? The thing is, we can see it comin'."

Luc thinks about it, then, "Sorry I asked that question but, since we are discussing it, for my edification, how many troops would it take to, in lack of better terms, conquer my people on Sashi?"

Charles nods, "I'm sorry you asked that question too but, to be honest, considering you have no weapons, no defenses planet side, and no skills or abilities whatsoever...do you really want me to say it?"

Realizing that there are 150 of their armed troops on Sashi running maneuvers, Luc insists, "The question stands, how many?"

"One company should about do it." As Luc absorbs this, Charles reaches for his keyboard and asks, "Any questions?"

Blinking, Luc glances at Lilith and says, "No."

In a few seconds a voice comes over the speakers from Sashi, ["General Washington, what can we do for you, sir."]

Charles asks, "Captain Maat, how did maneuvers go?"

["Very well, sir. Awaiting your orders."]

Staring at Luc, who is obviously shocked by this, Charles then says, "When their saucer comes to bring you back...load and return."

["Confirm your status, sir."]

"*Semper fidelis.*"

["Glad to hear, sir. Load and return, confirmed. Out."]

After a few seconds of silence, Charles drives it home, "Luc, if you were looking to light a fire under these people, I want to thank you for the help. It made all the difference."

Luc chirps, "You're welcome?"

Marcus adds, "You have a real army now. A modern army."

Charles is proud to say, "I would put these people up against anything Earth could possibly throw at us, now."

Luc points out, "You know, I haven't seen your people march or drill or parade for the longest time."

"Why? That's a colossal waste of effort. Combat is chaos, and these people, with all their life experience, now thrive off of that. Where credit is due—they're smart and they are quick studies."

Rachel throws out, "We can teach you if you want."

Luc looks to Lilith who nods yes, so he says, "I think it would be in our best interest to take you up on that."

Charles asks, "Since the ratio of female to male is now, what, forty or fifty to one?"

"Pushing sixty to one. Fifty-eight to be exact."

Charles snorts a laugh, "Must be nice."

Rachel swats Charles' arm as Luc smiles slightly, "It's a job."

"I suspect you will not be risking any males so, offhand, since you are gone all the time, I believe that Lilith would be best suited to take the reins on this one."

Lilith jumps at that, "Yes...yes, I will."

Charles says to Lilith, "Volunteers, only."

Luc, thinking deep, looks at Charles with a smile, "Good job!" He then turns to Marcus and, "I guess you are free to go, Marcus."

Marcus nods in gratitude, "Thank you."

The meeting breaks up and Lilith wordlessly accompanies Luc to his ship where, upon reaching it, Luc turns to her, "You were right."

Lilith shakes her head, "When are you going to listen to me?"

"From here on out." Luc shrugs, "You were right all along."

"They just proved that they *are* in league with us."

"Yea, but...we got our ass handed back to us."

"There is no way to spin it, grandfather. We deserved it."

"It's just that it's so damned unnerving."

"You'll get over it." Lilith gives him a little kiss, "I did."

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From his hillside villa, overlooking the coastal city of Ipet Hah, Marcus is standing there with Rachel and Lilith. The three are each enjoying a glass of wine while watching the sunset of the red dwarfs, *Rouge Deux* and the far distant *Gros Rouge*, over the bay. On the other hand, behind them, Charles and Jason are like two little kids as they sort through Marcus' Centurion armor and weapons they just pulled out from its nitrogen display case in his living room.

Even though the display cabinet was oxygen free, Marcus still had to refurbish and replace all the fabrics, leather and wooden parts

many times over the last twenty-one hundred years he has been here on Imi. The one thing that did not survive these two millennia, no matter what he tried, was his cherished Centurion *vitis virgam*.

His vine-wood whipping staff crumbled away long ago.

Compared to Marcus, who stands just an inch taller than the Nefer Key at five feet and five inches, Jason was considered imposing when he first came here. Jason was tall for the mid-sixteenth century, coming in at five-nine, but he was originally from a well-fed blue-blood stock before being captured and pressed into a pirate crew at sixteen. Charles, however, is gargantuan by comparison at just a smidge under six-four, which is the maximum height for an astronaut.

Point being, these two lug-nuts both tried to put on Marcus' *galea*, his centurion helmet, which was way too small for Charles, but a tight squeeze on Jason's head, and with the helmet on and fondling the pilum spear, Jason says, "All this shit is like new!"

Charles, holding the torso *lorica segmentata* armor against his chest, laughs, "Damn, Mark, this looks bigger in the display!"

The doorbell chimes as Jason goes, "Marcus, can you imagine what Goliath here would look like in this shit?"

Marcus steps in the room and laughs, "Can you imagine what Chuck would look like in the arena?"

Jason pulls the helmet off, "Murmillo!"

"Exactly! He'd be unstoppable."

Charles grins, "You two are blade guys. I don't do blades but I'll happily go into the arena with my forty-five."

Laughing, Marcus steps through the room and when he opens his front door, finding the delivery guy with a pizza cozy in hand, but instead of greeting him Marcus is surprised, "Captain Maat?"

Maat is an olive skinned Egyptian and the oldest living human resident on Imi, going on four-thousand years, and like Marcus looking all of maybe thirty something, "I was at my wife's shop. I saw this and thought I'd bring it." He pulls the pizzas out from the cozy and asks, "Is it true, dude? They lettin' you cash out?"

"Word gets around fast..." Marcus takes the three pizzas and wonders, "I never did ask you, but how are you dealing with Chuck being in charge? I mean you were a general under me."

"I resented him at first, flattening it all out, but what he did was the right thing to do. Oh, when I got back this afternoon he bumped me up and gave me a Battalion!"

Marcus smiles, "*Homo sum humani a me nihil alienum puto.*"

"Ain't that the truth, brother." Maat snorts a laugh, then he gives Marcus a Roman salute, "Journey well, my friend."

"Thank you my general." As Maat walks away he laughs big when Marcus adds, "And soon to be a general again!"

Marcus steps back inside and enters the living room where Lilith snatches the pizzas from him chirping, "Thanks, babe!"

With Jason and Lilith opening the three boxes, looking for their pizza, Charles laughs, "Pineapple! Uuuugh, I can smell it. I almost forgot you and Robert ate the shit outta that."

Lilith smiles, "It's heavenly."

"Thank you, hon!" Jason gives Lilith a little kiss as she hands him a slice, then to Charles, "Cowabunga, star dude!" He struggles taking a bite as he says, "Ya know, when I was a kid, a pineapple was worth a king's ransom where I was from, but to find it on pizza?" He takes a few chews and, "I'm eatin' the motherfucker on pizza!"

Rachel steps up to the boxes while scolding Charles, "I can live with the green olives, but it's your anchovies. We can thank our lucky stars Maat's Pies doesn't carry those evil things!"

Marcus speaks up, "I like anchovies!"

She turns and hands Charles a slice of his current favorite of olive, bacon and basil, "At least she carries bacon." She then turns to Marcus, "Remind me not to swap spit with you if you eat those things."

"My wife loved them too."

As Rachel shudders at that, Charles goes, "You should have seen Rachel's face when I made a peanut butter and tuna sandwich when we got married. I thought she was going to divorce my ass!"

Rachel gives him a quick kiss, "That's still on the table."

Marcus laughs and thumbs towards the patio, "Let me go get my wine, okay. Give me a minute."

Marcus steps outside to collect his glass of wine, and as he looks up he is suddenly captivated by the two red dwarf stars as they make their final plunge below the horizon. With the starlight reflected from Sashi above, in contrast to these setting stars, it makes for a very romantic setting. He remembers the countless evenings he spent with his wife in his arms at this very moment on Imi, and he longs for those moments again.

Raising the glass, Marcus says, "Be with you soon, love."

This intimate-memory moment of his was suddenly shattered by Jason bumping up against the rail of the patio, "So, got a sec?"



“Do I got a choice?”

Jason grins as he spins Marcus’ gladius in the air, then twirls it around and holds it up to Marcus all the while asking, “Let me get this straight, dude. You’re gonna put all that shit on in there...then you’re throw yourself on this? That about sum it up?”

Marcus nods with a smile, “It is the Roman way.”

“Really...I say you’re *non compost mentis*, asshole.”

“You mean, *compos*?”

“No, I meant what I said. You’re not a shit for brains! Where I’m from whacking yourself is a mortal sin, so I just can’t stand by and let you do that. In good conscience I really can’t let you do that.”

“When the Nefer tech is filtered out of my body, I really don’t want to wait decades for it. Like four or five decades.”

“Oh no, no-no-no, I got a better idea.”