

LCTN: POLARIS-AB (Ursae Minoris)
CORD: SAO-308.03 (133pc from SOL)
TIME: 22:20zulu

Having entered into the LSO recovery approach, Maria performs a rolling touchdown on the port flight deck thirty-seconds after Boxter's ship had landed. They both taxi onto the same elevator forward of the sail, the superstructure joining both the dome and dish sides, and the Iron Maiden makes the jump from Calar-3 to Polaris while they were descending together to the main hanger deck.

Both move into the airlock and the hatch closes behind them.

As the elevator goes back up, the lock floods with atmosphere and opens to the hanger. The Thunderbird taxis out and circles back around and heads deep into the hanger while the Star Clipper pulls out of the lock, and is personally walked by the flight operations mini-boss towards an adjoining parking space for a hard shut down.

Porter and his fire team step out and trade salutes with the escort waiting for them, while Porter asks, "My good man, would you prefer us to leave our pew-pews behind on the clipper?"

The gunnery-sergeant shakes his head, "Naw, Colonel, it's no biggie! Just make sure your shit is safed and slung."

After Porter and his team clear and sling their weapons, he signals for Boxter and the guests to come on out.

As Boxter, Wanganui, Bristol and Alcock step off the ramp, Porter says, "Gunny, you lead an' we'll anchor."

Boxter thinks nothing of this, but it is shocking for Wanganui and the generals to see that Porter and his fire team are allowed to bring their weapons onto the Iron Maiden.

In the aft quarter of the hanger, far from Boxter's ship, Maria hops out of Jessica's Thunderbird, pops her helmet and tosses it to

Snoopy who was waiting for her, "Ready for this?"

Snoopy catches the helmet and, "You're shittin' me, right? I've been ready over three years now!"

With Mooch and Sandoval stepping out of an elevator lobby with her clothes, Maria smiles at him, "Good things come to, you know, those who wait an' shit!"

Maria has popped her suit, and as he helps hoist her out of it, "Whatever you say, but this had better curl my claws!"

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Along the strut that spans across between the two flight decks on the dish side, forward of the widowed conservatory in the sail called "the stack," is a large observation room along the edge of that strut. It consists of a transparent floor and window that faces out between the flight decks and the bow of the ship and is made of the exact same indestructible carbon composites from the canopy of the Thunderbolt. Only here it's two-meters thick and 80,000 times more indestructible.

Everyone is already there when Mooch and then Snoopy enter from the Starboard doorway. With Mooch hanging back, Snoopy steps up to the forward window and taps it, making a tactical desktop appear while saying, "Hey, Porter! How's is shakin' babe?"

Wanganui and the generals, never having met a Xhemal, are quietly amazed that these two would know each other.

Porter smiles, "Oi, always more than three, mate."

Snoopy turns with a fist-bump, "I still owe ya that drink."

"Not keepin' tabs, feather-boy, but ya did ask for a rematch."

Maria blows in, saying, "I wanna thank you all for coming!"

Boxter speaks up, "Well, Marshal Ramirez, the mysteries surrounding this...meet up piqued our curiosity! How could we pass?"

Maria is in standard black BDU pants, t-shirt and, where the generals are in field uniforms, still loaded with ribbons, badges and gold braided frogging, she has a simple belt clip insignia board pinned with a die cut silver star. Maria gives Porter a quick nod then smiles at Boxter, "Great to see you again, Box! Last time face to face was?"

"The funeral for Caffyn." Boxter points to her and follows with, "Sorry to hear about Bob. His loss has been felt far and wide."

"Sucks hu?" Maria nods, "His replacement is capable."

Boxter nods in return, "More than, I'd say."

With an HWG98 moving out from under the transparent floor, Maria points down towards it, "Wish we had time to catch up, dude, but we're kinda in a time crunch here."

Boxter looks back at the other three asking, "Baited breath, yes gentlemen?" With no response from them he looks back at Maria, "Oh, do go on. The floor is most definitely yours!"

She looks to Snoopy who says, "Two minutes."

Nodding, Maria looks at their guests and gestures to the Xhemal, "Everyone, this here is Gunnery-Sergeant, Mooch, and this is Master-Sergeant, Snoopy! And I'll have you know that they are directly responsible for what we're doin' today." She then comically points up into the air followed by her rubbing her hands, "And to illustrate what we got goin' on, you know, sharing is caring an' all that, how 'bout we start this demonstration off with a story..."

This whole time the HWG98 has moved forward and up into view, revealing an identical ship that is upside down with a structural latticework connecting them both, and nested inside this latticework is the massive Barn Diamond, named Terence. As Maria continues her story Terence picks up speed, and when clear of the ship's bow, the battle platform then pitches up just enough for both stars, that being Polaris-AB and the far distant Polaris-B, to drop into view.

Maria opens with, "When I was a little kid, we didn't have shit. It was before the Herrero family business took off, and my father just died, so my poor mother bought me this old tablet from a second hand store, and the thing had a thousand games on it. I played the livin' shit outta all of 'em, but the games I loved most was a series called, Angry Birds!" She shrugs, "And, at five, it was a blast an' a half—"

With the window darkening, adjusting to filter out the glare, Snoopy whispers to her, "One minute."

"Cool!" Maria continues her story, "Get this, you got these flightless birds and the piggies stole their eggs so, with a slingshot, ya gotta fling 'em at the bad piggies and collapse their buildings. Okay, yea, pigs are crappy engineers an' all but that's the gist of it! Point is, there was one bird that I loved the fuck out of, and that was Terence! He is a big boy, I mean huge and, with the right trajectory, he was like droppin' a fricken anvil on their shit! So, in that spirit..." Maria's open hand points outside the window at Terence, who is securely nestled in the latticework, "I give you, Angry Birds mode!"

They all full-well know what is going to happen in just a few seconds, so Bristol dares to ask, "What's the target, mum?"

Maria rolls her eyes, "Depends on what you mean by target?"

Boxter says, "I believe the star in front of us is Polaris AB."

Maria points to him, "Correct-a-mundo!"

Snoopy, not so quietly asks, "Let 'r rip?"

Maria thinks for a second and, "Send it."

Terence pulls hard to starboard and as it swings out in a wide loop, Alcock quietly realizes that, "The target is Javan."

With the thing suddenly zipping off in a MDDSH bubble, Maria throws out, "That it is, Alcock and no balls, you get the see-gar!"

Maria's contemptuous insult falls on deaf ears with the three of them mesmerized by watching the impact on the wormtrac display. In counterpoint, Boxter struggles with holding back his amusement while asking, "How...long till we see the results, Madam?"

Maria looks to Snoopy who answers, "Eighty seconds, Sir."

Boxter asks Snoopy directly, "How long till the photon flash?"

"Hits Javan?" With Boxter nodding yes, Snoopy shrugs and, "Three-hundred and thirty-two hours, just a smidge over thirteen and a half days, Mister Hartcourt. The bulk of the core will jet out in that direction and we're estimating that it'll take at least sixty-nine days."

"To reach said target."

"Yes, Sir."

Boxter then asks, "Since you two look like the type who would cover all the bases, I believe you have already put your minds to how long you think it would take to evacuate New Nippur. Am I correct?"

Mooch fields this one, "Five days, Sir. That's if you limit the civilians to carry on only. Anything else may double that estimate and trying to haul out personal property will just make a mess of things. Anyone still in the city will easily survive the flash-over itself, but our models show that two-thirds of Javan's atmosphere will be stripped."

Boxter asks, "Up to two-thirds?"

"Minimum two-thirds, Sir." Mooch shakes his head, "We have no way of really knowing but, with the high temps between the photon pulse hitting and the debris catching up, well, it may require heroic measures to evacuate anyone after the flash-over."

Suddenly, outside the window, the star, Polaris-AB, starts to explode in super slower than slow motion. It starts by puffing up as debris from the convective zone sprays back out of the point where Terence force-jumped and punched into it. As the entrance continues to expand, on the far side of the star it opens up as a jet from the shattered core pours out like a fire hose but, because of the massive

scale of this event, everything is moving at a snail's pace. The donut like puffing up of the radiative and convective zones expand further out and are now stretching into a linear-cylindrical shape that is starting to rip apart along the edges.

With Wanganui and the generals in open mouth astonishment, Snoopy says to Mooch, "You were right again, model Bravo-One-A."

Mooch bobs his head, "Yup, motherfucker, I win the bottle!"

Snoopy turns to the whole group, "It will take about an hour for it to fully explode, totally shred, but you get the idea."

Boxter asks, "How fast was...Terence going?"

"Don't know exactly? It was a forced jump like out at Nu Ari."

Boxter shrugs, "You mean 'c' times thousands maybe?"

Snoopy shakes his head, "Aaaaah, it's more like in the upper six-digits? I'll have hard numbers in the next week."

Maria volunteers, "We'll have 'em send you the report. Cool?"

Boxter nods and gives them a little round of soft applause, "Bravo, my good chaps! Well done." He turns to the generals and, "We should focus on evacuating New Nippur. You will see to it, yes?"

Maria interrupts, "Yeeeee, about that."

Boxter looks back at Maria, "Yes, madam?"

"See, Box, the problem with these guys here is that they won't want to give up the stuff they've been squirrelin' away! Right now my Weasels have already destroyed all their Triple-A assets and my assault teams are now in the process of, well, gaining access to the mines. There's no point in telling you the obvious, that they intend to set charges to collapse the roofs over the mine entrances so, it's just as well that I spare ya'll from telling ya the obvious!"

Boxter wonders, "So they can reopen the mines?"

Maria nods, "Yea, they can! They got loads of time, but that would put the fuck to evacuating the city! The flash-over would be like a three or four day hiccup, but an evacuation would be low priority to them. You should read some of their contingency plans." Maria points to herself, "Now, I can be a soulless cunt, guaranteed, but at least I'm not a women and children last piece of shit like these guys."

"I'll make sure they pursue the right course of action."

"Well, I appreciate that, but I already took the steps to take that choice out of their hands." She looks at the generals and smiles, "I don't know if any of you heard or not, but we hit GTB6 today! The distribution facilities and pretty much all the storehouses that would

matter to you two...gone."

Bristol glares at her, "You did not."

"Oh hell yea, baby! There ain't one forklift, crane, backhoe, or bulldozer left. There's not one piece of earth moving or excavation mech on the planet that isn't a pile of scrap! We blew it *all* to hell."

In a moment of feigning introspection, Boxter says, "The take away here is that it pays to be thorough. Correct, gentlemen?"

Maria again takes a poke at the generals, "Guys, my troops are close to wrappin' it up on Javan but, I would prefer it if your people would stand down and let mine finish up, how 'bout!"

Bristol flashes indignantly, "The nerve!"

Maria throws her hands out, "Lionel, Nigel, dudes! I mean, do we gotta kill all your minions? Like, really?"

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Anyone with an iota of tactical knowhow knows that defense is universally believed to be a losing proposition—and to charge one's troops with the defense of the indefensible, say the 182 mines here on Javan, that mission would be considered nonsensically suicidal at best.

The 23mm and 30mm micro-nuke bombs Peña fired at the hillsides and into the access-way cut into the rock at MS-182 did the trick, and the platoon leaders smartened up real fast and immediately broadcasted their surrender over the IFF without firing a shot in return.

This same thing happened at all of the mining sites on Javan.

In the coming days, Co-op senior command may be pitching a bitch over the division elements giving up Fondue Pot too easily, but nobody from paygrade O8 and below will blame them one bit.

Again, everyone from Major General on down, every one of them in the know have always known that this effort was an absurdity from the onset yet, somehow, the pilots from their squadrons never did get that memo. Right as the Epée up and leave, here they come blasting into low orbital space and, yea, this was a total surprise that Kati and her people were not expecting or ready for, but the CDF did lose 80 of their fighters trying to bum rush the FCAP.

It was costly but 331 got past them.

Those Condors and Djinn are now diving straight down for the deck with 80 of their fallen comrades bringing up the rear. That is, falling towards Javan and starting to tumble out of control as they hit the upper atmosphere. It is at this point the pilots detach the cockpits

and continue the decent in a controlled fall as their ruined ships spiral crazily towards the ground.

As for the 331 Condors and Djinn they are way out ahead and, by the time they reach 30 kilometers altitude, here is where their IFF transponders finally update with the latest from the AO. To their horror, all of the mining sites have already surrendered and they see that 286 of the Annex Weasels have joined up with the 360 Thunderbirds flying CAP! Also changing gears and heading up to CAP are another 145 Cerberus fighters who were flying close air support and are now looking for something else to do.

That is 331 nimble but tired F51 fighters versus a mixed bag of 791 Annex fighters—and these are not good numbers when you consider that the 360 Thunderbirds, the ones doing lazy loops on CAP, have been waiting patiently for them and still have a full load out.

At twenty-kilometers altitude, the Co-op fighters all break west, so Jacob comes on the CAP frequency, laughing, ["That there is a nope-nope-nope!"]

With hundreds of clicks swamping the CAP channel, the CDF fighters, now outside the AO, start dropping to ten and five thousand meters altitude, so Jacob comes up with a plan, ["Okay, I'll bait and you guys on CAP, you follow me at a distance. Rodan and Thumper, bottle 'em up. If they break you run 'em down."]

Peña is pulling in beside Jacob, ["Want me to go in with ya?"]

["Yea, sure, they got a fat bounty on your head too!"]

Jacob and Peña race ahead out over the open space between the two sides and, with their IFF transponders now flashing who they are, over a hundred of the CDF fighters split off and streak in and, not wanting to miss this opportunity, the closest eighteen each fire two Centipedes split between Jacob and Peña.

Those two turn hard about and drop dozens of Micropedes that cancel out the CDF missiles, and as they slip under the swarm of Thunderbirds charging in—a cease fire is broadcasted.

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It's 5:10pm here in Kansas City, and in the Sculpture Garden, outside the south entrance to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Jessica's HWG101 has landed in the open field and is perfectly framed by two ginormous sculptures of shuttlecocks.

With five-centimeters of snow already on the ground, it is now falling from the sky in clumps. With no air movement to speak of this

deadens the sounds from the city as well as significantly mutes the laughter and shrieks of joy from all the girls who are playing in the snow, throwing snowballs and making snow angels. With the two squads of ghost droids securing and patrolling the perimeter, Jessica steps down from the ramp in back of the ship in her armed JACC.

Monique is standing with the Museum Director by one of the shuttlecocks, so as Jessica steps up, "Thank you for the tour, ma'am!"

The Director nods, "It really was my pleasure, Jessica!"

Monique then says, "*Ms Civella*, I have taken a liking to this place so, my grandson, Josav, he now represents one of my charities, *Amoureux des Arts Fondation*. He will be here next week with the funds for your renovation. Would three-billion suffice?"

The Director blinks, shocked by the offer and the amount, "Madam Ribot, that would be way too much for a renovation."

Monique shrugs, "That happens to be pocket change to me so, while you're at it, how about you throw up a new wing?"

Jessica says to Monique, "Gotta go, babe." Jessica then steps away and calls out, "Let's load up, ladies!"

Watching the girls racing towards the ramp of the fastback, the Director says to Monique, "We'll dedicate the wing to you."

Monique shakes her head, "*Madame Conservatrice*, when one must pass through that eye of the needle—their charitable efforts must remain anonymous. Agreed?"

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A scant minute after the cease-fire the eighty CDF fighters that the FCAP destroyed fall into the AO and splat in the mud. Instead of staying with their cockpits, the seventy-eight surviving pilots eject and fly towards the wrecked docks by New Nippur for pickup. While the assault companies set the 1kt charges and blow the vestibules, the CDF platoons are evacuated from the mines by the warthogs to be dropped off at New Nippur to also wait for pick up.

With the Weasels on sweep, off dropping 20/20 cluster bombs on their fallen ships in MOAB mode, Jacob takes time to review the casualties for today.

With what was going on here, the casualty count on both sides is astronomically-shockingly low. The CDF lost only seven of their pilots to Kati's people on FCAP, and only eighteen from the platoons were killed when CAS attacked, and that was only after the Weasels cleared the Triple-A and their platoon leaders didn't cry uncle

on the IFF fast enough.

The CDF did lose another thirty-two from the crews of the Epée when they got hit but those deaths won't be reported for weeks.

Today, the Annex lost only five Weasel pilots.

It takes an hour for the Annex to drop off all the Co-op pilots, scrape up their five dead, and blow up their downed ships. With CAS, CAP and FCAP having left the Area of Operation, this leaves Jacob and Peña watching the Weasels in their Thunderbolts make a final sweep.

Right when the Annex started their drop, the civilian crews at the mines loaded up into six and eight wheeled vehicles and have been driving back to New Nippur this whole time. Only a handful of them are still approaching the city when the Weasels set to work blowing up sections of roadway between the mines with their 23mm cannons.

Each of these little micro-nuke bombs has a blast equivalency of 1,000 kilograms, and firing them in half-second bursts, spread out in a linear pattern, completely shreds two or even sometimes three kilometers of roadway per burst.

With Peña pulling alongside Jacob, he ties in and radios Peña, ["These KIA numbers are insanely low."]

Peña notes, ["If we would have tangled with their fighters it would have been a slaughter."]

["I always like a good fight but I'm glad we didn't today."]

["I'll second that."]

Jacob then sighs, ["We did lose Split-S and Wabbit."]

["Yea, I saw it happen."]

["Aaaand I stupidly wonder, why them?"]

Gumball links into the command freq letting them know that, ["Okay, Buzzard Chow, we're done. Get outta here so we can."]

Jacob replies, ["Righty'o, Gumball, we're outty!"]

It takes Jacob and Peña six-minutes to reach space and, when they do, they pull back over New Nippur to watch.

The Weasels are scattered over the AO and, right on queue, all 286 SEAD pilots pull their noses up towards the sky and blast out of the Area of Operation, Saturn-V style.

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