

101

ministry of love

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)  
CORD: SAO-76131.02 (134pc from SOL)  
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-2-MONDAY  
TIME: 10:21zulu (local 08:45pst)

Bill Nguyen has had the best four years of his life, and if Bill could whistle fitly he'd be whistling up a storm. He has a gorgeous wife, and they have a gorgeous daughter, and this whole time he's been in command the universally coveted SA36, the Iron Maiden.

With a happy bounce in his step, Bill enters the lobby of the Spike and stops at one of the eight tabletop concierge kiosks available to anyone who asks for help or is not recognized by the AI.

Bill glances up at Jacob's old Thunderbolt that's hard-mounted to a suspension rig used on the old MAD cruisers before they were reconfigured into battle platforms. The SA saved all of them in case a need ever arose, but hanging Jacob's ASF47 from the ceiling is the very first time they ever dug one out from storage.

The ship slowly rotates with a slight bank above the lobby, still missing its wings and rudders, and everyone loves seeing Beatrix above as the full body hologram of her pops up beside the counter, "Hello, Field Marshal! What can I do for you?"

"Hey, Trixie, here for my meeting!"

"I see, for ten-thirty! Well, Bill, I'll hold lift eighteen for you."

"I'll take it, cutie patootie! My undying thanks to you, Trixie!"

Bill trots off for his elevator, hops on and in ninety-seconds he's steps into the main lobby of the Annex on floor 321 of the Spike. He shoots his finger at the receptionist as he blows past her, and as he enters the executive lobby to Maria's office...

"Awe, shit!" Bill punches at the air with both fists and stomps a foot, "Musical mutherfuckin' chairs!"

The executive lobby is filled to standing room only, with Gerald Stark, Fred Sargent, Nancy Yoon, Scott Rutledge, Kacper Cyzk, Anthony Gudici, Kristi Venkatesh, Tristen du Conde, Beth Sandoval, and Michelle Kiel sitting next to Jacob Graves who is standing by the door with Oscar Peña.

With everyone there giving a polite chuckle at his reaction, Jacob asks, "What makes you think that, Bill?"

"Get real, Jacob, I just lost my command!"

Everybody there nods, yes, knowing that Bill nailed it, but instead of Jacob shoring him up with lame falsehoods, he simply asks, "Was it everything you thought it was going to be?"

Tight lipped, Bill nods yes and says, "Ya'll know, when Beth got it right when this feud started I was shocked, but you ended up in a way better place because of it... At least I had the girl."

Jacob cringes, "Bill, I really wish I could say that you're gonna love where ya goin' but you will end up where we need ya."

Bill looks to Cyzk, huffs a laugh and says, "I reckon you'll be the one blessed with her, and she is a peach!"

From her office, Maria has opened the door and as she leans against the doorjamb, "Sorry, Bill, but that part is not settled quite yet. Just be assured that you have done a bang up job for us as its FM!"

"Thank you, Maria, I'll quit fussin' 'bout it."

"Of all the people here, you're the one that has every right to be pitchin' a bitch! Now, if it were up to me I'd be putting this off for a spell, like after the war, like I planned too, but circumstances threw musical chairs into our lap today."

Fred Sargent asks, "So, I take it we're waiting for someone?"

"Yep!" Maria now turns to Sandoval, "So, Beth, while we're waiting for our guests, you got those numbers on the forty-sevens?"

Beth sighs, "With the dust settled, after pissing everyone off shifting inventories, we're short on numbers with an average of 650 fighters on each of our platforms. This breaks out as 300 bisE, with a two to one split between the bisE and the conversions on the Mbande and the Maiden. Then on all platforms there are 32 bisEa conversions, 16 new bisEb, and 300 of the 74's with that number the only one climbing in count. As for the stations, they have higher counts on active service but the storage inventories are holding."

Maria nods, "What are the overall, big picture numbers?"

Beth shrugs, "We have 10,100 bisE, 1,900 bisE conversions, and over 1,500 of the bisEa conversions."

"How many bisEb we got?"

"We have 960 on hand and we've slowed the line to about one every three days now."

"And the three lines for the 74's? What's the output there?"

"Quarter capacity at nine a day since day one." Beth gestures towards Maria, wondering, "What do you got on your mind, boss? Paleo told me you were talking to him at length last week."

"He didn't tell you what this was about?"

"No, he said you'd be bringing it up to me today!"

Maria shrugs, "Since we got Jacob and Oscar here, I'm gonna be taking all of them! Every one of the 47's. Not the bisEb's, but everything else is goin' to the CXi."

Jacob looks to Peña with a laugh, "Pay up!"

"Fucker." Peña grumbles as he pulls a five Au note from his pocket, then hands it to him, "Here's your fin!"

Maria asks them, "You guys done?" They nod yes, so she asks all three of them, "Is it doable?"

Sandoval nods, "I figured this was comin'. I already got it worked out, that is if we control the inventory shift in stages. If we push the 74s to full production we can have it all over inside two years, 24 months, but with combat losses make it 28 unless you reopen the 47 lines on the three Titus stations."

"How fast can you un-mothball those lines?"

"I can have them fired up inside four weeks? Half-cap for the first six months with current ready stores, and full capacity once they start printing components on site."

du Conde asks, "Madam, I thought the CXi had this settled?"

"Yea, we do! We've got the CivX interceptor trickling out of Palmdale for the Service Militia side of the house, yes, but the Service Divisions coming from all the countries are cluster-fucked up beyond imagination." Maria throws her hands out, "That is unless we help them! We can't do it for the CXi side of the house, my hands are tied there, but I can with the Divisions running the Trungs."

du Conde again asks, "Why are we doing this, madam?"

Maria shrugs, "Everyone is jerking around with obsolete shit that needs fuels and combustibles. We can't have that on the Trungs, and we just finally figured out that we need some commonality here. Only the US, the RU and the UK have equipment up to snuff but right now they can't find the funds to build more."

du Conde shakes his head, "I can't imagine the United States taking charity like that!"

"It's not charity when we have no outlay. The Yanks are supplying their own 380's for close air support so they're doing their part. The UK is looking for the budget and the Russians are okay with the 47 for CAS, but they said they'll give the 380 a fair shake."

Bill nods, "We do need commonality between the services."

Maria nods, "It is better that we try to unfuck this now."

Peña speaks up, "The RU-380 might be a non-issue."

Maria asks, "The B-Mod?"

Peña looks to Beth who motions for him to run with it, "Instead of waiting till next week to discuss this...well, Beth and I have decided that it's better to replace all our base-model three-eighties."

"Seriously, that's what you wanna do?"

Sandoval goes, "We have to strip each Cerberus down and replace a third of its fuselage. Basically, we're rebuilding them. To do this for all sixty-three hundred of our three-eighties will take from five to six years but, if we fire the lines back up to full production, we can replace all of them inside two years."

Peña points at Sandoval and laughs, "What she said!"

Sandoval shrugs, "We can then give all our base-models to the Service Divisions as our new ships come on line at nine a day!"

Maria's face scrunches up, "Remind me why?"

Peña goes, "We have no intermediate weapons on the thing. It's either the thousand-kge sledgehammer or the eighty-eight surgical scalpel! We could use a little finesse in the job—where a one-hundred or two-fifty ballpeen, or a fifty-kge tack-hammer would do us nicely." He puts a hand out, "Look, in an urban environment we swap the thirty for another twenty-three and load it with fifty or hundred-kg bombs and that, well...it's messy tryin' to dial it in."

Maria remembers, "Yea, I remember, loadout."

"We never go over ten percent usage on the twenty-three and we burn through our eighty-eights because of the gap. I'm the only one to use the whole drum, and that was over Tareyton." He points at Maria while asking Sandoval, "Oh yea, you wanna ask her?"

Sandoval nods, "Sure, during the eval, General Giáp asked if they can hang Oscar's Cerberus in the atrium of their clubhouse."

Maria laughs big, "You're shitting me! The one that was shot to shit! It's still sitting at the ninth-tee, right?"

Sandoval nods, "Yea, and Maggie, who was Pena's co-pilot ghost for that day, she's volunteered to be their concierge!"

Maria looks to everyone else, and throws her hands up, asking, "Any push back?" With everyone shaking their heads, *no*, Maria goes, "If Maggie wants to do it then mount it for 'em!"

"Thanks boss!" Peña then smiles, saying, "Tareyton is now the most popular field-trip site on Taiji! The kids tour the Salt Mine and named my old ship, Doggo. They touch her canards like they're petting the thing and, with the front gear now collapsed, the teachers have covered the canopy with their lip prints."

Maria asks, "Let me guess, they want to mount the thing so no one will get hurt around the wreck?"

Peña points at her, "There, that's a good reason!"

"Do it, it's in your court." Maria looks to Beth, "So, back to the previous issue, I learned we've been holding the bisEb's back from combat missions, right? I talked to Paleo and I see the logic in not letting the slingshot drive fall into their hands, *and* I know the Weasels want the bisE for SEAD, and they are not gonna budge on that! So, our one 47 line will be building bisE and bisEa's to replace transfers. Also, from here on out, the bisEb's are now strictly for CXi missions and to be driven exclusively by our pilots. Cool beans?"

Jacob, Beth and Peña look at each other and nod with approval, as Jacob says, "We're good with that."

Maria asks Jacob, "How's the Baby-P working out for ya?"

He laughs, "It's a death ray! Now that they realize we have these guns on our 74's, the Kali no longer runs down the center like they used too. They take bites out at our periphery."

"Do we really need to build the new Ea's as interceptors?"

"We still have to chase after the Express."

"Okay, you'll get those replacements with the padded missile loadout. Same for the Weasels."

"Cool! When do we get our Hornets, Beth?"

Maria looks to Sandoval, "Where we at with those, and do we have countermeasures for their Hornet missiles yet?"

Beth shrugs, "Nope! We have to shoot them down. Their hornets are persistence weapons and, when they lock on one of our ships there is no other option except outrunning them."

Peña adds, "Which is pointless if you wanna stay in the fight."

Maria asks, "Lasers?"

Beth shakes her head, "Waste of time."

Jacob asks, "So, when do we get our Hornets?"

"Yellow-Jackets start next week. Two squads per platform."

Just then, Cricket and Paris step through the door with Maria smiling big, "Well now! How 'bout we all come into my office and get this shit over with!"

00110010-00101101-00110110-00101101-00110100

With everyone looking for a spot in Maria's office, most of them taking a seat at her conference table, Beth quietly says to Jacob and Peña, "The Green Hornets are a month out."

Peña asks, "How fast do they go?"

Beth says, "I wanted that to be a surprise."

Peña laughs, "Then, surprise me!"

"Okay, Mach-eight at a thousand millibar." With Peña doing a double take, Beth adds, "It's acceleration is shit but it'll get there."

Jacob points out, "Then it doesn't replace the Mew-Two."

"No, they're different beasts altogether."

Peña smiles, "Cool! Leaves us with choices."

Maria clasps her hands together, and rubs them while saying, "Okay, let's get some housekeeping things out of the way before we get to the musical chairs! Beth is here to meet with Nancy, Jerry and Fred after our meeting, who...well, they'll be coming to the CXi and take over command of the Titus Stations as Group Marshals. They will remain in the SA, as will all the station personnel until the CXi builds up some experienced people to take over."

Sargent asks, "This is in effect when?"

"Eleven-hundred hours, right after we break up from here." Maria puts a hand out to emphasize, "So, as a Group Marshal they got shitloads of time on their hands, but these guys are going to be busy as all-get-out! Jerry will command the Oakley, and that will be in the leading edge of the spur outside our bubble. His real job is to oversee the Service Divisions coming on-line with their Trungs."

Jerry laughs, "Yup, I'll be boxing a few ears."

"Yea, but not like Fred! He'll be in command of the Bordon, trailing our bubble. Fred will be getting all the Service Divisions in line with our systems. There is already a fuck-ton of push back but they have no God-damned choice in the matter. They gotta tow that line."

Maria gestures towards Nancy, "Toons here, Nancy, she's now in command of the May West that'll be stationed in our bubble and, as her side job, she'll be handling the Titus expansion program for Beth. To start, we're planning six more of the things and we're lookin' to be building 'em in pairs. We're also working on mini-anchor stations to test for now, an' that'll maybe cut the need for future stations?"

Jacob asks, "The previous Group Marshals?"

Maria shrugs, "They are in planning now."

Michelle adds, "We needed their eyes."

Maria points at her, nodding in agreement, then, "An' we got two more housekeeping items! Tristen du Conde is now back from Dolphin Reel, where he's been runnin' interference for Luc de Prima. Stand up and take a bow, sir!"

du Conde just puts his hands up with a smile and a nod, "*Merci! Le plaisir était pour moi!*"

Jacob has been around Monique enough to know what that means, so he grins, "I bet it was!"

du Conde rolls his eyes, "*Oui*, one for the team they say!"

Maria nods, "We're glad to have him back because he has volunteered to represent the CXi in the FIS as its Alpha."

As they applaud, du Conde nods, "Again, one for the team!"

Maria points both her hands towards him with genuine gratitude, "Thank you Tristan!"

du Conde laments, "Monique will also miss Ipet Hah."

Jacob smirks, "I bet she will!"

Maria throws out, "One last item, guys. Michelle, here, will greenfield out through Strategic Planning and it...it breaks my heart to see you go, Guns." The pain and emotion that flashes on Maria's face was not lost to anyone here, but it gives way to her laughing when she adds, "And the irony here is that she'll be going to take over for her great-grandfather, Nigel Kiel. As we speak, Michelle is now Chairman of the Board of the SCC as well as the Presiding Chair for the infamous, Corporations Commission."

With looks of disbelief going around, Michelle adds, "Yea, and I'll be moving into the Star Castle."

Yoon asks, "Why are they allowing this?"

"They're not stupid, they see the writing on the wall."

Maria shrugs, "Considering where we're at I'll debate that."

du Conde asks, "Where's the Mountain Troll in all this?"

Michelle says, "He's cashed out five-percent of his estate and he'll be traveling and, well, he's gonna be involved with the CXi."

They all look at Maria, who nods, yes, saying, "Yep, that's all true, but we're keeping it on the down low for the now. In fact, he doesn't want it to get out that he'll be supporting the program."

Michelle smiles, "But, he'll be supporting it in style!"

Maria announces, "Ya'll know we're building a new Air Force One for the US, right? Well, those designs are actually knock offs from the custom coaches we've built for Nigel and Michelle."

Michelle points to herself, "We paid for those!"

"That they did!" Maria nods, "So, going forward, any coms, any Secret Sam messages between us and Michelle must be handled through Graves. We already have a secure instance of the tacnet at the Star Castle." She puts her hands out to emphasize, "Nothing can move between us and that node until the war is over! As it is, that pathway is blocked until further notice. After the war, Michelle will be working with Planning to help the Co-op unfuck the mess they made." She then points to Cricket, "Okay, babe, the floor is yours!"

Cricket turns to Paris and, "Go for it!"

Paris' feathers ruffle, "As of zero-hundred hours this morning, I resigned from the office of the Secretary General to the FIS." She gestures towards Cricket, "My buddy, chum and pal, Consulate Marshal, Washington is, yet again, filling in pro tempore!"

du Conde asks, "Good heavens, madam, whatever for?"

Paris huffs, "It's almost embarrassing to say but my biological clock is winding down for me. If I want to pop out some eggs and chicks then, between family and career...I'll choose family!"

Sandoval asks, "Can't you raise a family here?"

"Well, kindergarten for us is chasing things and...killing then eating them! Not sure if any charter schools here provide that?"

With everyone bobbing their heads with understanding, Sargent shrugs, "She makes a good point!"

Paris smiles at that, and, "As for my replacement! We've ran a lot of polls over the last couple of years and one person comes up consistently with eighty-percent or more of the vote, and that person is Cricket! Unfortunately, to be nominated, she needs to be a vote wielding representative. So, conveniently, Cricket is a resident of the City of New Sydney and they happen to be in the market for a new rep in the AC! We think it's a good fit."

Cricket adds, "My resignation as Alpha will be tendered at eleven-hundred hours and my exit through Planning is at noon. I'll be sworn into the FIS today, after lunch. Paris' resignation will be posted officially this Friday morning."

Bill lazily throws up a dispirited hand, "What time do I post?"

"Noon today." Maria feels guilty, asking, "Forgive me, dude?"

"Fucking Alpha..." Bill smiles with, "Not a chance, bitch!"

Maria snorts a laugh, "You'll become SG pro tem early Friday morning and oversee the emergency nomination that afternoon."

Bill asks, "That's in the Security Council, right?"

"They already know to be there. You'll have a quorum."

Paris says, "Taiji will be the one making the motion."

Maria adds, "The vote will be in the AC this February."

Paris laughs, "We already know she's a shoe-in!"

Sargent raises his hands, "Here's to Paris, Cricket and Bill!"

With the applause dying down, Cricket throws out, "Paris will still be with us as the goodwill ambassador for the FIS."

Paris smiles, "Yea, try as you might, ya'll can't get rid of me!"

Jacob nods at Cyzk and says, "With Bill in the FIS, this makes Moidah next up on the Thirty-Six. Congratulations, Kacper!"

With wide-eyes, Maria goes, "Not so fast! I happen to have a shortage of Field Marshals and two Trungs that need 'em and, well..." She throws her hands out, "You two work it out!"

Jacob wonders, "Seriously?"

She asks, "You opposed to commanding a Trung?"

"NO! No, I'm game!"

Maria lays it all out, "Look, the Thirty-Six and the Ninety-Six both need a Field Marshal and you two are it! I'm gonna let you guys fight over who get's what and, just so you know, Thirty-Six-Eleven is going to the Ninety-Six, that's a given, but either the First or the Third are going with 'em." She swirls her hand around to Cyzk, Jacob, Gudici and Venkatesh, saying, "You four figure it out!"

"Can I say something?" Venkatesh has a hand up, so as Maria gestures to her Venkatesh says, "I've been a bouncing ball in the Annex, but Gudici's entire career has been on the Maiden. I don't want to take that away from him. Mook should go."

Gudici blinks and says, "Thank you! I appreciate that, Venk."

Maria nods, "With that settled, what does Graves and Cyzk wanna do? I'll give you guys three minutes before I decide for ya."

Jacob asks, "You already have a desired outcome?"

Maria doesn't want to say it, "Yes, yes I do."

Cyzk motions towards Jacob, "You got seniority, dude!"

As Jacob is thinking, Maria quietly asks, "Can you go back?"

Jacob is shocked that he turns to Cyzk and says, "I can't go back. Maria's right, an' I'm not going to make that precedent. I would give anything to get the Maiden back but...it's not my ship anymore."

With gratitude, Cyzk nods, "I'll take good care of her."

"Please do." Jacob then smiles, "She is a peach!"

Maria is surprised, "Well, thank you all for seeing things my way! Obviously..." She points to Gudici and Venkatesh, "You two suckers are going to be the new division commanders, but I was wondering who is going to be taking over for Mook?"

Venkatesh smiles, "Montaña will be."

"Oh, he's gonna hate your guts."

"As opposed to when?"

"Aaaaah, good point."

Jacob looks to Stark, "Who's driving the Ninety-Six?"

Stark goes, "Nelson."

"Zach? Isn't he a little young to be a Command-Chief?"

"He was my best student." Stark shrugs, "The kid is good!"

Jacob asks, "He swingin' the balls to tell me to get fucked?"

"Yea, and he'll mean it! It's your mission but it is his ship."

"Good!" Jacob nods, "We'll work out well." He looks towards Venkatesh, "You gonna tell me to fuck off?"

Venkatesh asks, "It is gonna be my division, right?"

"Yea?"

"Then, fuck off!" She laughs, "Let's get that out of the way."

"Yep!" Jacob laughs and gives her a fist-bump, "This'll work!"

Maria turns to Peña, "The RRF is your baby now, and you're in command of it on all the CXi stations as well. Cool with that?"

"I didn't see that coming!" Peña thumbs towards Jacob, "If I can tap this guy when I need him, then count me in!"

Jacob looks over at him, "You got me any time, Oscar."

Maria laughs, "That's good to hear because you're still doing mission oversight!" She then offers Peña, "I can make you a Roving Field Marshal if you think that'll help. You will be doing the job."

Pena shakes his head, "I don't want the political bullshit with becoming an FM. I just want to do the job. Also, the silver star on a PFC-Five puts the Service Divisions on edge now." He then laughs, "And the divot cut into it really freaks them the fuck out."

du Conde asks, "What level are you working at?"

"O-ten and, trust me, barking at the Service Division generals with all my rockers cranks the coolness factor up quite a bit."

"That it would!" Maria agrees with big-eyes, then asks them, "Anyone have anything else to add? If not, I have one last little bit of gristle I wanna throw out here for you guys to gnaw on."

They all look at each other, wondering what Maria has to say, so Paris speaks up, "I want to invite everybody here to lunch for Cricket's swearing in. I'm covering it, and we got way more than enough food with KCMoe's catering it!"

Cricket asks, "Mind if I bring Green?"

"Please do!" Paris smiles, "That's a given."

Maria snorts, "Yea, he'd have a shit hemorrhage if there's sweet potato pie and he's not there." With everyone chuckling, Maria announces, "I wanna thank everyone here for their support over the years. At eleven-hundred hours, sixteen minutes from now, I'll be stepping down as Bravo an' exit at twelve-noon with Cricket." To dead silence, Maria's bottom lip quivers slightly as she looks at her hands and wipes them off on her BDU pants while saying, "I'm wearing too many hats and, well, anyway, it's about time I commit to the CXi."

Jacob says, "No fucken' way!"

"Yes fucken' way!" Maria now cracks a small smile, "Guys, it's been a hoot and, like Michelle and Cricket, I'll still be attached to Planning so you're not getting rid of me that fast. Then again my new office is only a few floors below this one."

du Conde jokes, "The Ministry of Love."

Maria has to ask, "Why do they call it that?"

"In the exec-suite downstairs, your office number is 101."

"And that means what?"

With a smile he says, "Madam, if you can, path the book 1984 tonight and we'll laugh about it tomorrow!"

Sargent asks du Conde, "Her office there is really room 101?"

"*Oui!*" He nods, "And it is out of respect."

"Whatever!" Maria shakes her head and turns to Rutledge, saying, "I only have a few items here to take down, so I'll be cleared out before the end of the day. Enjoy the digs!"

"What?" Rutledge wonders, "Why you telling me that?"

Jacob laughs, "'Cause you're it, dude!"

He points towards Jacob, "Shouldn't it go to him?"

Maria thumbs towards Jacob, "I can't give the peace to him. Everyone will freak the fuck out if we did that, so you get it! All the players like you, so this'll put the motley lot in the FIS at ease."

Jacob points out, "Jacob scares the fuck out of everyone."

"What he said!" Maria emphasizes, "Scott, you're already doing sixty-percent of my job, so it's the perfect fit!"

Rutledge goes, "Bullshit, you just want the Nefer Key to chill."

Maria can't skirt the issue, "It was the deal I had to strike at U-Turn to smooth their hackles. How would you've cut it differently?"

Rutledge huffs, "There you go, being logical and shit!"

Bill throws out, "Scott, it is where we need you."

"Okay, I'll do it." Rutledge shakes his head then points at Jacob, "But you're keeping mutherfuckin' Mission Oversight."

Jacob smiles, "You got it, Boss man!"

Rutledge laughs, "Fuck off!"

Jacob nods big, "Yeeea, I've been getting that a lot today."

"This war is basically over." Maria turns to Rutledge, "There are a lot of things on the table that I'll have to get you up to speed on. I'll help you get through it all but, lucky you, you'll be in command of the Annex as it enters its golden age. And, since the SA and the CXi will be working hand-in-hand, you'll be seeing a lot of me!"

Rutledge points out, "We have to be towing the same line."

"That's why you're it!" She looks over at du Conde, "Oh yea, the clones Vana and Nickle are going to be coming to work for you and me in the CXi. We get to share 'em!"

du Conde nods, "That is good to hear!"

She turns to Michelle, "How are you and Shest getting along?"

Michelle goes, "We're great!"

"Good!" She turns to the others, "Shest, Nikki-Six for those of you who don't know, she's gonna be shadowing Michelle, posing as her personal assistant. Jessica has been training her and, she's not exactly a Puppet Master, but as their best empath she pretty close." She turns to du Conde, "Oh, lest I forget, we also have a handful of Nefer Key coming to the exec wing next week, led by their general, Zora du Laret. Thought you'd like to know?"

He nods with a smile, "Well, things are looking up!"

Maria dares to ask, "Do you know Zora?"

du Conde cringes, "Intimately?"

"I shouldn't have asked."

"We get along, swimmingly!"

Jacob quietly snarks, "I bet you do."

du Conde smiles, "They can be...addictive."

Maria urges him to, "Just keep it on the down low."

"*Oui!*" du Conde then points up, "You know, since we have a few minutes to spare, how bout we all help Maria take what few possessions she has down to her new office?"

01001101-01001111-01001111-01010100-01010111

Everyone has something of Maria's in hand when they enter her CXi office and, even though it's identical to her SA office upstairs, Jacob looks around and points out, "Browns! Lots of browns."

Maria puts her coffee mug down on her desk and looks at him while taking a deep breath, "Earth tones, mutherfucker."

Jacob shrugs, "Brown by any other name!"

"Here I need to come across as approachable, get me?"

"You, approachable?" Having poked fun at her, Jacob gently places her smilodon skull on the credenza and says, "Just so you know, Diego has something for your office here, and she's been sitting on it for quite a while too."

Paris says, "The three will be at lunch, so have her bring it!"

Maria gruffs, "That means I'll have to put it up."

Jacob goes, "You'll want to put this up!"

Maria moves the skull a few inches further down while saying, "Like her drawings of murder unicorns. Remember those?"

Cricket laughs, "They were awesome!"

Jacob laughs, "Yea, but her grade school didn't think so." He then says to Maria, "But what she has will fucken-a your feng shui!"

Maria looks at him with suspicion, "That's a tall order."

"I helped her dig it up!"

Her suspicion doubles, "Why do I not like the sound of that?"

Jacob shrugs, "It was six years ago. When you and Bob were mapping out what to do with the CXi. She heard about this thing in school and said she wanted to get it for you so, by god, I got 'er there and we fetched it up!"

Maria's eyes squint, "I really don't like the sound of that."

"She's been sitting on this now for six years, looking for the perfect time to give it to you, and I say today is it!"

In Jacob's defense, du Conde points out, "Madam, if I recall, six years in most jurisdictions is past the statute of limitations."

Maria shrugs, "Let's see what this is before I blow my top."

Jacob adds, "She says it's the coolest thing she ever did."

"Well, that depends if she gets called up or not?"

Sargent and Stark look at each other, so Stark asks Maria, "Whaddaya mean, called up?"

"The Dodger's shortstop may be out for the season? The guy ran into a tree while skiing, so she'll know by spring training."

Sargent knuckle taps Stark while saying, "Yea!"

Stark laughs big, "The Majors, baby!"

Jacob nods in agreement, "That would be the coolest thing!"

Michelle announces, "I'll spring for the box on opening game."

"You're on!" Maria then smiles, "An' maybe then she'll drop the god-damned modeling gigs? I can only hope!"

Michelle points out, "Fat chance there!"

Yoon adds, "She's too beautiful."

du Conde dares to ask, "Is it true? Did Sian put that fashion designer in the hospital last summer?"

Maria nods, "Yea, she did!"

She gives Jacob a dirty look so he throws his hands out, saying, "Oh no! Jessie taught her those moves, not me!"

Maria puts up a finger for each, "Jaw, arm, ribs and then she ruptured his gear with a knee."

"She did tell that guy to walk!"

Yoon goes, "And he did grab her junk!"

Stark laughs, "And it was caught on camera!"

Jacob points out, "A video that was jumping around because the droids who were shadowing her were laughing their asses off!"

"But the guy was charged, not Sian!" Rutledge says, then adds, "And, because of that, Carlos wants to write her into the fourth installment with Angela, or maybe Kill Bill like Jessie?"

"The fuck!" Maria looks at him and throws her hands up, "Why am I just hearing about this now?"

"Diego is of the majority, and she thinks you have way too much on your damned plate?"

Jacob looks at Maria and says, "Babe, she is having fun."

As Maria sighs at that, knowing he's is right, Paris throws out, "What are you going to do with these walls?"

Maria rolls her eyes, "I gotta figure somethin' out."

"How 'bout bones and fossils and shit like that?"

Cricket motions towards Paris, "Yea, a natural science theme!"

Yoon adds, "Considering this is the CXi, it'd be perfect!"

Paris was looking around and points towards the largest wall in the back, "You know, let me do this for you. I'll have sheets of stone with fossils and foot prints cut for you. Trust me, you'll love it!" She turns to Maria and smiles, "It'll be my gift."

Maria asks, "Gift for what?"

"Between Bob and you...you've done a lot for us."

"Okay, then go ahead and surprise the fuck outta me!"

With another moment of silence, and all noticing the rain that's starting to fall outside, Michelle has tears in her eyes when she says, "You know...I'm really gonna miss you guys."

Maria motions for the others to, "Lets get in on this!"

With Yoon, du Conde, Paris and Cricket stepping in with Maria to give Michelle a hug, Maria assures her, "We love you, Michelle!"

Cricket adds, "You got a tough job ahead of you, girl!"

Michelle nods, yes, when Jacob asks, "Exit at noon?"

After the hugs, Maria says to Michelle as she looks between her and Jacob, "You guys ready for Brillig on the fourteenth?"

Michelle sniffs and smiles, "Yea, and Brie is really thrilled about it. She's always looked up to Chuckles as a father figure."

"Then I say it's a good fit!" Maria reaches into her pocket, "An' one last thing, since I only got three-minutes left on the clock!"

As Maria pulls Michelle's insignia card from her belt, with a divot-cut brass star, and clips on a card with a polished-gold star, also with the divot-cut, Sargent calls out, "*More majorum*, atten-hut!"

Everybody has snapped to attention, as Maria goes, "It is a rare thing to polish someone for their end of career, but here we are! You were always Johnny-on-the-spot when the bad guys needed killin', when asses had to get saved, and wounded were desperate for evac. You bitched and complained like everyone else, but when something had to get done you were always at the front of the line." Maria takes a step back and, "I wish I could have done this for you for Mari Lug, but it's better we do this now than never."

Maria snaps a salute, followed by everyone else, and as Michelle returns it, Maria breaks hers off with, "For everyone you got out of a jam through the years, thank you Deputy Marshal, Kiel."

With all of them hugging and congratulating Michelle, Maria pulls Rutledge aside, "Thirty-seconds and you're it! Whaddya need?"

He looks at her and asks pointedly, "The Alter of Chains? What the hell is it and how do I get access?"

Maria nods and, "After lunch and Cricket swears in, we'll bring the kids up here with Diego's thing to find a spot. After that...I'll get ya hooked up."

000001100101