

105

taco tuesday

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When the FIS moved over to their new stadium sized facility, just north of the flight line at the foot of the Spike, the lights went out in the auditorium they've been using for a mere twenty-three minutes before they flickered back on and the CXi slithered right on in.

Since their new digs had new everything what few members of the General Assembly still there, weeks after the closing of the ninth and final session of the GA, simply grabbed their mugs and purses then waddled out—leaving all of their chairs and equipment behind. Yes, they'll return as the Diplomatic Convention next October but, much to their annoyance, the *hoi polloi* Assembly of the Commons will be meeting for the first time in February and totally upstage the DC.

In their minds, the great unwashed shouldn't require a voice.

Anyway, that all happened mid-December, on a Wednesday, and Maria really wanted to reconfigure the auditorium as soon as possible but, with the ongoing and pernicious infighting between all the scientific cabals, she has decided to put this off indefinitely.

Which is okay 'cause the space is useful as is!

What's not okay, and this has been annoying the crap out of Maria as of late, is the nonsensical shit on the docket today. A small group of idealists have been bending a lot of ears over the last few years, and it's all come to a head on the floor. Originally, these people petitioned the CXi to adopt a series of implacable and unwavering operational mission directives. After hitting that wall they then tried the FIS to no avail, but now they're back and flipped the script! Today they are motioning for the adoption of a "code of conduct" towards the same affect, and even though Maria respects their tenacity in this, it is her job to cock block 'em yet again...

Inside two hours she will kill this effort once and for all!

On the floor the sponsors just read the motion, and with the tally being counted, a vote to carry the motion to an adoption vote this very afternoon, Maria gestures for Lloyd Wyandotte to step up to the dais and do his job while saying to her assistant, "Vana, have Nickel order the hundred taco platter from *olá* for eleven-thirty. Make sure she requests the Maria Mix. They'll know what it is."

Vana asks, "The build your own?"

"Yup! Set up in my office."

At the lectern, Wyandotte clears his throat, "Hate to say it, but this is not a democracy, people. Here we've given you the forum and tools to formalize your efforts, to encourage you to work together so we can establish the processes and procedures when it comes to the science." He nods big, "And, I have to say you've done a bang up job, in spite of the pissing contest between the life sciences and, well, pretty much everyone else!" This gets him a laugh from the floor, where he adds, "In our eyes, you people have managed to do the impossible. You've established comprehensive protocols and a flexible batting order for the competing disciplines. So, for the most part, you have worked out your differences and we commend you for it."

His tone changes, "However, the issue on the floor today is administrative in nature and not science. We have allowed this effort to run its course with the idea that maybe we in admin can learn a thing or two by this exercise, and we have, but before we formulate our own opinion we would like to offer the sponsors of this motion to come to the exec floor and make your case with us directly. We'll be providing lunch, so if the eight sponsors are not there at eleven-thirty the issue will be tabled permanently if you are a no-show."

One of the sponsors, Candice Nehrer, raises her hand and when Wyandotte points to her, her voice pops up on the address system where she asks, ["Dies as in, like, forever dies?"]

"That's affirmative. As in never to be brought up again. This is your one and only shot at making your case. So, show up and don't pull your punches because we will not be pulling ours."

Candice looks at the others and nods, "Okay, we'll be there."

Wyandotte returns to the head table and plops down into the chair beside Maria, asking, "That okay with you, boss lady?"

Maria smiles big, "You are becoming one of us!"

"What, I'm becoming a prick like you guys?"

Stockmyer laughs, "No, management!"

With the speaker and parliamentarian exchanging pleasantries leading up to the next item on the dock, Wyandotte shakes his head, "I'm lookin' to see what you three do to Nehrer and Siino."

Dowds asks, "Does it have to be them?"

Maria shrugs and points out, "With the two new stations, I'm catchin' heat to put sciences at the exec level. He's in astronomy and sorta thinks like us. I never met her, but she's into...what, is it bugs?"

Wyandotte goes, "She's an entomological pain in my butt."

Dowds says, "You'll meet her at lunch, she's one of the eight. In fact, Nehrer is their ring leader!"

Maria perks up, "I didn't know that!"

"That was Nehrer talking, so when you gonna offer the job?"

"We'll smack 'em down over a taco then offer it to her today!"

Stockmyer adds, "She's the perfect counterbalance to Siino."

Dowds says, "They're at each other's throats half the time."

Maria nods, "Well, fuck me runnin', things are lookin' up!"

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With Peter weaving through the *olá* staff as they are stepping out, having set up the self-serve taco platters beside her conference table, Maria gives Léon a little hug by the door, "Mercy, pear!"

Léon rolls his eyes and, "It is *merci, père!* Your annunciation *en français* is gawd awful anymore! *Pire que jamais!*"

Maria chuckles then, "I'm workin' on it!"

"It's hard to learn a language through osmosis, *ma poulette.*" He gives her a kiss and steps off saying, "If your dear mother can cuss me out in my tongue then so can you!"

Maria smiles, "*Oui, papa!*"

Léon wags a finger at her while laughing, "Proper inflection! There's hope for you yet?"

"*Au revoir!*"

Maria hangs back as everybody else builds their taco plates, and as they all sit at the conference table, Maria is standing there and staring at the *olá* set up as Wyandotte opens with, "Candice, everyone, we happen to be on first name basis up here and I hope you're okay with that? So, for my edification, your goal is to restrict direct contact between us and any and all intelligent life we encounter—"

Dowds whispers to him, "Technologically developing."

Wyandotte nods, "Yes, thank you! Technologically developing intelligent lifeforms we may encounter out there. That is, until they themselves create, what again, warp drive is it?"

Candice corrects him, "FTL drive."

Stockmyer throws out, "Warp is a term in common parlance."

Candice nods, "We're trying to distance ourselves from—"

Dowds cuts her off, "It's not working."

Wyandotte goes, "Trust me, there is no separating yourselves from the source of this policy you are championing."

Stockmyer smiles big, "Everybody can see it."

Dowds, looking at his taco, "Here's some push back. The CXi is not where *the humanities* should be allowed to gain a foothold and, me being a philosopher and all, and very serious about the importance of my craft, when I say it doesn't belong here I am not kidding!"

Candice shares with them, "We have the votes, Bill."

Stockmyer quietly says to her, "Ah, no ya don't."

She shrugs with confidence, "I beg to differ."

Maria nods, saying, "You know anything about meteorology, Candice? You ever hear of high and low pressure fronts, and how the high chases after the low tryin' its damndest to balance shit out? You know, nature abhors a vacuum and all? From this you get a butt-load of turbulence as a result so, I have to ask, you feel that rumbling in your belly? Well, babe, that happens to be the pressure differential between what your mouth is sayin' and what your ass don't have." With Maria selecting the blue corn tortillas, she says, "Peter!"

Peter nods, and gives it up, "We've been coaching everyone you've approached to string you along. The idea was to see where this effort was coming from and, do you know what surprised us?"

Candice says, "We were doing this on our own."

"Yea, exactly! Weren't we surprised, but we had to be sure."

"I take it you were planning to humiliate us with the vote?"

"We were, but now we want you to withdraw the vote."

Candice's eyes drill through Peter, asking, "Why now?"

"We're not exactly unsympathetic to your goals."

Dowds is licking his fingers, having wolfed down his first taco, "Are your arguments for your code of conduct good ones? Why wasn't

your contact point set at the moment of developing jump over warp? Why not opt for flight itself? Then, when you think about it, maybe it should be nuclear power or weapons over warp drive to initiate said contact? Maybe those would be better options? Point being, FTL drive is entirely arbitrary for a, an' I'll go ahead and say it, prime directive."

Candice points out, "We're not using those terms, Bill."

Wyandotte goes, "Why not? It is what you're going for."

Stockmyer says, "It kinda leaves a toxic taste in the mouth."

With Maria adding the meats to her tacos, she speaks up with, "Me thinks the words you ran into were, what...not, and...binding?"

Candice looks at Maria and swallows hard—next to Peter she is the one person that everyone in the CXi is very wary of, "We don't quite understand why this has created such a stink."

"It's an interesting quandary we have here." Maria nods and gestures towards the *olá* platters, "Looking at the food from *olá* is like a time warp to when I was five. The odd thing is that most of the *olá* patrons believe that the veggie-taco filling is old hat, but they think that the picho is a nuevo dish created by my stepfather."

Candice wonders, "Mr Cadieux and your mom are—"

"Married, yes, and my girls think Léon is a blast and a half!" She continues building her tacos, "My mother is Cuban, but my father was a blend of Tex-Mex and Aztec. Specifically, the Nahuatl, and those people sure do love their turkey! The picho on this platter is from a thousand year old recipe that my mother trans-morphed into her own thang. She actually injects a salted pork tallow into the meat before roasting and, after a two-hour rest she refrigerates it overnight and deconstructs the bird the next day. Taste it and you'll see that it is the most scrumptious and juiciest damn turkey you could ever imagine sinking your teeth in!" Maria turns to Candice, "You try it yet?"

Her face scrunches up, "I didn't know what picho was."

"It's Taco Tuesday, want me to make you one?" With Candice nodding, yes, Maria pulls up a blue corn tortilla and throws in the picho and vegetable mix while saying, "Now, this veggie-mix came after my father died. My mother couldn't upgrade to the CLaW, being an illegal, so she concocted this from her garden and kept me and my sister fed. She could only budget for one turkey a month, and that she had to stretch out as far as she could, but Ophilia became somewhat of a famous chef locally by cooking for our neighbors and catering on the side. Sneaking meat from those side jobs kept protein in our bellies." She holds up the taco and asks, "Cheese and salsa?"

Candice blinks, "Aaaah, feta an' the verde."

Surprised, Maria nods, "Good choices!"

With Maria adding those items and handing it to her, Candice wonders, "I'm curious, and not to be an ass, but why tell me the story of the culinary exploits of your mother?"

Maria reaches for her own plate while saying, "Well, I had a point to get to, but I think maybe we should just cut to the chase." Now sitting across from Candice, Maria takes a bite of her machaca taco and declare, "For you to say what you just did took a lot of nerve, Candice. That's the sort of backbone I can use around here!"

Candice recoils slightly, "Hu?"

Maria gestures towards Wyandotte, Dowds and Stockmyer, "See, these guys got saddled with your issues and, for the most part, I'm off the hook there! My focus is on Service Division and Militia affairs, and rarely do I ever have to deal with the science side of the house, but the last six weeks I've been snookered into dicking around with your shit, and you know what the issue *de jour* 'as been?"

Candice shakes her head, "I'm curious?"

"Mascots! Fucking mascots, can you believe it?" She thumbs over her shoulder, "John, here, sucks me into this problem because everybody wants to have a mascot for the whole of the CXI, and everybody still wants to keep their own mascot. Then, to spice things up, everybody is pushing for their mascot to be *the* mascot!"

Candice huffs a laugh, "Yea, I've been watching the polls."

"Ya get it, hu! The one condition I made was that they had to be in the public domain, and still we had over eighty mascots in the running. Astronomy glommed onto a double-A baseball mascot called Sprocket, and he's cool. The life sciences submitted some green-eared thing in a floating egg called Groku, or...Grogu was it? Then we have Sandy Cheeks offered up by the oceanography geeks and, honestly, she's my personal fave, but after twenty votes one bubbled up to the top. We'll announce it this afternoon but might as well tell you guys since you're here...it's a god-damned flying Pop Tart with a cat's head and rainbow spooling out of its ass to a J-pop spaz attack!"

The big guy sitting next to Candice goes, "Nyan Cat!"

"Yea, that's the one! And, before I could blow my top I hear that the Service Divisions got it's evil twin. A flying toaster waffle with a black cat's head and the skulls of its victims spiraling around it."

Candice smiles with, "I bet ya, you warmed up to that one!"

"Yea, sure, but we're back to square one. We needed some character to use so we can convey safety messages and shit, so now it

looks like we're gonna crowbar Rocket Raccoon into that job because it's the Service Militia mascot and they're on every station as well as all the Trung platforms driven by the Service Divisions."

"So, this effort was a dumb-ass effort?"

Maria cringes, "Do ya have to ask?"

Candice nods, "Okay, how 'bout cutting to that chase?"

Maria nods in return, "This humanities motherfuckery you've been beating to death, it ends here and now...because?"

Candice realizes that, "It's not binding?"

"Yea buddy, an' on so many levels."

"The United Nations adopted it!"

"Sure, under the UNDRIP declaration, but it's not binding."

"Didn't UNOOSA ratify it?"

"You can't get more 'non-binding' than UNOOSA, and as for the COPUOS, that is Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, well, they got a hard on for the CXi but everything they do is?"

Candice deadpans, "Not binding."

"You kinda clued in now? See, without the ability for you to put the Steel Annex and the Service Divisions under your thumb, this Code of Conduct thing ain't goin' nowhere. Come on, give it a try!" She motions for Candice to take a bite of the taco as she continues, "What you don't know is that the Service Divisions are operating under contract, and those contracts have clauses that specifically precludes and blocks what you're doing, and for them those stipulations were not negotiable. Because those provisions exist we have a CXi."

"Damn this is good!" Candice smacks her lips then suggests, "How about we adopt it for ourselves? Would that be a problem?"

"Kinda? Look, my side of the house is going to do everything they can to protect their people and what they're taxiing you around in. Their job is all about force projection, kicking ass and takin' names, and that's only if it's necessary! If ya'll in the science side of the house get in a jam then they may stick their willy into your sitch regardless of what rules you live by. The SDs, id est the Service Divisions, have the prerogative, at-will, to fix shit that needs fixin' an' they'll fix it how they see fit, and I do not get a say how they go about it."

"Aren't they held to Admiralty Law out there?"

"To a point, but we're entering unknown territory. I have only two rules from the Annex for the SDs to live by. First is *don't fuck up*, an' when shit happens, because it does, the second is *don't cover up*.

Yea, we'll be reviewing and critique their efforts, after the fact, but be assured it'll only be after the fact."

"I don't think that's enough."

"I'm not gonna tie their hands."

"Isn't the Service Militia supposed to be guarding the S3?"

"Yup, but the PMC guys work for me! The SDs are gonna come get 'em out of a pickle regardless of what you may want."

"That's also expressly stated under contract, right?"

Maria shakes her head, saying, "Ya have to ask?"

Candice looks to Peter and nods towards Maria, "Pete, from what I'm hearin' this doesn't sound at all sympathetic!"

Maria throws out, "Candice, if I may, and more likely than not what I'm about ta say will probably confuse the shit outta ya, but the more I think about what you're tryin' to do, the more I see merit in it."

She stares at Maria and goes, "Seriously, why? Is it because that was how the Nefer Key approached us when they did?"

Maria breaths and, "That's a false narrative."

Her people look at each other, and one of them dares to ask, "So, then the rumors goin' around are true?"

"How many tall tales makin' the rounds now, ten—twelve?" Maria shrugs then, "I ain't sayin' shit but one of 'em is the truth."

Another lady asks, "I hear that the Nefer Key has abducted large numbers of our males and use them as sex slaves. Is that true?"

Wide eyed, Maria goes, "It's not slavery if you wanna do it!"

Candice scowls, stating matter of factly, "I don't believe that! Nobody would ever volunteer to do that. I mean, nobody."

"Nobody?" Maria gestures to the big guy next to Candice, "Reginald, right?" He nods yes, so she asks, "Let me ask ya, Reggie, let's go back more than a few centuries, to a world full of violence and bloodshed. You know, warfare, starvation and oodles of horrific death, follow? Let's say something bad happens to you like, in a battle, and these little gray beings whisk you away and patch you up. They then say to you, 'We can take ya back where you came from or...you can come to our worlds! All the food and drink you could ever want, and no fighting, but all ya gotta do in return is to boink our women and put a smile on their faces.' An endless parade of horny little gray hotties, and they are! So, Reggie, what say you?"

His eyes look both ways before he says, "I can't answer that."

Maria leans in towards him, "Ya just did." As some of the ladies on their side give Reginald a dirty look, Maria sits back and says to Candice, "Imagine what you could learn up here working for me."

With suspicion, Candice asks, "You offering me a job?"

"I got two new Titus Stations that need leaders."

"Vincent Siino was announced this morning."

"Yea, that means I've got one open slot."

Candice recoils in disbelief, "For me?"

Maria shrugs, "Sure, why not?"

"Tell me why, or get bent."

Maria nods with tight lips, "Okay, we've noticed you always rootin' for the underdog. You brought in some boutique sciences that we didn't realize we needed and, well, you were right to push hard for 'em." She then thumbs towards her three execs with, "Then there was the wrench you threw into their gears. The Campfire Survey?"

Candice corrects her, "Infrastructure Survey."

Maria huffs a laugh, "Yea, whatever."

"I had time on my hands."

"You know, the big dog sciences spent an entire year fighting over the approach criteria for a life bearing planet, and here you came along to up-fuck their world."

"Wasn't I right?"

Nodding, yes, Maria breaths deep and, "Not to sound cliché, Candice, but you think outside the box, you go to bat for others, and when there is push back you don't take it personally."

Candice asks, "Aren't we supposed to be adults around here?"

"Ya think, but..." Maria shrugs, "You'd be one of the few."

"Okay, I'll take the job if you answer one question."

"Fair enough, spit it out!"

"The Mandala Report...was that thing released to create fear and push-back against non-interference like our Code of Conduct?"

Maris grins, "Why, yes...yes, it was."

"So it was all bullshit all along."

"No, that report is real."

"You denied it!"

"Exactly!"

"Why?"

Maria looks at her seven compatriots and asks, "Is everybody gonna shut the fuck up?" As they nod, yes, she pulls up a holographic screen and touches a red button, and with an almost inaudible buzzing sound in their ears, Maria says, "That, my peeps, happens to be the *Cone of Silence* I just kicked on. Your neuronet-POV audio and video capture is now scrambled and useless to you."

With Scott and Jacob stepping into Maria's office, Reggie leans in towards Candice to quietly say, "Dis gon be gud."

Maria goes, "Do you guys actually believe that the Nefer Key approached us four years ago—and now we're sittin' around holdin' hands, knobbing each other off and singing Kumbaya?"

Candice smiles, "That didn't pass the smell test."

"You'd be right." Maria smiles back as she motions for Jacob and Scott towards the *olá* platters, "See, Mandala was a United Nations study all to support your 'prime directive' nonsense, but it ended up destroying their everything—and everybody dropped this effort like a hot potato. So, from the modeling, we had a one in three chance of going to war with the Grays because of *how* they approached us. An implied threat is still a threat irregardless of how benevolent and altruistic they think their intentions may be."

Candice says, "We dodged that bullet."

Maria's eyebrows frown, "I beg to differ."

"Was Betelgeuse our response?" With a smile Maria shrugs big, so Candice goes, "I get it, think of what I could learn up here."

"When we got ahold of the model, and stripped out the bias, the results were shockingly worse than before." Maria points towards Candice and goes, "What I thought was interesting, and you might too, was that monolithic, one-world governments and cultures, had about an eighty percent chance of going to war where a multi-cultural world with a bazillion countries, like our Earth, fared so much better."

Candice nods repeatedly, "So, why we have all the Trungs with all those divisions out there is all about force projection, right?"

"Let me put it this way, Mandala made the CXi an easy sell." Maria sits back with a relaxed, "If you work for me this'll be a side job I'll throw in your court. And as for the Code of Conduct, I suggest that you continue to work on it and think of it in terms of..." Maria sweeps her hands overhead in a rainbow arc while saying, "Guidelines!"

"You want me to think of every possible approach?"

"For every possible world and peoples you can dream of, yea! As a heads up I'll push back on language that has words like shall, will and must, ya follow? The end product has to bend and flex, and per the Gray List we got time enough to get this done."

"I'm curious, who has access to that data?"

"Only the exec wing, we're it. On each of the Trung's it will be the Division Commander and Field Marshal who has access and, just so you know, SA Planning owns the data set."

"Planning? What are they doing with it?"

Maria chuckles, "Waddya think, wargames!"

Candice admits, "That was a dumb-ass question."

"You asked it, Candice!" As she rolls her eyes, Maria goes on to say, "For the CXi, the real value of that data set is as a tool to evaluate our methodologies and to catch mistakes in the field."

"That's been the talk around town but, after what I've learned about the Nefer Key, I seriously doubt if we'll be missing anything."

"That also happens to be the talk around the exec wing!" Maria, having nodded in agreement with her, now adds, "There will be a first contact comin' up soon, but it's far enough of a ways off for you to figure this out and show us the way! The long and short of it is, going forward, and you may not like this, but we're forced to approach all first contacts from the position of overwhelming dominance. How we tap 'em on the shoulder, and how we go about developing trust enough to bring them into the FIS, it's now in your hands! That is, if you decide to work for me. I can't think of a more important task at hand, and I can't find a person better suited to run with it."

"Can I bring some people with me?"

"Yes, but limit it to two."

"Janis an' Reggie."

"They're acceptable."

"You already checked them out?"

"Yea, and they know the meaning of STF-and-U!" Maria picks up a taco, then drops the cold thing back onto per plate, "Candice, to give you a heads up, to do this job you'll be the only science guy in the CXi with access to the Steel Annex's, Delphi system."

Candice then pointedly asks, "Alter of Chains, the rumors are makin' the rounds but...does access to Delphi come with that?"

Maria sighs, then, "There's a lot of talk out there, an' I can't contain the rumors and mindless chatter about a subroutine on Delphi."

Just be aware, and this means listen up Reggie and Janis, loose lips can be a fatal malady up on the exec wing, get me?" Then to Candice, "If you need access to the Alter...well, it will come for you."

Candice realizes, "Just don't ask for it."

As Jacob and Scott take a seat at the end of the conference table with their plates, Maria looks over the eight, "Everyone, I hate to cut this short but I gotta meet with these guys, so whenever Candice has something to look at on this project I want all of us here to meet on it and knock it around. Cool beans?"

"You mean we'll be able to talk freely, right?"

"The process is called a Murder Board."

"Looking for glitches an' stuff?"

"Yup! Whatever it takes to make things work, an' you'll love the process." Maria already has the holographic screen up and right as she touches the red button, with the inaudible buzzing sensation fading out, she goes, "We got a ton of food here so how 'bout you guys make a plate on the way out? After this next meeting I'll be opening it up to the floor so, please, have at it!"

Reggie nods towards the platters, "This happens a lot?"

Maria smiles, "You're gonna love it up here, Reggie, an' I'm gonna give you so much shit for the privilege!"

Reggie laughs, "Bring it on!"

With the others making a taco to go, and Reggie building a plate, Candice dares to ask Maria, "M'curious why were you beating around the bush with all the story-time detours?"

Maria snorts, "Oh that! That's so I wouldn't sound like a ball busting cunt like everyone says I am! I wanted you to take the job."

"What about your mother, we got time to finish that?"

"You takin' the job a done-deal?" With Candice nodding, yes, Maria says, "How 'bout you show up around six so I can treat you to Tabula Pasta, but before you take off...go peak behind my desk, in the credenza. That's where the story ends."

Candice takes a look and returns in jaw-dropping amazement, "Am I seeing things? There's five water jugs full of coins!"

"Sorted by two penny, one nickel, one dime and one quarter! At one time there were eight, five-gallon bottles but my sister and I gave three of 'em to my Aunt Dolphi, an' that's how the Herrero's got into the automobile market! With those in hand they did a bunch of coin-for-car trades when the coin market was stupidly high and the

auto market had pancaked into the dirt.”

Jacob says to Maria, “We got the time.”

Scott agrees, “Yea, I want to hear this.”

“Okay.” Maria says to Candice, “When *mi padre* died my little sister, Syleste and I inherited them. They came from my grandmother who got them from her grandfather who collected them. Anyway, my grandmother was getting on in years so, to help her out we moved into her house in Lincoln Heights. *Mi nana* had what my mother and father called a hording room—that was crammed full of all kinds of useless shit, so we never went in there. Now with her gone, and my father being killed shortly after her death, that following summer my mother had no money and the garden was still three weeks out so, needing to feed us, she all of a sudden remembered her mother-in-law talking about jars of coins. So, feelin’ kinda desperate, Ophilia dove into the hording room and wasn’t my mother shocked to stumble onto eight, five-gallon bottles filled with coins!”

Scott asks, “Those the bottles in your credenza?”

“Yup, that be them!” Maria looks back to Candice, “So, from an unsorted bottle, she took a handful of mixed change and we went to her wholesale butcher. She puts a single nickel on the counter and asks ‘What will that get me?’ My mother had no idea what they were worth, but the guy comes back and gives her a thirty-pound bird, four jars of pork tallow, and ten-pounds of skirt steak.”

Candice asks, “How many cars did your aunt buy with them?”

“I think just under a hundred? Those coins she got from us were worth millions. See, they just set up a machine shop in Arizona, an’ the commute from Havana meant they stretched their budgetary rubber band way-way too far. That spare change turned their world around.” Maria then laughs, “Then came their reality show, which is moronically-fucking stupid, but it has been great for business!”

Candice nods, “True that.”

Maria closes out by saying, “So, with this Code of Conduct, I’m hoping that you’ll be able to morph it into something useful, and maybe you’ll be the one to take the reins and make that first contact for us so we can avoid a...oh, I dunno, maybe a war?”

Candice nods, “That would be nice.”

Maria smiles at her, “Wouldn’t it?”

“Wait a minute, you want *me* to make contact!”

Maria points to herself, “You want me talking to ‘em?”

Candice almost laughs, “You do have colorful language skills.”

"Fifty years in the military and twenty on the streets of LA will do that to ya but, you know what they say about people who curse a lot? It's said that they are the most honest of people."

Candice laughs, "So, when do you lie?"

"Every time I open my mouth!"

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"Let me slam these down before we talk. I need to eat."

Having finished building a new plate, Maria drops into her seat at the conference room table and digs in while Jacob, Scott and Peter each make another taco for themselves, and by the time they sit down Maria is picking up her last taco while saying, "Guys, we need to step up the transfer of the Forty-Sevens. I'm in a jam."

Scott leans in to take a bite, "Yea, we figured as much."

"I wish Beth was here for this." Maria points to them, saying, "Oh, did you hear? Her granddaughter was born this morning!"

"If her daughter is any indicator on how this one will turn out then the wrinkled little ant-larva in that pic will end up a knock out!"

"That's essentially what Beth was saying!" Maria then laughs, "Come to think of it, our Jessica was a wickedly fugly baby."

Peter adds, "And look how she turned out!"

With everyone laughing, Scott asks, "I take it the last meeting went better than expected? You were wanting Candice Nehrer, and here she was, but you sounded like you weren't ready for that."

"She was with the gang of eight, an' that was a surprise."

"You didn't know she was part of that?"

Maria just took a bite and says, "Not a clue, and two hours is not enough time to plan, so I just rolled the dice best I could!"

"Well, score! I see she took the job!"

"Everything should've turned to shit, but—"

Jacob throws out, "You got a way with people."

Scott asks, "I'm curious, why'd you give her first contact?"

"Shootin' from the hip and it just came to me out of the blue!" Maria shrugs with, "Then, when you think about it, she is the most qualified to lead that effort, and now that she's part of the bigger picture I'm expecting great things outta her."

Jacob laughs, "Best part is you don't have to do it now!"

"That's a no du'h!" Maria takes a bite, "Ready to talk shop?"

Scott is about to take a bite, "I hear you're against the wall with outfitting the Service Divisions so, I gotta ask, you'll also want the bisE conversions for the time being, right?"

Maria downs the bite she just took, and, "Yea, we'll take those until we can get them replaced with the bisE's we'll be building. The hang up is we're still waitin' for the tooling."

"What, you don't have the tooling?"

"For the bisE, you guys are sitting on it." Maria thumbs over at Peter and, "Pete's been working on this."

Peter opens up with, "There are several problems that are in convergence that affect production. It's not just the Forty-Sevens, but let's start with those! Of the three fighter assembly lines on each station, only the Carrie Nation and Mata Hari moved to bisE production where the Bordon, Oakley and West lines were mothballed while you were building the Mbande platforms."

Scott adds, "The HWG production lines were shut down too."

"Yea, an' all that shaved six months off of each block."

Maria laughs to herself, "And here it gets messy!"

Peter nods in agreement while saying, "Currently, the lines on the Augustus stations break out into three lines for the Seventy-Fours, and two for the Cerberus, while keeping one Forty-Seven line to build the bisE-b's which...is now being expanded to also produce the E-a as well as the latest and greatest block of the bisE."

Scott goes, "We're focusing on the bisE for the Weasels."

"Yea, that is the priority! Now, as for the Titus Stations, all of their production lines went straight to Seventy-Four and Cerberus assembly after completing the block-two Trung's."

Scott realizes, "That's right, their lines never did get the bisE."

"All that tooling went straight into storage and, since you transferred the Titus stations to the CXi, their assembly lines for the Seventy-Fours have been shut down, but two of the Cerberus lines are in the process of being retooled for the CivX Interceptor."

Scott rears back, "I thought that was exclusively Palmdale?"

"Was, being the operative word."

"What happened there?"

"Recently their output is trickling out at one a day when under

contract they're supposed to be doing three a day, but now we want them doing at least six a day!"

"So, what's their hang-up?"

"This run is closing out and the run for the next twenty-four Trung's has not been signed off yet, and they wanna keep that line open so they're claiming supply chain holdups."

Scott rolls his eyes, "We own the supply chain."

"They don't know that!" Maria laughs, then nudges Peter, "Tell 'im what ya did that torqued their faces when they heard!"

Peter goes on to say, "I told 'em that we we're taking over the Three-Oh-Eight-X production for the CivX fighters but, if they look the other way, they'll get the export versions of the Three-Eighty and the Eight-X that all the SD members were scrambling to budget for, so it was okay with us if they bowed out of the Service Militia contract."

Scott snarks, "Gives 'em time to fix their supply chain issues."

"Yea, they can't suddenly claim that their supply chain has been magically fixed. They lose the Service Militia but they'll get the exclusive rights with the export Eight-X and Three-Eighty."

"You're not giving them the Three-Eighty cockpit?"

"They'd charge an arm and a leg for the install, but it's simply a plug and play with five minutes of testing. They'll be okay if we do it because they can ask a whole lot more for the Cerberus."

"They've both got the same fuselage."

"The loadouts and configs are way different and, for now, both ships are NERF'd compared to what we're flying."

Maria throws out, "Now, here's the best part!"

"You're not gonna like this one." Peter nods, then reveals, "The Titus stations will be doing two Eight-X lines in quarter output for now, and keep a Three-Eighty export line open at one a week. Then when we get the tooling we'll have three lines puking out the bisE."

Scott goes, "Getting that tooling to you is now my priority."

"Cool! What you don't know is that the other three lines are being tooled for the redesigns of the F-Fifty-One Djinn and the Enfield for Security Services. This Djinn is the D-2 and, since the update to our Enfield is significantly more robust, that's now the G-Model."

Scott is almost laughing, "Is this were I lose my shit?"

Maria adds, "We're calling it the Gargoyle. In fact, Boxter was the one that came up with that handle!"

Scott protests, "The war isn't over with yet!"

"Planning ahead, dude!"

Scott looks to Jacob, "Didn't you test fly the D2?"

Jacob says, "The D2's loadout is shit, it's a PEZ dispenser, but it does carry an obscene number of hornets. That and cannons, an' that's about it! It's a pure in-your-face dogfighter."

"I thought you said it was amazing?"

"To fly, yea, but this Djinn is a one trick pony! Not quite on par with the Seventy-Four, it can't skid for shit, but now the thing is competitive enough for me to wanna keep 'em at arms distance."

Maria asks Scott, "Can you take the numbers hit?"

Scott looks to Jacob, who says, "We'll be at three-hundred and sixty Thunderbirds per platform so, yea, with our low loss ratios and only two major engagements to go, we can take the hit."

"Maui on the first, but Pee-Towel is when?"

"Forty-Four Tau is probably at the end of February or maybe sometime in March? It all depends on how bad General Giáp and his crew puts-the-fuck to Scorch."

Maria looks to Scott while nodding towards Jacob, asking, "Can we pull him out of the fight?"

Jacob protests, "Not at this juncture."

Scott goes, "It'll be bad for morale if we did."

Maria says, "He's done enough for God and country!"

Scott reverts to his Jamacan/African accent when he says, "Our one an' only Obia Mon stays on task fo da duration, a'right."

She pleads, "Come on, give me something!"

"How 'bout this..." Scott turns to Jacob and, "Orders are for you to manage the fight, but stay out of it." He turns back to Maria, "That work for you?"

"You can do better!"

"Okay, I'll guarantee this, he's out of all the small actions that are coming up, and there is a shit-ton of 'em, but he's on for both Maui and Rho Tau. I ain't pullin' him out of those engagements."

"Give me something!"

Scott glances at Jacob and turns back to Maria, "The Alter suggested that I have a ghost droid shadow him on Maui so...I'll have a ghost droid shadow him on Maui!"

Jacob rolls his eyes, "Under protest."

"You don't get a vote, Chuckle Fuck!"

Jacob shakes his head while muttering, "Asshole."

Maria smiles towards Scott, "I see you're getting into the swing of things!" Then to Jacob, "Who's driving it?"

"Bud."

"Hu? He's a zoomie, not a ground pounder! How 'bout ya pick Simmons, or Prather, Hewlett, or maybe Paleo?"

Scott goes, "I made the same argument but it is Jacob's choice. At least Bud will be overclocked to the nth degree."

Jacob says, "I had the jump seat to Trixie Pi pulled, and a cradle installed for the droid. I'm giving you guys that, okay?"

Scott informs Maria, "Just so you know, the Co-op's general staff has been begging me to pull Graves out of action so, I gotta ask, what does Hartcourt think?"

Maria shrugs, "He wants us to leave him in."

Scott's face scrunches up, "Why?"

"It's making the command staff freak the fuck out."

"I don't understand the vibe between you and that guy?"

"I'll fill ya in when this is over with." Maria turns to Jacob, "Speaking of which, come see me on the third. Eleven-hundred hours would be good!"

"Sure. Can you give me a heads up on what this is about?"

"Family business?" Jacob spins his hand asking for more so Maria goes, "For starters, Boxter and Nigel both want to tag along with you and Michelle when ya'll come see Diego at spring training."

Jacob wonders, "Okay, but why didn't they ask me?"

Maria almost laughs, "With the war still on they're not gonna text anything, and you are kinda hard to get a hold of?"

"That's right, they're family!" Bewildered, Scott now sets his elbows on the table and buries his face in his hands while blurting out, "I can't wait until this shit is over with."

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