

114

number one on my personal spank bank

LCTN: SOL-3 GOOSE HUNT, VIRGINIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-MARCH-28-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 11:45zulu (local 06:45est)

It is nuts to see Diego dressed nice and ready to go this early.

Dawn heralds the first day of a two-day break before the MLB regular season starts this Friday, but yesterday afternoon, while her team celebrated the last preseason win, Diego was hotfooting it out for the mail run in from One-Klick that just landed at the Padre's facility.

Dropping Diego off here at Goose Hunt just made sense.

The Steel Annex has a fenced in quarter square-kilometer of the airdrome, what everyone here calls the freight yard, east of and butted up to the Willoughby Spaceport. A quarter of that is the service center to support ships coming in and out of Home Base.

For a facility with a civil bent to it, the SA has a surprisingly high volume of missiles and bombs and bullets stored here. They also have a shitload of CWR-RAT food packets sitting on the pallet racking that they cycle out through the Annex facilities here on Earth, but half of those pallets actually have ghost droids cocooned inside. With those the Annex has a tightly packed, kami-origami bundle of six droids, a whole squad, so if the signal goes out they can burst, unravel and hit the deck shooting inside eight-seconds.

These pallets are also rotated through their facilities, and they have anywhere from four or five companies of these evil things up on the racking at any given time.

For Diego, the geezer squad of six retreats that run this place were a blast and a half to hang out with. Between the bar-b-que and pool table, the hot-tub and 76 hands of Texas Holdem, Diego surprised herself when she actually got her ass out of bed in time to shit-shower and dress with a half-hour to spare! Any other morning her tail would

be dragging but she wanted to have coffee with the crew before Maria showed up. The cherry on top was when Chuck, the crew leader here, braided her long black hair with ribbons entwined just like he used to do with his granddaughters when they were little.

Chuck and the crew really wanted nothing to do with Diego when they heard the big cheese's daughter was getting dumped in their laps, but her bringing in steaks and spuds was a surprise—and by the time they hit the sack at 2am they were her biggest fans.

Guess who's buying tickets to the National's next month?

Anyway, Maria is piloting Sasha's brand-new suborbital glider with Alexander and Copper riding along. Tagged as an SA admin-flight the ATC ignores them as they drop into Northern Virginia to a service altitude at or below 100 feet AGL, and way below the commercial flight tracks coming into the Willoughby Spaceport from the south. Now above the Oatlands, they swing to the north and then west to skim over the top of the Hogback to land at the Annex partition located at the far southeast corner of the Freight Yard.

The Annex has their own east/west landing strip they share with the United States Air Force, who has a very similar facility across the apron, and when coming in from the east they can land without ATC involvement. Now operating like a normal floater, Maria turns right and drifts into the open hanger doors that cover the western side of the facility. Pulling up to the office and apartment complex built in the northwest corner of the warehouse, the four pile out of the glider and enter the door to the first floor.

Where the exterior of this facility looks utilitarian and Spartan, even the gas grill outside appears secondhand, the inside of this living section is shockingly gorgeous. Over the years the retread crews put some serious effort sprucing the interior up.

Maria walks in, gawking, "Who the fuck took a gargantuan southwest contemporary dump in this place, hu?"

As the other three step in and around Maria, also impressed by the sharp, stylish and clean décor, Chuck huffs a laugh while nearing the end of Diego's braid, "Who the fuck is asking?"

Maria smirks, "Your Über Führer, that's who the fuck!"

Diego laughs, "Be nice, mom!"

"I am being nice!" Maria protests, then looks towards Chuck, "How've ya been, Chief?"

Having tied the bow at the end of the braid, he pats Diego on the shoulder, "There babe!" Then smiles at Maria, "It's corporal now. I'd rather go back to bein' a PFC5. There's a lot more stroke to it."

Maria shrugs, "Well, you'll always be a chief to me!"

He shrugs, "An' you'll always be a maggot to me!"

"Last time I laid eyes on you was when, dude?"

"They were packing your ass off to law school, and what the fuck that was all about was beyond me. Like you were gonna make something of yourself? Fat fuckin' chance there!"

"This guy..." Maria drops into the seat in front of Diego and points to Chuck sitting behind her, "This guy here was our regimental chief. While I was gone they shipped him out to the Pandemonium."

Chuck finishes with, "Yea, and after the war I ended up as the Command Chief for the Iron Man."

"When did you retread?"

"A year before they wasted the ol' bastard out at Dedede. Broke my heart when it got nebulized."

Maria nods, "Yup, that was a damned good ship."

Chuck stresses, "It was the best damned ship."

Maria shakes her head, "Sorry 'bout that."

"I understand why ya did it, I just don' have to like it."

One of Chuck's crewmembers adds, "Never in a million years would anybody ever believe that we would intentionally do that."

Maria goes, "They still don't believe it."

Chuck leans in towards Maria, "True, the ploy worked, but you'll get no forgiveness from me." He then pats Diego on the arm, "But havin' your little thigh sprout here made up for it!"

Maria asks Diego, "So you've been makin' friends?"

Diego throws it back at her, "The best damned friends!"

Chuck goes, "We're gonna go watch her play the Nationals."

"For that, let me hook ya up!" She then motions for Diego to, "Wanna make the intros?" Diego hops up and makes the introductions for everybody, and when done, Maria goes, "We gotta get goin'."

Chuck volunteers, "You know, if I drive ya I can get you there faster by cuttin' through the thirty and fifteen-naut rings."

"I don't want to put you out any more than I already have."

"Well, I'm headin' out to Oceana anyway. Takin' the squids a QP-generator for a Cerberus that arrived DOA."

Maria's eyes squint, asking, "What are you getting in barter?"

"Monday their engi-squids are bringing in backhoes to rip up the asphalt and dig us a pool out back!"

"Seriously, for a generator?"

"Well, for them it's five-mill, US, but for us it cost nothin' and I got dozens of 'em collecting dust up on the racking."

A crewmate says, "Comes with a ground level hot tub."

Another nods with, "Schedule-eighty plumbing."

Another adds, "A Granite bar with fridge!"

The lady crewmate laughs with, "And their C.O. says he'll be springing for the Tiki-torches out of his own pocket!"

Maria wonders, "Isn't it a warranty item?"

She goes on to say, "Yea, but with production in Palmdale shootin' up for export contracts it will take at least six-months to get one kicked off on their dock. I checked."

Chuck grins, "But I'm coming through for 'em today."

Maria gives an approving nod, saying, "Fair trade I say."

He then thumbs back to their garage, "Send your floaty back to Austin and let's load 'em up! M'kay, boss lady?"

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Metric may be a universal standard, sure, but for navigation in and around Earth both altitude and distance are still expressed in feet and nautical miles. Only military flights, or pilots with the proper licensing and certifications, can enter the progressively restrictive tiered zones of airspace that encircle Washington DC.

Commercial pilots are allowed to navigate the 30nm SFRA without much trouble, but to enter the 15nm FRZ ring they'll need security clearances, permits, and an approved flight plan or they'll be intercepted and escorted out of the zone by fighters. Then, turn away from an approved flight path towards the P-56 "oh, hell no" zones in central DC and you may get shot down. Well, P-56B you may get a warning first, but for P-56A they'll just give you the trigger.

NORAD oversees this air space, and select US military units have free reign over both the 15nm ring and P-56 zones, but the one exception to this are pilots on the 'hot list' for the Steel Annex. Over seventy pilots flying the trash, mail, beer and red-eye runs coming in and out of Earth are authorized for the 30nm ring, but there's a short list of select pilots that have been cleared "hot" and this includes the geezer crew out at Goose Hunt. These guys are on alert and scramble

their fighters with the US Air Force air crews from across the apron at Willoughby, as well as a rotating ANG squadron always standing by at Andrews Air Force Base on the other side of DC. Those also on the hot-list include Maria, Zamboni, Vossler and Jessica who have all landed on the south lawn under the call sign, Air-Force-One.

Chuck radios local ATC, "Reagan, ACC-SA-Six."

["Reagan, go ahead SA-Six."]

"SA-Six, advising Reagan we'll be taking the CONR approved VFR route from Goose Hunt to Andrews. You copy?"

["Reagan, SA-Six, we see your transponder. You are clear with a twenty-minute window. Eighty-AGL on leg three. Please advise if you stray from the corridor. Reagan out."]

The Annex six-seat glider drifts out to the apron and taxis towards the runway. Once there they lift off, straight up, then head due east towards Lowes Island on the Potomac river.

It's a hands-on flight under VFR rules, so when they hit Lowes they turn right 37° for the next nav-point, Theodore Roosevelt Island, and as the Potomac snakes back and forth under them, Maria asks, "How often do you guys scramble hot with the Zoomies?"

Chuck shrugs with, "'Bout once every week or so?"

"Orbit the fifteen-mile loop at eighteen-thousand?"

"Yup! We just sit an' spin while covering them. The hundred and thirteenth has been runnin' an active CAP when the zones are busy, so the calls to scramble are down considerably."

"That's good to hear."

After a few seconds of silence, Diego asks, "Chuck, the thing is coming up on the right, right?"

Last night they were talking about the memorial statue to Claudia Willoughby, at the entrance to Arlington Cemetery, so Chuck snorts a laugh, "Right when we turn into the next leg."

Sasha shakes her head, "Let's not."

Alexander goes, "No, I wanna see this!"

Sasha protests, "Seriously, do we have ta?"

Both Diego and Alexander laugh at her, "Yea!"

Maria looks at Chuck and says, "If we can stop for a minute?" He nods his head over his shoulder, towards Sasha, so she then says, "Yea, ah, make it a half-a-minute."

The Annex glider drops to eighty-feet and slows down while it

approaches Roosevelt Island. Flat turning right by 15° Chuck brings the glider to a stop over Arlington Memorial Bridge.

Only Chuck doesn't know that Sasha, seated behind Maria, who is to his right, is *the* Claudia Willoughby. That is the very person represented by the twenty-meter tall bronze statue that is mounted to a ten-meter tall granite pedestal in the middle of the roundabout at the entrance to the Arlington National Cemetery.

The figure before them is that of the late President, in what appears to be a sheer, form-fitting, floor length peignoir-wrap that blends seamlessly into the pedestal. With eyes closed, her arms are outstretched as if she were in a swan-dive, but here that dive has her soaring up into the heavens. Because this president has been so shamelessly fetishized over the centuries, it's been argued that this monument is the most beautiful bronze sculpture ever made—on top of being the largest single-cast successfully attempted.

With the light from a sun that is low over the eastern horizon, enhancing the contours of this surprisingly erotic sculpture, Alexander, Copper and Diego can only gasp when they see it for real.

After a few seconds, Chuck says, "Ya know, Sasha, you look like President Willoughby...when she was young." As the glider now continues for Andrews, he glances back at her, "You don't sound anything like her, but you sure as shit look like 'er!"

With her broken slav accent, Sasha says, "I get that a lot."

Diego volunteers, "Chuck sent me his PBDi avatar of her."

Maria snorts a laugh as she asks, "The interactive one?"

Diego grins big, "What would be the point if it wasn't?"

Maria nudges chuck, "I gotta know, is it any good?"

Chuck shrugs, "If you must know I've had it since I was a kid, and it's still number one on my personal spank bank."

With Alexander, Copper and Diego suppressing their laughter, and Sasha shaking her head, Maria nods, "Ya got good taste, Chief!"

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After three centuries the 89th Airlift Wing is still in service and doing what they do best—which is hauling shit around. They handle an esoteric assortment of aircraft not common in Air Force inventories, but the only reason they've survived the many organizational changes that regularly redefine the United States military is that they have been the one Presidential Airlift Group for as long as anyone could remember. So, with the PAG and Special Air Mission groups combined

they get tasked with hauling VIP shit around in style! Their parent unit designation has changed a handful of times over the years, but they've always come back as the 89th when times are good—and times have been really good under President Mofid.

Experto crede they say, and for the 89th that really matters.

It was only 40nm between Goose Hunt and Andrews, and the second Chuck touches down he kicks them all out on the tarmac in front of the hanger doors to the latest build of the massive PAG facility at the southwest corner of the air base. Chuck then zips off laser straight towards the Naval Air Station at Oceana some 230 klicks away, or 125 nautical miles per local navigational standards.

The Air Services guards and Secret Service know who these people are and didn't bat an eye when they piled out. They were scheduled to show up and, since they are around a lot, they're treated better than the extended members of the first family. Fact is, since the Steel Annex supplies the United States with HWG99's at cost, and ghost droids under the table, more importantly Maria and everyone from "spooky town" are treated as equals.

Marine One, VA70x, a pimped out version of the armored AA70d assault transport, drops in and puts down at the exec landing pad at the PAG facility. After a few seconds a Marine in dress uniform opens the armored door to the craft where President Mofid and the First Lady step out of the ship, followed by an assortment of the usual White House staff toadies.

Mofid returns the salute to the Marine...

This president has this weird, almost visceral respect for their men and women in uniform and it shows. When returning a salute he tries hard to make that all-important eye contact with the rank-n-file troops tasked with guarding him. This admirable behavior, however, is counterbalanced by a strange and, one could say, eerie suspicion of the officer corps...well, specifically O8 and above that is.

What pisses the high-brass off is that all presidential security details are infused with a shaker full of Delta and Air Service types in the mix where, behind closed doors, Mofid makes a point to hear what they have to say. Point being is that from them he hears what he needs to hear and not what the general staff wants him to hear.

Anyway, it's 7:25am and the silhouettes of two charcoal black Razorbacks are silently approaching them from the taxiway. Mofid steps up to the brass salad consisting of the Air Force member to the Joint Chiefs, the CO to the 316th Wing that commands Joint Base Andrews, and then the Colonel commanding the 89th Wing along with his XO. The lead here today is the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the

Presidential Airlift Group, his XO as well as their E9—who sits on the right hand side of god around these parts.

When the Annex offered Mofid a brand new VC, Air Force One that is, at cost, the Air Force leadership was vehemently opposed to it. Since the current VC85, Boeing Trident Star Clipper, in a Super Guppy “party barge” configuration, cost the taxpayers over 38-billion for the two ships—the VC88 Razorbacks, like the big one sitting behind them right now, was only 23-million out of pocket. All the Air Force had to cough up for was components, kit and fluff that the SA couldn’t source out of an asteroid for the interior layout of the hold.

Now, Esma ran with this project for her husband, and what tickled her pink was that, with these numbers, the brass and the GAO couldn’t come up with one substantive argument against it.

While Mofid has to give a few minutes to the generals, Esma gravitates towards the PAG crew and says, “I wanna thank you all for keeping this thing with these new ships on the down low. When we go to Geneva next week the Euro-trash will be pissing themselves!”

The LC nods, “You get your wish, Madame! This’ll do it.”

With the staired-ladders down on both Razorbacks, Cricket Washington and Beth Sandoval exits the larger one and approach from behind as Esma turns to Maria, “Great to see ya, Mar!”

Maria smiles, “Lookin’ forward to getting’ your hands on ‘em?”

“First, let me get my hands on sum hugs!”

Esma hugs Maria, then the others, and while pulling away from Diego she goes, “Now, where are my toys?”

Mofid didn’t notice Cricket and Beth behind them when he turns for Maria and the others, “Mar, Sasha, Alex, Copper, Sian, great seeing ya’ll today! Are the new ships here?”

Maria points past him and Esma, “Right behind ya, Moot!”

Mofid hasn’t been called that since Bob was around, so he smiles as he turns—and his eyes light up when he sees Cricket and Beth, where Cricket says, “Hello, Mister President!”

“Beth!” He nods to Beth then says to Cricket, “Cricket, you’re a head of state now, so you can knock that shit off when the press ain’t around!” He then points to the two ships behind them, and like all of the HWG series—in full on sunlight they look like massive black holes sitting on the tarmac, “That them?”

Cricket motions to Beth who says, “Sir, the larger HWG99e, tail number 99-echo-0002, is VC-88 code named Sasquatch. The next ship is a HWG101a4, tail number 91-alpha-40032, and is SC-92 code

named Soccer Mom. The other Air Force One and Two replacements will be delivered this afternoon...Sir."

Maria adds, "Hope you like 'em, dude!"

Mofid rears back slightly, "I thought they were supposed to be painted already? What happened to that?"

The exterior of the large one changes as Beth goes, "It's a dial up, sir. There's matte, glossy-black, pixelated gray camo, and a whole variety of blues to choose from. Then this is our favorite pink camo, that's for those sneaky dawn or dusk incursions, and—"

"Where's our livery?"

Esma prods her husband with an elbow, "How's this?"

The skin of the VC88 suddenly goes into an animated video that covers the entire ship. With "Stars and Stripes Forever" blasting away we see an American flag waving across the skin. This is followed by fireworks, marching minutemen and bald eagles zooming about.

With more fireworks, and a piccolo dominating the melody, the head of a monster screaming eagle shrieks on the front of the ship, so Esma gives him a big hug with an excited, "Do ya like it, hon?"

President Mofid slowly turns his head towards her, "Let's not."

Esma is about to burst out laughing, where she swallows big and says, "Okay, how 'bout this?"

The skin of the new Air Force One switches over to the retro, baby-blue and effeminate *Loewy Livery* scheme, where Mofid does a double take and almost shouts, "Oh, hell fuckin' no!"

Esma explodes, laughing, and goes, "Okay, how's this?"

The ship switches over to what is still, to this day, referred to as the *Trump Livery* so Mofid goes, "Now THAT's a keeper!"

Laughing along with the others, Maria goes, "We need to get going here. We'll do the walk through under way."

Everybody remains in the front half of the ship and strap in, with Esma in the VIP section alongside Sasha and the kids, where their E9 escorts President Mofid, Maria and Beth to his office in the back.

Entering the office, Mofid asks, "My ass is in the aft...why?"

Beth goes, "We sim'd the shit out of this. The bulkhead here, outside your office and through the rear of the fuselage, is hardened, so if we end up flying into the side of a mountain at six-hundred Knots this bulkhead and space has survived that smashup every time!"

Maria adds, "None of your people got a vote."

"Easy mentioned it but I forgot." As they all grab a seat and belt in, Mofid asks, "Chief, they wouldn't send you back here alone unless they wanted you to tell me something so, what is it, son?"

The E9 nods and says flatly, "Sir, you have this uncanny way of thumbing your nose at the rules. All the rules."

"It got me where I am today."

"That it has, Mister President, but now we have a rule for you that we're not gonna yield or bend in the slightest. Ya wanna hear it?"

Mofid nods with a smile, "Okay, puke it out, Chief!"

"This thing hauls ass, so at thirty-thousand feet or fifteen minutes away from docking you are to find your way back here and strap in where, with all due respect, at twenty-thousand or ten minutes to dock we'll come escort you...to...your...seat, Sir."

Mofid chuckles, "You're not gonna give an inch?"

With the ship rolling, the E9 is not kidding when he huffs and, "I don't give a fuck if you've got a worm-hole channel to Allah himself on your prayer rug! Thumb your nose at my crew at twenty or ten and they'll hogtie ya and handcuff your ass to that seat...Sir."

With a laugh, Mofid goes, "Okay, Chief! I will comply."

The E9 nods back, "Good to hear, sir! Have a pleasant flight."

With him turning away to exit the office, Mofid calls him back, "I got a hypothetical question, Chief!"

The E9 turns back and says, "I don't do hypothetical, Sir."

"Humor me anyway!" With the E9 nodding, yes, Mofid goes, "So, what if I had the First Lady on all fours an' she's screaming for me to give it to her, and we've hit the ten-minute window. Waddya do?"

"In all honesty, sir?"

"I wouldn't be askin'!"

The E9 shrugs, "Drag your ass away and, if the First Lady is still beggin' for it, well...with only eight weeks left on my 1411, and to protect my people, I'll take the bullet for the team, Sir!"

With Maria and Beth cracking up, Maria goes, "Yea, he'll do!"

The E9's eyes squint, "Do for what, Marshal Ramirez?"

"Chief Zajic, on the CXi side of the house I got me a shit-ton mish-mash of disperit American units comin' together, and if they're gonna take over for SA personnel I gotta get someone ta box their ears so they'll be towing *our* line! You'll be leaving with me this afternoon and I'll have you back on a beer run this Friday."

The E9 asks, "This a job offer, Madame?"

"You come highly recommended, but from here on out it's Maria or Mar, m'kay?" With him nodding, yes, she adds, "The short of it is, after six-weeks in our Annex retread program, you'll transfer to the CXi as a Command Chief, the equivalent to a Major General here. And, that little divot cut in the star surrounded by all those stripes and rockers means that the shit comin' out of your mouth—will be comin' from me. You'll be speaking for me, Chief."

The E9 asks pointedly, "I answer to you...alone?"

"Only to me." Maria nods, then, "And if you know of ten or so people who you'd want to work for you, workin' for me, then hand that list to the Barkeeper, directly. Nobody else, *capiche?*"

Mofid adds, "A variety of experienced people from across the silos would be preferred. Our involvement with the CXi needs to succeed and, well, you're it if you want the job."

The E9 nods and salutes Mofid, "I won't disappoint ya, Sir."

Mofid returns it, then, "Worry about her, not me! If you're makin' Tigger happy, it makes me happy!"

The Chief turns to her and dares to ask, "Even if on all fours?"

Laughing big, Maria says, "It's all in or nothin', Chief!"

He nods, "Everything is a joke with you, hu?"

"Got me ta where I am today!"

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They have 90 minutes scheduled to get to the Carrie Nation, but it'll take VC88 only 38 minutes from wheels up on 01-Left, transit 1,048.73 light years—and hit the dish side flight deck of the battle station that's in orbit around the red dwarf One-Eighty, 1,800au from the binary-primary star, U-Turn. Logging this very first AF1 flight cycle will be a revelation for the Lieutenant Colonel in command of the PAG. Both the flight and maintenance crews told him that this thing flies like *Speed Racer*, but this little ride along changes all their SAM planning charts and scheduling going forward.

Because their tour of this new ship got cut short they decided to pick it back up on the way home, and with the extra time, and very few showing up for today's christening, they decided instead to take a quick tour of the Claudia Willoughby, CX102-US.

On the United States Naval books as CX102.

See, the CXi made a point to have the operating countries use

a secondary designation with their two-character country code as an operational prefix. The Air Force wanted "US" as said prefix but the prefix "CX" works perfectly for the Naval ship designation schema. The problem is that the Navy will be running the ship, and the Air Force will be running the aircrews, and the Army will be providing the troops and armor, but none of them see things the same nor do they speak the same language. Then you have the United States Marine Corps, and these guys figured this shit out long ago, but nobody wants to talk to them and nobody wants to give an inch.

The United Kingdom, Russia, France and the Nefer Key will all experience similar growing pains while adapting to their Trungs on this go round, and the Annex will be running these ships and guiding them along the way. Then when you toss into the mix the science dweebs, and Security Services coming in after the war—for the United States this will all be doubly painful.

Rolling out of the air lock and onto the main flight deck of the Carrie Nation, they disembark Sasquatch and load up onto a handful of eight-man wheeled golf carts. They hit the utility elevators and ride up to the midpoint of the central hub. When they all exit the lifts, the five carts race off down a tunnel towards what the Air Force generals here insist on calling US102.

Point is, last Thursday was the christening of the Enterprise, with the designation of CX101, interchangeable with US101, and it was a media circus. This gala was the first christening of a CXi Trung, as well as the first ship named Enterprise in quite a long time! With over one-thousand dignitaries, and a hundred reporters too, the biggest celebrity draw was the cast from the eighth reboot of Star Trek taking center stage—with the actress playing Nyota Uhura smashing the bottle of White Star champagne over the center kiosk on deck eighteen in the stack. All the while the ship's SYLNb clone, derived from the DNA that actress volunteered, applauding from the sidelines!

That was huge, but today will be a quiet affair by comparison.

Streaking along a nine-meter wide tunnel, when the color of the walls at 700 meters change from blue to a dark-gray, this indicates that they have entered the aft portion of CX102, in the tunnel nestled in the center of the quad-pod. That is the four quantum particle engines that are rarely ever used. Exactly 400 meters later they enter a massive dark cavity that is 50 meters wide by 100 meters deep. The lights above their heads are 120-meters up, and below them it's all of 110 meters down. They are now zipping across a 100-meter long beam-support ramp that connects the tunnel on both sides when this space not in use. The ramp is smackdab/dead-center of a platform elevator shaft that connects all four of the flight decks in the ship, with two above in the dome side and two below in the dish side.

Reentering the tunnel, that here balloons to thirteen meters in width, they rip past an elevator bank, hundreds of utility hatches and bulkheads, and 200 meters later they slow to a crawl while passing another elevator bank right before entering the atrium in the stack.

Everyone at the christening last week, or watched the stream of it, was floored when they laid eyes on the stack of the Enterprise. Twenty-five beautifully appointed and spacious structural decks are in the sail, each with an added secondary riser deck in between. With all the transparent walkways and guardrails, along with planters filled with ivies and dwarf trees everywhere you turn, for a military ship this was not at all expected and shocking to see for the first time.

Mofid and the gang, rolling into the spacious atrium on the 18th deck of the Willoughby, didn't bat an eye because what they see here was expected, and they were not disappointed.

Since VC88 landed 52 minutes early, and everyone is already here, they decide to push the christening and commissioning ceremony of CX102 up an hour. They only had enough time to see the bridge and CIC, where they learned that, unless they were duking it out in an actual dogfight, and the Iron Maiden has, it's actually the CIC where all the real action takes place—not the bridge.

At 14:55zulu, for them 9:55est, with a modest three-hundred in attendance, and only seven reporters, when Maria enters the atrium with Mofid and Esma she can hear a Secret Service agent say to his wrist, "Barkeep, Bouncer and Tigger have entered."

It was at that moment Maria realizes that the Secret Service could use their own secure instance of the Annex tacnet.

With Mofid and Esma taking their seats, Maria steps up to the lectern, by the central kiosk mount, and says, "I wanna thank you all for coming. I know this is a big chunk out of your day, and I don't think you want to hear me ramble on about stuff. I'm gonna let Lloyd Wyandotte and President Mofid do that to ya!" With everyone there chuckling, Maria cuts it short, "I know these guys are gonna bang on about cooperation. You know, inspiring words about us joining hands, workin' together and Kumbaya. An' that means the Jabbers, Xhemal, Nefer Key and humans together. It's what they're supposed to say, it's what we need but, the fact is...we don't know what's out there. Haven't got a clue, so...we're gonna go find out."

Before she can step down a reporter asks, "How many of these platforms are you building for the CXi?"

Maria shrugs, "Hundreds? There's a lot to explore out there." She then motions for Wyandotte, "Lloyd."

The reporter couldn't resist, and asks a follow on question,

"The Annex has the smaller Mbande and you're not making any more. We were told they were 'right-sized' for their mission, but that doesn't tell us anything. What edge do they have over the Trungs?"

Maria wonders if she should answer that, but with Wyandotte stepping up she thinks why not, "'Bout half a second!"

With Wyandotte starting his speech, and Maria tying into the tacnet to chat with Cricket, Esmá, Michelle, Sasha and Jessica, and with Diego, Alexander and Copper quietly cracking jokes to each other, Mofid ties into Jacob's mind via the tacnet and asks, <"So, you're the captain of one of these things?">

<"Well, Mister President—">

Mofid rolls his eyes and, <"Knock that off here!">

Jacob smiles, <"But, you happen to be—">

<"After six years, that shit gets real old. I'm still Moot.">

<"I'm not the captain per se, I'm a Field Marshal, which is the mission commander. I figure out where we go and the shit we do when we get there. The Deputy Field Marshal commands the division, and their exec, a Command Chief, they run the division.">

<"Who runs the ship then?">

<"That would be another Command Chief who has a crew outside of the divisional table of organization. They drive the ship.">

<"Aren't you the commanding officer with the final word?">

Jacob's face scrunches up slightly when he goes, <"Yea, 'bout that, we don't have an officer corps. Not a one, so when you ask who the captain of the ship is and who has the final word it's...kinda the wrong question?"> Mofid looks confused so Jacob goes, <"Look, the chief has final say if we do something risky with the ship. If we wanna do a 'random walk' he gets to overrule us. Okay, here's an example of why we're different...everybody flies! There is not one of our people who cannot pilot a Razorback. We can all do it! Because of this we do not have a division between an air element as opposed to the ground element. For any mission each regiment or battalion will select the aircrews from within their T.O. for the type of mission planned. Then, if you can believe this, ninety-five percent-plus of our fighter pilots are PFC-Two and PFC-Three in rank. Again, we don't have officers.">

Mofid is taken aback by this, <"None, seriously!">

<"That's a no-shit, big guy! Only two at my level are fighter pilots, and that's Field Marshal Cyzk and myself. See, driving a Trung is like piloting a Razorback. Some of the time it's point and click, sure, but you've got a stick at your right, a throttle on your left and peddles

for yaw control, so when the shit hits—it’s a barnstormer!”>

Mofid wonders, <“Then anyone can step in?”>

<“Yup, old school stick and rudder!”>

<“You know, I’ve been made aware of a huge problem.”>

<“What problem could that be?”>

<“Efficiencies, we’re terrible at that.”>

Jacob huffs a laugh, <“Mofid, dude, we’re not gonna realize any efficiencies out of the mix of countries coming to us, with all their unique cultures, and that’s especially true for you guys. You’ve got competing branches, with hostile divisions and jealously protected responsibilities, and skill sets, then ya toss in the constantly rotating crews, and endless training...our goal here is to establish effectiveness across the silos. When it hits the fan what matters is effectiveness and not efficiencies. Yea, there are a few things we gotta unfuck here, but let my people take care of that for you. Leave it to us.”>

<“Maybe we should model after you?”>

<“Oh, hell no! Don’t dick with what you got! In spite of all your organizational inefficiencies, and the unrelenting mutherfucking infighting, what you have is perfect for what you need. Don’t you change anything! Again, let us do it!”> With Mofid stewing on that, Jacob adds, <“Maybe in the not so distant future your military branches will see the light—but *they* have to approach you! Do not impose it upon them. THAT would be a disaster.”>

Mofid asks, <“I’m up now, can we chat later?”>

<“Sure!”> Jacob turns to him and smiles, <“You’re a friend to Maria, and with ol’ Bob, so that makes you a friend of mine.”>

Mofid stands while saying, <“I don’t have a lot of friends.”>

Jacob nods with understanding, <“That’s two of us.”>

After a few minutes on the virtues of cooperation, Mofid turns to Claudia Willoughby, “There’s very little we can say about President Willoughby that hasn’t been said a million times over. Two centuries of countless books, movies and documentaries have laid her life bare in vivid detail, but this one little thing has never gotten out until just now. If you can believe this, on her first run the Secret Service called her Barbie, but in 2100 they changed it to Phoenix when she swept all the primaries. Now, as president, I have to say my favorite moment was when she bulldozed the United Nations in New York. Sure, she paid to rebuild it, but she got her point across. After that...yea, even now that makes her a real tough act to follow!” Mofid gestures to the bottle of champagne beside the lectern and calls out, “Jessica!”

From the back of the atrium, Jessica steps forward in a tight body-contour dress that's the same color as her red hair. With a high neckline, long sleeves and skirt to her mid-thigh, this dress reveals nothing except a knockout figure. With a provocative walk, she steps past the reporters and says to all of them via her eerie mind link, <"Remember, you guys say anything...it won't be a social visit.">

Jessica picks up the bottle of champagne, and as she turns towards Maria she asks, <"You really want this done, babe?">

Maria's eyes close, in pain, where she then opens them with a zen-like clarity of mind sweeping over her, <"Yes...do it.">

<"Okay!"> Jessica throws back at Maria, then turns to Sasha, saying, "Stepmother, Sasha Zinovenko-Demitri-Ramirez, please step forward. I require your assistance." With Sasha giving her a panicked shake of the head, Jessica rolls her eyes and says to her, "Look, Sash, everyone here knows it's you so, fuck it! Get up here!"

Yes, everyone in attendance knows it's her...

To the sound of a slow clapping that builds up into a rolling applause, spiked with heartfelt cheering, Sasha is handed the bottle by Jessica, where Mofid leans in and gives her a little peck on the cheek, "This is for you, hon. The USS Claudia H. Willoughby."

The crowd goes quiet for the few seconds it takes for Sasha to proclaim the ship's name and smash the bottle over the solid steel kiosk at the edge of the deck. With champagne spraying all over both hers and Jessica's dresses, and to a standing ovation by the crowd, she has a smile and tears streaming down her face as the ship's SYLNb clone of Claudia steps in and gives her a joyful hug.

For Sasha, Claudia that is, it feels good to finally be outed, but for Zora du Laret, Nefer Key ambassador to the CXi, in cadence with the crowd gives a light but reserved applause.

Claudia has now been fully compromised.

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