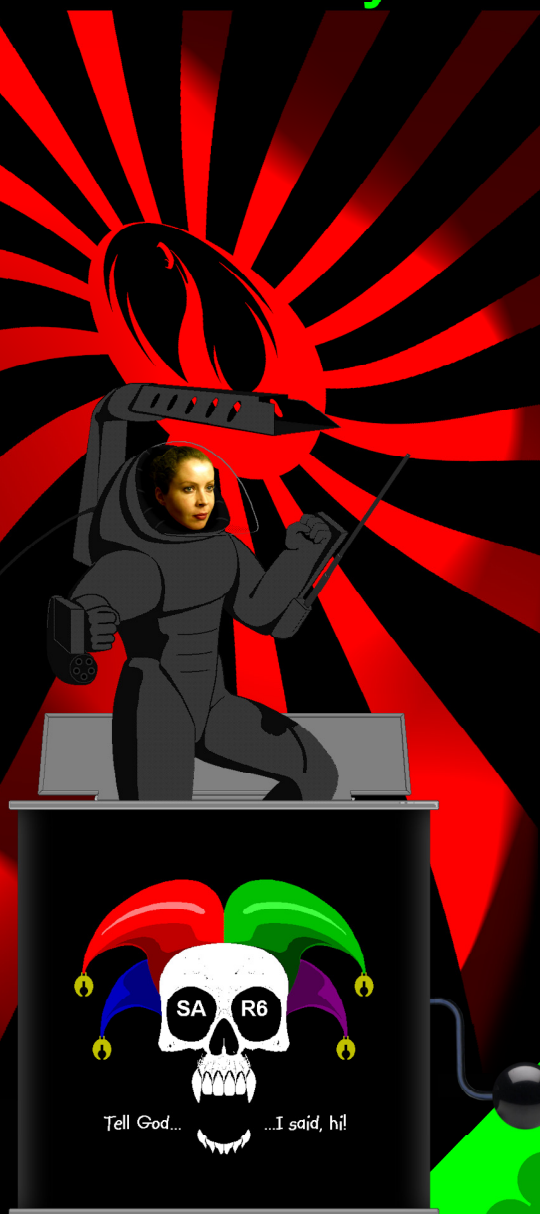


jacc in the box

JNTB PART
04

sunk cost fallacy

nicholas ralph baum



jacc in the box

PART 04

sunk cost fallacy



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jacc in the box
PART 04
sunk cost fallacy

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DEDICATED TO
MY FATHERS:

Lloyd Ralph Baum
(my father)

Ira Eugene Cripe
(my lead)

John Clayton Okerson
(my dad)

Nicolai Petrov
(můj kamarád)

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He was preparing hell for those who pry too deep
— Augustine of Hippo

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2119ce-MAY-05-FRIDAY
TIME: 01:17zulu (local 21:30mst)

High up from Charles and Rachel's cliff side home, Port Royal at night is a breathtaking sight. Catering to both civil and commercial traffic recreational sail is the most numerous vessel type moored in the harbor. Every permutation of rig you could imagine, from the simple sloops to rigid-foil trimarans are anchored here, but the dominate rigs as far as the eye can see are the dhow and old school felucca.

The port complex is butted up to the main city of Ipet Hah, and where the architecture of the city is a mix of ancient Egyptian in the core, surrounded by classical Roman everywhere else, Port Royal is a contrast of Egyptian stone permanency salted with modern glass contemporary and, esthetically speaking, these styles don't clash at all. Branching out from Ipet Hah is a new and ever-expanding suburbia, whose style is akin to American Southwest and Pueblo, but the people adapted well to having elbow room instead of being stacked one on top of another back in the city like they have been for millennia.

Most of the residents here on Imi came from old world human civilizations where toilets and baths were communal, with no concept of personal space, so the odd freakishness of western modesty eludes them still even though they now enjoy a sense of privacy.

The surprisingly difficult things to adapt too were transitioning from the Roman 'always left' standard to the modern 'always right' for roadway traffic, but that happened before Charles and Rachel came so the people could not blame them. What the locals could point at them for was the hated metric system—which everyone here resented being crowbarred into their world. Giving up their *passus*, *congius* and *uncia* for meters and liters and grams was like pulling teeth.

Yet, to industrialize on par it was necessary.

Now, long ago human males were first brought to this world as romantic surrogates, to take the heat off the Nefer Key males, and this was a positive thing in the minds of those captives then. To trade one subjugation of short lives, hunger, hard labor and violence for one of long lives, full bellies and endless sex in the service of, what they believed to be, petite gorgeous gray goddesses was a no brainer for them. What little down time they did have these humans just didn't sit on idle hands—they built things, lots of things, and this impressed the shit out of the Nefer Key. The old city temples were designed for their pleasure and is a sprawling complex still in daily use with pools and baths, luxurious couches, oil lamps with incense, and drapery flowing in the breeze for as far as the eye can see. Where across the way on the planet Sashi the Nefer Key live in an up-scaled but stale vision of Tomorrowland, by contrast, the warm esthetics of Imi was shockingly aphrodisiacal to female Nefer Key sensibilities.

Point being, these primitive humans erected massive stone structures and gardens with clean running water with little more than timbers, rope, levers and chalk lines. Two million years ago, the Nefer Key themselves were primitive captives and when they gained their freedom they walked right into advanced technology and bypassed these intermediate periods of development altogether. What humans accomplished here, without the aid of computers, robots and heavy machinery, was a miraculous feat by Nefer Key standards.

Another thing that impressed them to no end, something they found both counterintuitive and bewildering, was the human ability to fight and even wage war amongst each other—a concept the Nefer Key seems to have lost after thousands of generations of the easy life.

They just couldn't get the hang of it so they fetched Marcus, and when Marcus realized he was finally out of his league they then groomed and snatched Charles up with surprisingly little effort.

With their toga party for Marcus breaking up we have Jason, Lilith, Charles, Rachel, Maat and his Nefer Key wife, Aat, looking out over the harbor. A short throw below them is a felucca heading into the bay, and in it is Marcus reclining in a large pile of cushions with Claudia Willoughby snuggling up to him.

Sex under the stars or the shine of Sashi, like now, is the reason for most of the sailboats here. You can work them manually, yes, but pretty much all of the boats are computer controlled and sail themselves—you just have to shove off and dock manually and this allows the riders to attend to other pressing matters.

Rachel nudges Charles, "We're gonna hav'ta get a boat."

Amused, Charles agrees, "Yup, we can do it under the stars!"

Rachel coyly says, "Waddya mean we?"

Charles huffs a laugh as Rachel gives him a guilty shrug, "I've been meaning to have one made but Marcus is giving us his."

"No shit!"

"Tomorrow, that's our boat." Charles thinks about it and, "When was the last time he was with a woman? A human woman?"

Aat speaks up, "That would be before we got him."

Lilith notes, "Human babes have always been in high demand around here, and are spread thin."

Behind them, Claudia's Secret Service agent, Zach, has stepped up while saying, "Yea, but I think Claudia has made up for the lack of numbers. She's been making the rounds."

With everyone smiling and nodding at that, Maat thinks about it, "Prima and Marcus were mostly exclusive, and he hasn't been with anyone since she died. I'm surprised Claudia got him on that boat."

Rachel looks to Aat, then her husband, "No offense, Aat, but would you turn her down?"

Aat quickly throws out, "I didn't turn her down!"

Maat looks to Rachel with a smile, "What she said."

With everyone laughing, Charles looks to Zach and asks him, "Everything ready?"

Zach nods big, "Yup! We just got done fixin' the place up, and right under the wire. The facility is old but the decks will hold."

Rachel looks at Jason and asks, "You really want to do this?"

Jason gestures towards Marcus in the boat drifting away and declares, "I love this man. It's my gift. I'm obligated to him."

Charles speaks up, "Jay, remind me not to exchange gifts with you when I'm feelin' kinda blue."

Lilith turns to Zach and asks, "So, Secret Service man, I've been meaning to ask. You got any ideas for our training? I have a bunch of us girls ready to do this so, what do I tell 'em?"

Zach asks, "Want me to tell her, Chuck?"

"Might as well..." Charles then says to Lilith, "I was hoping for a way to go easy on you, but that ain't gonna happen. Tell her, Zach, and don't sugarcoat it."

Zach huffs then, "We looked high and low for ways to cut corners with your people but we can't. To make you into soldiers is a

tall order because you grays have no discipline, none of you have had any hardship whatsoever, and to top it off you're lazy as fuck. It takes your people forever to get anything done, and the worst of it is that none of you have worked an honest day's work in your lives! What we're gonna half'ta do to you people, to instill discipline in you, well, it ain't gonna be fun and that I can guarantee."

Charles points out, "The one thing in your favor is that you are all in great physical condition and you're going to need it."

Lilith blinks then asks, "Need it for what?"

Zach shrugs big, "Paris Island?"

01000110-01101001-01101110-01101001-0110011

Sitting across from each other in a dark passage, with stray beams of light peeking through the cracks around the doors covering the entrance, Marcus and Jason are waiting for their turn. They can hear the crowd outside, a mix of human and Nefer Key voices, all of them shouting and cheering for whatever is performing to the driving ninety mile an hour beat of an African drumline.

After the longest silence between them, Marcus looks up and says, "You are being inordinately quiet."

Jason shrugs, "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know, say something maybe?"

"Something." With Marcus shaking his head, Jason then asks, "Okay, I'm curious, how was Claudia?"

"Fantastic...but it made me miss Prima all the more."

Jason nods with understanding then, "Hey, when we get out there, do we say like, *nos morituri te salutant* or what?"

Marcus chuckles, "Nobody ever said that shit."

"Oh, okay...so, Luc gives a speech and it's on?"

"Yup."

After another silence, they hear Zach call out from the other side of the door, "One minute, you two."

Jason looks Marcus square in the eyes and reassures him, "Remember...with blades, CQB, I'm a god. Nobody can beat me and you know that. You're gonna feel more alive than you have in a long time but, for this to work, for your desired outcome, you gotta fight me. Don't be a puss and I'll get you where you wanna go."

With the crowd cheering, Marcus says through clinched teeth,

"I don't want you to get hurt."

Jason smiles, "Who do you think you're talking too?"

Marcus nods, "Point made."

"There's a stack of timber out there waiting for you, but you have to fight me to get to it." Suddenly the doors open, and as the light pours in, Jason stresses, "In this here theatre in the round, let's not make it look just good, dude. Let's make it real, okay?"

As they stand, Marcus asks, "Don't hold back?"

Jason singsongs, "That's the idea!"

Stepping out onto the sandy floor of the arena there are over twelve-thousand in the stands cheering for them. Walking away from Marcus and Jason are thirty costumed Zaouli dancers of mixed races who are waving to the crowd, and lining up with another two hundred men along the perimeter of the arena floor—Egyptian, Syrian, Roman, Jew, Gaul, Thracian, Scots, Mongol, Zhou, Nippon, Welsh, Norse, Ashanti, Songhai, and the Guro who brought the dance.

All here to honor their long time commander and friend.

Marcus and Jason are dressed for the moment with metal greaves on their shins and manicae protecting their arms, but where Marcus has one on his right side Jason gets both arms covered.

Before them are five Zaouli dancers. All have the smiling and angelic Djela mask, but each costume is framed radically different. In front of Jason is an orange cheetah and a rainbow parrot themed dancer, and before Marcus is a green and brown bison and a purple gazelle. Between them is a master Guro dancer in a black and yellow honeybee stylized costume. With the drumline hammering out a walking beat the bee performs a complicated foot dance as the other four strut around with a bladed weapon in hand. Two swinging a dagger tipped Mainz-Fulham style gladius, and two with gracefully curved yet exactly honed falx-like sica.

The four thrust and spin the weapons in the air, working the crowd up into a frenzy, and as the drums stop the bee dancer freezes. Suddenly the drums bust into hyper drive and all five kick up dust in time with the beat—their upper bodies suspended and unmoving as their legs and feet go stomping wildly in lockstep. They hold out the weapons and slowly approach the two combatants, all the while the bee hauls over a large scutum shield for Marcus.

The drums break-beat and then continue on as the dancers now load Marcus up with a spare gladius on his left side with the scutum, and the free gladius in his right hand. Next is Jason, and the second he is handed his two sica the five Zaouli dancers pick up the

beat of the drums and stomp-dance away to the edge of the arena all the while gladiator cassis helmets are lowered onto their heads.

It's only the purple gazelle that hangs back with Marcus and Jason in the middle of the arena. Now solo, with his feet tearing it up, little gray hands flip horsehair whips back and forth to the rhythm of the drums. After another half-a-minute of him dancing he and the drums suddenly stop and the dancer whips back his mask.

It's Luc behind the mask, and with the crowd now cheering wildly for him he says to both Jason and Marcus, "Ya know, when my tongue turns white, I hope that I have the foresight to make damned sure everybody is annoyed with me."

Jason snorts, "You got that now!"

Luc nods with a smile and says, "We love you, Marcus."

Luc steps back and pulls a wire mic around to speak to the crowd, "We are here today to celebrate the life of our friend and loved one, Marcus Cnaeus Septimus." With a sweep of his arm, Luc motions behind them towards a funeral pyre. The pyre is beautifully stacked with Roman banners draping over the sides and a fasces adorning each corner. Luc adds, "Our gift to you, awaits."

With the drums kicking in, Marcus watches as Luc walks over to hug Maat who was in the parrot Zaouli dance costume and Abeeku who emerged from the bison costume. In the stands behind them he has everyone cheering him on, all except Charles and Rachel.

Charles is taking this especially hard.

Marcus looks to Jason and asks, "So it's on?"

"Yep..." Jason gestures towards the pyre, "I'm gonna hate to touch a match to that thing. Even with your ass on it, dude!"

Marcus reaches out with his gladius and says, "Honor."

Jason crosses that blade with his sica, "Damned straight."

Historically, gladiatorial bouts between professional gladiators was pretty much the WWE of the ancient Roman world. Many people died on the sands of the arena but few of them were from pro-stock. The high-end professionals learned to make it look good so working together to make a good show of it the crowd would, more often than not, give an up-vote for the loser to fight another day. Sad to say that attrition got the better of them in the end. A lot of capital went into a 'seasoned' gladiator so for one to enter into an actual no holds barred death match was indeed a rarity—and that working together thing to make it look good kind of went out the window.

But, for today its opposites day...

Having been a centurion for the longest time Marcus logically gravitated to the Murmillo class of fighting, and having once been a boarding party duel-wielding asshole of a pirate Jason instinctively opted for the Thraex.

A good thing since these classes matched regularly.

The battle starts off simple enough with Marcus making quick stabbing thrusts towards Jason, as one would while fighting in a tight formation in the field, but Jason swats them away with ease.

After the tenth thrust, Jason flips the helmet off his own head, "I can't see shit!" Then motions for Marcus to, "Step into it!"

Marcus steps into it by leaping forward and thrusting out hard. For the casual observer it looks pretty good, but Jason can see that he was intentionally throwing his aim off towards the side, so in a huff Jason punches down on Marcus' helmet, "Get serious!"

As Jason rolls past the strike he pops Marcus in the back with two quick slashes across his shoulder blades to get his attention.

Fuming, Marcus scrunches his shoulders up from the pain. He then rips his own helmet off and stomps towards Jason. He thrusts his shield out and slams it into Jason who jumps back just as the gladius slashes out where he was a second ago.

Jason nods big with a grin, "That's the idea!"

Marcus again steps in and thrusts out perfectly, Jason parries it away with the left sica while with the right sica he flips it around the shield and slashes Marcus in the chest. It is a superficial cut but it bleeds like hell and it makes him drop the shield. Now mad, Marcus pulls the spare gladius with his left hand and sets to work.

Jason is impressed by the thrust and slash combos that Marcus now throws at him. This is a style that Jason has never seen and it is totally amateurish—and yet so surprisingly effective. Marcus will not let up and the three times a gladius snags on the manicae covering Jason's arms it prompts Marcus to push even harder.

After about a minute and a half of this thrust, slash and parry barrage, Marcus is now obviously losing steam, so during a slight break in the action Jason says to him, "Give her our love."

Jason has finally spun the sica around in his hands, with the blades now along his forearms, and after three more quick attacks and blocks he steps inside where Marcus can't get either gladius around to fight back effectively. Jason slashes Marcus' left arm and he drops that gladius. They grapple for a few seconds and when Jason hops back Marcus lunges at him. Jason pushes the gladius away with the blade in his left hand, but with the one in the right he drives it home.

The hooked blade slips in behind Marcus' left clavicle and Jason sinks it deep into his chest cavity—slicing through the brachial veins, lungs and piercing the heart. Marcus drops to his knees in total shock by the suddenness of this strike.

In the arena it's now so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

Marcus looks up at Jason with the handle of the sica moving in time with his heartbeat, and with blood filling his chest and his lungs near collapse he has very little time left, but the confusion and shock on Marcus' face suddenly gives way to a far and distant yet joyful recognition. With that, he silently mouths her name, *Prima?*

Jason does well to hide the grief that overwhelms him, and before he pulls the sica from Marcus he says, "Go to her."

||||| ||||| |

68

cannon break

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-21-THURSDAY
TIME: 10:05zulu (local 09:33mst)

Jacob pops into relative space high over Sapphire, and dashes down to one-hundred and sixty kilometers altitude before dropping out of the MDDSH spacial displacement field. It pops like a soap bubble leaving him with a forward velocity of just under supersonic, which is no big deal, but he exits the dash without wings or rudders attached to his fighter which is kind of a big deal.

They had already been ripped off long before he jumped.

He instantly switches on the anti-gravity drive, because it's the easy option, and when he does he feels a bump and hears an electrical 'zit' from behind the cockpit. This is followed by an alert that the AG drive has just dropped off and the left MDDSH nacelle is also now down for the count. In the tacnet, projected in his visual cortex, he gets dished up a delightful little image showing the path a 7.62x54 bolt where it entered the fuselage from behind, then ricocheted against the top-port razor engine, followed by it puncturing the AG drive unit. Turning on the AG killed both it and the port MDDSH node.

Jacob says to himself, "Houston, we have a problem."

Bud comes across his headset, ["Well, this ain't good."]

"No shit, a triple failure."

["I can't say you ripping your wings off going after those two IR5 was a failure per se. That was intentional."]

"I got 'em didn't I?"

["I'm already dead so for me it was a hell of a ride."]

"It was a hell of a ride!" Jacob laughs, then switches coms and asks, "Trixie, you got any ideas?"

The ship's imbedded computer AI, named Beatrix, responds, ["Yes, ejecting would be in order."]

"No fucking way! You've been flying with me now for twelve years! I am not gonna let you go, Trix!"

You can almost hear Beatrix pursing her lips, ["Let me put it to you in terms you will understand, copy me over to your PBDi and punch the fuck out!"]

Bud laughs, ["What she said!"]

Jacob argues, "Trix, I'm sorry I ripped your wings off to bag those two Kali, but I did it and I still managed to get us outta there!"

Beatrix agrees, ["Yes, but I got a tail full of Long-Legs for that stunt. Look, my recommendation now is to eject."]

"I can get you on the deck."

Bud protests, ["Will you listen to her?"]

Jacob shakes his head, "I got pitch, I got roll, I got this."

The aerodynamics of the Thunderbolt airframe produces a considerable volume of lift without said wings and rudders, and the canards and ventral fins both provide pitch and a significant amount of roll if needed, it's just that Jacob has to maintain a high enough velocity to keep it all in the air. Beatrix flashes up three potential flight paths into the Church Key and Jacob picks the first option.

Jacob says, "Bud, alert civil CK-Control that this is a mayday. We'll be coming in below the common flight paths and drop in on the main six-klick runway. Maybe fifteen minutes or so? Trix, at subsonic, what do I gotta do to maintain level flight on the approach?"

Beatrix says, ["Keep it over eight-hundred kph at a three to five degree pitch. You'll have to play with it coming in. To land, reverse vector full power for three seconds and you'll cut forward velocity by half. Any more than that and without the wings we'll drop like a rock and crush the gear."]

Bud speaks up, ["Dude, the breaks will not hold."]

Beatrix confirms, ["They'll strip out at over two-fifty kph."]

Jacob comes back with, "I know. We'll cannon break."

Bud and Beatrix both go, ["Cannon break?"]

"Yea, cannon breaking! We'll fire the twenty-three at full power and empty the drum-magazine."

Bud laughs, ["You'll burn the gun out, d'uh!"]

"Trixie, we've torture tested the guns like this, right?"

Beatrix informs them, ["At twenty percent power, what we usually set the twenty-three-three for, we can fire for two whole seconds. Cool for thirty and fire again. At full power we are limited to a quarter-second burst because if you fire for more than a half-second the gun will seize up if you try to fire it again."]

Jacob asks, "But if we don't let up we can empty it, right?"

["Correct, every test proved those results. Doing so will burn the gun out and it will not be recoverable."]

Bud goes, ["Wait, what? You're fucken' nuts!"]

Here's the deal, for close air support (CAS) pretty much all fighters carry a cannon called the 23 that fires the 23mm rocket assisted micro-nuke bombs with a 1,000 kg yield. The most common is a single barrel weapon called simply enough the 23. Some guns are a two-barreled reciprocating bolt in a 'Gast gun' configuration called the 23-2. On the other hand, the Steel Annex came up with a gnarly three-barreled rotary gun design for their Razorback variants and the Thunderbolt designated the 23-3. Nobody ever uses the 23-2 or 23-3 designation and refer to all of these weapons as simply the 23. Now, the Razorbacks and the Cerberus uses the 23 like fricken crazy, but the Thunderbolt rarely, if ever, finds itself in a CAS role. Jacob has never had the opportunity to fire the 23 on a mission until now.

Beatrix adds, ["Bud, the twenty-three with a reciprocating bolt or rotary chamber will seize while firing where the twenty-three-three will go right on firing as long as we do not let up. All stress tests of this weapon system confirms this finding."]

Jacob also adds, "Paleo did this in a simulator and it worked."

Bud thinks about it and, ["Man, I still say eject."]

Beatrix throws out, ["Fire time for the twenty-three-three, to empty the drum, is approximately sixteen point two seconds."]

With the Church Key coming into sight, Jacob steepens the decent and says, "Bud, you're on radios. Trix, defeat the gun settings and config weapon trajectory for maximum range."

["Field Marshal, at a maximum ballistic profile the rounds will reach thirteen kilometers altitude and drop down range from sixty-six to sixty-eight kilometers. That depends on the tail wind which is about twenty kph. Detonation will be two-hundred meters altitude."]

"Perfect!"

Bud informs them, ["FYI, C-Three says to eject."]

Jacob snorts, "Yea, right."

Bud laughs, ["That's exactly what I told 'em!"]

"Thank you!"

["Doesn't take a mind reader."]

At thirty-five kilometers distance Jacob calls out, "Feet dry."

They are now flying over the peninsula towards the civil airstrip, north of the pyramid complex, and coming in at four hundred meters altitude they are descending rather slowly.

It takes only two and a half minutes to cover that distance, and as they approach the end of the runway, only fifty meters up, Jacob says, "Trixie, if the gear collapses and we skid then that's okay, but if you are about to roll—only then do you eject me. Got that?"

Beatrix says, ["Got it."]

Now over the runway Jacob concentrates, "Let's stick this!"

He pitches the nose level and punches the reverse-vector of the razor engines to full power for a count of three. Reverse vectoring has this weird push me-pull you effect where the intake suction-thrust fights against the rearward-thrust being channeled above and below, and opposite the direction of travel. This still manages to cut their speed down to just below 440 kph. The ship is now dropping fast so Jacob pitches the nose back up to 12° and this creates a huge pocket of lift above the Thunderbolt and dramatically slows that decent. While deploying the landing gear the covering hatches rip off, but the gear holds firm as they make contact with the runway.

He touches down and rotates better than perfect, but the problem now is that they are coasting at over 400 kph—and not slowing down one bit. When they cover half the distance of the runway he switches trigger control to the 23 and fires.

The muzzle is by the cockpit, at the root of the starboard nacelle opposite the other gun called the 88, and where the 88 sounds like a shrieking rip the 23 is like a jackhammer going off. The weapon fires over seventy of the 23mm rocket assisted bombs per second. The bombs arc slightly up as they streak away while the ventral fins sweep left to compensate for the cannons off-center torque. At 16.25 seconds all of the 1,160 rounds in the drum are gone, yet the force from this weapon has not only stopped all forward momentum but has pushed the ship backwards—now rolling at a brisk 5 kph in reverse.

With a plume of heat rising up from the muzzle, warping the air on the right side of the cockpit, Jacob takes a deep breath and, "Okay...I think that'll do."

He pushes the drive management control forward and the thrust from his razor engines pushes his Thunderbolt forward. Jacob taxis off the runway and pulls onto the ramp that is a straight shot to

the Spike all the while Bud radios to CK Control that they're clear and that they should check for debris on the runway. He then informs the C3 they are taxiing in their direction. It takes less than three minutes to reach the Spike, and with them approaching the grassy knoll near the entrance there is already a crowd forming.

As the ship stops at the knoll, Bill Nguyen and Kevin Vossler are already taking a quick walk around it. Surveying the damage they just shake their heads as they count the crush fractures on the canopy as well as dozens more on the fuselage and left canard. They also count only one actual entry hole in the back, which must have been the culprit that took out the AG drive.

Jacob opens his canopy and as it tilts forward the distant explosions from the 1,160 bombs finally reaches the Spike. Like a muffled rolling thunder, everyone looks towards the west but they cannot see the explosions that happened three minutes and forty seconds ago down range.

Hopping out, Jacob floats down to Bill and Vossler and pops his suits canopy while Bill gives a low whistle, "You are the talk of the town! When we heard you were gonna land this heap we had to come down and see for ourselves, and you did not disappoint!"

Vossler agrees, "Mighty-mighty fine flying, FM."

Jacob asks, "How long to make her airworthy, Bill?"

Bill shakes his head, "Nope! What we got here is a total."

"Come on, man! Can't we sneak some parts in or somethin'?"

"No can do, buckaroo! All the forty-seven lines are down for retooling, and nobody is going to give one up—even for you! And before you ask if we can slip wings out of the seventy-four lines that will not happen for a bis-E conversion. It's a total."

While shaking his head, Vossler smirks, "Should have thought of that before you went after that Kali."

Bill goes, "Two Kali."

"Two? Nice!"

Jacob nods and asks, "So...whaddya got for me?"

Bill smiles, "Seventy-Fours, only..." He gestures towards the cavernous hanger under the Spike, "In this gaping maw here, in the bowels of God's Own Punji, I got thirty-two Seventy-Fours primed for bear. The sixteen on the right—they're mine. The sixteen on the left has had not one flight hour or portion thereof with a human butt-cheek in the seat! Go pick yours and just give me the tail number."

Jacob huffs, "WEP is He rated, right?"

"Just like the Cinderblocks will be, but if they sit idle then it's cryo-nitrogen. If you got an hour we can re-tank it!"

"Naw, cryo-N is good enough."

Bill nods, "Just so you know in this universe, the Forty-Seven has always been the fastest off the line...until the Seventy-Four."

"Ya, it beats it in the quarter but the T-Bolt always takes it in the stretch...every time." Jacob starts for the dark hanger while he thumbs towards his junk heap of a fighter, "Park Beatrix underground and nobody touches her! My ship here is a legend, got that?"

"Righty'o! Nobody touches her, I guar'ontee!" As Jacob steps into the dark underground hanger, Bill calls out to him, "Remember, on the T-Bird everything is exactly the same...just different!"

With the suits canopy still in his hand, Jacob stops just past the underground opening and waits for his eyes to adjust. After about a half a minute, two lines of fighters come into clear focus.

Where Beatrix manages his Thunderbolt, the ChiP AI from his personal PBDi unit works his JACC, and where Beatrix is exceedingly nice and friendly Jacob's ChiP, whose avatar is based on the fictional animated science fiction character Asajj Ventress, is crass and direct, <"All of 'em look like cookie cutter what the fuck, if you ask me.">

Jacob laughs at that, "Yea, Asajj, my sentiments exactly."

<"They look so damned fragile.">

"Made of the finest Ural-grade Stalinium."

<"Remains to be seen, so...which to choose?"> She then erupts in a curious excitement, <"Hey! Look at the tail numbers.">

Jacob reads the first one as 31409 and the second one as 31423, so he snorts, "I think I'm thinking what you're thinking!"

<"If it's here then that's the one!">

They walk down the line of fighters and the second to the last airframe they find 31415, so Jacob smiles, "Well, I'll be damned!"

<"Yea, baby! Let me tie into it for ya!"> Within seconds she links into the ship and fires it up, <"Power up initiated. Trixie and Bud are uploading now. Three minutes, a reboot and she's yours!">

Jacob stares at it and wonders how small it looks.

Called the Thunderbird, the ASF74 uses exactly the same air surfaces of the ASF47 Thunderbolt as well as the same landing gear and weapons systems. Only problem is with a 40% reduction in mass and cross section of the fuselage also means a 25% cut in missile load out but only a 10% reduction for the 8.80mm ammo drum. This nip

and tuck job to the 47 was to gain greater maneuverability—all to take on the Djinn in an honest turn fight. Then again, the Djinn can't skid for shit so, in Jacob's mind, what's the point exactly?

Jacob starts laughing, "That cockpit looks so little!"

<"You always go for the tight holes!"> His ChiP snarks. She then displays the skin options and says what they are as they flash up, <"So here we got matte-black, glossy, camo green, pixelated gray, desert tan, sky blue and, your all-time favorite, tiger-stripe PK!">

Jacob just shakes his head as the ships skin rolls over to pink with light tiger stripes, "I hate that combo."

<"Yea, but it works.">

"Thanks, Asajj. I'll take matte for now."

With it changing she says, <"Hop on in and I'll sign off.">

Jacob floats up and slips into the cockpit. Sitting in the couch he takes a long minute to look around—realizing that everything is small and cramped. It's the same as the Cerberus cockpit, copied over from the IR5, which is even smaller than the Gryphon cockpits.

Scooching down, he clamps in as the canopy lowers over him.

Beatrix speaks up, ["As you would say, love the digs. Flight parameters are uploading and compiling. We can taxi out and launch in thirty seconds. Remember, the main gear have the powered wheels like the bis-E blocks. Sixteen kph max."]

Bud wakes up, ["Well-well-well, what have we here!"]

Jacob thumps his shoulder into the canopy, and then the other side while shaking his head, "Damn! Tight as a fist."

Bud laughs, ["You can kiss Saturn goodbye in this thing."]

Jacob activates the wheels for taxi, "Ain't no wiggle room."

Silently, they roll out and turn towards the hanger entrance, and halfway to it a familiar silhouette appears in the light.

Beatrix announces, ["We are now ready for powered flight."]

Slowing to a crawl, Jacob huffs, "Or maybe not?"

With the silhouette of Maria raising her arms and crossing them above her head, Jacob brings the ship to a stop five meters short of her, so Bud goes, "Let's see what she wants?"

As the canopy opens and Jacob unbuckles he says to Bud, "How about you go talk to her."

["Nega-tory, you got this!"]

"Coward." Says Jacob as he hops out of the ship and steps up to Maria while taking the full helmet off his JACC, and as he opens his mouth to say *hi* she puts a finger up to her mouth with an audible *shush* indicating to him that he needs to shut up.

"I got an alert from Taiji, before you jumped, and I pathed your file!" Maria takes one step towards Jacob and, "I thought I would come down and say, hi! Then before I could get my ass in gear I hear you performed this aMAziNg landing! I mean it's one for the books but, on the way down it all started to worry me just a tad..."

Jacob opens his mouth to apologize but Maria puts two fingers up to his lips and, "Shush-shush-shush! See, that shushing sound I'm making, means for you to keep your gob-awful yap shut. Feel me?" She takes a long breath and, "Thinking we need to have a chat about this, and to save time, how 'bout I talk for you too!"

While using her hand like a puppet, mimicking *Jacob*, Maria goes back and forth while speaking for both of them, "*Sorry 'bout making you worry, hon.*" — "That's okay! How's Peña?" — "*He's fine, not a scratch.*" — "And after catching a blue shell up the ass that's good to hear! Now, Trix switching off the governors so you could go after those two IR5 on the deck was pretty ballsy." — "*Kinda scary if you ask me.*" — "Yea, ripping your wings off at over Mach five-three would make my butt pucker too!" — "*But I did splash those two bastards didn't I!*" — "YES, yes you did! Got yourself a double ace on one sortie now did ya!" — "*Plus one!*" — "Plus one..." Maria is about to blow her top when she says, "Let's count together, shall we—"

Glados, suited up in a JACC, has been approaching Maria from behind and says to them, "So, I got your orders. We're leaving early?"

Without breaking her predatory gaze into Jacob's eyes, Maria first whispers to him, "You lucked out..." She then responds to Glados without pulling that gaze, "I talked to Scott, the drop on Ngāti Whā has been cancelled for today. We're gonna switch targets and pallet drop those bots on Nufa and probably Primus Hyadum next Wednesday."

Glados nods, "GTA5! That'll freak 'em out."

Maria turns her gaze to Glados and asks with a happy voice, "Hi! Just wondering, are you two...still an item?"

Curiously, Glados goes, "Yea?"

Maria nods big, "Good! Glad to hear, tight bonds..." She then points to the fighter, "You're air combat rated now so, how many hours you got so far?"

"A hundred and twenty-eight in the ZoMug, thirty-two in the Thumper and, to date, I have eighty-three in the HoMug."

Maria's face scrunches up slightly, "HoMug?"

"H-M-M-G, for Holy Mary Mother of God."

Maria laughs, "That was quick!"

"Yes, it was. Word is nobody can tell them apart until they get right on top of 'em, and by then it's too late."

"So, you're comfortable flyin' this, the HoMug."

"Like everything else, easy to pick up but a bitch to master."

Maria smiles at Glados, "Okay, you're driving..." She then points at Jacob, snarling, "Don' you be sayin' a fuckin' word, *pandejo*!" Maria again shifts gears and smiles at Glados, "My orders are for you to take him to One-Klick, and Mac will pick you up in an hour! Now, go hang at Monique's, have a few drinks, a few laughs, fuck your brains out and I'll see you tomorrow at eleven hundred hours Pacific time. And if you haven't guessed it by now, chuckle-fucker here is off the clock for the next four days. Not a call, not a text, not a peep!" Again she snarls at Jacob, "An' that means shit outta touch, mutherfucker!" Maria bodily turns to him, hopping mad with balled fists, "When I told you, you could get back into the shit didn't mean for you to MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME!" She shouts, then asks, "Feel me?"

Glados chimes in with, "I'm right there with ya!"

Maria looks at Glados with a cruel deadpan, "Saddle up."

With Glados slinking off towards the fighter, Maria gets in Jacob's face, "If it wasn't for Diego's quinceañera tomorrow I'd be stomping your shit about now!" She starts to laugh and can't suppress it, "I'm so angry! Get outta here before I lose my cool!"

As Maria turns away she shouts, "Glados, that's One-Klick, one jump, not one deviation or I'll disappear his ass!"

With Maria stomping out of the hanger, Glados slips up beside Jacob with a wicked little smile, "I say you got off pretty easy."

Jacob just puts his hands out, not saying anything.

Amused, Glados asks, "Coming?"

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69

never knows best

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.000au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-22-FRIDAY
TIME: 19:41zulu (local 11:41pst)

After a hundred and fifty years in a plummeting real estate market, Descanso Gardens has quintupled its footprint in the Verdugo Hills. Now on the third iteration of the beloved Japanese Tea House, across the expanded lake sits the brand new Shōgun Castle adjacent to the century old Cherry Blossom Forest. It's November and the blossoms are not going to blossom for a few more months, so the Cherry Blossom Forest goes for a cut rate this time of the year. Not as cheap as it would be in August, but Maria was able to lock the price in when they scheduled Diego's quinceañera four years ago.

The castle wasn't part of this event but the Gardens threw it in at no charge because they can't lease the castle separate from the forest, so this was a big win for Maria and the family.

It ended up being a bigger win for Descanso Gardens when they were shown the guest list and who RSVP'd.

Because a handful of the attendees are high profile, security for today is astronomically tight. The park is still open for business so on top of the three dozen or so visible Secret Service agents is a whole company of ghost droids running around the place arm-n-arm with Delta operators, and where the park is open the airspace was closed off for ten kilometers in all directions. Orbiting overhead to enforce the no fly zone are four 'beauty and the beast' teams consisting of a white USAF Bulldog fighter and one of the black SA-Cerberus fighters shadowing them as their wingman.

Esthetically, no one likes the Cerberus and pilots have called it the Beluga out of spite, but now that it has proven itself as a monster in the CAS roll it's popularly referred to as the Evil Beluga around these parts, or Waluga for short.

Having learned everything he could from his wife, Ophelia, as well as her sister, Agatha, Léon is thrilled to be catering this event for his granddaughter. Léon and his staff have long been cleared by the Secret Service as well as by the RaSP to handle food for VIPs such as the first lady, Esma Mofid, Queen Victoria, as well as the Xhemal but, per policy, they must always sample the food at length.

Oh, to be so put upon...

Along with the Xhemal VIPs are Paris and Chell from Second Hand and, like with Esma, Piper Hartcourt was also extended a last minute invite and these three showed up with Eight, Copper and Peanuts who came with Scott, Cricket, Bill, Sandoval, Artyom and little Angela. Keeping company with Diego this week was Cap who herself has been a constant and a "candle" in her life for some time.

Rufus Tyrol and Paula also crashed with seconds to spare.

Monique and all the family members from La Cañada as well as Los Angeles and Havana are here but Junior was the one person that put the Secret Service on edge. Assigning their best field agent to shadow Junior kind of backfires because, having as big a personality as Maria, Junior is such a slick operator that he quickly finds himself chatting him up, comparing battle scars, and hitting it off so well that Junior scores a hot date with the agent that very evening.

Since it was Adolphina who did most of the planning and legwork for today's festivities it is she and Lucia who ends up emceeding the event with the girls from *iFamilia Cubanaza!* all dolled up as Diego's *Corte de Honor*. Diego wanted to avoid the stale traditions like *Damas* and *Chambelanes* because none of her small number of actual friends who were attending could wrap their brains around it, but since the cast members knew how to snark, strut their stuff and dance their asses off she bowed to the will of the family. Remotely controlled octodroid cameras are everywhere filming everything for the show so the *Cubanaza Damas* hammed it up like the consummate professionals they are—and they only get one take.

Starting things off at eleven, after the benediction and prayer given by Syleste, are three Mariachi bands who, vying for position on stage in a comically absurd Ranchera riff-off, end up strolling through the crowd in different directions while performing perfectly in synch with one another. Now, whether you like Mariachi music or not, what caught everyone by surprise were our catnip-crazy *Cubanaza Damas* performing their own twist to the *Flamenco*, with precision, and this blows everyone away.

Fashionably late, Jessica steps up to the edge of the party in a heavily embroidered dark green and white *Áo dài*, and says to herself, "So, whadda we got this fine morning!"

With one of the Mariachi bands approaching her, playing and singing their hearts out, Jessica takes a moment to drink it in—but it's not the music she is sampling here. Taking a deep cleansing breath, Jessica nonchalantly glances in Monique's direction who, with Jordan, Carlos and Peter, are hugging and yucking it up with Lucia, Adolphina, Paula and Tyrol. After a few seconds Jessica huffs with a nod while quietly muttering to herself, "No shit, hu!"

She then rolls her head in the general direction of her father who is flanked by Glados, Alex and Sasha. Locking her radar down she allows her gaze to follow the Mariachi's as they stroll past, and after only a few seconds of poking around she and the others clap for the musicians as they motor along—all the while she laughs to herself, "Now, that's a double-dipped no shit with whipped spunk on top!"

Jessica again stares at Monique for a few short seconds, then back towards Sasha, and after shaking her head in amazement she turns her eyes forward towards Maria, who is between them at the center table, hugging Esma by the raised dance floor.

Maria is taking Diego around to meet everybody and tagging along is Victoria, no surprise there, but while Diego is focused on Artyom, Esma motions for Piper to come over to them.

"You have a half an hour to shut her up."

Jessica blinks, "My God, I had no idea."

"Be the brick, think you can do it?"

Jessica turns her head then looks down at her brother, Seth, "I wish you would have told me what this was about."

"Life should have some mysteries, no?" Seth points to her and smiles, "You have always said it yourself and, considering...us, I think they are words to live by."

"Okay, what mysteries me is you dabbling in Mini-Mon!"

"Oh, that...cultivating the future? Liken to your Josav, I get to have one confidant don't I?"

"He doesn't know shit."

Seth shrugs, "Josav is not stupid, he knows you work for the Annex, but that's not the problem. Then, like Cloé, both of them are madly in-love with you and still that's not the problem. Then again, Josav and Cloé tag-teaming like rabbits when you're not around is still, yet, not the problem but...you not wanting to rock that boat is—"

Jessica almost growls at him, "I don't want to hear this."

Seth smiles, "You know, when I tell *them* on new year's that they've been stagnant for a thousand millennia, twice over, and that

their golden age is at their fingertips, well, I'm here to convey that message to you...too! Dive into that *ménage*, babe, capsize that boat! Spread your leathery wings and expand your horizons."

"I don't want to lose them."

"Who says you're going to lose them?" Seth then points out, "Not everything should be packaged for immediate consumption, or nibbled to death to prolong the end-avoidable. Like a heady cheese or a fine wine some things need to age to be savored but, who am I?" He gives her a little brother hug, "Right now you've got a job to do!"

She looks at him and, "I don't want Mini-Mon hurt."

"She and I have a long future ahead of us, on and off, but at least with little Monique I can drop the innocent autistic façade."

Jessica points out, "That shit façade keeps you alive."

Seth nods, "Yes, but necessary for only a few more weeks."

"What about you and Peanuts?"

"Aaaaah, the older woman!" He cringes at Jessica as if she caught him with his hand in the cookie jar, "Let's not rock that boat, shall we? I really do enjoy the diversion." Seth gives her a quick kiss then, "Angela deserves to get this revelation on Christmas morning, Diego deserves to have today be about her and, mostly importantly, Scott needs to focus on missions for the next two weeks."

"You haven't shown me why...why?"

Seth stares at her and, "Let's not approach this task with a sense of desperation? I'll show you after the party."

Jessica nods and as she steps off she stops and looks over her shoulder at him to ask, "Leathery wings?"

"Ominous...foreboding? Feathery doesn't convey that."

Jessica rolls her eyes while suppressing a laugh, "Ya prick."

"If I may, since you are not one for compliments—"

Jessica turns towards him, "Shut up."

"Ah, no...you look gorgeous today!" Seth immediately slinks in closer with, "When you are out and about with Cloé doesn't it get annoying how people fawn over her?"

Jessica is frustrated with him, "The point is?"

"Nobody can pay you a complement without you projecting hatred? Just so you know..." Seth nods towards Cloé who is hanging with Josav and José on the sidelines, "People may be fawning over her but they are all, without exception, drooling over you."

Jessica snarls quietly, "Get real."

"Sorry, but sometimes your ego needs to get stroked against your shitty judgement, and you can't deflect it from me...I get a pass."

"How 'bout you take a break and fuck off?"

"My, don't we have a seriously bruised sense of self-worth!" Seth dons the autistic façade while saying with his normal speech impediment, "Big sis, we'u gonna haft'a wurk on dat."

Jessica leans in to him and, "Right now, fucking off would be in your best interest. Think you can handle it?"

In her face, Seth kisses his middle finger, flips it towards her, then touches it to her hip and shudders with the sizzle, "S-s-s-s!"

Suppressing a laugh, Jessica makes an observation, "By the way, you're sounding more and more like Boxter everyday."

Seth thinks about it, "Box...he does have a beautiful mind."

"He's rubbing off on you."

He mimics Boxter, "I dare say, yes. I'm dug in like a tick!"

"Have you uncovered anything I need to know?"

"On a need to know? There's nothing you need to know."

Jessica stresses, "Yet."

"Life should have some mysteries, remember? For you, yet, in this context is a ways off. Think you can handle it?"

Turning away, Jessica says under her breath, "little prick."

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"Glad you could make it, Piper!" Jessica says, then gives Esma a hug while nodding at Piper, "I hear you two go way back."

Esma laughs slightly, "Waaay-way back!"

As Jessica gives Maria and Victoria a hug, Piper tells Esma, "Easy, baby, I'm gettin' a tag for late February! Care to join?"

Victoria asks as Jessica pulls away from her, "A tag?"

"Safari! A wee-little hunting expedition."

Esma asks, "Bunny? Drop bear?"

"Gettin' me a tag for a Jabber!"

"Are you shitting me! Thought those were protected now?"

"Not when they be prayin' on your garbos!"

Maria asks, "What the hell is a Jabber?"

Esma laughs, "They've got dragons on the Queensland Vista."

Piper says, "A Jabberwocky, three tons of chomp and chaw!"

Esma adds, "They're dusk gliders, most active when the sun is low on the horizon." She then looks to Piper, "But they don't stray far from the northern terminators so what gives?"

"We bagged too many banders an' the bumbles exploded so the Jabbers came down for the snackies." Piper then says to Maria, "To them humans look like baby bumbles and both are easy pickings."

Esma gestures to Piper, "Twenty years back I saw her nail a Jabber in a dive. I couldn't believe the lead she had to give that shot!"

"The fun and games is making it so you don't have to lead."

Victoria realizes, "By making yourself the bait I take it."

Piper smirks, "Gives 'em a sporting chance!"

Esma rolls her eyes, "You're a fucking asshole."

"Yes, and my husband revels in it!" Piper then says to Maria and Victoria, "Since Easy is prevented from going, how 'bout you two ladies? We have a whole family of four to drop!"

Victoria puts a finger up, "I'm up for it!"

Piper smiles, "Lovely! We'll have a stonking good time!"

"The fuck!" Maria turns to Victoria and, suddenly realizing she can't prevent her from going, looks to Piper and asks, "What do you use on these, I dunno...god-damned dragons!"

"Ummm, fifty B-M-G, bolt action. Get's the job done!"

Maria, against her better phobias, flash-processes the specs for the old .50BMG and says, "Hooooow 'bout...a Ma Deuce? I won't pitch a bitch if Vic and you all have our M2 to play with."

Piper looks at her, "That BR1? The eighty-eight BR1?"

Maria nods, "I'll have Michelle Kiel deliver a dozen of 'em with crates of ammo and the N2 interface to boot. They'll drop a Fifty-One so they'll put the fuck to a Jabberwocky, I guarantee!"

Esma looks at Piper then slowly towards Victoria while saying, "Now, I'm gawd-damned jealous of you two fucking bitches!"

Piper blinks, "Well, Easy, instead of making curt observations how 'bout you try throwin' us an insult maybe?"

Victoria, in open-mouth astonishment by Piper, laughs big, "Oh, bloody bollocks, I love this woman!"

As Victoria, Esma and Piper laugh it up, the three Mariachi bands are back on stage and end their set with an abbreviated take on Mozart's Violin Concerto No.3. Here the three violinists' are seamlessly flipping bars from one to another during the solos and this brings theirs and most of the other conversations to a grinding halt.

During this stunning performance, Jessica pulls in close to Maria whispering, "The Nefers agree to be at the rendezvous on time, but I need to talk to you right after Leon cuts in on your dance."

Quietly frustrated, Maria asks, "This can't wait?"

"I have a brick for you." As Maria nods with understanding, Jessica ends with, "I'll be in the castle keep."

With the Mariachi's set ending there is an explosive applause for the musicians but, before Jessica could get away, Diego clotheslines and pulls Jessie towards her and Artyom, "You're not getting away that fast. You gotta say hi to Artyom!"

Artyom looks at Jessica and shakes her head, "Jessie, you look beautiful, but then you always do."

Jessica hugs Artyom and sizes her up, "Wow, I have to say that blistering-hot raven-haired Persian works for you! I mean..." She thumbs towards Diego, "I didn't expect to compete with this thing here and now to contend with you in that mix!"

Artyom blushes with, "You're too kind, Jess."

"I hear you got the Ninety-Six?"

"Diego helped me pick *Artemisia tou Caria* as the persona for the ship, and that's primarily so that I can keep my name."

Jessica gestures towards her body, "How long with the bod?"

"Nine months now, and Glados was right! The oral fixation is troublesome but my colleagues, all of them, are accommodating."

Jessica laughs, "The slut!" With Artyom coyly smiling at that, Jessie asks, "Was Glados right? You feel alive now?"

Artyom nods, "Yes, being alive feels wonderful, and scary."

Diego cuts in and says to Jessica, "Okay, you gotta hear this!" She then taps on Artyom's head while going, "Knock knock!"

Artyom laughs, "Okay, okay Sian!" She takes a breath and then opens her mouth and says in the exact voice of Michal Pitney, but only a half octave higher than normal, "Oi, Jessie, love! You be taken' good care of our lil' roo rat 'ere!"

Jessica gives a slight double take, "Mikey?"

Because of an infamous mass murder case, by UN treaty it is illegal for “ghosts” from hosting worlds to operate androids and bots in the real world so Michal Pitney had to sneak in by stowing away on Artyom’s brand new electronic brain in “her” spanking new human body. As the SYLN-b AI for SA96, a block-3 Trung class platform currently under construction, only the sail has been laid so the core interface module has yet to be installed on Artyom’s pop-tart brain.

Michal was uploaded and masked as an imbedded subroutine and after about a dozen attempts it was clear that she couldn’t actually pilot Artyom’s body. Everytime they tried Artyom’s walk and gestures made her look like a drunken Sicilian marionette, so they focused on what they could get out of the language center. Speech transposition through the tacnet-interface was so good, flawless in fact, that Michal is able to speak with her own register, inflections and accent.

Michal as Artyom says, “SWAG’d it on the first try!”

Jessica cringes, “Quiet, you gotta keep this on the down low!”

“I hear ya, Red. Chat ch’ya up at Monique’s!” Artyom then takes her voice back with, “She’ll be with me for a few months testing the interface and it’s fascinating to say the least. It’s like I got this little person in me watching me eat, poo and fuck.” Michal again takes control of Artyom’s voice, “I’m havin’ a balls-bloody blast with this!” She then looks to Diego and, “Told you I’d make it here, doll!”

Jessica urges Artyom/Michal to, “Knock it off already!”

Diego bumps into Jessica, laughing, “Isn’t this a scream!”

On the stage Adolphina calls out, “Okay, we need the daddy to bring our Quinceañera up to the stage!”

Jacob is already there with a smile and his hand outstretched towards Diego, “Come on, honey. Let’s go change your shoes.”

With happy tears in her eyes, Diego kisses both Artyom and Jessica saying, “I love you guys!” Then cupping her hand she says in Artyom’s ear, “You too, Mikey!”

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Changing the shoes of the Quinceañera before the father and daughter dance, like most quinceañera ceremonies, is usually a solemn affair but for Diego’s party the focus here is on having fun and not taking any of this seriously. Jacob is visibly startled when he finds and extracts Diego’s old baseball cleats from her feet and this is great fun for a big laugh. To have her beautiful new pumps brought out on a gilded pillow—and replaced by crapped out sports shoes on said pillow

makes for a fantastic visual in the memory book.

The traditional father-daughter dance has also trans-morphed into an “all ya’ll come dance with the Quince” dance, and the Mariachi rendition of the Nutcracker’s, Waltz of the Flowers is uniquely perfect for this moment. Jacob in his charcoal back suit, formal attire for the Annex, and Diego in her stunning dusty-rose dress is a beautiful sight that everyone applauds when time came for Maria to cut in.

The schedule is tight and where Jacob gets ninety seconds with his daughter, Maria is only allocated a precious minute. Maria is also applauded when Léon cuts in—and as the cuts continue everyone else can now take to the dance floor.

From the tower rampart of the Shōgun Castle, Jessica enjoys the beauty of the moment. Watching as Léon gets cut by Ophelia at the thirty-second mark, followed by Seth, Victoria, Esma and Piper, but it’s when Bill then Scott cut in that she is awed by how handsome they both look dancing with her younger sister. Before just now, Jessica has never thought of these two as sexy per se, but she finally realizes what her mother saw in Scott.

Noticing Maria approaching from the outer walkway, Jessica quietly slips into the first floor castle keep. Maria steps in after her, and before Jessica can say anything Maria already breaks the ice with a long shot, “Riddle me this...what’s red and bad for my teeth?”

Jessica nods with genuine surprise, “Very good!”

“So, I gotta be doin’ somethin’ or be shuttin’ up my pie hole?” With Jessica touching her own nose on the second option, Maria says, “Let’s play that game! You know the one, simple answers?”

Jessica agrees, “Let’s do that.”

“The floor is yours!”

“Okay.” Jessica thinks about it for a few seconds and asks, “You know how lil’ Angela has wanted a full-time sister, because Diego and I are gone a lot and, well, ask and ye shall receive!”

Maria laughs, “Who did Scott knock up?”

Jessica thinks about it, “It’s not who, so much as when.”

Maria asks, “Have I met ‘em?”

Jessica nods yes with, “The end product, an’ that’s really not gonna help because you know all the candidates and there’s so many to choose from! Wanna kick the difficulty level up a notch?”

“Sure, I’ll take a hint, two words max for the pot. Throw me a curve ball and give it your best fricken shot.”

"This, right now, is why I hate playing password with you on the opposing side!" Maria shrugs big while Jessica ponders the hint, "Okay, for the big win...ninety...years."

Maria rears back in total confusion, but it's only temporary.

Jessica is amazed by watching Maria visually transition from a perplexed 'what the fuck?' to an aware 'what the fuck!' as the cogs and gates in her brain case clank and pachinko and cypher it all down to only one possible candidate, followed by her quietly saying, "whoa."

That was the easy part because Jessica is even more amazed as Maria, while having a two-way mental conversation with herself, turns towards the cannon portal in the castle wall, and after a pregnant pause with her looking out over the party she turns to Jessica while pointing out that portal—making the wildest possible ass of guesses, "Claudia or Rachel?"

"Whoa is right, you're already connecting the dots...Claudia."

Maria thumbs out towards Sasha and asks, "Jacob does not know that's her?" Jessica shakes her head *no*, so Maria states clearly, "Jacob does not know that Alex is him."

"Not a clue."

Maria wonders, "How does Monique factor in with the Nefers?"

"From what little I was able to gather she provides a lateral pass point for info, data, materials, money...people!"

"Obviously, they got that sample from her but...she just found out who Sasha was-is when she told 'er who Scott was to her, right?"

Jessica moves her finger back, forth and back, then, "Yes!"

"So, Scott doesn't know about Monique, and she just found out about Scott, Angela *and* Sasha, or Claudia, but if Scott is working for us then where would we be hemorrhaging gray now?"

"Chief Nelson. I snagged that tidbit from Luc, quiet like."

Maria is shocked, "Zach? Isn't he the Co-op mole we doubled against them? This makes him, what, a triple or re-doubled agent?"

Jessica thinks about it, "Maybe a third-party double, I think?" She then shakes her head and, "Back to the issue, you were going to say something to Scott and Monique in passing and—"

"The fuck I am now!"

"Exactly!"

"You do have to admit they'd make excellent bed-bugs!" Jessica rolls her eyes as Maria continues, "Okay, I was wondering why

Monique was inviting him and Angela over without us around and now I know!" Maria then asks, "Wait a minute, does Monique know you're our Annex contact with the Nefers?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know I know that she's one."

"If you plug the dyke here then when is Scott gonna find out? He *is* going to find out, right?"

"Christmas. It's just that they can't know just yet."

"Because...it would fuck up the upcoming missions?"

Jessica nods, "I don't know how but *he* won't show me."

"How can two stupid-simple insertion missions get screwed up to cause so much blowback?" After a long pause Maria thinks out loud, "Jacob is next in line if anything happens to me."

"That keeps the Co-op in check."

"And...if he ever dies?"

Jessica realizes, "They won't count on him becoming a ghost!"

"oh, my god, if I get whacked there'd be no stopping him." Maria whispers, then looks to Jessica with sad eyes, "I'm trying to save lives, here. That's been the plan all along."

Jessica mouths the words *I know*, then, "On all sides, I know." She then huffs a laugh and adds, "If you die he won't play nice and, in spite of what you may think otherwise, father still loves you."

Maria shrugs, "He's got a funny way of showing it."

Jessica almost laughs at that, "Yea, an' you don't?"

Maria admits, "I know, I can be a cunt at times."

Jessica smiles, "You mean, *not* a cunt at times."

"Well, ya got me there!" Maria nods then asks with stabbing eyes, "Now, I long ago figured the Nefers had to be involved with the Geisha bullshit somehow but, tell me, how does Monique factor in?"

"She doesn't factor, but gray-matter did provide funds and eugenics controls. They bowed out when they found out about me."

Maria squints at her with, "There's an *and* in there."

"Aaaand, him. They wanna talk to The Alter."

Maria visibly goes from really pissed off to a quiet resolve within a few short seconds, followed by, "And what if I say, no?"

"EEEEENT!" Jessica makes a loud buzzer sound then laughs, "Wrong answer! Try again."

"For my edimifuckencation, why should I agree to this?"

Jessica thinks and blinks and, "My brother and I play an odd game on a regular basis. We try to surprise the other but it's all ass backwards because, for us, the winner is the one who *gets* surprised!"

"Figuring out how well you tune shit out, right?"

"Yea, so don't ask if you wanna win this round."

Maria shakes her head, "I don't like this game."

"Neither do we, but for us it's kinda rewarding." Jessica then puts a hand out, "So, after the demo I'll bring them here to Monique's and, before you say anything, when the time comes you'll be like all cool with that. Trust me, you'll be pleasantly surprised." Jessica then points towards the party and, "I still have time to get my cut so, remember, you need to talk to José before the candle ceremony."

She nods yes, and as Jessica steps away Maria calls out, "Hey, is Jacob banging Paula already?"

Jessica looks back and snorts, "Liquor a man up and spread your legs and waddya think is gonna happen?"

Maria points out, "That goes for all of us!"

"It's for laughs, and they're keepin' it quiet."

Maria then asks, "Did he figure out Babs yet?"

"No, but when he does I'll be your fly on that wall."

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Lucia puts an earbud-mic on Victoria and, "You're on, *chicas*!"

Victoria takes Diego by the hand and, "There are many a little strumpet in the world who dream of a coronation and there are some, like us, who dreaded it and couldn't ditch theirs. You, my dear, came to mine to laugh at me walking around in my silly looking dress, so it's only proper that I come to yours in good turn!"

Diego snorts a laugh, "Sorry 'bout that!"

"Oh no, my love, all's fair but, unfortunately, I am cheated from mocking you in yours because...look at you!" Victoria holds Diego's hand up and turns to the crowd, "She's just too damned stunning in this thing." Victoria lets go of her hand and points to a chair, "Have a seat 'cause it's time for us to dish it out."

"Dish it out in full, I take it?"

"Just two scoops, me poppet!"

With Monique's antique medieval scissor-chair here as Diego's throne, Diego fluffs her skirt out and sits gracefully as Lucia points to her and goes, "If you know Sian like we know Sian, then you'd know Sian ain't a tiara kinda gal so, what to do? And, of all people, the only level headed one of us, our Aunt Ophelia, comes to the rescue!"

Ophilia steps up beside Diego saying, "*Mi bomboncita*." She then looks out over the crowd and nods for a laugh, "I know, I know *Inglés, Inglés!*" Ophilia touches her shoulder, "When Diego, our Sian, was two we called her *El Niño* for a reason! Our *mija* then was a little bundle of terror." Adolphina is already leaning in with an open hatbox, "Here in this box is what you get for being such a rotten little tot!" She kisses Diego on the head as Maria reaches into the box, "You did not know *tu abuelo*, your grandfather, but he knew you."

Diego gives a little shriek as Maria pulls her grandfather's fedora from the box—the hat that everybody in the family has coveted and, skipping generations, now goes to Diego. The fedora matches so well one would think that the dress was designed with it in mind from the onset. As it's placed on her head the Xhemal, Sheila, inserts one of Caesar's black and red feathers, one she plucked from him minutes ago, into the hatband then gives her a little nuzzle from behind.

"No way!" chirps Diego as everyone applauds.

In tears Diego hops up and kisses and hugs Ophilia, Sheila, Lucia, Adolphina, her mother, and as she sits back down she gives a double thumbs-up to Ceaser with a cheerful, "Thank you!"

Caesar double thumbs back with an, "Owie!"

This gets him a big laugh since Caesar yelped aloud when Sheila harvested it from his neck plumage.

Victoria slithers in and goes, "Well, this next scoop is on me for obvious reasons because I happen to know about scepters and I know first-hand of little girls who don't want their scepter!"

Lucia hands Victoria a long box and, "Sure about this, Vic?"

Victoria pulls the top of the box off and says, "Waddya think?"

Lucia looks into the box then at Diego while she elbows Victoria with a laugh, "Yea, it's her! It's definitely her."

Victoria steps up to Diego saying, "I had to take my scepter but, for you, I brought a fine substitute over impractical tradition. Reach your hand in here and take a swing at this!"

With Victoria holding the box out with two hands, high enough so that she cannot see what's inside, Diego reaches in and is surprised by the heft of the object. She tugs and with party poppers going off,

showering her and Victoria in confetti, she pulls a mace from the box all spruced up with black and red bows and ribbons tied to it.

Laughing hysterically, Diego goes, "It's a, it's a...a mace!"

"Fifteenth century, Italian. Use it in good health, love!"

Diego's laughter quickly flips to happy crying because things could not be more perfect than they are now, and with everybody laughing then clapping while she hugs Victoria, Lucia steps up and raises her glass of champagne, "Before we take some photos and start the banquet." Lucia then throws out, "And the green tamales *son mejores que singar!* I want to propose the first toast for our quince, Sian Diego!"

On that note, Maria slips away from the proceedings...

Standing in the shadows of the cherry trees, away from the party, José Ozo has an excellent view of the stage. With the third toast for Diego being given by Victoria, Maria strolls up beside the now incredibly tall and handsome José, and quietly says, "You know, I've come to love you as my own son."

José couldn't resist, "You mean, the son you never had!"

Maria cracks up, "You're right about that!"

As her laughter dies down, José drapes his arm around her shoulders and Maria is actually surprised by his deep voice and how big he has become. He's not a man yet but he might as well be, and Maria has to remind herself that she can't look at him in those terms.

Maria thinks about it and opens up like never before, "I owed your father. He bought me a precious few seconds that turned that fight around. Mahko saved our asses."

"He was doing his job. You don't owe him a damned thing."

"I owe him my life."

"If you say so, okay, but what still sticks with me sore is that you wouldn't let me see his remains."

Maria deflates because this is something they never really talked about before so, finally, she begrudgingly says, "I carried his legs out. That was all that was left. I couldn't let you see that."

José thinks about it and nods, "Okay, I can let that one go."

"Thank you!" Maria then ventures to guess, "To risk asking a stupid question, but, are you still in love with Diego?"

"d'uuuh." José huffs a laugh and, "Stupid question is right. She says she thinks of me as a brother now."

"I'm curious, back when you were hanging out together on Second Hand when you were eight, were you two intimate?"

José swallows hard then quietly says, "every day."

Maria nods, expecting that answer, "Then she is choosing to see you as a sibling and not as an option because...you are not safe." Maria bodily turns towards José and adds, "If you stay here you will not have a chance in hell with her. You do understand that."

José nods, "Kinda."

"Look, you are family to us and you will always be family but, honestly, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have with my daughter, but with the feels Diego is a chickenshit so that's not gonna happen if you stick around. You gotta make yourself scarce."

"I figured, I know you talked to my mom already."

"Clem has all those restaurants in a dozen major cities. She travels everywhere so you two would have fun!"

"I liked my roots being here."

"That's why she was okay with you staying here, and your roots will always be here but things change. Let me rephrase that." Maria pokes him in the chest, "That is, if you want things to change. If you wanna take that chance then right now is the time to skedaddle."

José scrunches his brow, "You mean, right now."

Maria pulls a card out and slips it into his breast pocket and, "This is Mahko's. There's a lot more but this will get you steppin' out right. Mac is waiting to take you to Monique's where your mom will have a limo pulling in, in about twenty minutes." Maria gives him a motherly kiss and, "I want to see you whenever you come to town."

"You're kind of busy, remember? Waging a war and shit?"

Maria nods and smiles with, "I always make time for my kids."

José gives her a big hug and, "Can ya tell Cap bye for me?"

"Thank you for not resenting Cap all these years."

"Why? I feel sorry for her." Maria gives him a confused look so he points out, "Diego is not complicated. Cap is a toy to her, she's always been, but after this deCap shit hitting the N2, and even though she denies it, everybody knows it's her. Diego was rippin' pissed about it when she found out, but she feels more bad for Cap."

Maria feels a little guilty, "I didn't authorize that."

"Yea, I know. Eight told me." José gives a little smirk, "See, Cap may be Diego's toy, but Eight has been mine."

Maria grins big with a genuine sense of relief, "I have been wondering where she's been gettin' that smile!"

"Thanks for letting me get cut early. She loves it!"

"Glad to be of help. Mac is waiting, *vámanos!*" Maria gives him another little peck, and right as he starts to step off she says, "Hey, I heard that some scouts were checkin' you out!"

José shyly grins while looking back, "Yea, and Diego too."

"That may be but if anyone has a shot at the pros, you do."

He spins around and prophetically adds, "Don't rule her out."

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The banquet that follows is a monumental hit but the families from Havana and locally are confused to no end. The flavors here are all Ophelia and Agatha but León stabilized their recipes for a consistent outcome and labored to death over presentation—and it shows.

What was beautiful to the palate is now beautiful to the eye.

If there ever were to be a five-star Mexican-Cuban restaurant hybrid then León could pull it off with this fare. He actually toyed with the idea over multiple glasses of a wicked *Franc Bordeaux*, thinking of *olá* as a possible name, that being the first letter of their three names, but a pipe dream spawned from a bottle of wine is still a pipe dream.

Their luncheon takes the better part of an hour but Diego only has time to shovel in a quick bite of *pollo asado* before the dreaded Candle Ceremony—fifteen candles on stage, and fifteen people to be called up to light them with her. If one averages out the time on stage it's about two minutes per candle, but Diego fears that this thing will be an ordeal to get through. It can also be sort of confusing because the 'candle' for a year denotes the year leading up to that birthday.

It isn't butterflies in Diego's stomach but pterodactyl, plural, because this process usually comes with lots of hugs and tears.

Maria is presented the very first candle and she is the obvious choice because she is the mother, and Ophelia was the second candle because what can you say about a grandmother!

Agatha got candle number three all because she didn't drown Diego in the toilet, she was a rotten little kid, and Jessica followed with candle four for the exact same reasons.

It was Lucia who brought baseball to Diego in her fifth year, followed by Adolphina for discovering and pointing out to Diego who she really was in her sixth year.

Monique took the seventh candle because, without knowing it, she inspired Diego on how to be a lady, and the eighth candle was secured by five of her little league teammates who remained friends with her to this day through thick and thin and thick again.

It was here that Diego was, not exactly frantically looking around, but not seeing José she sticks to the sheet and calls out for Chell to step up with, "Chell, here, is my ninth candle. She taught me a lot about her world and their biosphere. She and I bonded and we had endless and wonderful conversations back then."

With them lighting the candle together, Chell goes, "I may have been your tutor but I really was your friend."

After hugs and kisses Chell steps down and Jessica says to Maria through the tacnet, <"We dodged that bullet.">

Maria shoots back with, <"So this *will* happen, right?">

Jessica gives a sly smile, <"The theme for today is pleasantly surprised, remember? Let shit play out naturally, okay?">

Maria raises and rubs her middle finger against her cheek and jaw in an obvious stealth flip off, which makes Jessica chuckle.

"Artemisia, please come on up." Diego asks, then tears up, "Michal Pitney was my tenth year candle and one of my best friends. She helped me get over the hump to becoming me. I paid forward what Michal did for me with Artyom." Then to Artyom as she steps up, "I want to thank you for being here for Michal."

As they light the candle, Artyom says, "Sian, I will always be grateful what you did for me. Being there for me."

With tears streaming down her face, Diego laughs big, "Everybody is thanking everybody today, aren't they!"

Frivolity and fun comes with Rufus Tyrol who shares candle eleven with Cap, and Victoria who scores candle twelve, but of all people it's Junior who lights candle thirteen because he spent quite a bit of time rounding her edges off—where Monique stands and points at him while laughing, "So, *Monsieur*, that was your doing, *tu cad!*"

Where Junior innocently shrugs, "*Si*, my apologies, *señora!*"

With him stepping off the stage, Diego looks out and can't find the words, so after a good twenty seconds it is Angela who speaks up, "Sian, what you are doing here-now is between me and my flan!"

Diego rolls her eyes then points at little Angela and says, "You, I got your number. Just you wait!"

Angela spins her hands around at Diego while mocking her, "Yea baby! You got my number!"

With everybody laughing, which is normal around Angela, Diego takes a deep breath and, "Most everyone I know complain that their fathers are not around. My family complained that my father was never around." Diego points up and, "But, I don't know how, but he always knew when I really needed him. I mean it was my fourteenth year and I was awkward! With Jacob still sitting she starts gesturing at him excitedly, "Come on, get up here already!"

"Like my mom he's a busy guy, and I was sprouting and I was a damned mess, like all thirteen year olds, but he knew I needed him." And as Jacob steps up, Diego winks at him, "Sometimes I think he never knows best but...he always knew. I never had to say anything and he was always there when it mattered. That year we went places, and binged on shit cartoons and, god, I love him for it!"

With them lighting the candle together, Jacob whispers, and just enough to get picked up on her mic which gets him a big laugh, "You can shut the fuck up now, You're making me wanna cry."

Diego gives him a huge hug to a loud round of applause, and as he steps away they mercifully come to the final candle.

Diego now looks down towards little six-year-old Angela and, "Didn't I say I had your number? Well, that number is fifteen!"

"Wha?" Angela goes—then realizes, "No shit!"

Diego pulls a chair around and points to it, "Get your butt up here, already!" With Angela moseying along like a snail Diego laughs, "It's now *you* between you and your flan!"

Angela kicks it in gear and boogies it on stage and hops up on that chair. Now eye-to-eye to Diego, Angela turns to the crowd and spins her finger around her own ear then points at Diego, where Diego shakes her head and, "Teen angst was the special of the day this year and you went out of your way to make me laugh. You really did."

Angela stares into her eyes and, "You're easy."

Diego grumbles, "You're a little ass."

She pats her own butt and, "I'm six so wadda-ya expect, hu? It'll get bigger!" With everybody laughing at this, Angela asks directly, "If I say nice things will that get me two flan?"

"Sure!"

Angela touches her lips while in deep thought where after a short pause Diego asks, "Nice words, how 'bout?"

"Tryin' to find 'em!" With everyone cracking up Angela puts her hands in the air and, while turning to look into Diego's eyes, she leans in to say, "And cheap!"

Diego is indignant, "Cheap!"

Angela shrugs, "You said it yourself at the discount rack!"

Shaking her head, Diego takes Angela's hand and has to pull her arm in so they can light the candle together. When lit, Angela looks at Diego, snarls a tad and gives her a quick kiss, and then, as is her style, she turns away, bends over and starts spitting.

With everyone laughing, Adolphina hops up and motions for Monique to come forward, and as she does the *Cubanaza Damas* bring a long-flat gift box up to a table on the stage. As they set up, Monique dons an earbud mic while Léon sneaks in with two flan deserts for the giggling Angela who is back in her seat.

Adolphina announces, "Madame Ribot, the stage is yours!"

Monique looks at Diego and shakes her head, "*Ton cadeau*, you were vocally opposed to this but your vote didn't count, but how does one go about buying for someone who want's for nothing?"

Diego laughs, "We can cut it off here if you want!"

Monique shakes her head again, "*Oh-no no-no-no! Ma petite cocotte*, after what we went through? *Oh no*, but this fell on *moi* and I had not an idea, nor a lead to go on, and the family here were racking their brains along with me and, by chance, your father suggested this." With the *Damas* nudging Diego up to the table, Monique continues, "Instead of a reproduction we were determined to seek out an original. The bidding was fierce but our Josav prevailed and, well, *voilà!*"

Diego asks, "You want me to open this?"

Monique sighs, "*Oui mademoiselle!*"

As Diego starts tearing the wrapping, Jacob calls out to her, "With this you'll be a genuine First Class, Space Patrol Officer!"

Diego gives her father a confused look while she unwraps a beaten to death rectangular guitar hard case. Unlatching it, she slowly opens the case to peek inside. Startled, she catches her breath and it slams shut. Diego opens it again and can't believe her eyes.

"Oh, my God, no way!" Diego shrieks, throws herself into Monique's arms, and starts bawling with racking sobs.

Surprised, Monique asks, "I believe we hit it out of the park?"

Through the crying, Diego comically nods yes repeatedly and, "I don't believe it!" And as she stands to collect herself she asks, "Seriously, is this thing real? Really real?"

Josav speaks up, "A nineteen-seventy-seven Rickenbacker. It's real alright! We had it refurbished for you."

As Josav and the Damas pull a blue 4001 model bass from the box and help her strap it on, Josav asks, "You been playing long?"

Diego sniffs with a happy-sad face, "Just a year."

"Ever hear of an Ampeg tube head?"

With a quivering lip, "No, what's that?"

Josav smiles, "You will when we get up the hill!"

Standing beside Diego, Maria looks at Jacob sitting below and gives him an approving nod, transmitting, <"Ya did good, fucker.">

Jacob smiles and uses her line, <"So, when am I right?">

Maria shakes her head with, <"Lick my twat!">

He perks up, <"Is that an offer?">

<"You got a full dance card, buckwheat.">

<"Wanna cut in? For you, just say the word!">

She smiles, <"When I'm in the mood I'll take a number.">

Jacob nods and, what follows absolutely floors Maria because, Jacob blows her the sweetest of kisses. Maria is gut-punched because this was a silly-stupid thing they did when they were first married. Subtly looking around to make sure nobody was watching, Maria snatches it from the air in slow-motion just like the old days.

Only Jessica notices what's transpiring here, and she's moved when Maria's hand drops to her side and grips it tight.

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"I just can't get away from this mutherfuckery, can I?"

Maria is shaking her head as Jessica crosses her arms and leans into her saying, "Nope."

It's late afternoon and the protestors have been there since early this morning. By now they're all shouted out but the second they see her it fires them up again but it's not near as loud as it was earlier. They have been held in the far parking lot and because of the acoustics none of their shouting made it into the park. A police line of a hundred cops is holding them in check and the press is intermingled with the police to take interviews and film the nonsense.

Just then Léon and his staff with the *Damas* start to walk from the park with Eight, Cap, Peanuts and Copper in tow. Five carts piled high with trays of food follow them, and as they reach the police line they set up tables and off-load the trays of food and drink.

Léon walks up and taps the lead officer on the shoulder, “*Monsieur*, this is a gesture of gratitude for your fine assistance today, but we have enough on hand to feed both you and our silly guests here so let’s be kind, shall we?”

There is twenty times more burritos on the tables than there are police officers and this was intentional. As the police line pulls back behind the tables, each cop picking up a burrito and a drink, Léon steps out towards the protesters who are actually quiet for once, and waiting to hear what this guy has to say.

“Well, we must be peckish after a long day of making the loud noises, *oui*? For being civil today, *bon appetit*!”

They look at him in shock so he throws his hands out and laughs, “Come on, come on! Please, while it’s hot!”

They approach the tables like locusts, tentative at first but orderly, and snatch all but a small pile of these huge burritos from the tables. While they are scarfing them down Maria steps up, takes one of the burritos—and with the clones keeping them calm and focused on eating Maria can unwrap it in full view and in relative peace.

“Kinda hard to shout stupid shit with a mouth crammed full of *carne asada* isn’t it?” She takes a bite and looks at Léon, saying, “Damn, dude, this is good!”

Maria tosses the burrito over her shoulder where Jessica catches it like they’ve been practicing that toss, and while she takes a bite, Maria points to the three main protest leaders and thumbs towards the trees at the end of the police line, “My brown ass doesn’t do well in the sun, so let’s chat over there.”

With Maria and the three walking off, Jessica notices a skinny young man in the crowd who’s about her age. While she takes another little bite she paths her way into his head and learns something very sad about the people on this planet—the young have no responsibilities to speak of, nothing to look forward to and nothing to be proud of.

He wolfed his burrito down so with her head she gestures for him to come over. Surprised that this gorgeous redhead would do that to the likes of him, he approaches slowly and, “Wha’?”

She hands him her burrito and, “You still look hungry.”

Suspicious at first, looking at the food then at her, he realizes that she is being nice so he takes it and says, “Thanks.”

Jessica could drop a suggestion in his mind but she chooses to try verbal persuasion in its stead, “You look bored. That seems to be an epidemic around here.”

With raised eyebrows he agrees, "You could say that."

She nods repeatedly then quietly asks, "Lookin' for something to do? I can get ya hooked up."

"Right, a job? Nobody has jobs."

Jessica stares at him and says even quieter, "I got something comin' up that, well, there won't be enough people to do the work and we will need people, not bots for it."

"Doing what?"

"Can't say, but you see the tall black building behind me?"

"The Klick?"

"That's the one. If you wanna get a jump on the premier for this show then all ya gotta do is just...walk on in. It's that simple."

Thinking, he nods and asks, "Front row seats, hu?"

She smiles at him, "Best seats in the house."

Maria snags four folding chairs from one of the carts and sets them up in the shade of three trees who are duking it out over the sun, and while working on their burritos these leaders are rattling off to Maria that she is a warmonger, a fascist and a Nazi of all things.

With Peanuts by the cart, channeling herself into their minds, she compels them to now cooperate while Maria puts her hand up to her mouth motioning for them to be quiet then say, "Have a McFuckin' seat already. It's my time to get a word in."

One of the leaders say, "So, you're going to listen to us?"

Maria snorts, "No, what makes you think that?"

"I'm wondering why the press here is not mobbing you?"

"Because I'll punch their lights out, remember?" She smiles big and, "See, if I wanna talk then I'll invite 'em over to ask questions, all nice-nice, but since they're spewing bullshit and spinning lies, well, there's not a court in the land or the four corners of the TPZ that can convict me of assault. They keep their distance now."

The next leader leans in and says, "Then to get your attention we're just gonna hav'ta step up our game."

"Really, that a challenge? If so then I'm up for it!"

"Ma'am, you're evil."

"They jump my shit and I'm the bad guy? Do you really listen to what you're saying? I venture to guess that if the media stopped sucking on the Co-op sugar tit and actually reported the truth then

maybe you'd be pitchin' a bitch elsewhere."

The third leader suggests, "You could sue for peace."

"And then what, peace? What a puerile notion!" Maria leans in towards them and, making sure the octodroid camera that's close picks this up, "I can tell ya right now *that* ain't gonna happen, and all ya'll got left in your quiver is exactly what you are protesting against here. Years ago you started with-like 'make love not war' or whatever it was you were puking out then. Now, three years on you're calling us fascists and Nazis and everything else in the book! Like you really know what those are?" She pulls out a transparent infrared filter sheet and says, "Here, look back at your people through this."

The leader looks out at the protesters enjoying their food and, all over them are little green dots everywhere, so he says, "Oh crap!"

He hands the filter off as Maria thumbs behind her, "See these cops and Secret Service guys here? Tell ya what, I'm gonna cut 'em loose! From now on if it's just me then these guys won't be around and that should give you a clear shot to punch a Nazi, throw a rock or pull a gun, but before you do...lookie here!"

Suddenly, two platoons of ghost droids flash into view, many of them floating in the air with their weapons pointing in all directions looking for threats, but mostly painting the protesters to freak them out. Everyone, including the reporters, see the droids and the hushed silence that falls over the entire crowd is deafening.

Maria continues with the slightest little evil grin she could muster, "I can't seem to shake these damned things off. They shadow me and my people everywhere we go and they are like, totally overkill an' psychobilly overclocked."

Just then, Diego leans in and gives Maria a quick kiss, and Maria says as she pats her on the backside, "You did good today, hon! Give me a minute, okay?"

"Okay, mom!"

As Diego walks out to the limo with Jessica and the clones, Maria stands, "See, this whole time you had it all wrong. The cops and the Secret Service standing guard were not protecting me from you. They've been protecting *you* from me."

The first leader asks, "Is there any way of ending this?"

"Why?" Maria then thinks about it, "I tell ya what, after the first of the year, March-February maybe, I'll be back and the four of us can have a two way dialectic over a beer then. Deal?"

"What's that going to accomplish?"

Maria asks, "Seriously?"

"Yea, what's that gonna do?"

Maria points out, "Reality check babe, the problem you've had all along is that out here in the free world you have a right to speak! What you don't have on the street is a right to be heard."

"Question stands, what'll it accomplish?"

She shrugs slightly, "I'll be listening."

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By the limo Jessica and Seth are watching the others load up, and far enough away for Jessica to ask, "Wanna show me now?"

Seth scratches his nose and, "Well, about that. I was hoping you'd forget." With Jessica slowly turning her head to him he realizes he can't slither out of this, "Sorry I played you but it was necessary. We couldn't let you approach step-mother with a lie on your tongue."

Jessica's lip curls slightly, "You lied...to me."

Defensively he says, "About the missions, yes, and both your imaginations ran wild. It was perfect!" Seth looks up at her, "Point is, this opportunity allowed us to lock-in New Years without having to pull teeth. Remember, Jessie, this is not about us."

"You never lied to me before today."

"Would you like to see how really messy today and the next six weeks would have been if I didn't?"

Jessica realizes, "I'm gonna half'ta let this slide, aren't I?"

"I tell ya what, sis." Seth gives her a peck on the cheek, "If I have to lie to you in the future, I promise I'll ask for permission first."

Jessica gives him a confused look, "That makes no sense."

"When the time comes...it will."

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70

distractamundo

LCTN: TURA-TAU-4 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76618.04 (47pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-27-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 08:00zulu (local 12:48mst)

High over the coastal trading city of Nufa, at the mouth of the massive river known as Novyy Belaya, SA32, the Annex battle platform christened the Tamerlane, screeches to an almost instantaneous stop at two-hundred kilometers altitude—and a handful of seconds later it rips out of the area just as speedy-quick as it came in.

In that short period of time they were hanging motionless above the planet, Tamerlane launches five HWG99 Razorback drop ships, referred to simply enough as razors or slicks, as well as six Cerberus fighters, ten Thunderbolts and just one Thunderbird. With no lateral movement, like from an orbital insertion, all twenty-two ships dive straight down for the deck without the pesky heat and buffeting that comes from reentry to slow things down.

Here they're speeding things up.

All platforms have six drop stations underneath the ship and on a combat assault they can drop up to four ships from each station, launching twenty-four ships in all. Because of the time it takes to do that they have to release them below the operational floor of the Co-op spider missiles in case there are a bunch of them scattered about in M3 minefield mode. Here they're launching only one ship per station so for today two-hundred clicks it is.

A quick zip in an' out.

Since there was an open drop station for today's insertion mission, Jacob took that and launches along with the Razorbacks in his littler Thunderbird fighter.

Everything about a drop is counterintuitive because the ship you are in is being pushed up against a cradle attached to one of three

swing arms or against the ceiling itself. This pushing, or in actuality lifting, is tirelessly performed by your ships on-board AG drive and is held securely in place with tons of displacement force without the use of any mechanical or electro-magnetic clamps.

Because of the gravity flow while staging the crew and cargo inside said ship, waiting to drop, are now hanging upside down against their restraints and anchors—when they are actually oriented right side up in a ship within a ship with a downward flow...confused?

Anyway, there are also eight catapult launchers, sixteen on the Trung class, where they can each stage up to four fighters to launch in quick succession but today they are only punching out two per catapult. If they would have staged four then two of the pilots would also be hanging upside down just like the crews in the Razors.

Now, along with the recent updates to the Razorback family of transports and gunships the AG drive has doubled its displacement power, from three-gravities to six-gravities, so going from a stationary 1g while falling up towards a cradle to being ripped out the bottom of the ship and accelerating at 6g's kind of gets all of your attention.

SA fighters can now pull 12g's from this drive system.

While falling away from the Tamerlane at break neck speed, once the Razors rotate nose-down into a dive, the pulseblade engines snap shut and fire. Now equipped with the exact same safety-razor pulseblade engines used on the Thunderbolts, the cryogenic oxygen and hydrogen fuels have been swapped out for liquid nitrogen.

Plasma is still plasma when coming out the back of the engine so, with the massive output of these engines, this thrust matches the Delta-V they could get out of the old oxy-hydro mix which was a nice fuel to have while in space, but cryo nitrogen is way-way safer to handle and store since it is an inert element. The big bonus with the safety-razors is a huge 80% boost in thrust when they open the air intakes and use the ambient atmosphere.

The fighters, on the other hand, don't need to waste cryo-N like this. With 12g's of AG they catch up to the drop ships in seconds and split into groups of two Thunderbolts to screen and one Cerberus to run point for each Razorback. The five groups of ships are already splitting up and dropping at different speeds towards predetermined points over the Novyy Belaya, south of Nufa.

The free Cerberus pulls in close to the Thunderbird, and Peña radios, ["This being my first actual combat drop, how we doin'?"]

Jacob, in the tight cockpit of the Thunderbird, which is the same cockpit as the Cerberus, goes, "You're a fighter jock right? Try it from inside a slick. It's kinda scary then."

["Nope! Nope-nope-nope, if I'm gonna die I want to see it comin'. Know what I mean?"]

"Yeppers but, statistically, they stand a better chance getting to the ground in one piece than we have protecting their asses. If you ever have to Fuck Off or O.P. for a mission—"

Peña cuts him off, ["Nope, I'll stick with this!"]

Jacob laughs, "Dude, everybody gets to have their day in that barrel. One day your number'll come up so don't be surprised."

["I don't like you right now."]

"I get that a lot." Jacob pauses then says with a sense of pride, "Okay, Dog, today this is your baby. Take us in!"

["Righty'o! One-thirty, mark."] Peña then thinks about it and when they hit a hundred and ten kilometers in altitude he realizes, ["Hey, we never gave this thing here a name."]

"Okay, then have at it!"

["This mission, I dub thee...distractamundo!"]

When a flight is on open channel and pilots hear something they approve of they'll click their mic buttons, which cycles their unit, and this broadcasts a subtle "snick" on the channel. Holding the mic button down gives a negative recycled "buzz" but here they are getting dozens of repeated clicks of approval from the pilots on the team.

Jacob nods with a smile, "Then distractamundo it is."

Mach scale is relative to altitude and air pressure, i.e. bars, so the higher you are vertically, and the thinner the air, the lower the Mach speed is when compared to the same mps or kph at sea level. That is, they do not match one for one. While descending straight down there is a point where Mach increases while kph either holds or decreases so pilots pretty much ignore Mach until they hit an altitude, usually between twenty and fifty kilometers, where the scale would start to become relevant and that depends on the specific planet and its atmospheric pressure.

Here on Nufa its forty-five klicks.

It's still a sliding scale but here at Mach-8, with everyone now using only the pulseblade engines, the time it takes for Peña to call out, "Rotate forty" they rip past forty-five kilometers and hit forty klicks where they aerodynamically pitch their noses up and start to spread out in a long string over the Novvy Belaya.

At this point, they are breaking like mad using their AG drive.

With this extreme maneuver the five Razorbacks and their

escorts start to slow down at significantly different rates and, like synchronized swimmers they spread out to hit five target points over a four-hundred kilometer stretch along the river south of Nufa. Where the coastal city of Nufa is actually clear of clouds for once, which is a rarity, the rainforest that dominates this planet has them packed in today with sporadic precipitation.

Peña calls out, ["Thirty seconds."]

The assault teams rip into the clouds and break through at a half a kilometer, and as the slicks level out at fifty meters over the seven-kilometer wide river, at just below Mach-1, they hear Peña call out the final mark, ["Drop in ten!"]

At the seven second mark, on all five of the drop ships the drogue chutes unfurl and start to pull the main chutes out. With people you would normally slow down to about two-hundred kph for a pallet extraction but, since these are robotic combat droids and drones being delivered, then they can extract at near Mach without a problem because nobody will get dead from it.

At one second, right before the main chutes snap open, the razors pitch up by two degrees to help the extraction. There is a slight tug on the ships as the chutes yank hard and rip the pallet assemblies out the back of the ship—which consists of the pallet racking, the flooring of the cargo hold, as well as the rear hatches with a violence.

With the pallet extraction assemblies falling away the pilots are free to take direct control of their ships.

With the breaking rockets igniting, the pallet assemblies have already slowed down to below three-hundred kph where they hit the river like a sled. Kicking up huge fans of water, the pallets then dig in nose first and come to a screeching stop. It takes ten seconds for them to slip below the surface and, instead of cutting the chutes loose, those are pulled underwater along with racking and the cargo.

Inside a minute all the droids and drones are free from the pallets and are moving underwater towards their jumping off points.

Peña has been watching the tactical situation coming in, and it's his call what they do to get out. Right now they have four F51 Condors launching out of Nufa, and fifteen more coming up to meet them from the Nufimsky Metro-District, outside of Net Basha. The flight from Nufimsky is all of eighteen minutes out and a non-issue, it's the four from Nufa that's the potential problem.

Peña orders, ["Okay, people, lets E-Three in twenty seconds. Initiate climb to the southwest and at one klick altitude change course towards the east. Stay in the clouds on that heading below Mach-1 for five minutes then zoom up an' outta here."]

Peña gets the acknowledgements as they start their climb.

With the Razors and escorts entering the clouds, Jacob asks, "So, Dog, how you wanna to do this here?"

["This is so much cleaner than Taiji."]

"Yes it is."

["You bagged eleven, dude. People are still talkin' about it."]

"We knew it was going to be a mess, and it was."

Peña starts laughing, ["You ripped your god-damned wings off goin' after those two IR5 that shot my three-eighty out from under my ass! Man that was fucking legendary."] There is a short pause, then, ["Okay, you're higher up so I say you bait. Extend towards the southwest and drag them out that way. I'll go under and around, behind 'em."]

"Spook or shoot?"

As Peña slips into the clouds below he says, ["They've gotta be BDF old timers. I'd rather not shoot these guys down."]

With the condors now at eighty kilometers out, and screaming in, Jacob starts accelerating, "I fully agree."

Within ninety seconds Jacob has the four fighters on his tail but he's outpacing them and keeping ahead of them by ten kilometers at over Mach-5. Three minutes later he starts to slow just enough for them to get inside ten kilometers where the two lead fighters each fire a centipede missile after him. This forces Jacob to pour on the coal and boost his speed to Mach-5.8 which is just under the wing rip speed at this altitude or, more specifically, 500 millibar.

The centipede is a long-range Mach-6+ missile, yes, but the old ones struggle to hit max speed so gaining on Jacob is slow going. At two kilometers out Jacob tube-launches a 20/20 cluster bomb backwards to take care of them early but, as it is with aggressive weapon systems, the bomb killed the missiles and still had thirty-eight bomblets on board so, for giggles, it starts to yaw and pitch and rocket thrust to intercept the Condors because they are in range.

Just as the centipedes were blown to smithereens the five Razors and their escorts burst out from the clouds over three hundred kilometers away, and with clear skies above them they race for space. At the same time Peña shoots out of the clouds from right below the Condors and, noticing the 20/20 bomb spinning in towards the lead ships, he corkscrews away from his intended jump-scare, that would be shooting up through the middle of them, and opts to zoom climb up behind the two trailing Condors instead.

What the two lead pilots were focused on was a mystery to Jacob, Peña and the trailing Condors. Either it was the Razors getting away or Peña climbing up their ass, or whatever it was they did not notice the weapon slipping in between them until it showered both with sixteen bomblets split and shared evenly, each with a one-ton yield.

The follow on Condors did notice and they snap maneuver out of reach of this evil bomblet dispensing machine that is now spiraling towards them. The number three Condor breaks away clean but his wingman, however, flies right through Peña's reticle at only seventy meters distance—where on auto-sweep mode the AI fires the Cerberus' eighty-eight which rips the 8.80mm rounds across his back—sniping off his right canard, gutting the AG drive pod in the fuselage, and ripping off his left wing.

Where the pilots from the first two Condors had no aircraft left to detach their cockpits from, this ship's cockpit falls away from the wreckage and the pilot ejects from that.

As their number three fighter dives and streaks away, Peña snarls, ["God damn it! That was not the plan!"]

Jacob laughs, "Shit happens, Dog!"

["But I'll take it if that's okay! Did the first two make it?"]

"One ejected. The other pod is still falling."

["Idiots!"]

"The others are about eleven minutes away."

["Let's get outta here."]

"I'll follow you out."

Peña's Cerberus fighter lifts up and starts accelerating like mad and, within twenty seconds, Jacob's Thunderbird pulls to within two kilometers off Peña's right shoulder. Now pushing 110 kilometers altitude they rip out of the area at 0.6 of light speed in MDDSH, and then zig zag out to two AU where they stop to spool for a jump.

Jacob asks, "What time is our rendezvous with the Maiden?"

["Seventeen hundred hours. That's eight and a half hours we gotta kill until then."]

"How 'bout I buy you a burger. We can go to that place in L.A. you've been talking up a streak. Tommy's is it?"

Peña laughs, ["They're closed, dude. It's midnight there."]

"Oh yea. That's out."

["Your tab, your choice. Think of someplace."]

While pulling in to nestle his ship belly to belly with Peña's, Jacob goes, "Hey, I know the place! Black Star, it's in Moscow. They're not half bad and they'd be open for lunch now."

["Burgers?"]

"Yea! We can land at *Vnukovo* and I got some buddies there at the Sukhoi satellite facility who worked on adopting the E-blocks to their Forty-Sevens, and now they're itching to see the Seventy-Four. Biggest-Six wanted me to fly one in when I could, so now's good!"

Peña adds, ["Sure! Let's go surprise the shit out'uv 'em!"]

Seconds later a baby-baby black hole yawns wide to swallow both ships and poof—they're gone.

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As rescue crews pick up the two surviving BDF pilots, and scrape the dead one up off the jungle floor, the fighters from the Nufimsky District searched in vain all along the Novyy Belaya looking for any sign of the SA. They burned over six hours in a fruitless search and, finding nothing, they finally head for home.

Two hours later it's dusk, with the star Tura-Tau dropping below the horizon, and at a preset time every twenty clicks or so along a five hundred kilometer stretch of the river, a single ghost droid emerges from the water and scouts the rain forest near the bank.

Five minutes later those droids are joined by two more, and those are followed by 150 PacMan combat drones.

Three of these teams head north, and in two hours they will encircle the Co-op base outside Nufa that is manned by over 5,000 BDF troops. The twenty-two remaining teams race south for the vast grasslands surrounding Net Basha. There they'll find three bases and over sixty Co-op facilities spread out far and wide and stocked with a combined total of over 36,000 mixed BDF and CDF troopers.

The word for today is "mayhem" and the tee-off time is set for six-hundred hours, local.

000001000110

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-4-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 04:23zulu (local 08:15pst)

It is still early Mimisday morning, eight whole hours after the start of Twilight 360, and with Chernobyl high in the sky there is a soft cottony gray surrounding it as the light reflected off the gas-giant highlights the cirrus clouds above the Jacoby's Stump airfield. Except for the rain storms scheduled to charge in at around lunchtime, the sky will remain this way for about another seventy hours until it starts to darken for twenty-six right before the star Zemu rises in the west.

For the people who visit New Brisbane, on the planet-moon Prypiat, with its unbelievably long stretches of twilight and surprisingly predictable weather, it is ridiculously mind-blowingly enchanting.

For the five-hundred million residents here it's old hat.

When someone from Prypiat visits Earth, with its twenty-four hour day synched up with an actual day-night cycle, it is shockingly difficult for them to adapt to the cheerfully bright sunlight, imprecise seasons, and who the hell knows what the weather will be?

A large stretch limo slips onto the airfield and parks beside the Trident Star-Clipper, next to the Security Services hut. Piper climbs out of the driver's seat, and riding shotgun as her guard is none other than Staff-Seargent, Smyth, of the Honey Badgers.

It is 8:15 local and the Razorbacks are just now on approach. They would have been landing on time if it wasn't for Prypiat Traffic Control holding them up in orbit waiting for clearance. The two ships from the Pleiades already had a pre-clearance to enter their airspace to land here, but these ships were from the Steel Annex so the PTC reaches out to ask, "*Aren't we at war with them?*"

Be that as it may a clearance is a clearance, and this happens

to be a neutral territory, so the local head of Security Services gets on the horn to yell at the controllers, "*Land those bloody things!*"

Leading the two in is an executive coach build of the new HWG101. Like how the ASF47 was cut down to the 74, this here is a gangsta chopped version of the 99 that's only seven-meters shorter, close to a meter shaved off the top, but it has all the same everything save for a thirty-five percent cut in cross-section and weight taken from the fuselage. This thing was built for speed and is believed to outrun anything that flies except the Kali, the Dip and the Thunderbolt.

It looks like Paleo scores again with this crazy idea.

The 101 lands vertically without a bounce, rotates on a dime and slips across the taxiway onto the apron to park beside Boxter's Star-Clipper. As the ship squats and drops the ladder in the back, a Warthog gunship, with Michelle Kiel at the helm, sets down on the runway where the 101 landed a minute before and holds position.

At the ladder, which is actually a staircase built in an access ramp, Piper calls up, "Permission to board, ladies?"

At the top of the ladder, in her JACC fighting suit, Maria bids her to, "Come on up, Piper!"

Piper climbs up into the smartly appointed interior of the ships hold, and is taken aback by the blazing-white decor, "Well, I say, for a diplomatic transport isn't this insufferably decadent!"

The clones all shout, "Piper!"

After Eight, Copper, Peanuts and Cap get their hugs, Piper turns to hug Angela, Connie, Mini-Monique, and Diego, "All of you are so beautiful, and that was a wonderful celebration to be part of!"

Diego smiles, "More fun than I thought it was gonna be."

"Terribly fun by all accounts, but you did very well, my dear Sian, and, considering the crowd you were on display for that would be an understatement." Piper now turns to Brie Kiel, Michelle Kiel's now fifteen-year-old daughter, and says, "Brie, my-my, it is shocking to note that you are as smashing as your mother at this age." They hug and Piper adds, "And naturally blonde too! Such a rarity."

"Thank you, Piper! Me mun said to call you Piper."

Piper now turns directly to Maya Kiplinger, Ranch and Hanna's daughter who has had a make-over to totally change her appearance, and knowing who this really is Piper says with a sly and knowing smile, "By simple deduction, I believe you must be Jessica's cousin, Zoe!"

Maya offers her a handshake while struggling with American parlance and accent, "Pleased to meet ya, ma'am."

"It's Piper, my dear." Reaching past the handshake, Piper pulls Maya in for a little hug and pulls back to whisper privately to her, "I am delighted, beyond words, that you and your family made it out."

Maya worries quietly, "What if someone recognizes me?"

"That would be wishful thinking on their part? You sound nothing like your old self and everyone has a doppelganger or two running around." Piper touches her face and smiles, "I think you'll enjoy the Brillig tomorrow, Zoe. In fact, I know you will!"

Maya breaths easier, "I hear it's a lot of fun."

Piper looks around and, "So, I don't see your cuz?"

Just then, Jessica slips out of the pilot's cabin, in an unarmed JACC fighting suit, and as Maria comes out of the WSO's cabin in front of her she says, "Okay, well, she's yours to fly. Here's the keys!"

As Maria signs off on her type-rating sheet on a tablet, Jessica asks, "Here's the keys? What's that?"

"Nothing." Maria shakes her head and then tells her, "Your new Seventy-Four will be at the Spike when you get back, but if you are going to carry passengers I want you to use this thing. And, since Bud has volunteered to be your personal ghost, and we're sharing this ship, you can solo when you take it out." Maria pokes Jessica in the chest, "What surprises me is that you have made no mistakes whatsoever, but considering you I shouldn't be so surprised."

Jessica smirks ever so slightly, "You've seen me in the sims."

"Yea, and you fly just like your dad. It's eerie how you two are alike. It's unnatural."

Jessica nods, "Nail on the head!"

Piper steps up and, "Oi, you two!" As she leans in for a cheek-to-cheek kiss with Maria and then Jessica, Piper continues with, "Dress fitting is at ten local and we meet Cloé for lunch at one at my establishment, so we've got oodles of time!"

Maria nods, "Michelle has got your toys outside!"

As Jessica dismounts from her JACC, and the girls start to pile out for the limo, Maria leads Piper to Michelle's gunship out on the runway. The ramp is down and a squad from Security Services have loaded six crates onto an electric cart, and two of them have already been cracked open by Michelle.

Stepping up to Michelle and Sergeant Smyth, Maria reaches into the crates to fish out a full magazine then a BR1-M2 while saying, "Here is what I promised. You're familiar with our BR1, right?"

Piper nods, "In four-seven-five, and a fine weapon at that!"

Maria hands her the M2 and the mag and says, "Instead of the grenade launcher on top it has a recoil-compensator that slams forward and sucks it in. There is no kick and no flip, but the shock wave that comes out of this thing will no-shit ruin your dental work, so if you death-grip this bastard say goodbye to any fillings you got."

Piper slaps the mag in and drives it into battery with, "Loud?"

"Ninety decibels. That's all. No need to suppress it."

"Right!" Piper looks out and, "I see a tree that's encroaching onto our flight path. Think we should pinch it back a smidge?"

Maria smiles, "Never thought of this as a gardening tool, but why not? Oh, and the N2 interface is in your queue."

Piper lines the red dot sight up on a tree that's two kilometers out, and asks, "Eyes on target, let 'er rip?"

"Send it!"

The shot from the M2 sounds like an electrical slap when the bolt comes out of the rail. Instantly, the tree trunk is shattered but the explosive bolt itself detonates a meter past exiting the tree and the force from that blows the debris back in their direction.

It takes four seconds for the sound to reach them where Piper shudders slightly saying, "ooooh, I think I kicked on that one!"

Maria nods with a smile, "First time, every time!"

Admiring the M2, Piper glances at Sergeant Smyth and says to him, "Mr Smyth, if I recall there was something you wanted to say?"

"Yes mum..." Smyth nods and, "aaaaah, aaam—"

With Smyth struggling to speak, Piper helps him out by saying to Maria, "Our Staff-Sergeant is quick with the bullets, but he falls short on eloquence. Mr. Smyth happens to be Isabelle's father."

Maria goes, "Oh!"

Smyth finally finds his voice, "Marshal Ramirez, Madame, I want to thank you for sending the girls out last summer."

"It was the least we could do considering the circumstances."

"I am indebted to you and your people."

"You owe us nothing, Sergeant. How is she doing?"

"Izzy is a right happy little girl! No more nightmares."

"That's good to hear."

With Jessica stepping up to them, in her everyday BDU pants and t-shirt, Piper says to Maria, "On that note, Boxter and you did discuss opening up a direct line between your organization and our Honey Badgers and we would like to make...Lieutenant Smyth, here, our liaison!" Piper smiles warmly towards Smyth, "He has a knack for bypassing impasses and, well, bucking protocol and thumbing his nose at rank to get results! Boxter and I, we adore self-starters and, well, Sir, you drew our undivided attention."

Maria says to them, "Your contact will be Shane McElroy. He's a PFC4 in our Strategic Planning group."

Noticing the confusion in his face, Piper adds, "Their PFC4 is the equivalent to a Warrant Officer-Three. The Annex ranking takes a little getting used to."

"McElroy used to be an Inspector with the NYPD. Trust me, if you're a self-starter you two will hit it off. And if you need anything, he has direct access to me if something comes up."

"Yes Madame." Smyth turns to Piper, "Lieutenant, seriously?"

"You really impressed us on your...taking the initiative on the Ipswich project. Oh, we do want to be notified of any messy business that may come along, and preferably before getting wet."

The new Lieutenant Smyth grins, "Yes, mum."

Piper breaths deep as she hands him the M2, "Lieutenant, at the end of the flight line is a wind sock I've asked to be taken down. It's taking too long, would you be so kind?"

"If you say so, mum."

Piper says to Maria, "Watch this man work."

As Smyth pulls the weapon up to sight the target, he asks Maria, "This bastard is sighted at?"

Maria says, "On ballistic rounds, five clicks out of the box with a one-meter rise. The impulse bolts are flat for fifteen clicks."

With glee, Piper pats him on the shoulder, "A bottle of Suntory if you make this shot!"

Zeroing in on the target, Smyth says, "Mum, if you ask me you are a little too loose with your wallet."

Piper snorts, "Better my wallet than my legs."

Smyth almost laughs as he says, "Do we get a vote?"

He fires and the bolt punches through the pipe below the sock and, exploding a meter behind it, the fireball and the vapor chine from the shockwave shreds the sock into spiraling tatters.

Michelle Kiel, watching through her spotting binoculars in her JACCs helmet, says, "That was four klicks. He nailed it."

Maria adds, "I'm impressed."

Piper smiles, "Not bad, sir! A bottle well earned."

At the eight second mark, the pop from the explosion is heard as Michelle ask Jessica, "Did the girls like the powered take off?"

Jessica nods, "They thought it was a blast."

"Did you curl the leading edge at all?"

Jessica grins, "Nope. I squatted aft with a three-degree pitch on the deck, just like the ninety-nine. At eighty-five percent power the thrust was pushing the damned thing forward, in spite of me stomping on the breaks, so I had to let 'er go or it was gonna shred the tires."

Maria adds, "It was scoochin' like crazy!"

Michelle asks, "Did you WEP it at all?"

Jessica shakes her head, "Not a squirt. At seven-hundred meters it rotated on its own to five-degrees on the deck, and lifted wheels up at under a thousand. All on it's own, nice and pretty like."

Maria shrugs towards Michelle, "Sorry, we're not putting guns on the thing." She turns to Piper, "Well, it's been fun! Michelle and I have a detour on the way back, we're testing a little something on the Black Stump so, keep me posted and have a blast, girls!"

Piper laughs, "I noticed the tockley sprouting under the nose! If that's a Pazuzu gun I'm sure you'll have a banging good time of it."

Maria cringes slightly, "Yea, ah, ya'll noticed that."

Piper leans in, "If it helps I didn't see anything. Mr. Smyth?"

Smyth nods, "Sad to say me eyes are on the blink too."

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The massive glass wall behind the chef stations arcs up high and overhead into the ceiling of Piper's restaurant. It faces west and south and embraces the weather, twilight and sun cycles in the West Banes. The thunderstorm raging outside, with the lightning and sheets of rain being whipped onto the glass high above, is acoustically muffled and contrasts directly with the dry warmth, wood and brass décor.

It is cozy in here at a steady 25°C with indirect, and one could even suggest, romantic lighting. The ambiance and menu are geared strictly to a woman's sensibility and it shows. Even the waiting staff consists of dapper middle-aged men in utterly fantastic physical shape

with salt and pepper hair and this itself is a huge draw.

With all the girls in the party mobbing Cloé as she steps inside, Jessica slips away to sit with Boxter who is waiting for her in an elevated booth along the north wall that has the best view of both Chernobyl above and the tables below.

"I want to thank you for allowing us to move our meeting up while we lunch today. I have had my hands full of late."

Jessica smiles at him, gives him a little hug, and as they both sit, "If it keeps me away from that goofy shit then I'm all for it."

Boxter notices his granddaughters ganging up on Cloé with the rest, "It's farcical how my young kin-lings now speak highly of Cloé when they used to pay her the littlest of mind. It's unsettling how our cultures attribute celebrity to those who make...believe yet overlook people who make a real difference. It's nonsensically...tragic."

"Amen."

"I want to apologize because I took the liberty of ordering for you ahead of time so there would be no delays." Boxter perks up with, "This dish is what I order every time I come, and you do look like a savory kind of gal. If it's not to your liking I'll have our waiter fetch whatever your heart desires. On or off the menu."

"I'm really not a pasta person so I'm sure it'll be fine."

"We're also going to join in a bottle of Lambrusco. Normally a blanc would be in order, but its sweet effervescence is a fine contrast."

"Lambrusco?"

"Oh, you must trust me on this one, my dear."

"I do...so, how's it coming with Tillsdale's replacement?"

"To risk sounding cliché, Noah Wanganui has proven to be a bit of a sticky wicket. Clint, his youngest having joined the Annex, has made our effort challenging, a tough sell, but the dirt dug up by Eight seems to have...stifled the higher chorus of voices in opposition."

"You have confidence in 'im?"

"In the sense that he'll get too big for his soiled britches? Oh, most assuredly, yes! I'm counting on it." He subtly points up in the air, "Like attracts like, incompetence is drawn to its own. The snooker cue playboy will surround himself with all the right people, and with ol' spit-n-polish Bristol in command of the CDF, well, what better formula could there be for...success! I don't know of another off hand."

Jessica just shakes her head, "I'm tryin' to figure you out."

"What, your brother hasn't shared anything with you yet?"

Jessica knows better than to deny what Boxter has already figured out himself, so she asks, "How would you know that?"

"Seth is good, but his age and impatience gives him away. How 'bout you tell the little scamp to say hello next time he's sneaking around." Boxter gives her a little smirk, "And if the little bugger is not sharing then I believe he is faced with that 'knowing paradox' that troubles your efforts. You know, Bletchley Park and all."

"How do you know that?"

"A good guess? It's the only thing in history that matches on all fours what you're trying to accomplish with...The Alter of Chains."

"Since you brought up The Alter." Jessica looks at him and, with pain on her face, says slowly, "We have a friend...and we don't know how to bring something to his attention because—"

"The best course of action is to do nothing." Boxter finishes her thought, and with Jessica nodding yes he realizes he is that friend, "How 'bout we cut to the crash then, yes?"

Jessica hesitates, then quietly says, "Bobby."

Boxter blinks and, "oooooooooh, Blue Boy came down for her." A thousand emotions race through Boxter but after a half a minute in deep thought, his lip quivers slightly as he asks, "Will my Piper suffer?"

Jessica is about to cry, "no."

Boxter takes his napkin and dabs at his watery eyes, sniffs and asks, "Will she get the beast?"

With Jessica nodding yes she says quietly, "I'm sorry."

Boxter pats her on the hand and assures her, "I so admired you and your brother's strength leading up to the loss of your mother. I do believe that you looked at this from every angle, and now faced with the prospect of emulating you...I have to say I learned well by your example." With a stiff upper lip he finishes with, "You have my gratitude for not shying away from this. The irony being she has always said, to kill that...monster is worth dying for."

"We all love Piper. Spend as much free time as you can with her, but don't make it obvious."

"Yes." He wonders, "Without Piper what will become of me?"

With the waiter approaching them, Jessica looks Boxter in the eyes and assures him, "You will do very well, but I can't say anything."

Boxter realizes, "Because it can ruin not-said outcome."

"I'll be there for you. What I can share is that you'll be looked upon as a 'man of peace' after this."

Boxter rears back slightly, and, "That I find comically absurd."

"No, really!"

"They...those beasts are aware?"

Jessica nods and, "Language, oral history, the works! Not quite as agreeable as the Xhemal, but...you'll see!" She looks down at the dish of pasta placed before her and goes, "hu?"

Boxter nods, "Yes, beige, not quite beige, but this is the most visually bland offering on our menu, yet deceitfully flavorful."

The waiter pops the cork on the wine and says to Jessica, "You'll love it, miss. I know you will. You look like the type."

With him done pouring the wine, Boxter says, "Thank you, Captain." And with the waiter stepping away, "He is the most drooled over of our waiting staff. Even the young girls that come here and see him are rendered...moist. Too bad for them he's partial to The D."

"Captain?"

"Smithers, he moonlights here. Sixteen air-to-air kills before signing on to my Badgers. We like hiring exceptional people. I hear that you're getting your own Seventy-Four soon! My analysts tell me you are...lethal. The Captain in his Djinn and you in your T-Bird, what a contest that would make!" He gives a sinister little grin, "If you are interested, I arranged for the simulators in Security Services to be free this evening but I apologize that we only have the modeling for your Thunderbolt handy. Still, what a throw down that would be!"

Jessica is trying not to crack a huge smile, "Yea, I'm definitely up for that. It would be a blast! I'm curious, who are you going to put your money on?"

"Me, I don't gamble, but if I were to make odds, the Captain with his extensive experience, and you...your pedigree, I'd have to say it would be even Steven as they say."

"I fly just like my father."

Boxter frowns, "Oh, if you wouldn't mind making your victory seem like you...worked for it? I'd rather not have the Captain's spirit dashed by getting roundly-n-soundly trounced by a nubie."

Jessica nods with an agreeable, "Got'chya."

"I have to say that your father's eleven-kill streak, the week after last, well, my pilots will not stop yammering on about it. The interesting thing of note is their undying respect for him by saving his ship the way he did, and not punching out like he should have."

"My father is sorta complicated."

"I would suggest differently."

"Beatrix meant a lot to him."

"And yet reported to be negligent of his PDBi-AI? What I do know is that, long before you were born, he was in a tryst with an android, a one Glados. Maybe there were unrequited...feelings?"

"She's back in his life."

"Yes, as a SYLN-b now, and with their renewed interest in one another I have to say he is, indubitably, not complicated at all."

Jessica was about to take a bite and puts her fork down, "And, how would you know about any of this shit?"

Boxter gives a wickedly evil grin, "Long reach?"

"Jesus, dude, you kill me! You have eyes everywhere."

"Unfortunately, I do not have you or your brother's eyes."

"You have eight and the clones wrapped around your fingers."

"Not so. Fifty-Two is like herding cats and I am a yarn ball of activity. As long as I keep scratching their noggins and rubbing their bellies I'll be of interest but, more sooner than later, they will tire."

"You know which side I'm on."

"Yes, but after today's discussion with the Major, in due time we may find ourselves on the...same side. We can only hope!"

Jessica laughs a little snort, "And I got a hard-on for hope."

"Yes!" Boxter smiles and introspectively says, "Even though I tried to assassinate your grandfather, various attempts and always a step or two out of reach, I have to say that the world is a lesser place with him and your mother gone."

"Yup." Jessica nods, then finally takes a bite of the angel hair pasta on her fork and is shocked, "Oh, my god! This is good!"

Boxter smiles, "Thought you would like it! Grated asiago with oodles of butter and a smattering of sea salt." He holds up a fork with the pasta twirled on it and, "See, angel hair is thin and capillary and holds onto the butter like nothing else. This dish is the very reason Piper came up with the name of this restaurant."

"Tabula Pasta. I don't get it?"

"It is derived by the concept of a tabula rasa, which is a blank slate. A wax note taking device from ancient Rome which has become one of many argumenta on the...nature versus nurture debate."

Taking another bite, Jessica goes, "Okay, I'll plead stupid."

"Stupid you are not." Boxter gives a little laugh and, "Point is that pasta is the perfect analogy for tabula rasa wherein it's all the same ingredients and yet you have a virtually endless variety of cuts and shapes that you are at liberty to do with as you please!"

With Boxter taking a bite, Jessica goes, "I think I get it?"

He nods then says, "And therein lies the bitter fallacy of the argument. Pasta may be a blank slate, yes, but each final form lends it to very specific uses. You see, angel hair cannot itself be stuffed like a shell or a manicotti no matter how much it desires that outcome. All the well wishes and prayers in support from its brethren pasta will not make it so!" Boxter holds up another twirling of angel hair and, "Just as manicotti fails to perform this feat of magic with...butter."

Jessica takes a sip of the wine and, "This tickles my nose!"

"It contrasts well with the asiago, does it not?"

She smacks her lips, "Yes, it does. It's surprisingly good!"

"I am glad." Boxter smiles and, "Piper and I built this place for the fun of it, but we do carry our own note."

"So, you have no debt hanging over the operation."

"True, but we do measure our success on a level playing field against local competition and...so far we have been very successful."

Jessica suggests, "You need to put one on the Church Key."

"And in New Darwin, yes, but would you have a suggestion on a possible location on the Church Key? If so, I have people who can deal with negotiating the lease and zoning issues."

Jessica shakes her head, "Vossler has the final say and he'll think it'll be a kick in the ass to have you build this there. I know just the place, so it's already a done deal."

"I wouldn't want to put you out like that."

"By the Spike there is a cliff-side outdoor lounge, and beside that is the perfect spot. The sunsets, which are spectacular, and the tides coming in and out below are, well, it's perfect!"

"That sounds smashing!" Boxter is genuinely surprised, then dares to ask, "Before the Major gets here I have to ask, in case you are privy to this info. Since my granddaughter will not say, while she is here on the coming holiday, was...was she on Taiji?"

Jessica's shoulders drop and she says, "No, she and Clint were with three-six-oh-three on Ngāti Whā."

"oh my." Boxter frowns, "That was a terrible fight."

"Just so you know, Mook has been grounded over the next few months. They will not be anywhere near the next operation."

"You mean, Polaris."

Jessica deadpans, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Boxter pats her on the forearm with a warm smile, "I don't rightly know what your exact plans will be, but please assure Marshal Ramirez that she has...my blessings."

"I'll let her know."

Boxter then says, "We have so many fun activities lined up for you and the girls over the next few days but, I was wondering if we could maybe take a little jaunt...a little spin in that ship of yours?"

Jessica nods, "How fast do you wanna go?"

Boxter rolls his eyes, "How much fast you got?"

"Piper would get a kick out of it."

"Exactly!"

Jessica asks, "Powered-runway takeoff?"

"I've three miles of runway, wouldn't want it to go to waste!"

"That's at least six-G's if I WEP it. I only have four, forward facing seats so that's you, Piper and how about the Captain?"

"Yes, indeed, and can we add my youngest, Samantha?"

Jessica laughs, "Samael, sure!"

"You remember!" Boxter grins, "You know my oldest, Piper, aspires to be Piper, but my Samael is looking to fill...my shoes."

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72

mutant pygmy

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-B6 (Hyades cluster)
 CORD: SAO-93868.0207 (49pc from SOL)
 TIME: 09:00zulu (local 13:06mst)

Most star systems consist of binary pairs and Primus Hyadum is no exception. Primus Hyadum is the name of the primary “A” star that is young, big, red and already starting to die off. Two-hundred AU from that is the much smaller “B” star and this thing is also young, with an orange hue, but it has a long life ahead of it.

When time came for IAU name registration, of the thirty-six submissions for B it was the prank application in Esperanto, Oranĝo, that won that race by seven seconds—and this pissed everyone off. Now days it’s just Primus Hyadum, because they happen to be circling Primus Hyadum, and if anyone has to expressly put a name to the actual star their planet is in orbit around then it’s now referred to as Baby-Prime and pretty much everyone today is okay with that.

Oranĝo, the IAU name for γ -Tauri-B, has been forgotten.

Then there is the ongoing argument on whether the primary star is actually Primus or Primis or Prima Hyadum, but the locals have drawn a line in the sand for Primus and have told the IAU to get bent.

Anyway, the sixth planet in orbit around the expressly stated Baby-Prime is called Zemlya Dva, which was a web-translator phonetic alternative to the Russian Cyrillic for *Earth Two*, and this has been kind of problematic. See, Russian nationals occupied the planet first but the place has since been overrun by a flood of Australians, now a ninety to one ratio, and they have their own way of naming things.

To them Zemlya Dva is simply Rock, Slime or The Nuddy.

Zemlya, because everybody everywhere here has dropped Dva from the name, is the one planet closest to Earth in every respect except for life itself. Here it’s more like how Ngāti Whā was in its early days where bacterial organisms have exploded and is now choking all

the low salinity oceans. Having consumed almost all the free CO², the bacterial life has dumped ridiculous amounts of free O² into the seas and the atmosphere. Only just recently have life forms developed that utilizes O² in its metabolic processes so, finally, the huge swaths of dead organic matter in the oceans are just starting to compost.

Hence, Slime by the locals along the coasts.

Zemlya, articulated with only two-syllables, has all of twelve continents, the same number of oceans, and every bit of the exposed land mass is barren rock with no soil or dirt to be had. Geologically active, with at least two or three volcanos somewhere on the planet spewing clouds of dust and debris up into the sky, this activity promotes rain—lots of rain—and everyday with the rain.

After all is said and done, our Gamma Tauri Bravo Six is a wonderfully clean place to live, as long as you stay away from the coasts, has twelve-million residents and the few major industries that flourish here on this rock are focused on vertical farming, warehousing and distribution.

Commonly referred to as GTB6, it's actually the third moon spinning around GTA5, the fifth planet orbiting Primus Hyadum itself, that is the industrial Cthulhu of the Hyades Cluster. What was called Schooner, now Scorch, is being stripped bare by industries that are pumping out all kinds of products, from thousands of factories, and then packing it all off to GTB6 for storage, picking and shipping.

GTA5 is where most people here commute to for work, and GTB6 is where people live and lounge around away from said work, so when the Basilisk, SA26, pops into the system everyone is completely taken by surprise when they popped in over GTB6 and not GTA5.

Oops...

See, of primary interest during a time of war is targeting and crippling your enemy's means of production, and GTA5 represents ten-percent of the Co-op's manufacturing capability. The Annex did not go after this juicy target in the previous war, and even though they have made no overtures to go after it this time around—GTA5 is the most heavily defended planetary system in all the Hyades.

In low orbit around the third moon of GTA5 are over twelve hundred spider missiles in M3 mode. Above that are eight Épée WECG cruisers in geostationary orbits, and in the atmosphere, at about ten thousand meters altitude, are anywhere from one to two-hundred F51 Gryphon-Condor fighters running a constant round the clock 24/7 CAP (21/12 if splitting hairs) with another eight hundred Condors ready to fly at the drop of a hat. With layered triple-A, ground-based troops are utterly superfluous so, in short, GTA5 is a mission planner's dream job

because *everything* here is a target ripe for bombing.

This is in sharp contrast to GTB6 which has got dick.

What Zemlya does have to draw the interest of the Annex is a sprawling CDF base that is considered a light-duty administrative op with no actual military value. It exists solely to host troopers coming out of active duty stations and, like New Darwin, channel those troops and their money into the local cities for R&R.

So, when the Basilisk drops five Razorbacks along with their fighter escorts there was no BDF presence here to oppose it. Any response must come from GTA5 and, as it is, the sixty fighters that launched from there will take almost thirty-five minutes to get here and in position to make a difference—where the SA will be in and out and long gone inside twenty.

On this drop the Razorbacks have all stuck together in a tight finger-four formation with their escorts flanking. The fifth ship is right behind them and happens to be Michelle Kiel flying the same Warthog from earlier that day on Jacoby's Stump. She is surrounded by six F308 ghost droid Cwn Dawg fighters, but these are not the throwaway J and K conversions. Here we have the 'Mako' M models, configured from ships pulled from the F380 Cerberus production lines and retooled into ghost droids, and these blocks are keepers.

Trailing after them is Jacob in his Thunderbird and Peña in his Cerberus, and with the lead ships breaking thirty-thousand meters altitude, Jacob points out, "Dog, dude, I just realized something!"

Peña grits his teeth, ["Every time you realize something at the last motherfucking minute, I have come to realize how really stupid I look for overlooking that last minute motherfucking something you point out! What is it this time?"]

Jacob grins, "You forgot to name this mutherfucker!"

["God-damn it! You had me thinkin' I forgot somethin'!"]

"Well, ya did! You're the mission planner, so you name it!"

Peña grumbles, ["*Pinche puto!*"] With the head Razor leading the way, at twenty-five thousand meters they begin to pull out of the 90° vertical dive, according to the mission profile, so while monitoring this Peña starts to say, ["Okay, this is a cakewalk, so—"]

Suddenly there are repeated buzzing sounds on the channel as pilots press and hold their mic buttons, so Jacob notes, "I don't think the team likes that one. Even though it may be a cakewalk?"

["I didn't say to name it that! But, last Sunday I did call this thing here the 'mutant pygmy brother to distractamundo' didn't I?"]

Now at twenty-thousand meters they are on a very shallow 5° decent path, and with them starting to slow it down, Jacob points out, "No, if I recall correctly, you said it was the 'mutant pygmy son to the brother of distractamundo' remember?"

["Sure! Okay, let's go with that!"]

"How 'bout shortening it to, like, mutant pygmy?"

["If we gotta, but I like the full version of the name, myself."]

"Okay, instead of making an executive decision, let's put it to a vote. Let's hear it if you want, cakewalk?" With no clicks on the channel, Jacob then asks, "Or do you want, mutant pygmy?"

With repeated of clicking on the channel, Peña huffs, ["Okay, assholes, mutant pygmy it is! You fuckers have no sense of humor."]

Michelle Kiel comes on the line and, ["No disrespect, FM, but when you two get going you two sound like a couple of retards."]

Now with mad-crazy clicking on the channel, Jacob laughs, "Why yes, Guns, that's the, ah, general consensus I think?"

Hitting sixteen-thousand meters, Michelle's ship and her six ghost droid fighters peel off and roll back towards a large thunderhead cloud formation behind them, and while breaking and entering she goes, ["Okay, these will do nicely! See ya'll next year, guys."]

"Sorry about ruining your Christmas, Guns, but it was the only way we could think of to sneak your ass in here."

["Nope, Buzzard, I volunteered for this shit. Just make sure my Brie has a good Christmas, okay? I'm holding you to that!"]

"She'll have a great time. I guarantee it."

["Okie dokie, this is Gun Crazy goin' cold. We are on radio silence until the third. Fly friendly, out."]

Peña follows that with, ["Bust one on 'em up for us, Guns."]

With no response, and none expected, they fly level for a few more minutes at Mach-2, and then initiate their final decent and breaking while approaching a huge lake coming up over the horizon.

On Zemlya there are a ton of streams, lakes and rivers and, unlike the oceans, these bodies of water are squeaky-clean. Because boozing it up, gambling and whoring gets sort of old, the big R&R draw for the troops coming to The Nuddy are water sports. Speedboats, skiing, parasailing, whitewater rafting, kayaking, scuba, and to round it all off—the cherry on top is sailing—for those who want to engage in water sports while they booze and whore it slow and quiet like.

Anyway, the ships are racing towards New Lake Eyre but,

unlike its namesake back on Earth, this one is full of crystal-clear water devoid of salts. Now over the water, with the fighters spread out, the ramps of the Razorbacks snap open and hundreds of droids and drones start to spill out as the ships streak down the middle at 300kph.

Blaxton is the main city in the region and is sandwiched in the middle between lakes Eyre, Frome and Torrens. That Co-op base is on the far side of Blaxton, between lakes Frome and Torrens.

With the ghost droids flying off towards the coast away from Blaxton the PacMan drones start methodically approaching each boat on the lake looking for anybody in a CDF or BDF uniform or in field kit. Not finding any such targets, they quickly move from one boat to the next without engaging—id est, not shooting at any of the people.

With only a single column of egress from the racking in the hold of the Razorbacks, the ships have to hold rock-steady for a count of ninety seconds to offload the entire compliment of robots. If it were a company configuration with a two-column egress it would take just forty seconds, but here it's an unwavering ninety-second run.

With Peña and Jacob high above them, Peña says, ["That's a lot of boats, dude. That's a lot of eyes on us."]

Jacob agrees, "Yep, an' that's the idea!"

["Think they'll get the hint this time?"]

Jacob laughs, "I sure as shit hope so!"

["What's the count now?"]

"On Taiji it's twelve-hundred wounded and it's climbing, but slowly. Those casualties are not even close to Nufa."

["They got a count of five-thousand now, right?"]

Jacob shakes his head as the Razorbacks finish offloading, snap their ramps shut and start to climb out, "Actually, it's pushing a solid fifty-three-hundred and those numbers are not slowin' down."

Jacob and Peña had switched to powderpuff pink camouflage when the Razors went low, so Jacob asks, "Hey, Oscar, you up for making a low level pass? You know, shits and giggles?"

Peña grins big, ["You have to ask?"]

"Let's do it! I'll stick to your nine-o'clock and match you."

As the Razorbacks and their escorts hit two-thousand meters and break south, Jacob and Peña switch the camouflage on their ships from the pink to a visible matte-black. They dive in a split-S and shoot across the lake at a leisurely Mach-1. Thirty meters above the surface, vapor chines repeatedly flash over their fighters.

At three-quarters of the way across the lake, they both skid vertically by pushing their tails down and pulling their noses up in a partial Pugachev's Cobra maneuver. This quickly bleeds off much of their forward velocity but, instead of rotating their noses back down, these two nut-cases push their engines to maximum thrust and add WEP on top of that. For every second, at max WEP, the system will spritz sixteen-liters of liquid cryogenic helium into the engines all along the quantum particle-annihilation blades—converting both ambient air and cryo-helium into a high-pressure superheated plasma. With this, both fighters explode straight up into the sky, Saturn Five style.

Trailing plasma exhaust spikes that are as long as the fighters themselves, within seconds they hit Mach-2, and at five kilometers altitude they rotate upside down and roll out of it—as they chase after the Razorbacks that are now eighty kilometers downrange.

The eyes of every person on the boats here are glued to the Thunderbird and Cerberus running parallel over the lake. Their exit leaves no doubt as to who these two pilots were.

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The crew for Michelle Kiel's mission on GTB6 was carefully selected for their abilities and adaptability. Flying the Cwn Dawgs we have two instances of Paleo, two of Maggie Prather and two copies of Bud Sheatz. Normally you would only employ a single instance of any one ghost on a mission, but these three have respawned so many times they have gotten used to randomly running into and working with themselves in the field. Since they're on strict radio silence these three can anticipate each other's moves, and working with a copy of themselves makes it even doubly so.

Flying as the ghost co-pilot on Kiel's Hog is Angela Simmons, who happens to be a superb Warthog-gunship pilot but, other than Michelle, the only alive-n-breathin' crewmember, functioning as the missions Weapons Systems Operator is PFC4, David Gilroy.

Pretty much each and every Warthog gunship in the SA has the Missile Farm pod installed as a 'just in case' they are needed sort of thing. As part of the Close Air Support role, fire support missions are a common occurrence but your everyday WSO will almost always defer to weapons from the Missile Bay instead of the Missile Farm pods. Your average fire support mission requires anywhere from one to maybe twelve of the 20/20 cluster bombs which is easily handled by the bay—where the pods have a bazillion of these weapons, 1,404 in the standard loadout intermixed with 468 Millipede missiles. The pods are very effective when used but the underlining problem with them is that they are a time consuming bitch to support and swap out.

WSO's avoid using them like the plague.

A mission planned with the express purpose of using the farm pods as the primary weapons platform of choice is a rarity to behold, and the best guy to run such a mission just so happens to be Gilroy.

The historical problem with launching a Missile Farm barrage is that over a hotly contested piece of turf, when it makes tactical sense to launch one, it has this weird cascading effect that tends to work against the opposition. The ship with the pod requires a lot of elbowroom to move around because once this thing gets going, and the enemy realizes the attack for what it is, every defensive weapon they can muster is going to be launched against the farm. That is, where it was because the Warthog is always moving in some crazy random zig-zag pattern to avoid the bombs coming in at them and, in good turn, to detour some of its bombs to the location where those defensive weapons came from.

As long as they keep shootin' an' scootin' and don't hold to any one location or vector for too long, like more than twelve to fifteen seconds, and if the operator is good, like Gilroy, then the operator and ships AI come across more like Virgil Fox and arch-angel Sandalphon together hammering out Bach's Little Fugue in G minor—but here it's with a Missile Farm pod instead of a cathedral pipe organ.

In the thunderhead, with lightning bolts busting right and left, Michelle laughs, "The Condors are backing off, what a hoot!"

Gilroy, studying the topography of their target zone and the proposed points of attack, asks, "How many did the droids hit?"

"Seven so far, and they are all bugging out."

Each of the seventy-five ghost droids they dropped over Lake Eyre are carrying the Maw Duce and eighty Micropede missiles, so Gilroy says, "You think these Co-op ass-hats realize how much we already control the air over Blaxton?"

"I think they kinda get the idea now."

"You figure out how you wanna do this, honey-buns?"

"That all depends on where you wanna go?"

Gilroy flashes the translucent topographical map up on the transparent aluminum-Alon wall between them and points to a spot on the map, "Can you get me there, sugar?"

"That's the place?"

"That high mesa is the sweet spot between Livingston and Blaxton. I think I can use the point-eight-seven gravity and elevation to extend our ballistic reach quite a bit. If not, we only have to fire on

one DC and then scoot over for the next."

Kiel looks at the map, sighs big, and then points to a valley two-hundred kilometers southwest of the mesa, "If we ride this thunderhead till dark we will end up around here. If we keep to the shadows by day and move at night, taking the long route, we can be on that summit across from the mesa inside two weeks."

"From there we can then watch what they're doing!"

"An' we'll have a couple weeks of F-an-K to sort things out."

Gilroy nods, "Sounds like a plan!"

Kiel ponders their route and then asks, "How's Scott?"

Gilroy looks up at Kiel, and in his standard everyday snarky-flamboyant style, "Honey, for once I've got no idea of what to make of Mr. Beefcake! In the past I have always been the seventh-inning stretch between you bitches, and this is the first time he's ever been serious about marking days on a calendar with me."

"Are the kids warming up to you?"

Gilroy snorts and, "Ya know, I'm a lot to take in so most kids keep their distance, but Burke's two have gone way beyond welcoming open arms, they've pulled the red carpet out for lil' ol' me!"

"They're a couple of good kids!"

"They got this weird vibe about them. Can't quite put my finger on it but...it's like they can read my mind? Anyway, Scott's lil' Angela just throws herself at me! Kids have never taken to me in the past so I never paid 'em mind, but these three are all over me like I were a pumpkin-spiced latte!"

Kiel laughs, "You're a fucking scream to be around and, to be honest, you are hot as hell...even for being such a campy fag."

Gilroy smiles, "Well, thank you, sweetheart!"

"Don't mention it!" Kiel then just shakes her head, "Ya know, nothing personal Gilroy, I love the shit outta you, but the next time I plan a mission with this much F and K in it...I'm gonna make damned sure it's with someone who puts out!"

Gilroy snorts, "You know, my little honey-pot, eating at The-Y may not be my cup of tea, but sometimes...I just want a nice steamin' cup of Jo—sie as a change of pace! You just might get lucky!"

"I don't think I've gone five weeks without getting laid, so don't you be yankin' my chain, mutherfucker."

Gilroy quietly says to himself, yet loud enough for her to hear, "Had to start somewhere...an' it'll be like goin' home."

Kiel snorts and quietly mumbles, "Put a smile on this face and I'll be your *okoge* for life."

Gilroy heard that and asks, "Wha'd you say there, blondie?"

"Oh nothing, Dav'eed!"

"Hum!" And while starting to plot the first of many surveys of the proposed fire mission, Gilroy nods and mumbles, "Looks like we're gonna hav'ta put a smile on that frowny face of yours!"

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"Those are some mighty big shoes to fill."

In the booth at Tabula Pasta, with the storm raging outside, Boxter adds, "Yes, for perambulation I've been endowed with size twelve aqua flippers." Then beams, "Piper delights in the novelty!"

Jessica looks up and quietly says, "I am *not* touching that!"

"Oh, lookie! It's the Major, and *not* prompt as unusual." With her rushing into the restaurant, Boxter adds, "By her hurried step one would think she may have something of interest to share...no?"

With Jessica biting her own lips, Boxter gives a knowing smile as Major Lynn approaches their booth all the while calling out to him, "Sir, we have a situation out at Primus Hyadum!"

He puts a finger up and says, "First things first, Major. Would you like Pappardelle? It is what you...always order, correct?"

"Sir? The situation—"

"Major, we are both aware that my...reach does not currently extend to Primus Hyadum but, honestly, of more pressing concern at this very moment is ordering your lunch!"

"Sir, I dispatched Ratel Team Nine."

Boxter thinks for a sec and perks up, "Then problem solved!" He smiles warmly, "Madame, are you in the mood for your favorite, the Yabby tails in garlic-white with the Romano, or the special for today, a pungent mushroom Marinara with grilled bratwurst?"

Lynn knows that Boxter is already aware that it will take time for the Badger crew to reach Primus Hyadem so, to playfully downplay the urgency of the moment is his way of slowing things down, to step back with clear heads and maybe rethink choices made, so as to the question she visibly deflates and says, "Aaaah, the brat."

"Excellent choice, I'll have it sent out with a dry Merlot!" Boxter gestures for Lynn to, "Please, join us, Major!"

Jessica hops up and gives Lynn a quick hug, and as Lynn sits next to Boxter, across from Jessica, her slightly pursed lips gives away how frustrated she is, so Boxter swirls his hands in front of himself and sighs big, "Breathe, Major. You really need to take a deep breath and exhale big on the by an by. You take things oh-so seriously."

"About as relaxed as I'm gonna get, sir."

Boxter nods and looks to Jessica, "This drives the Major loco. She has important information for me, and she made a critical decision on all our behalf and believes that it...should not wait!" He turns to Lynn and, "But, answer me this, is there anything I must do about it at this very second? Be honest."

Lynn blinks and nods, "No, sir, we have a half an hour."

Boxter verbally thinks, "If I had the luxury of that much time for most of my affairs." He then announces, "Since Gamma Tauri was an unexpected move, and to entertain your sense of urgency, I have but two questions. What did they drop on Scorch and...how, pray tell, did they get out? I mean, with all those particle batteries in orbit! They'd have to get their hair mussed."

"Not Scorch, sir, they dropped on Rock."

Boxter, with his mouth open in surprise, sits back and after a few seconds he huffs a laugh and quietly urges her to, "Oh, do go on!"

"They dropped a shag of bots over Lake Eyre. The ghosties jetted-off for the south beach. Those cloaked an' scattered and appear to be humping a bit of kit but, the PacMan started a survey of the watercraft in the bright of day without cloaking. They completed Eyre and are now spreading out to lakes Torrens and Frome."

"Casulties?"

"None so far."

"I wouldn't expect any, our troops would be in civies." Boxter then asks, "You do understand the message being relayed, yes?"

Lynn nods, "Five by five, sir."

He turns to Jessica, "See, the base on Zemlya Dva is basically a staging post. A flop house for drunkards toddling in from R-an-R, and yet..." Boxter then looks towards Lynn, "You sent a wet team. I gather the local command failed to receive the same message."

"Exactly, Sir. The base commander, Ingersol, he has ordered all leaves cancelled. He intends to go on full alert and lock the place down. He also requested a react contingent."

Boxter grins, "Bravo! Excellent call, Major! Team Nine will land and reach fail-safe when?"

"Thirty-two minutes, sir."

"Please, do green-light them to proceed."

Lynn, in the Security Services-N2 module, launches the orders and, "It has been done, sir."

"If that drooling dolt, Ingersol, fails to cooperate then, well, by all means send a...lovely bouquet to the family." Boxter then turns to Jessica with, "See, the smart move would be to extend leave to everyone, cut them all loose into the city and abandon the base in its entirety. Our Badgers will see to that outcome."

Jessica wonders, "I was under the impression that you were having a blast with the mayhem protocol."

"Oh yes, I am! The protocol is sinfully delicious! It's just that on Taiji and Nufa the regenerations are hitting specific budgets. The tiny problem with the base on Zemlya Dva is, well, anything that goes on there will hit the general fund...and the thirty-eight billion in bonus' earned by Security Services this year will not transfer till the fifteenth. On behalf of our people Major Lynn made the right call to intervene, but then..." His eyes wonder off then pulls back in on Jessica, "Still it makes me wonder what little Mary Lynn is up too?"

Jessica shrugs, "I couldn't say."

"More specifically, you can't...say." Boxter smirks, then sighs, "I will dare to share than the last few weeks have been immeasurably entertaining. The command chain on Taiji has shown some remarkable competence in rooting out those...evil little PacMan drones of yours. Even though the casualty count has been high it's become manageable but still...General Giáp is a no-show!"

Jessica deflects by asking, "What about Nufa?"

"Nufa, now that has been a rofl an' a half! See, my dear, places like Nufa is where the Co-op deposits all of their washed up commanders when put out to pasture green, but in their lap you threw a chance for a...a do over, and they have not disappointed! Left to their own devices the troops have been tripping over themselves as if they are out chasing after Pokémon, but at the regimental levels you'd swear to God they were on a bloody fox hunt!"

Lynn throws out, "And the foxes are winning."

Boxter nods with a laugh, "Yes! As is Pikachu."

Jessica asks, "Isn't the casualty count stupidly high now?"

Lynn rocks her head to the side, "You could say that, Jess."

Boxter adds, "Problem is that Net Basha is throwing a tantrum and local command is doing the...best they can."

Lynn smirks, "Which is not saying a lot."

"The numbers speak for themselves, and just minutes ago they've crested fifty-four hundred...after only a week of self-abuse."

Lynn nods with, "Projected forty-eight billion in red ink."

Boxter smiles at that with, "The two things that I find rightly amusing is that, first, those combat bots are reported to be calling out squeaky little war cries like '*banzai*' and '*spoon*' or they lament an apology like '*me so sorry*' as they fire on their victims but...you knew that." With a smile, Jessica gives a little shrug, so Boxter continues with, "The second thing that caught my attention is that the troops, knowing they are *not* going to die, are taking inordinate risks, but here to be shot by one of those...mechanical fiends is considered a badge of honor. What's truly remarkable is that our more shiftless troops seem to be going out of their way to intentionally...get wrecked!"

Jessica is startled by that, "Why?"

"Depending on the severity of one's injuries, it's anywhere from nine to twenty-four months of convalescence on the corporate sugar-teat. Then when you throw in the added incentive by collecting a blood-stripe and bonus for basically...taking an arrow to the knee, well, the prospect for some is irresistible."

"That's kinda nuts if you ask me."

Boxter laughs at that, "What's nuts from our perspective is that on Taiji the CDF can still collectivize on their losses—and they are still in the black for this quarter, but just barely. In keeping with their fierce reputation, I was expecting some resistance before the end of the budgetary cycle, especially from the house of Perth so..." He looks Jessica in the eyes and suggests, "Let them know there is still time to make a splash!" He then delights in saying, "Nufa, on the other hand, each traumatic amputation stands as its own variance and...from the look on your face I believe you find this all amusing?"

Jessica almost laughs as she says, "Ya know, Boxter, there is a lot to take in from you guys but, what throws me for a loop, is that it's not tactics or logistics you talk about here, for you at this level, here you guys talk about fricken budgets!"

Boxter rears back in surprise, "How profound of you to notice! The contemptuous reality at the tippy top is the dehumanization of armed conflict by rendering it all into...ledgers and the...color of ink. Fact is, it is most soul-crushingly distasteful."

Jessica snorts, "But you're so good at it!"

Lynn laughs, "I take that as a compliment!"

"Why yes!" Boxter points in the air, "Quite unlike the budgets for the Steel Annex. Now, those happen to be an incomprehensible fiction and annotated to distort, to mislead...designed to fabricate, obfuscate, bait and...switch. I must say that the bean-counters who came up with *that* Gordian Knot of mystifying complexity deserves our undying praise and respect."

Jessica nods with a little smile, "I'll let 'em know."

"For us, thank them." He then adds. "To our government and military leadership it conveys a sad, abet pathetic story of financial ruin and...an unravelling logistical infrastructure."

Lynn adds, "Brings a tear to me eye."

Boxter nods in agreement then says, "But for us and the greater intelligence community it paints a much broader...radically different picture. Oh, for this to come to an end and...compare notes." He sighs, "My patience is bound to wear thin."

With Major Lynn's food delivered to her she thanks the Captain, and with him stepping away Boxter says, "Anyway, it's time we get down to business at hand."

Jessica leads with, "Since I have the first item on the agenda, the short answer is, yes. Ngāti Whā is on the back burner for the duration, but she is curious as to why?"

"Oh..." Boxter comes clean with, "The shares for that mission and the import company that championed said mission both pancaked into the dirt so...I swept it all up! Because I carry that note I'm at liberty to turn the screws when I choose. The shares were sold at cost to Security Services' Bonus and Pensions division. The abbreviated response is that Ngāti Whā becomes a protectorate, the tariffs go away, the prices stay jacked up, the locals see up to a twenty percent higher return by giving up distribution, and Security Services continues to get fat bonus' and a fully funded pension plan going forward."

"How about swapping out the CDF with your people?"

"That has been negotiated. Since the Pleiades is short on infrastructure the focus is now on Orion and they want the hell off Ngāti Whā. Security Services' control will be by appearances only."

Lynn adds, "Money talks, love. The farmers on Ngāti Whā are already aware of this arrangement, and with the rates we are offering under contract—they will not want to trim these sails."

Jessica nods, "Okay, she'll be okay with that."

"Excellent!" Boxter says, then dares to suggest, "Now, as for the main purpose of our meeting today, that being our future state as

a joint venture going forward. We did review the Marshal's plan and template and we would like to put this discussion off until after the first of the year. Maybe sometime in mid-January or soon after?"

Jessica wonders, "Is there a problem?"

"From us? Oh no, most definitely not!" Boxter shakes his head slightly, "As I conveyed to the Marshal, the plan happens to be utterly brilliant, and generous to both parties. It's just that to invest in the plan we require other people's skills and...some of them may not see our end goals as inevitable just yet."

Lynn adds, "That is, until the dust settles after Polaris."

Jessica pulls up her tacnet calendar and, "I don't know shit about what you're talking about, Major, but let's go with Saturday the eighteenth. Sound good?"

Boxter huffs a laugh and, "I'm not sure off hand what day of our week that is, but it is totally acceptable."

Lynn motions to get Boxter's attention, and whispers, "Dan."

Boxter goes, "Oh yes! Lest I forget. We were wondering if we can impose upon you for one little...task, if you're up for it?"

Jessica shrugs, "Do I hav'ta kill anybody?"

"Not yet?" With Jessica laughing at that, then gesturing for him to continue, Boxter says, "Over the next few years some of our more competent commanders are bound to make regretful choices hostile to the less competent in...leadership roles and, well, they are destined to fail. There is a most accomplished commander whose life we would like to see preserved for our soon to be future."

"If I can reach 'em, sure! Who's the guy?"

"A one, Maroochy Dan."

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itty bitty bitchy kitty

LCTN: SOL-3, MESA, ARIZONA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-13-FRIDAY
TIME: 22:20zulu (local 15:20pst)

Here in the Mesa studios they are recording the Tonight Show for webcasting later. Back when they moved it to California they used to announce "from Hollywood" but the NBC studios were actually in the outlier city of Burbank. Because Burbank was not "sexy" per se the hosts then made endless remarks and snide comments about Burbank. Here in Arizona they announce that the show is "from Phoenix" but the studio is actually down the road apiece in Mesa and, just like then, the host today also makes Mesa the butt of jokes because it is notorious for being flat, stodgy, and devoid of any nightlife to speak of.

Mesa is part of the Phoenix metropolitan area, yes, but in a fit of hubristic irony the actual sound stage used for filming the show just so happens to be over the municipal border and squarely in the city of Apache Junction. Now, with the offices, the bulk of the studio complex and the tour itself in Mesa then it's kind of a moot point—but it wasn't exactly a moot point with this building sitting in, not Maricopia County but Pinal, because with the property tax falling in arrears the first year they had to puke out five-million in ransom to get it back.

Still, streaming from Phoenix sounds sexier than from Mesa even though Phoenix is 22 miles away as the crow flies.

This is Caesar's sixth consecutive appearance on the program since his debut in 2313, but this is the first time that his mate, Sheila, is a no-show. The last four appearances she was with him on stage and the audience loves her biting tongue, in fun contrast to his wacky stories, but Caesar must go at it alone for tonight.

Stepping up to the host, Mikhail Popov, they both reach out to shake hands as Mikey asks, "Where's our Sheila?"

"Sheila-babe sends her love, Mikey!"

Caesar was scheduled to be here at the beginning of the show so the studio grips had to take the ottoman out from the seating lineup during the monologue. With him showing up at the last minute the audience whoops and applauds as they bring it back out.

With the previous guests he shakes hands with Rufus Tyrol, then hugs the bombshell starlet that will be sitting between them, "Hey, hey, little Brittney! How are ya, ya sexy beast?"

"Never better an' you should know!"

As she turns away to move over to the next seat, Caesar thrusts his hips out like he's humping her, pumping his fists and rocking back and forth. Noticing the audience cracking up, and knowing first hand of Caesar's antics at Monique's, she turns around only to find him standing upright while giving her an innocent shrug.

Brittney knows better so she scolds Caesar by wagging a finger at him, and when she turns back around to move over, Caesar flairs his feathers out, bares his teeth—while menacingly lashing his claws at her from behind. Again, there is a maelstrom of laughter so she whips back around and catches him just as he retracts his claws and his feathers snap back into place.

Shaking her head, Brittney turns back towards the audience and thumbs behind her while mouthing the word, *asshole*.

With the laughter finally dying down, Mikey gestures for him to take a seat while saying, "You're late for once!"

Caesar drops on the ottoman and, "Had trouble getting a seat on a commercial flight here! My tickets for first-class were already paid for but they wanted to have me check in as cargo!"

"Good heavens, why?"

"Look at me!" Caesar looks out over the audience, pointing to himself, and they start laughing as he says, "I don't exactly blend in?"

Laughing, Mikey asks, "Wha'd you do? How'd ya fix it?"

"Good thing you asked!" Caesar motions out towards the audience and, "I was flying with my good friend, Pete, and he had to declare that I was his service animal to get me on."

"What? You, a service animal, that worked?"

"Yea, Pete said I was his comfort, Nicobar pigeon."

Tyrol laughs, "He's got the feathers to be a Nicobar pigeon!"

Mikey asks, "Yea, but but aren't you a little big for a pigeon?"

"Experimental, and you know what?" Caesar then looks out over the audience, flairs his feathers and shakes his head while saying,

"They bought it! Woo-hoo!" With his feathers snapping back into place, he grins at Mikey with a goofy, "Hook, line and sinker."

With the laughter dying off, Mikey asks, "How have you been? I mean, with Sheila now your UN ambassador you've been on the talking circuit for, you know, what was it again?"

"Aaaah, we're calling it the Polly-want-a-cracker tour! We're goin' aroun' talking about the Civil Exploration initiative."

"Isn't that the same as the UN thing?"

"The UN was trying to create a, okay, I'll say it..." Caesar does double quotes in the air saying, "Star Fleet." He shakes his head while continuing, "But this is the third time the knee-padded narcissists in the General Assembly have attempted to pull this same stupid shit."

"When you think about it, who wouldn't want a Star Fleet?"

Caesar huffs, "Okay, when it comes to government programs, the better something sounds—the worse it is! This was a power play, bureaucratic overreach! People have forgotten that this was the very reason President Willoughby bulldozed the GA way back in her day."

Mikey realizes, "Oh, yea, she did do that didn't she!"

"Yea, and this time Belgium was championing it."

"They got that vote to pass, didn't they?"

"Yes, but it pancaked! See, what the GA does is a suggestion at best, a maybe, and the perma-members of the Security Council had to cock-block it yet again! The funny thing is nobody had the funding and they were hoping the US would stupid-up and pay for it."

"President Mofid has no love for the UN."

"No d'uh there! You know it would be moronic for anybody to voluntarily subject themselves to UN oversight on anything...ever!"

"So, what's the difference with your Civil Exploration deal?"

"Well, for one, it's strictly run by academia! No governmental controls and zero bureaucratic oversight! It is exploration for the sake of exploration and, well, honestly, our thousand light year bubble we have free reign in is a gawd awful mess! There are some places we should never have colonized so we want to control that going forward."

"So, what's your role in all this?"

"Tryin' to get all the universities on board! That and helping to develop our protocols and methodologies." Caesar turns towards the audience and points his claw up in the air, "On that note, to risk sounding like a dumb-ass advertisement, we're taking applications!"

Mikey is startled, "You're taking applications now!"

"Hell yea, we are!" Caesar turns back to the audience saying, "When this thing gets goin' we're gonna need a lot of people, so if you're physically fit, and can follow instructions reasonably well, get on the N2, search for C-X-I, register now an' start taking the tests! We're thinking the first interviews will start in about eighteen months or so. Maybe twenty-four on the outside?"

Mikey wonders, "Any particular field of study you looking for?"

"Nope, we're taking all comers!" Caesar shakes his head and, "Look Mikey, there are not enough people in the sciences to do all the work. The numbers are not even close, so for what we're doin' smart enough is good enough! Right now, right now we're interested in people with a military background as early hires."

"Why's that?"

"Someone has to wear the red shirts!" With the audience cracking up at that, he turns to them and shrugs big, "Am I right?"

After a few seconds, Mikey asks, "So, what else is goin' on?"

Caesar thinks about it then, "Oh, we finally got a cat!" With the audience cheering and applauding at the news, he turns towards them and grins big, "Awesome! That's cool you all remember!"

Mikey nods, "Finally facing your fears I see!"

"Yea, Sheila and I found her while walking our dog, Chief, in Central Park. The itty bitty thing was just a few weeks old so we took it home and nursed her back to health."

"She have a name?"

"Itty Bitty!" Caesar nods then, "At first, but as time went on she became, well...Itty Bitty Bitchy Kitty."

"What?" Mikey is laughing at that, "You're serious?"

"Yea, the little furball is a handful! She's got this strange food fixation, I mean, we bought Chief one of those big-huge gravy bones for his birthday, and the little demon jumps on it, snarling and spitting and clawing at him! It was a riot, Chief with his sad eyes whimpering at us going 'that's my bone!' A hundred pounds of Rottweiler cowering to a ten-week old kitten! After a few months it got so bad we had to lock her up when we had people over for dinner!"

With the audience laughing at this, Mikey asks, "How bad?"

"Well, it's like this..." Caesar shifts on the ottoman and sits up as if he had a plate in his lap, "We'd all be sitting there and, all of a sudden, someone would say, 'where's my drumstick?' Caesar then

points to the audience and asks, "Anyone want to take a stab who the culprit was, anybody?"

A couple of people shout, "Itty bitty!"

"Damn, that was a good guess!" He then turns to Mikey and shakes his head, "But, that wasn't the worst of it!"

Mikey smiles, "Okay, I'll bite, what was the worst of it?"

"Glad you asked!" Caesar points back towards the audience and, "Just last month, Colonel Pete, there, he had a hot dog on a bun and right as he is about to sink his teeth into it here comes..." Caesar puts his hand up beside his head, where his ear would be if he had one, and leans out towards the studio audience."

The audience shouts, "Itty Bitty!"

Caesar throws his hands up, "How'd you guess!" He makes a sweeping then a spinning motion with his clawed hand while he says, "There was this black streak past Pete's face and...there goes my cat, spiraling through the air with his hot dog in her claws!"

When the laughter dies down, Mikey looks at Caesar while gesturing to the audience, "Colonel Pete, you say?"

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Mikey is laughing, "That really happened?"

Caesar nods big, "Honest to god, that was not a story I just pulled out of my ass! Our cat is frickin' nuts alright."

Across the facility, due west by one nautical mile, between the entrances to the tour and the studio itself, is the studio commissary that serves both the studio and the public. As a cafeteria it offers an unbelievable variety of cuisine at better than reasonable prices. To help draw in paying customers cast members from on-site productions are encouraged to frequent the commissary but "stars" usually end up at the Eighth-Tee which is a sit down private restaurant hidden away on the other side of the commissary kitchen. The studio is sitting on what used to be residential tracts wrapped around an eighteen hole golf course, so hence the Eighth-Tee. Even though this hidden cubby hole serves the "beautiful people" anyone who comes through that door will not be turned away—but one has to know about it to find it.

Mikey, and the show's executive producer for the last twenty years, Stewart Myers, brought Caesar, Peter, Jessica and Rufus Tyrol here for dinner. Where Monique holds dominion over the movie industry quietly from the shadows, it is the pompous and brash Myers who is at the tippy top of the heap in the N2 broadcasting circles. So,

if one shows some talent and wants a shot at celebrity and stardom all they have to do is to sell their soul and ass to Myers, but where Monique shuns the casting couch Myers is notorious for bare-backing those owing to him into oblivion.

In his mind it's not a casting couch if it's fair exchange.

Peter, in his khaki Marine service uniform, laughs as he adds, "I think the food was starting to get cold by the time we stopped laughing at that one."

Caesar points up in the air, "By then we had to put an APB out on the little fucker because another hot dog went missing!"

Myers laughs and sighs, "You didn't get any of this on video?"

"We got a few vids of her steeling chicken out from people's plates. Think you can use those?"

"People love cats! I can find a use for them."

"Sheila and I are in them."

"All right! That's even better!"

"Also, we have some of Itty Bitty taking Chief's food."

"Is he whimpering into the camera?"

Caesar laughs, "Crying like a little bitch."

Myers is excited by the prospect, "Yea, I can use 'em!"

Caesar takes a bite of prime rib, saying, "I want to thank you for dinner, Stewie. I know I can be a bit pricey to feed."

"Ah, naw! Anytime you are in town chat me up! I know this great steakhouse in Scottsdale..." Myers points at him with a smile, "Trust me, you'll fit right in!"

"You mean, stand out like a neon sign."

Peter pops Caesar in the arm, "By the way, ya feather duster, thanks a lot for pointing me out. Now I'm on the damned TV."

Mikey interjects, "*Nyet*, Peter! You were *fantastika* in your uniform! Everybody loves a man in uniform."

Myers asks, "Aren't you a little young to be a Colonel?"

Mikey raises his glass to Jessica and nods, "Young or not, I have to say if it gets him the beautiful women I am jealous!"

Tyrol laughs, "I'd have to agree, but Jessica is his sister."

Myers and Mikey both rear back slightly in disbelief, "Sister?" Myers then adds, "Well, if you're not taken, my son is available!"

Peter shakes his head with a warning, "I wouldn't wish that on him, she'll break his balls. Her body count is high."

Caesar agrees, "I've seen her in action, dude. Bad-bad plan!"

Myers laughs big, "Well, if that's the case, I'm available!"

Mikey shakes his head then nudges him with an elbow while he thumbs behind himself, "*Nazad linii.*"

"Wha? My Russian sucks."

"Back of the line, behind me, *glupyy.*"

Jessica shakes her head while laughing, "You guys are pigs!" She points to Myers, "But, I tell ya what, Stewie."

Myers leans in with a leering grin, "Tell me what, hot stuff?"

She huffs, "I'll come break your ass in two for the fun of it."

Myers laughs big and looks over at Mikey, "You know, every star I got in my stable is a total pain in my ass, all of them except you, Mikey!" He stands and picks up his jacket while saying, "You are the only one I would consider a friend, and with that said...your friends are my friends, so if any of you are in town come on by and we'll get a bite and have a laugh or two." He pushes his chair in and, "My apologies to one an' all, but I got an egotistic cheesedick that needs to be knocked down a peg or two before he leaves the studio. I'm looking forward to meeting you all again!"

With Myers stepping out, Mikey notices that the joyful mood around the table fades like the air being let out of a tire. He watches Jessica making a shooting motion with her hand and picks up on Caesar and Peter as they frown and nod with understanding.

Two tables over stands a thin redhead, Nikki-13, who looks every bit like a little sister to Jessica. She steps up beside her with Shane McElroy and Lieutenant Smyth of the Honey Badgers in tow.

Without looking back, Jessica says, "Hey, Lieutenant."

Smyth replies, "Oi, Red Love."

Caesar gives a slight wave to McElroy, "Hello, Shane."

McElroy nods, "Caesar."

Peter greets Nikki-13, "How are you, Ali?"

Nikki-13 says, "Was, Ali. I've taken my mother's name."

Peter is pained when he says, "Sorry to hear about Minura."

This newer Minura looks back and forth between him and Caesar, going, "Shane, here, he says you guys knew, Angel Griego."

Caesar says, "Sorry to hear about Angel. We loved the guy."

Minura nods yes, and, "On Ngāti Whā, when my mom became a GMI BER, it was Griego who spawned into her suit."

"Seriously, Griego?" Peter laughs, "I can't imagine!"

Tyrol puts his hands out and, "Is it true, the shit he said?"

Minura smiles, "I went to visit my mom at the Garden and Angel was there, and they were laughing their asses off about it."

Caesar asks, "What did our boy say?"

"Angel booted up in my mon's JACC, and with her head rolling around inside the visor he goes..." Minura now rocks her own head back and forth while mimicking Griego's voice, "Aaaah shit! This ain't right, I know this *chica caliente!*"

They all have a good laugh at that, and as it dies down Tyrol quietly reminds them all to, "Never forget."

With them nodding in agreement, Minura hands a napkin to Jessica who reviews the five handwritten names on it, so she hands it back and asks, "You sure about them all?"

Minura shakes her head, slightly annoyed, "Give me a break."

"You nailed it." Jessica looks up at her, "Ya did good."

"Anything else before we get this show on the road?"

Jessica hands Minura the business sized data-card with deCap on it and says, "Boxter wanted me to say to you guys...*Deus vult.*"

Everyone, except Mikey, nods in agreement, while Peter quietly whispers, "You got that right."

"Make sure you ping the chipsets and—"

McElroy chimes in with Jessica, "And send the cords of the victims to the cops before we post the stream." He shakes his head in wonderment, "It's hard to believe the public eats this shit up."

Tyrol shrugs and says, "Immaculate retribution. You know it's gonna freak the fuck outta everybody when bodies start showing up for each of the deCap streams that gets released."

Mikey sheepishly raises his hand, "Aaaaaah, I got a question. Why is it that I am privy to this? Just curious."

Caesar fields this one, "Publicly, you'll continue to do what you've been doin' which is sayin' that deCap is a hoax and horseshit." He then points to him, "But, privately, since you know everybody, you are tasked with sounding the alarm."

Mike realizes that Myers is going to die tonight, so he asks, "Stewie, that fucker is rotten to the core so he deserves what you're gonna dish out, but how many are you goin' after?"

Jessica says, "It's in the five-digits so, if we can...all of 'em?"

Minura, standing tall over Jessica's shoulder, snarls slightly as she declares, "Every mother-lovin' one of 'em."

Peter looks to Mikey and warns him, "You can't say who we are, you understand. You can't say how you know, but when bodies start poppin' up without a scratch, it'll back up your story."

Mikey jokes, "Or, you're gonna add me to the queue?"

Jessica gives him a tight-lipped smile and a shrug, while Caesar adds, "Don't make a mess of it and you'll be fine."

With her hand on Jessica's shoulder, Minura asks, "In the utility, to launch deCap, what's the prompt code?"

"Small case 'incubus' but swap the number-5 for the letter-s." Jessica reaches up and grips her hand while saying, "Make me proud."

As the three walk out of the Eighth Tee, Mikey looks around the table and exhales big, saying, "Well, I think I'm on board."

Jessica nods to the others indicating that he is being honest, so Tyrol says to him, "That's good to hear, Mike."

"Glad to be of help!"

After a long and uncomfortable silence, Caesar turns to Mikey and changes the subject, "Didn't you say your three youngest kids were looking for somethin' to do?"

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74

sunset strip tease

LCTN: SOL-3, HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-14-SATURDAY
TIME: 01:10zulu (local 17:10pst)

Everyone on Earth owns a floater and the top one-percent can maybe afford a high-end glider or two, vehicles that have replaced automobiles over the last century and a half, but autos are still around. Cruising is about the only thing you can do with the infernal things so it has become mostly a rich man's hobby to pass the time and throw buckets of money at. A lot of common folk also have automobiles but those are usually a mod, or a repro, or some rat-rod they took forever and a day to cobble together—lending to some very envious results.

Be ye rich or poor this community accepts all comers.

Most of the major metropolitan centers in the United States still have paved roads, and where cruising used to be scorned and ran out of town the cities of today, with long stretches of retail storefronts and restaurants, aggressively compete for that now desired traffic. In Los Angeles, back in the day, it was Whittier and Van Nuys Boulevards where cruising first started, but nowadays it's Foothill Boulevard on the first Saturday of the month, Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards on the second Saturday followed by Redondo Beach on the third Saturday. Well, that being the Pacific Coast Highway from South Redondo all the way up north to Manhattan Beach.

Where 77 Sunset Blvd in West Hollywood was the location for the long forgotten Dino's Lodge, six clicks east, here in the Los Angeles portion of Hollywood, 77 Sunset Blvd is the location for a very popular watering hole called Rufie's Landing, and where all of the freeways have long crumbled away, the short quarter-mile stretch between Hollywood and Sunset Boulevard's is the only segment of freeway that survives to this day.

Knowing Monique's plans the state gave it to her for a song.

This little eight-lane strip of the 101 freeway is now a glorified parking lot. Underneath the Hollywood overpass is a little drive-in burger joint, with human carhops on roller skates, that is a hybrid of the In-N-Out and Sonic chains of old named simply enough, Smaks! Then take a five-minute walk south and you'll find a glass-enclosed bar under the Sunset overpass called, Rufie's Landing. Popular with both the locals and tourists, business here is brisk when it is not the second Saturday of the month, and on that day things are jumping.

It's crazy-packed during the annual rally here in March.

Now, Monique owns the land, yes, but it's Rufino Tyrolia who owns the Landing as well as the burger joint, occupying those spaces under lease, and even though Tyrol owns them it's Monique's goons who happens to be running them—as hired hands on the books. She does this for all her "stars" because if and when their careers goes ass up, and it's inevitable, they'll have a revenue stream to fall back on that is both successful and held in trust. Something that they can't touch and fuck-into-failure because by then a successful actor will have the acute money management insightfulness of a crack whore.

The décor of Rufie's Landing has a fifties naugahyde feel to it with a different music style for every night of the week except on Saturday's. On that day it is always old-school rock-n-roll.

Behind the bar is a NORAD quality vault door that leads to an underground storage facility that has space for a hundred and thirty automobiles with two mechanical bays that is owned and operated by the Herrero family. This "garage" leases reasonably priced spaces for owners giving them a safe place to store their cherished automobiles with the one caveat being that the bar has their choice of which two or three they park and display in the bar on any given day. Roadsters and muscle cars being the favorites on Saturdays.

With the Herrero's in from Cuba at the last minute, and the popularity of *iFamilia Cubanaza!* off the charts, the crews from the production team mad scrambled to get their camera droids in place for tonight. They have always ended the season in October during the annual Redondo Beach Run, and return for Christmas to crunch-edit that video feed for release on New Year's Eve. When something big comes up, like with Diego's quinceañera, they can squeeze a two-hour special out of the footage and maybe six-hours of The Full Monty for streaming—and double-dipping always generates huge revenues.

Tonight was a last minute thing because everyone is going to be here so the crew showed up in case something big happens, and on that point the production team will not be disappointed because Lucia and Tyrol have already conspired to talk smack and race for pinks. Lucia in her red Dodge Hellcat against Tyrol in his black Lamborghini

Huracan will be a nice touch for ratings.

The question at hand is who do they pick to drop the flag to start the race? Hermosa? Diego? Connie? Everyone was considered but they settle on Jessica because she'll be dripping with attitude, but that little tidbit of stupidity is still four hours away...

Paula's famous gangsta-chopped black Lincoln, Frankenstein, now owned by Monique, has just been brought out by the attendants. Paula, Angela, Diego and Cap, pile in and right as they start to roll out of the bar to the applause of the crowd, Angela, who is in the front passenger seat, spins her hands in the air while cackling, "Yea, baby! Me be shotgunnin' all ya'll, baaa-bay!"

With them climbing up the ramp for Hollywood Blvd, the Herrero's '59 Impala ragtop is brought out for Léon, Ophelia, Mini-Mon, and Seth. They take their time piling in, and after holding the driver's side door for Ophelia, Léon turns to Jessica and smiles, "Now that I'm part of the family I have little time for *moi!*"

Jessica grins back, "And you wouldn't have it any other way."

"*Oui!*" He laughs, and as he runs around to the other side to hop in the passenger seat, "I'll have to give Mac a heads up!"

With them zooming up the ramp, and an Aventador-S pulling up for Josav and Cloé, Monique sighs, "I miss my chef."

Jessica asks, "I thought you liked Ursula?"

"That woman is an obstinate, as you say...cunt, but I'll keep her in spite of her warts!" With Josav and Cloé pulling away, she asks, "Not to pry, my love, but have you given up on our Josav?"

"No, I'm just busy and I refuse to put the screws to 'im."

"You will be back tomorrow afternoon for him, yes?"

"Yea, and...I'll have my breakdown then."

Monique nods as more cars are brought out, "With Cloé off to her shoot you'll have quality time for once. Make the most of it."

"Till Tuesday, but I'm gonna take him with me. He'll get an eyeful, but after that I'll be off the clock for two weeks."

"No point in hiding what you do any longer." Monique looks at her and says, "Though, you do seem a little frazzled."

"Does it show?"

"Not at all, but I know you well enough to know."

Jessica waves to Carlos, Jordan, Syleste and Hermosa as they pull away in a Rolls-Royce Phantom ragtop, "Who's the Mustang for?"

"The sixty-five is Agatha's latest acquisition." She gives a wicked smile, "Mac can barely squeeze into the passenger side so Agatha will be driving. Visually, it will be a hit with the onlookers."

With Tyrol opening the door for Connie on his Koenigsegg CCX, Jessica asks, "I've been waiting for you to ask about Peter?"

"What better alibi than to be present for one's last meal?" Jessica breathes deep and rolls her eyes, so Monique adds, "They found traces of a paralytic and adrenalin. Stewie's blood chemistry looked like he ran a dozen marathons, and with the deCap stream released it proves it was a homicide, but they can't seem to pinpoint the cause."

With the door to his Koenigsegg sealed, and a gleeful Connie bouncing inside, Tyrol runs around the car and calls out to Jessica as he hops into the driver's side, "Don't forget the striptease, gorgeous!"

As the CCX races up the ramp, and the white Metropolitan and the purple Super-Beetle coming out of the vault, Adolphina and Lucia step up to them with octodroid cameras in tow and Adolphina asking, "Striptease?"

Monique fields this one, "*Oui, madame!* Rufino refers to it as the Sunset strip...tease. When one parks and exits their vehicle, one must make...it...linger...for affect."

Jessica huffs a snort as she thumbs towards Monique, "Yea, Josephine Baker, here, she's a pro at it."

Monique snarks back, "And you, my little Mata Hari, have to wiggle those ample hips out...with a bump even."

Jessica's eyes bore though Monique, "ooooooh."

Out of character, Monique starts laughing big as Lucia realizes and asks, "Don't make it obvious, right?"

Jessica nods, "Yea, like last season when you were sitting on the hood of that blown Firebird with Hermosa revving it!"

Monique smiles, "It was like you were on a washing machine during spin cycle. The look on your face, it made my day."

Adolphina snorts, "Yea, that was up there with Sonia and Dot fighting over the pneumatic driver on the pilot!"

Monique quietly admits, "And shortly after watching them tussle over it I find out we had one in my garage. Imagine that?"

"Yea, imagine that." Jessica chuckles.

Lucia notes, "Just don't make it look like a pole dance."

Jessica just shakes her head, "Stick with what you know."

"Body slam!" Adolphina laughs while high-fiving Jessica.

Lucia shakes her head with, "I gotta be me!"

Adolphina looks to Jessica and asks, "Rufie finally get around to teaching you how to clutch yet? He was supposed to."

Jessica gestures towards the ramp, "Yea, the Ku-nig."

Adolphina points towards the ramp and, "The Koenigsegg?"

"Yea, that's the one! It was easy."

Adolphina and Lucia look at each other, then at Jessica with Lucia asking, "You pop it or grind the gears at all?"

"Once, but after that it was a cinch to feel it through." Jessica pushes her left hand out and, "Like Rufie say, if in doubt, clutch!"

Monique looks at her then gestures towards the beetle and the Metropolitan, "If this is the case which do you choose?"

Jessica points to the Super-Beetle and says, "I kinda get the feeling that this one is more forgiving."

Monique takes the keys from the attendant, "Thank you sir." Then tosses them to Jessica, "Here's the keys!"

Jessica rears her head back thinking for a second and, "Oh!"

With Adolphina and Lucia hopping into the Metropolitan, and Jessica and Monique in the Super-Beetle, Jessica follows them up the ramp onto west-bound Hollywood Blvd.

Now out of eye and earshot of the octodroids, Monique says, "People need to be held responsible. I can only applaud the effort and, at the very least, enjoy some modicum of involvement vicariously through my grandchild." She looks to Jessica, "And his sister."

Jessica glances at her and, with a weak clutch into third, she pushes it in and seamlessly corrects it with power while saying in a deadpan, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"As it should be." Monique nods with a smile, which then fades, "I dared to path the deCap feed this morning and I have to say the notoriety for Cap may become burdensome."

"She'll hold up."

"I've come to realize why people delight in that monster's work...and, with Stewie out of the way, I did take the opportunity to contact Mr. Popov yet, *à mon désespoir*, Mikey said that he'll remain on the program for another handful of years...by your request."

Jessica points out, "This is not about me."

Monique follows with, "Well, that being the Annex."

Jessica slows and breaks for a light, "We have a couple of big reveals coming up and people trust Mikey."

"I gather the importance. Anything to share?"

Jessica starts laughing, looks at Monique and laughs again saying, "One is a three-ton flying dragon, no shit! It sounds fucking ludicrous but that coming-out is a bit of a ways off."

Monique is surprised, "*Mon Dieu!* I would love to meet them!"

Jessica snorts with, "Trust me, you will, and feeding them is a little extreme compared to feeding the Xhemel!" She chuckles and, "See the Xhemel loves cow but these guys will want...the cow."

Monique nods and, "I'm sure Ursula can accommodate."

Jessica points into the air before she shifts and starts the Beetle moving again, "As for the other one, it's coming up very soon and, on that note, I was wondering if I could maybe impose upon you."

"You have never asked for anything, so I have no objections."

Jessica glances at her, "I want to invite four people to your New Year's Eve party. We'll be showing up about nine-ish or so." Jessica shifts again, "And since the conference rooms have already been purposed out I was wondering if we can reserve the observation platform on top of the chateau?"

"Consider it done."

"It'll only be for an hour. We will have two meetings before coming down, and we're inviting you to the second one...with Claudia."

Monique nods with understanding, "Our surprise attendees?"

Jessica announces, "Robert, Jacqui, Lilith and Luc."

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It's nine o'clock and the bar is hopping, but on cruising night the Landing has more of a family feel to it because there are always children and teens here until they get booted out at ten. With four bar tables pulled together, Jessica, Monique and Carlos are each nursing a dry martini at one end with their underage charges sitting around the tables fighting over baskets of onion rings and fries.

From the Smaks carhops, the two deep-fried dishes that they endlessly bring to the Landing are the Kerplunk and the Birds Nest. One is a basket of French Fries jumbled up with fried mushrooms, and the other is a basket of onion rings with the mushrooms nestled in the

center of them.

Carlos is pitching to Jessica, "Yea, we took what we could gleam from Dedede and our crew from John Hopkins came up with the new Xeno. Got rid of all that nonsensical silica and acid blood crap."

Jessica goes, "I haven't see it but I hear it can still spit acid."

"Yes, but now the chemistry and life cycle makes sense. It needs iron and has to eat big to hibernate and shed its skin. It takes twelve weeks for it to grow to full size. With this, and correcting the esthetic sins of the past, we have a winner on our hands! Everything that followed the second original is non cannon so we trashed it all."

Jessica shakes her head, "I loved the two originals."

"Yea, but with our Aliens we're going back a century and use a Force Recon blue-platoon of U.S. Marines they pulled out of action."

"Awww, no pulse rifle! Gives me a frowny face."

Carlos points out, "M-Ten-Seventy-Nine, Chattergun?"

Jessica nods big and, "Now, THAT puts that a smile back on!"

"Thought it would!"

Jessica asks, "I'm curious, why are you bringing this up?"

Monique says, "I'd rather he wait until Christmas but Carlos will burst his seams and soil himself if he doesn't get this out."

Jessica then shrugs at Carlos, so he comes at her with the big sell, "Brittney...Brittney want's to recast a part and she thinks that Angela's Newt would be the perfect balance to her Ripley."

Jessica blinks and shakes her head, "And you agree with her?"

"And fix the problems with the previous two Newts, yea!"

Jessica protests, "The first one was awesome!"

"Yea, but character consistency would be a nice touch? We also want a less screechy, more gutsy Newt! And you gotta admit that the reboot, with her shrieking and making the xeno's flinch was just fucking moronic the way they played it out!"

Jessica huffs a laugh, "It was funny!"

"When funny becomes a stupid, lame-ass weaponized plot device like how they did it...that's when it becomes fucking moronic."

"Okay, you got me there, but why ask me?"

Carlos looks at her and goes, "d'uh?"

"Okay, you got me there too!"

"So, you're okay with it?"

"Scott will be, but it is up to her. You gotta ask her."

With Lucia's Hellcat and Tyrol's Huracan rolling out of the vault, Carlos asks, "So, you *are* okay with it?"

Jessica just looks at him then says, "d'ur." She then huffs, "Angela adores Brittney so I'm sure she'll agree to it."

"That's good to hear, because I'll have Brittney come ask her herself on Christmas morning. It'll be a hell of a Christmas present!"

"Yea..." She looks at Monique who comically rolls her eyes when Jessica says, "Both barrels." Back to Carlos she asks, "Since we have no cannon to speak of, what are your plans after this shoot?"

"We're not killing her off if that's what you're wondering."

"Didn't think so..." With Tyrol hopping out of the Lamborghini and shouting for everyone's attention, Jessica mumbles privately to herself, "Thank God it wasn't a sitcom." She again looks up at Carlos, "Isn't Rufie cast in this one?"

"We offered him Hicks but he wanted Hudson. Says Hudson is a better character, so we're gonna offer Hicks to Mikhail Popov."

"Isn't Mikey a little past the expiration date for a corporal?"

"Picture it, a grizzled staff-sergeant busted back to corporal? Not uncommon then and, since he and Brittney are an item, he'd be perfect for the role! The audience will lap that shit up."

Jessica notices Angela at the far end of the table, oblivious to their conversation, and throws her hands up, "Fuck it, okay!" She then points to Carlos, "But, Peanuts or Eight will be on set."

"Ooooh, make it Eight! I can use her as a Marine!"

Jessica can see in the mirror of the bar that Tyrol is two tables behind her, and calling out, "I need a purdy lady to drop the flag!"

With all the young women and ladies in the bar hopping up and down vying for his attention, Jessica shakes her head and says to Monique and Carlos, "Fucking idiots are gonna race."

In her mind she hears Seth say, <"You're on!">

Jessica wonders what he meant as she reaches for the last mushroom in a bird's nest, and beating Hermosa to it her smile fades as Tyrol calls out, "Jessica, I choose you!"

Monique and Carlos start laughing at her, so Jessica looks up at them, "Fuck you guys."

Carlos laughs, "Smile for the camera!"

Monique nods, "A lady like smile if you please?"

Seeing Tyrol in the mirror, she flicks the mushroom over her shoulder at him, and noticing the food item flying towards him from Jessica he opens his mouth and catches it to the cheers of the crowd.

Jessica slams her drink, brushes her hands off on her blouse, then spins around towards them and the cameras with contempt on her face. She slides off the bar chair, cups her breasts and hoists them up into position, and slowly weaves her way through the crowd to the open door of the Huracan. With Tyrol holding it for her she bares her teeth with a slight snarl of the lip and drops on in.

Exactly what Lucia and Tyrol were banking on.

On Hollywood Blvd, just past Wilcox, they set the starting point of the race with people at each intersection up to Highland to block traffic when needed. A bunch of octodroid cameras are stationed along the run out to the Chinese Theatre, with several there and at the quarter mile point where Paula is demarking the finish line.

Syleste is always the judge for these things—because nobody here will defy her. Vestments on or not, she is a priest. Syleste starts the event by giving a quick prayer, blessings and the Sign of the Cross over each car. That done, Agatha hauls her up to the finish line.

Jessica turns to Lucia and Tyrol asking, "On three?"

Lucia goes, "Count down, three-two-one, then you drop."

"On zero." Jessica shakes her head, "You guys are stupid."

Tyrol laughs as Lucia hands Jessica one of their signature checkered bandanas they use for a flag, "Make a good show of it!"

They hop in their cars as Jessica steps out into the street to the chalk marking the starting line. Because Tyrol has music blasting out of his Huracan she wiggles her hips and rocks her shoulders to the time of the beat. She's not the best of dancers but, with those hips and that tight hourglass figure, nobody gives a damn.

They line the two cars up by Jessica, who motions for them to scoot up little by little, all the while giving a little belly dance for the crowd and the camera—and these moves she has perfected.

With the music now cut, Jessica twirls her hands to get them to rev their engines for show, and with Lucia and Tyrol knuckling down and nodding yes, Jessica gives the countdown and drops the bandana.

Torque and horsepower matters in a race, and the old saying 'those who shifts best wins' is a truism, yes, but tread grip is what really counts here—and Lucia has it clinched right off the line when the Huracan's tires spin for a fraction of a second before they bite into the

pavement. If it would have been a half-mile Tyrol could maybe have taken her, in a mile guaranteed, but he didn't have a chance in hell to catch her in a quarter which is the domain of the Hellcat variants.

With everyone at the starting line jumping into their own cars, the Metropolitan screeches to a stop and Monique shouts, "Get in!"

They pull up to the Grauman's Chinese Theatre who, like the Egyptian Theatre, is one of the few landmarks that have survived the many years since their twentieth-century heyday. Yea, it took a billion and a quarter to renovate it to its former glory, but what else was Monique going to do with her spare change?

Oh yea, rebuild the Egyptian.

Anyway, Jessica and Monique slither out of the Metropolitan and step up past a cop just as Tyrol is handing Lucia a dollar bill, all the while grumbling, "I'll have my car back, thank you very much."

Lucia tosses him the fob and, "It's a pleasure doing business!"

The cop interrupts them, "Look, I've never written a moving violation so I'll cut you two a deal. If you don't broadcast this then no harm no foul. If you do the City of LA will process serve it."

Tyrol laughs as Lucia motions for the cop to, "Write it up."

Jessica points out to them, "You guys are a couple of retards."

With that said, Jessica notices a father and son who've been driving around tonight in an ultra-stylish rat-fink mod, and by the way they've been pointing at people all night they are obviously unaware of SoCal decorum and etiquette and are not from around these parts.

Jessica doesn't know why she picked up the bandana, after it got pulled under the Huracan's wheels and torn up as it shot out the back of the car, but she did and here it is in her hand. Jessica looks up at the thirteen-year-old boy who has pointed at her twice this evening, so she says to herself, "Why not?"

Stepping up to the father and son, she holds the bandana out for the teenager and says, "Try not to nut on it."

They laugh as he takes it, "You're on that *Cubinaza* show!"

"Eeeeh, not really by choice."

75

short straws

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-17-TUESDAY
TIME: 15:22zulu (local 12:35mst)

In her capacity as the acting Secretary General, *Pro Tem*, Cricket Washington has been playing the General Assembly of the Federation of Independent States like a fiddle, and today they are all dancing to her tune.

The thing is, the hundreds of ambassadors sitting here in the GA think they've been dancing to their own separate and unique tunes that they composed, but that's the kink with the modern-experimental symphonic abstracts. Each of the musicians is reading the music and playing the notes and bars that they themselves wrote in contribution to it but, with a conductor adept at editing and compromise, to the observer it all comes together complete, in concert, with the *fortissimo* crescendo here cresting in about twenty minutes—at about the time the sweet potato pie is being served.

Lest we forget, Cricket is providing lunch and as the jingle goes, 'Nobody turns their nose to KCMoe's!'

For a podunk Kansas City BBQ, this thing stormed the culinary world when it finally branched out from Clay County three decades ago. It was Clementine Ozo, Jose's mother, who inherited it from her parents after they resurrected the family business once they figured out how to smoke the cheap vertically-farmed meats when nobody else could pull that off. Clem took the reins and was the impetus for the expansion and elevating their menu into mainstream consciousness. Even their Vegetable Bakes will poleaxe the taste buds, so if one is not calling the vegans in for first dibs on that then the fur will fly.

When one enters the lobby to the Spike you walk right into the concierge counter. To your left is an admin satellite office for the SA, and to your right you have the new corporate offices for the CXi

that are under construction. Behind those are two massive elevator banks, and past that is a five-story auditorium currently occupied by the GA of the FIS until their own building is finished.

The nine square-kilometer airfield east of the Spike, that was cleared out for an SA airdrome forever ago, was never developed so this flattened mesa has now been repurposed for the FIS. A massive stadium-sized building for the GA is going up first however, a 15,000 station capacity for a body of 631 voting members may be considered a tad excessive but the Annex tends to think ahead. Also thinking ahead the Annex made a point to keep the western most taxiway that runs from the Church Key Civil Spaceport to the Spike, and some say it may break the visual flow to the GA, sprouting up here along the coast of Bludger Bay, but the FIS is getting this for an annual lease of only one Au-note so critics were quietly told to stuff it. Anyway...

Behind the concierge is Trixie, Jacob's old ASF47 he retired through action, and because she is interactive you can actually walk up and talk to her! She's become so popular with everyone that they are seriously considering making Trixie a permanent fixture in the lobby by repurposing her as the concierge, and thinking the hanging-stowage mounts from the century old Swingline cruisers would do nicely!

Behind Trixie, in the wide gap between the elevator bays, are three rows of tables loaded with KCMoe's brisket, tri-tips, pork and chicken shred. With the members of the GA now back at their seats with huge platefuls of food, they only put a small dent in it all, but where meat goes a long way the trays loaded with both Mallorcan and the ever popular Mexi-mild vegetable bake are about half empty.

With Moe's robots hauling in stacks of serving trays loaded up with slices of their famous sweet potato and cream cheese layered pies, wheeling them directly up to the entrance of the GA, Cricket turns to her personal assistant and asks, "Let's move a table with assorted meats over by the pies and notify the building that I said it's open season on the tables here."

Cricket's PA, PFC6 Lavon Green, the only living PFC6 other than Artyom, a fellowship lawyer in International Affairs who is second in command of the Paper Cuts group—and a veteran geezer brigade retread with tearing and burn scars on his face and neck, who scares the living bagebas out of anyone who sees him for the first time, looks out over the full GA while standing next to Cricket and shakes his head in amazement, "S'hard to believe we is here."

Both are from south side Chicago, so Cricket glances at him with a smile, "Believe or leave, muda-fuck'a, 'cause we *is* here!"

He leans in, quietly saying, "Yeeea, ma-nigga pulled this off!"

Trying not to laugh at that, She looks up at Green and snorts, "Jag the fuck-off already! Ya got your orders."

He grins big and walks away, "Yessiree, boss-lady! I'm on it!"

"Asshat." Cricket grumbles to herself, then calls out to him, "Seventeen hundred hours, my place. You be there, Lavon!"

Green points to her as he slips into an open elevator.

Now surveying the layout of the GA, Cricket suddenly looks back at the elevator while pointing to the tables then deflates while she throws her hands up—because they didn't move a table yet.

Thinking someone will come along shortly, she starts juggling trays so one table has a full assortment of meats, and as she finishes, Jessica steps up just in time, "Hey, Crick!"

After a little hug, Cricket points to the entrance of the GA and asks, "Can ya help git this over there?"

Jessica hops on it and after they carry the table over by the pies, and setting it down, she asks, "Everybody show up?"

"Yep! I can't believe this is comin' together like we planned."

"Only Cricket Washington herself could pull a bait an' switch like this-here." And after saying what everyone in-the-know knows is obvious, Jessica then leans in to add, "Babe, you're an evil-maniacal bitch with a million dollar smile, and you have to admit Bill was right."

"About what?"

"Your hair!" Jessica nods towards Cricket's hair, hair that used to be ultra-short while with her father but is now in long-springy curls, "It looks great! It makes you appear friendly...for once."

Cricket grunts a laugh, "I'll take those as compliments."

"Trixie is a scream!" Josav steps up while thumbing behind, "So my grandad landed that thing? Seriously?"

Jessica bumps up against him, "Yup! I'll let you path the file before I give you that dollar ride."

Josav looks at Cricket and goes, "She has a Seventy-Four!" With Bill coming out of the elevator banks carrying their baby in his arms we also have Eight, Copper, Cap and Peanuts stepping through the lobby, Cricket nods yes so Josav shakes his head, "Fucken' hell."

Cricket says to him, "She's gotta get around somehow?"

"But that?"

Jessica adds as she turns to Bill to take Jade, "Where I'll be going over the next couple of years, yea! Kinda-sorta need it."

Before Bill could reach her, the four clones block his path and say in unison, "Give me Jade or I'll hurt you."

"Come on!" Jessica protests as Bill hands her over to them.

With Jade in Copper's arms, all four of them look at Jessica and hiss at her like a clutch of vampires huddling around the baby.

"Bitches!" Jessica laughs at them, and then turns to Cricket, "You're gonna hav'ta have another because these shitheads are hoggin' up all the huggy time!"

Josav looks Cricket over, up and down at her thin and cut figure in a clingy knit dress, points towards the baby, "You, had this?"

Before Cricket could respond, Jessica throws out, "Yea, not even a stretch mark! Everyone is hatin' on her for it."

Cricket slithers between them towards the baby while saying, "One is enough." Then smiles at the four clones, "Momma gits a kiss."

Jessica says to Copper, "Thanks for taking care of Esma."

Copper smiles, "No prob. Peanuts is coming with me."

They laugh as Jessica worries, "Oh crap, maybe I should go?"

Peanuts playfully wiggles her fingers at Jessica, "We got this!"

Shaking her head, "I'm gonna regret this, I know it."

Copper laughs, "No worries, I'll have her on a choker chain."

Bill says to Jessica, "Red Love, Rat-One had a very successful weekend. They splat the last of the five on the C-List an hour ago."

Jessica nods, "Minura has been keeping me apprised."

Cricket asks them, "How was it working with Minura?"

Bill goes, "McElroy said she made it too easy for 'em."

"That's real good to hear."

Jessica asks Bill, "You wanna tell them?"

Bracing himself, Bill turns to inform the clones, "Colonel Ribot, Marshal Ramirez and myself all agree, 'levenses and cherubs only. Nobody that can even remotely be mistaken for Jessica, or you three, so Gail, Florence, Neon and Ruby will be assigned to a Ratel Team but I can't give one to Nitro, Cobi or Rhoades." He looks down at the now blossoming Peanuts, and asks, "You wanna join a team, kiddo? They got seven more slots!"

Peanuts shakes her head, "Uh-uh, not now. I enjoy annoying the shit outta everyone here too much."

"Okay, can you let 'em know then?"

Eight speaks up, "They already know now."

Cricket asks, "If Cobi is free I'd love to have her back."

Copper says, "Cobi would love too. Tomorrow good for you?"

"Fantastic! I love working with her."

Bill suggests, "Scott and I got a war to plan for, so if Nitro and Rhoades are looking for somethin' to fill thar day?"

Cap informs Bill, "Nitro and Rhoades will be here tomorrow."

Bill points to Cricket, "Ditto on what she said!"

Peanuts looks up to Bill, "We've got nine candidates for ya but we gotta draw straws to see who gets those slots."

Bill shakes his head, "Nope, I tell ya what, Peanuts, I already know the Honey Badgers want to double up on a couple of their teams. We'll take 'em all."

All four of the clones nod with approval, so Peanuts smiles at Bill saying, "If everyone is pulling short straws it's a deal!"

Josav, having just learned the full extent of Jessica's powers, thinks in his mind, <"What do these teams do?">

As Lavon Green comes back out of the elevator banks, with a Colonel Sanders of the PADF in tow, Jessica responds, <"deCap.">

Josav nods with wide-eyed approval, <"Oh, okay!">

With Green and Sanders stepping up to Cricket, she turns to the Colonel and asks, "So, Colonel Sanders, your people ready?"

Sanders nods to Cricket, "Madame, Secretary General. My agents and troopers are in the hanger bay and can deploy inside a minute. Our PADF coach is out front and ready to load. It looks like a standard mail run sitting on the deck so nobody knows what's up."

Green hands Sanders a file with the 132 arrest warrants, "Colonel, here are the warrants."

Cricket points to the file, "I'll announce the names in that order and your people are to arrest the accused at their workstations in plain view of everyone and the press. I know you were going to egress through the south exit but, for the viewing public, I now want the perp-walk to go right through the lobby here. I want it all on camera, and all the way up to your ship."

Sanders nods, "Not a problem. It'll take an hour to get to Second Hand, and we'll be taking them to Tower Nine, correct?"

"The PADF takes possession of it the second you land."

"Then we're ready to roll, Mum!"

"Let's give 'em all a few more minutes to enjoy their meal. Seal the GA when Moe's start serving the pies."

Sanders nods respectfully, "Yes, Mum."

As Sanders steps over to wait by the pies, Green slithers up to Cricket and quietly mocks the colonel by saying, "Hey-ho, Mum!"

Cricket shakes her head, "Shut up!"

Green is about to crack up as he says, "Just so you know, I got the final tally. With the truncated quorum we already know they won't have the supermajority but, word is, everybody who was going to vote yes with them are now going to abstain which is..."

Cricket lights up with excitement while saying along with him, "The same as a no vote!"

She high-fives Green as she steps past him and over to the catering manager from Moe's, and after talking to him she returns and says to everyone, "Ten minutes."

Bill takes Jade and kisses Cricket, "Kick ass, honey-bun!"

With Bill and Jade heading back to the elevators, Cricket turns to Jessica and the clones, "Okay, the idea is I want them all calm. All ya'll know how to broadcast those eerie-calming vibes, but for you..." She points to Jessica, "I want you to mess up three for me."

Jessica shrugs, "Anything is possible?"

"Good! With the new representative from the House of Anzac. I want that arrogant fuck in tears. You know, sniveling and shit."

Jessica nods, yes, "Yea, no prob there! The others?"

"From Yhi, I want that lothesome fuckwit shouting and shit like, *you can't do this*, and *I got rights*. You know, make loud stupid shit come out of that turds mouth." Jessica gives a thumbs up, so Cricket finishes with, "As for our enchanting Mr. Jones from Ngāti Whā, I want that cuck-wad kickin' and screamin' all the way out the door. Let's humiliate that fucker. Can you do that?"

"Can do!" Jessica then asks, "Biting and spitting?"

"Uuuuugh, I gotta say no to the biting."

"You want them dragging 'im?"

Cricket points to the lobby floor, "Along here would be nice." She then turns to Josav and huffs a laugh, "As for you, hunk of Sugar, grab yourself a plate and a pie and come watch the fun!"

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To the cheers of the representatives in the GA, Moe's robots wheel in the stacks of pie, and as they start distributing them the PADF troops quietly pour out of the hanger outside, enter the lobby of the Spike and seal off the auditorium inside a minute. Cricket is not only surprised that the GA was clueless to all this, but she was amazed that none of them noticed that the troops guarding the entryways have tripled in number and are now blocking their exit.

Cricket opens an incoming tacnet voice queue, <"Hey, Bob!">

Now that he's dead, Bob's voice from the Garden is friendly and has a soothing effect on her, <"Need me to hang with ya?">

She shakes her head, <"Naw, I'm good.">

<"Well, it goes without saying, break a leg.">

<"Bob, baby, ya just said it?">

Bob chuckles, <"You know me. I'm an obvious kinda guy.">

Cricket huffs, <"An' that's why you selected me for your job. I'm here because I'm not so obvious.">

<"You're about to up-fuck their world and they're clueless.">

<"That I am."> Cricket sighs while she steps into the GA, returning waves to friendly faces with a smile as she heads down the long isle towards the podium, <"I wanna thank you, Bob.">

<"Thank me for what?">

<"Being here for me.">

<"Cricket, hon, you *are* in your element."> Now half way to the podium, Bob laughs, <"Ya know, I am kinda jealous.">

<"Of what?">

<"You're about to wrap-up a Machiavellian power play that people only fantasize about, and this makes it your second tic mark!">

Cricket stops below the stage, at the stairs leading up to the podium, and wonders, <"What would Vasily say about all this?">

With her now climbing the stairs, Bob answers, <"Well, Vasily says that you, being outwardly maternal, lead people to believe you're malleable. He says your warmth gives them the false impression that you work from a position of weakness when you, to repeat what he says verbatim, are actually a claymore mine filled with glass shard flechettes wrapped in a baby's blue blankie.">

Cricket starts to openly laugh as she reaches the top of the podium, <"As only Vasily can put it!">

Bob laughs, <"Always remember, front towards the enemy!">

Cricket looks out over the GA below and mutters to herself, "And mine eye hath seen his desire upon mine enemies."

Bob notes, <"Hartcourt's favorite quote.">

Cricket smiles as she steps up to the lectern, <"Okay, Bob, get the fuck outta my hair and let me get to work.">

Bob closes out with a happy *ciao* as Cricket opens the mic, "How was lunch, everybody?"

With the GA giving her a robust round of applause, Cricket nods big with, "Only the best for you all!"

As the noise dies down, she continues, "We pretty much talked out all the pros and cons on the residency resolution this morning, so I want to thank ya for allowing us to move the vote up to thirteen-thirty hours. That's gonna be in a half an hour so, right now, I want to get a few housekeeping items out of the way."

Lavon Green has been approaching the podium and hands Cricket the final list but, instead of walking away he takes a step back to her four-o'clock, comes to attention and snaps into parade rest position. Everyone who knows Green knows he's a friendly sort of guy but at this very moment something is amiss. His cheerfully pleasant aura has suddenly vanished—and the piercing eyes and smile turned upside down now synchs up with his otherwise brutal exterior.

Cricket looks at the list, nods with approval and puts it on the lectern while speaking up, "I will be brief. First off, I want to thank everyone for their generous contributions to the Wilkinson Family fund. His wife wanted me to tell you it is very much appreciated." To the applause from the GA, Cricket goes, "Next up, our little league baseball team has a brand new logo and name and a new coach! They are now the Blue Foxes, which is as good as anything else on this planet since we have no indigenous fauna! I want to thank my PA, Lavon Green, here, for agreeing to take the reigns as their new coach. The team did well this year, taking third place on the Taurus Circuit is not half bad, so I would like to give Mr. Green a hand for stepping up!"

Because of the applause, Green gives a snappy wave.

Cricket glances down to the sheet and adds, "One last little annoyance, and I want to apologize for bringing this to the floor now." She looks up and, "We were contacted by the Registry Office over some silly little issues on the registrations for the new-replacement reps from member states now occupied by the Cooperative. We did

consider sweeping these pesky little technicalities under the carpet but, once we reminded ourselves that we have a responsibility to hold all or none to standard, the remedy became self-evident. This will affect all one-hundred and thirty-two of these new members who have recently taken their oath of office and, again, I want to apologize for the short notice today because the indictments given to us, to serve on you, will make a mess of your Christmas and holiday plans. We have a laundry list of charges for each and every one, but what applies to all is the submission of falsified documents, under oath, and perjury..."

The GA stirs, all the new members looking at each other with confusion and panic on their faces, but they are suddenly calmed by the soothing thoughts radiating from Eight, Copper, Cap and Peanuts.

Cricket continues with, "Aaaand, since each and every one of you is considered a flight risk, instead of a catch and release, which would be normal protocol, Colonel Sanders of the PADF will have his people come take you into custody now, and transfer you to Second Hand for arraignment. Please note that bail will not be issued."

There is more shock and panic in the GA that is, yet again, quashed by the clones while Cricket finishes with, "So, when I call your name, please remain seated and Colonel Sander's people will come to you, serve the warrants, and escort you to your transport! After we wrap this up we'll take the vote on the resolution on the amendment to cut the residency requirement at thirteen-thirty..."

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In the lobby of the Spike, through the windows at the entrance, we have the clones, Jessica and Josav watching the PADF's HWG-99 coach, taxi past the construction site of the new GA.

Josav asks, "Why don't they take off from here?"

Jessica points out, "If anybody takes off from here they'll be identified as SA—and may be shot at once they leave the system."

"They're PADF, not the Annex."

"Doesn't matter. Them's the ROEs."

"That's pretty damned stupid if you ask me."

Jessica and the clones all nod in agreement as Jessica says, "You got that right."

With people pouring out of the GA behind them, Cricket and the Xhemal representative, Paris, step up between Jessica and Eight.

Josav asks, "How did the vote go?"

Cricket just shakes her head in disbelief, "Four-hundred and ninety-nine no votes. Not...one...abstention."

Jessica looks at her, "Oh, my God, great job!"

"Goosebumps." Says Cricket, glancing at her arms, then to Jessica she says, "I really didn't see that coming...but?"

Jessica quietly nods, "The alter did. I couldn't say anything."

Cricket leans in, "What else are you not telling me?"

Jessica breaths in deep and, "Nice weather we're having."

Cricket nods then turns to Paris and, "Hey, gorgeous, want a glass or two of Shiraz to go with that tray of brisket?"

Paris smiles, "You bet! I want to thank you for setting one aside for me. I'm still a little bit hungry."

"I figured that. Now that this vote is out of the way I got somethin' I want to run by ya."

Paris' plumage ruffles slightly as she asks, "Sure, but I was wondering, how much time are they gonna get on sentencing?"

Jessica volunteers, "They'll get ten whole years. The courts here do not kid around with perjury. Eventually we'll cut it in half but, considering Tower Nine, it'll be more of a vacation for them."

Cricket laughs, "But without turn down service."

Paris says, "After the war I hear they're going to open it as a hotel and, without a doubt, it's the prettiest building on the delta yet."

"I haven't seen the inside of Nine but I can only imagine." Cricket then looks to Jessica and the clones, "Thank you for your help, ladies. Today was a huge success thanks to you."

Eight smiles at her, "For a repeat performance, I have to say that today you were in the groove. At the United Nations you were fun to watch but this time, running through that roll call the way you did, here you had me laughing my ass off."

Cap adds, "We all were."

Cricket thinks about it, "I don't know where that came from but, yea, this time it was fun." Turning to Paris she asks, "Ready to go up?" And with Paris nodding yes, she says to Jessica and the clones, "Thanks again, everybody!"

Jessica bumps her hip against Josav's and asks, "Would you mind taking the tray up for Paris?"

With them walking away, Jessica turns to the four clones and demands, "Okay, which one of you was it?"

With Eight and Copper looking down at Peanuts, she rolls her eyes and laughs, "Ya narcs!" She then thumbs back at Cap and says, "But the bad hair day comment to the rep from Yhi was her doin'."

Jessica huffs, "Yea, and that was the best line!"

Copper points out, "The way it was going the reps in the GA would be *en garde* around Cricket, but now they are all scared shitless of her. Going forward is this not what you wanted?"

Peanuts adds, "No abstentions! Snarky made the difference."

"Admittedly, yes, this is a better outcome." Jessica deflates, "Okay, thanks a lot, you guys. Ya'll can get the fuck outta here except for you!" Jessica is now pointing at Eight, "You're comin' with me."

Eight blinks, confused, "I am?"

"I know you ain't got a thing to do over the next couple of days so I'm taking you with us!"

"I thought you and Josav were going somewhere with your brother, Pete, and his fiancé?"

"We are, and so are you! Go pack a bag."

"Where, may I ask?"

"Ever hear of the Country Club Plaza?"

"No?"

Jessica smiles big, "Neither have I, so we'll both be surprised! Go pack yur shit."

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zero degrees of separation

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.002au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-25-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 16:10zulu (local 08:10pst)

"*Ma mie*, civilized or scrambled?"

"What...else...is there?" Diego playfully says to Léon.

Léon rolls his eyes at her, "*Un merdeux!*" He then turns to Jessica, "As for you, *ma beauté aux cheveux roux*, what have you?"

"Ah, civilized!" Jessica looks at Diego, "*Quelle petite merde!*"

Diego laughs at her sister with, "In a pig's eye!"

Jessica's leans in towards her, "*la oink.*"

Léon asks Angela, "What have you?"

Angela cringes, "Uncivilized?"

Léon shakes his head with a huff and looks towards Brie Kiel who asks, "What are we doing here? What am I asking for?"

Jessica says to her, "Your Christmas egg-in-a-hole."

Léon protests, "The way I make it, it'd be a proper basket!"

Brie says, "I'll go with civilized?"

Jessica adds, "That's a soft yoke."

Brie nods big, "Yea, let's go with that!"

Léon beams, "*Oui, mademoiselle!*" He then leans down over Diego and quietly says with a little laugh, "*Petit connard!*"

Diego looks up at Léon, with a huge smile, and she gives him the sweetest kiss, "Love you too!"

Having gotten everyone's order, Léon pats her shoulder and heads for the kitchen, while Connie asks Brie, "Having fun so far?"

"This place is bonkers, I'm lovin' it!" Brie smiles warmly to Connie, "Thank you for having me here."

"It's modest when compared to the stumps, but we like it."

Brie laughs and guesstures to their surroundings, "Okay, THIS is opulent, their shit is stupidly over the top."

Mini-Mon points out, "I did like Boxter and Piper's home."

Jessica nods in agreement then says to Brie, "Just wait until you see the house of the Mountain Troll."

Connie asks, "Nigel Kiel, right?"

Brie says, "Yea, he's my great-great grandfather."

"You ever meet him?"

"I'd like too, but there has to be a wedding or a funeral to get him to come out. Whichever comes first I guess."

Jessica adds, "If you like Boxter you'll love Nigel."

"Yea, you and my mom were at the star castle. She said it was fun." Brie then wonders, "I wish my mom was having fun now."

"His bastion fortification is nuts." Jessica says to Connie and, mentally reaching out, she then smiles to Brie, "And, yea, she is."

"How can she on a mission?"

"On her back?"

Brie laughs, "What, Gilroy is puttin' out? Gawd, I'm jealous!"

Connie asks, "Who's Gilroy?"

Jessica says, "David is Scott's current squeeze since my mon died. He's a throwback to the twenty-first century and probably the campiest fag you'll ever meet, but the guy is a scream."

Brie adds, "And gorgeous!"

Jessica nods, yes, "Fucker is fast too! I got my ass whooped by him. Like Boxter he's got that Tang Lang Mantis thing goin' on."

Diego jokingly laughs, "Boxter is a stud muffin! Ya'll can fight over David 'cause I'm throwin' down on Boxxxy Babe."

Jessica shakes her head, "You wouldn't."

"You're durn tootin' I would! I just have to figure out how to rub Piper out." Diego huffs a laugh as she pulls her coffee up to take a sip, "How do ya knock off a goddess, I wonder?"

Cap shrugs, "Leave it to me, I'll keep Piper occupied for ya!"

Eight, Copper and Peanuts say in unison, "We'll join you!"

Jessica shakes her head to the three of them, "Hate ta break the bad news to ya, but she's a committed pole dancer."

Cap smiles, "Sorry, guys, I'll let ya link up an' watch!"

Angela elbows Mini-Mon pointing out, "Need I remind you all that Monique here is nine?" She then points to her six-year-old self, "And I, myself, am at such an impressionable young age!"

Everyone cracks up at that, with Connie saying, "You? You're about as impressionable as a brick wall."

Angela nods, "Yea, ya got me there!"

Copper points out to her, "Another Maria-ism."

Jessica says to Angela, "For my edimifuckencation. You can add that to your ever growing list of snappy lines."

Peanuts says, "You can throw in, take a mcfucken seat, too."

With everyone laughing, Connie says, "Maria is so funny!"

Eight agrees, "The things that comes out of her mouth."

Diego throws out, "Ya'll don't have to live with it!"

Jessica can't stop chuckling, "I don't laugh anymore. I Mean I guess I'm just too used to it to laugh anymore." She looks to Angela, "What's your favorite Maria-ism?"

Angela shrugs, "So when am I right?"

"I haven't heard her say that since I was your age!"

"She was bitchin' me out so I couldn't laugh at the time. It should be her signature line." Angela thinks for a second and says, "Ah-naw, fuck that, I'll just steal it from her!"

With everyone cracking up at Angela, again, Monique's newly promoted master-chef, Ursula, comes crashing out of the kitchen and storms off looking for her.

Connie smiles, "Oooowee, looks like Ursa is a little miffed!"

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In the mansion's beautiful foyer we have Jacob and Maria approaching from the main hall as Monique, Scott and du Conde already greeting Bill and Cricket with their baby, Jade, in her arms.

du Conde, giving Cricket a little hug, asks, "*Grande dame*, how was meeting our Bill's family?"

"They are, as Bill said, a hoot and a hollar!" Cricket shivers slightly and adds, "It's colder out there than El Paso!"

Monique pulls away from a small hug with Bill and says to both of them, "My home is yours! I wish we had more time at the *quinceañera* to talk but we can make up for that this fine morning."

Bill nods, "We only have two hours and it's off to Chicago to meet her family, and I'm 'bout as skerd as a quill-less porcupine!"

Monique gently nudges du Conde out of the way to look at Jade, "*Mon trésor, tu es belle!*" She looks up at Cricket and smiles big, "*Ce coup de maître* last week, it was *magnifique!* I watched it all and, well, many-many props to a *coup* well played, *madame!*"

Cricket is humbled, "Too high of praise, but thank you."

Monique gestures to herself, "I was impressed."

du Conde looks at the gift brought by Bill and Cricket and says to Bill, "Sir, a house warming should not break the bank."

As he shows Monique an ornate bottle of Hine-550 cognac, Maria walks in saying, "Consider it a white elephant. He's been sitting on the damned thing looking for a reason to open it."

Bill adds, "I say today is, what she said, man-i-feek!"

Monique turns to Bill and, "*Monsieur*, if you were looking to make a splash then this is definitely a cannonball."

Jacob gives Cricket a little kiss and says, "Guys, Monique and Tristen are cognac snobs so... ah hell, I can't wait to try it!"

Monique and du Conde nod in agreement and, noticing Ursula stepping up to the entrance to the main hall, she says, "Something like this should be shared by all. If it pleases you we'll do a round during the gift presentation. Would you please excuse *moi!*"

As Monique heads towards Ursula, Cricket says to the rest of them, "I saw their used car lot! Jesus, I didn't know how much you can make on the used car market!"

Maria blinks with confusion, "Cars?"

Bill says, "Floaters! We still call 'em cars in the south and the mid-west regions. We also do refurbished gliders and automobiles too! Nothing like the Herrero's but there's no catchin' up to them in that market. Though, the family would love too."

du Conde tells them, "Please, come on in! If you're peckish in the slightest our breakfast buffet is open!"

Maria motions for them to follow, "Let's do this!"

Now in the main hall, Monique asks Ursula, "*Oui, madame?*"

Ursula fails to mask her underlining rage, "*Pardonnez-moi madame, mais je peux préparer la cuisine des pauvres aussi!*"

"*Excusez-moi*, no translators! With you it will be English until you learn proper *français!*"

"Your cleaning and security staff use the translators!"

"You are a chef! I hold you to a higher standard. When you can *parle-tu* nice and proper then you will have arrived."

Ursula is about to blow a gasket, "He is in my kitchen!"

Monique takes great pleasure in poking Ursula with a stick, as she has all her chefs, "*Madame*, in fine contrast to your stunning Czech beauty you are an obstinate and cantankerous beast—as all good chefs should be! Léon chose you well, but to succeed in my home you will need to better your demeanor with my staff and your underlings."

"I would prefer robots on my line."

"I prefer people."

"You would save money with bots!"

Monique huffs, and, "I have the rare privilege to hire actual people and you will not deny them the joy of that employment! Real purpose is hard to come by in this world."

"Your budget is outrageous!"

"The gift of purpose is the greatest of charities, *madame.*"

"And why the massive spread for this afternoon? For just you people? What an absolute waste!"

"I am not surprised nobody has told you! This banquet is for my staff. Christmas is for family and for giving, and for this afternoon my staff and their families *are* my family." Monique leans in with a snarl, "It is a tradition I relish and, so, when I top off your mimosa you will smile. In fact, it would please me to see that smile now."

Ursula's is so angry she can only manage to raise her mouth on one side, so Monique's eyes go wide as she demands, "Let us do the other side to even things out shall we?"

With a full-on pressure-cooker of a smile on Ursula's face, Monique starts chuckling and, "This hurts my face just to watch you!" With Ursula trying not to chuckle too, Monique adds, "Léon will receive his walking papers inside the hour."

Gritting her teeth, Ursula says, "Thank you, madame."

"Now, please, scurry along."



In the banquet room attached to the main hall everybody is gathered around beside a modest two-meter tall Christmas tree. All the family is here, along with Sasha and Alex Demitri. Each adult has a snifter in-hand with the cognac Bill and Cricket brought, as well as the children who have a shot glass with a small tasting sample of it.

Monique stands by the tree and smiles to all, "Christmas for us tends to be a family only affair. It is a rare occasion indeed when others are pulled into our small fold so let us give a *sipping* toast..." She raises her snifter to emphasize, "Because this is not for slamming! A toast to everybody here, and I pray that your Christmas wishes of today become your realities going forward this coming year."

The whole of them stir, delighted by the taste the cognac, with everyone laughing at Angela when she thumps her chest with her fist followed by a perfect Guzzler's Gin, "That was smOOOooth!" She shakes her head and goes *whew* and, "Something to look forward to when I get older. I bet I could really get into this stuff!"

Monique touches her face with a smile, "Dare not race into adulthood *mon chéri*, treasure the moments and joys of childhood."

Angela quietly points out, "Yea, I hear puberty is a blast."

"Before we present *the gift*, to follow the precedent set by *Madame* Washington last week, I would like to get a few housekeeping items out of the way first! *Monsieur Cadieux*, if you'd please."

Monique holds out a letter sized envelope towards Léon, and as he takes it she says, "*Monsieur*, you are fired. Open this, please."

As Léon opens the envelope he addresses her by her first name, "Monique, I was expecting the boot long ago."

"Well, I wasn't ready for it. Tragically, you did not make it to a pension but this pittance of a severance should allow you to achieve your greater goals. I've been keeping tabs, and I know you've been looking for financing so...a very merry Christmas!"

In the envelope Léon finds a letter saying only 'Thank you!' and along with it is a debit card and a bank deposit draft receipt showing a fund with thirty-million in cash on hand.

Léon looks up, speechless, so Monique says, "You should be able to open a restaurant or two with this, and I suspect *olá* may well be your first venture with your wife and her sister, no?"

"*Madame*, I could open twenty restaurants with these funds!" Léon tries to hand the envelope back to her, "This is too much."

"It's Monique now!" She gently pushes it back, "Léon, I have stupid amounts of money, mountains of it, and if I choose to throw it around I'd rather fund your endeavors since you are now in the family proper. Then again...you did earn it."

"Thank you, Monique."

"I have several leasing opportunities for you. One is on the Vegas Strip, and I have a prime spot open by the Chinese Theatre. It comes with a coveted patio alcohol permit." She gives him a little kiss and says, "Let's chat later, I have another pressing matter at hand."

Josav hands Monique three more envelopes as she calls out to, "Big Mac, if you please."

Mac peels away from Agatha and steps up, "Yes ma'am?"

"Thirty-nine years..." Monique's eyes start to tear up and her bottom lip quivers slightly, "I have dreaded this day. Mac, you have been my most loyal driver, personal guard, and, well, guy Friday! You have worn so many hats for me throughout the years that when you tie the knot with Agatha this summer you will not be able to remain on our general staff." She holds out the envelopes. "In these envelopes, three doors have you, I'm giving you a choice between retirement or management. One is an annuity, one is a cash out, or...if you would not mind, I need someone to manage all my Los Angeles holdings."

Mac asks, "I thought Josav was doing that for you?"

"He is being promoted and repurposed."

Mac looks back to Agatha for guidance, and everyone laughs when she says, "*Pandejo*, I'm gonna be busy, so you had better have something to fill your day or I'll kill ya!"

To Monique's delight, Mac takes the management envelope so she gives him a gleeful little kiss and a, "Thank you, fine Sir." She then motions for Josav to come up as she says, "I have but two more surprises after Josav presents...*the gift*."

For the benefit of the new faces, Josav goes, "We have rather odd traditions in this family. Adults receive gifts on birthdays but not on Christmas! Up until you're fifteen, yea, but only young children have gifts under the tree on Christmas morning. Point being..."

Angela raises her hand then points at herself, "Excuse me! Excuse me but, treasuring childhood, remember?"

Josav is about to laugh, "The morning cut off is five."

"Ooooh, okay, last night was it! Thanks babe, carry on!"

With everybody laughing, Josav smiles at her and, "For most people buying others what they want or need is a meaningful activity,

but we have...everything we could possibly want at our fingertips. For us buying *stuff* loses its meaning when you can just throw money around so, what we do is left to Monique and I. We search for a single gift for one person that will have meaning, and this makes it a rather difficult task because the item needs to define the recipient. The irony being is that everybody here dreads being the recipient of this gift."

Monique brings out an elaborately decorated gift-box as Josav finishes with, "Our victim this year has brought joy to everyone in the family just by being..." Josav turns to Maria, "Who they are."

Startled by this, Maria throws a hand out, "Oh-no! No-no-no! No-*nein-non-niet*-no fucken way, aaah...no!"

Monique sets it on the end table beside her chair and says, "*Madame*, there is no going back on this one. You are part of us so you must suffer just as everyone here has suffered in this position! Accordingly, a stiff upper lip would be in order!"

Josav points to the bow at the bottom edge of the gift-box, "Just undo the bow and pull the ribbon out from around the base. The top will come straight up as one piece."

Maria looks at the box then up at Josav and Monique and laughs at them, "Fuck you, guys!"

They start laughing as Diego speaks up, "Mother, please get on with it! I'm dying to see your face."

Maria looks at Diego with daggers in her eyes while pointing at the box, "I know you know what's in there."

"I helped pick it out!"

Maria threads her fingers back through her hair, cracks her knuckles and gets on with it. She pulls the ribbon away from around the box and lifts it straight up—only to gasp at the sight of the object.

While she looks at the thing with wide eyes, speechless, Josav says to her, "Maria, meet *Smilodon fatalis*. *Smilodon*, meet Maria."

Maria cocks her head to the side and, drinking in the fossilized skull from a sabre-tooth tiger, asks, "Is this thing really-real?"

Monique proudly informs her that, "You are well aware that we do not allow artificial, lite or fat-free in our home."

Maria is on the verge of crying, "How?"

"We donate regularly to Rancho La Brea, so this year we threw in a few trinkets we had lying around and *le voilà!* In fact, this acquisition was far easier to secure than Jacob's inch-pattern British FAL from three years ago!"

Josav laughs, "That one was a pain in the ass."

Jacob says, "I'm still gonna get back at you for that."

A face-palm, truth be told, is not considered a face-palm if the person palming has tears streaming down their face, and with Maria having difficulty fighting back the sobs, Josav sits on the arm of the chair and kisses her on the head, saying, "You know, this is going to look really super-fantastic on the credenza behind your desk."

Maria quietly blurts out, "I can't take this."

"Sorry, you don't have a choice!" He then whispers to her, "Fact is, as these gifts go, this one cost us next to nothing."

Monique leans in and adds, "So, *Perra Tigre*, enjoy!"

Maria sits up, sniffs big and, while wiping the tears from her cheeks she says, "Josav, Monique, you two are on my shit list."

After she hugs them both, then thanking everybody, Monique takes the floor, "I have but two more little surprises for...you!"

With Monique looking towards Angela, Angela goes, "What?"

Josav has brought up a bar chair and says, "You, Little Klicks, get your scrawny-little butt up on this!"

While she does, Monique motions for Scott to step up with his daughter, and as he reaches them she hands him an envelope saying, "Open this and take a gander at it if you please!"

Watching this, Angela says, "This is freakin' me out, guys."

With her hands clutched together, Monique shrugs, "There is no easy way of doing this so let's rip the band-aid off, shall we?"

Angela throws out, "Depends on who's wearin' the band-aid!"

Monique gives Angela a warm smile as Scott looks up from the genetic test report going, "No way. Monique, is this true?"

"Yes...father, it appears that anything involving the Nefer Key renders the degrees of separation to two or maybe one?" She points up and adds, "When I was little my mother told me my father's name was Abeeku. He came to *till her garden* then scamper off and I was never to meet him, or so I thought until October last."

Scott looks at her and says, "At the party."

"When Nicole revealed what your original name was it didn't take much brain power to put those odd puzzle pieces together. One has to admit as a praenomen it is not common."

Angela raises a hand, "Ooh-ooh-ooh, pick me! Pick me!"

"Oui, mon chéri?"

Angela gives an insane little giggle then, "Let me take a stab at getting this straight, okay?" She points at herself then at Monique, "My daddy happens to be...your daddy too! That about cut it?"

Monique nods, "That about cuts it, correct."

"So, this makes you my..." Desperately trying to contain her laughter, Angela bites her fist then throws her hand out towards Monique laughing, "Chuck, I would like to try the category, SIBLINGS, for a thousand!"

Monique is about to crack up, saying, "*Oui*, your sister!"

Angela points up at her father and laughs, "Just to see his face, right now, makes this the best Christmas evah!" She looks at all the other shocked faces and shrugs, "Hey, nobody is more surprised than I am now! I got me a sister-sister!" She looks at Josav and asks, "So, let me guess, this makes me your what?"

"Aunt. You're my great-grandaunt."

Angela snorts, "This is just getting better and better!"

With Carlos escorting Mikhail Popov and Brittney in from the foyer, Monique says, "We must cut this short, but we can chat about it later today. For now let's keep this news amongst us."

Finally getting a grip, Scott says, "Yea, we need to talk."

With Monique putting her finger to her lips, Angela laughs, "Don't know what we need to talk about but sure! Mum's the word!"

Monique looks to Jacob and says, "Jacob, when we're done, Sasha wants to chat with you and Alex in the Oubliette." She steps over to the four clones and tells them, "*Cinquante deux*, Maria and Bill would like to speak to you ladies in the Story Board room after this."

She motions for Carlos to bring the new guests in, and when Angela sees them she shouts, "Brittney!"

01100011-0110101-01110000-01100011-01100001-01101011-01100101

Next to the Oubliette, the Story Board workroom is its polar opposite in style and function. Where the room next door is strictly a conference room this place is three times the size and tech-decked out with screens from floor to ceiling on all four walls. With its tables and chairs in chaotic disarray, the workroom's purpose is for story boarding and planning, mapping, modeling and viewing dailies.

Where anyone can just walk into the Oubliette, this room is always on lock-down so Josav had to let them in.

As the wood-clad security door clanks shut, Maria tells them, "Don't sit, this will only take a minute."

Bill looks at Maria and Jessica asking, "Ya'll sure about this?" With them both nodding yes, he goes, "Okay, count me in."

Maria faces off with Eight, Copper, Cap and Peanuts, asking, "Is everybody listening? Do I have all of your undivided attention?"

Peanuts laughs, "You do now!"

"You need to know only one thing about what I'm gonna say." She thumbs over at Jessica and, "Her vote was the only vote that counted. We wouldn't be standing here-now if she said no."

Eight shrugs, asking, "No, to what?"

Maria looks towards Bill and says, "Do it."

Bill closes his eyes, links into their tacnet and, pulling up the main command and control console queue, he mumbles unintelligibly to himself, "Com-n-con queue... five-two-five auto-extract... standby... command override passcode... laaa-te-daaa, aaaaand execute?"

With Bills eyes now on Maria, she nods yes, so he returns the nod, launches the transfer command and, "Okay ya'll, it's done!"

Maria informs them that, "Cupcake, cupcake five-two-five to be exact, has been disabled. It is now on standby mode...indefinitely."

Copper asks, "What does this mean for us exactly?"

"Merry Christmas, you're off the leash."

As they digest this unexpected surprise, Bill clarifies things for them, "This doesn't change things much, it's just that the kill-switch utility will not autorun. It's on permanent standby. We can't delete the thing 'cause the failsafe mechanisms designed into it prevents that but, now, someone would have to intentionally launch it."

Maria adds, "Your lives remain business as usual, except now you have the freedom of movement on and off Sapphire. Destinations and common carriers will need to be cleared by us, just keep us in the loop as to your accommodations. We can and will be tracking you."

Copper asks, "Will there be escorts?"

"Just like the rest of us, until further notice, you will need to be accompanied by ghost droids, but *we all* have to have them for the duration of the war. Yea, that sucks but that's the way it's gonna be."

Eight wonders, "Who has access?"

"Can't tell ya that, but you already know who is at the dead end of the do-or-die pinging sequence."

They all know Jacob would pull that trigger, so Jessica makes a point to add, "If it comes to that you had better chummy up to my father, and quick like a bunny."

Just then, from out of nowhere, appears Seth.

Seth has this weird ability to vanish in plain sight. He's not invisible per se but he made it so that Josav and the clones did not see him follow them into the Story Board room—under their noses. Jessica and Maria could see him there, but the others were oblivious until now.

The clones are shocked as Seth slithers out from between Jessica and Maria, and quietly say to them, "Don't...fuck...up."

"We all on the same page?" Maria asks of the four, and with them nodding yes, she spins her hands around for them to come to her for a hug, "How about that Christmas huddle!"

01001000-0110111-01110100-01000100-01010001

It may be 10:17pst on the west coast of the United States, but the Annex runs on zulu time. Because Jacob is in command of the five react teams, he gets all the interesting nuggets of raw intel thrown at him way before anybody else and that includes Maria.

It was 18:15zulu when they got the first report from Taiji and it still took thirty seconds for his people to digest the info and forward the report on to him. Over the last minute and a half, Jacob has been running around looking for Maria to share the love with her!

Rancho Ribot is intelligently laid out and doesn't seem that big until you happen to be looking for someone. When you are in a hurry it becomes a serpentine-catacomb of *where the fuck are you?*

Navigating from the game room, into the kitchen, around the stairs, through the foyer extension, and into the main hall, Jacob is stopped in his tracks entering the banquet room—where he finds an impromptu coffee klatch consisting of Maria, Sasha, Monique, Cricket and Glados with baby Jade in her arms.

Jacob's brain seizes up by the sight of the five women, all of whom he has been—or is currently intimate with, and he can only stare straight ahead like a deer in the headlights because when they look up at him, staring at them, they start laughing hysterically.

In an unintentionally-comedic stroke, Jacob slinks backwards in reverse out of the room, stops and says to himself, "Goddamn it!"

Leaning through the doorway, they all start laughing again as he points to Maria, "Can I see you for just a sec?"

Giggling as they wave to him, he cringes and waves back.

Maria walks past him saying, "I'll give ya a minute, dude."

Now in the main hall, Jacob asks, "Stories?"

"Ya think?" Maria then acts-out one of their choice early-on engagements by saying, "Your chest, it's bigger than mine!" Then the Jacob hand-puppet, "*But, hon, yours are more fun!*" — "Okay, ya got me there." — "*Yea, but mine are firm and perky!*" She then mimics the back-hand that followed with, "And ka-pow!"

They both start cracking up with Jacob pointing to the banquet hall, "THAT is a dangerous room for me to be in!"

"No shit, Sherlock!" Collecting themselves, Maria asks the pressing question, "Any word on Missile-Tow yet? It launch on time?"

"Yup, they're raiding the stashes and shit. Word is, Homer is clueless and half-steppin' it. It'll take maybe an hour...hour and a half for them to start making contact."

"Giáp swings some big *cajones*." Maria nods then asks him, "The Oubliette live up to its name?"

"Ya think?" They both laugh so he adds, "I was wondering why I had this freakishly weird affinity for Copper, of all people! The whole time those were not dreams."

"Are you gonna be okay with this?"

"Alex *is* me, what am I supposed to say, no?" Maria shrugs so Jacob throws out, "Madame Fap-Damage! I can't believe I've been shagging Claudia Willoughby this whole time?"

"Lucky you!"

Jacob nods and shrugs, "I ain't gonna stop."

"Just as well, enjoy the ride!" Maria then thinks about it and, "Monique was wrong." And again, the hand-puppet, "*About what?*" With Jacob chuckling at that, Maria simply says, "When it comes to the little gray Daleks, if you think about it long enough, with them it's more like zero degrees of separation."

"No shit." Jacob is pointing up towards a sprig of mistletoe he just notice hanging above them, "You're gonna hav'ta put out now!"

Maria rolls her eyes, "She's got that shit hanging in every room! I've been dodging it like crazy when you're around."

Jacob gestures to himself, "So?"

Maria smiles, reaches up and gives him a sweet little kiss, "Merry Christmas, chuckle-fuck."

He nods, "Yea...but this is gonna be a fucked up New Year."

"No argument there!" Looking up at Jacob, she pats his chest saying, "When it's your time to tee up, well, you know what we talked about...endlessly. I got ta know you're on board."

"I'm on board."

"We want them strapped before you mop up the MOP!"

"I get it, I see the logic."

Maria then wonders, "I'm still tryin' to wrap my brain around what you're gonna to do after the third."

Jacob gives a wicked little smirk, "They've been conducting their shit 2D like it was the Pacific Theater. We're gonna shake it up! You know, fuck 'em in the ass and steel their purse."

"Fair warning...it's gonna change everything."

000001001100

77

slay ride

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
TIME: 19:23zulu (local 19:23act)

Here on Taiji things are simple because there was no klaxon, no alert or alarm, nor was there some stealthy Secret Sam go-code to watch for. Everybody here knows how to tell the time and when time came, they quietly gave their loved one's a kiss goodbye and made tracks for where they needed to be with just the clothes on their back.

And jumping-off at 18:00 they wouldn't even need those.

The citizen soldiers for the five houses didn't lift a finger when the forces of the Co-op landed last October. They sat it out, they let the Annex fend for themselves, which surprised a lot of people but the field commanders for the five houses said it was because they had a bitter case-of-the-ass for being sold-out to the PADF.

That was what they said, and it is believable considering we are talking about Taiji, but off-world some believe it was because the Annex had turned tail in the face of superior forces so why bother dying for a lost cause? Then again, knowing all the players here, that second explanation was not as believable as the first, but now there is a small faction who are gut-positive that the apparent apathy from the locals was simply a devious ruse.

Before the CDF could concoct and execute a plan to pursue options to counter that third possibility, by way of targeted arrests, interrogations and raids, because that's how they rock, they get tossed a cooked grenade!

The ghost droids and PacMan drones the Annex dropped off five weeks ago has been more than a one-off speed bump in the CDF's plans, but as it turned out it was still just a speed bump—one that brought everything to a crawl and that was the idea. The problem here for the CDF is that the population on Taiji is armed to the teeth so how does one go about pulling their military grade teeth and maybe a

few of the non-issued weapons without being obvious about it?

The best way to describe the people of Taiji is to take the twenty-first century United States, specifically the hyper nationalistic late-century US and not the pussified millennial roll-over US, throw it in a bowl, toss in ancient Sparta and mix well. Add to that about thirty firearms per household, then to top it all off you liberally spritz the zest of a metric fuck-ton of ammo and you get Taiji.

With a population of over twenty-seven million the people of Taiji to a man, woman and children included, are polite, decent, civil, morally upstanding, kind, humble to a fricken fault—and yet always up for an honest fight. If an honest fight is not to be had then they'll settle for a dirty one in its stead. So how does one go about pacifying people like these? *Id est*, how do you go about disarming them?

You don't, you can't, but maybe you can try politely?

The five houses, that being Anzac, Kyiv, Prague, Maple and Perth, have excellent recordkeeping so they knew what PADF rail-tech was issued to who, and from which house, but what surprised the CDF was that, when asked, these weapons were turned in to them without a peep or a care in the world. Not one of the quarter million railguns were held back and this threw a wrench in the Co-op's original action plan to kick in doors. See, the issued weapons are the proverbial drop in the bucket when compared to what the citizens hold privately, and there are absolutely no records of any kind for those.

Now, on the bright side for the CDF, all of those weapons are firearms, some of them centuries old, not railgun tech, so the urgency to "pacify" the citizens kind of got pushed to the back burner while their troops took care of the SA droids and PacMan drones that got dropped in their lap. What they didn't realize while chasing after the bots was that almost all of the citizens owns a fifty-cal or two so, with that in mind, who here needs a railgun exactly?

The people of Taiji happen to be the "packinist" people of the frontier but, with the CDF patrolling their streets the people stopped carrying side arms altogether. What they gave these invading troops were genuine smiles and cheerful waves—not the slightest provocation or justification to start bustin' down doors.

Today, Christmas Day of all days, at 18:00zulu that didn't matter anymore when a text went to all of the Co-op commanders, and the press, with an attachment listing the declared ROEs by the liberty loving people of Taiji. Scratching their heads by the audacity of this, the CDF did not know what to make of it, nor did they know how to respond until shortly after 19:19zulu.

Five CDF companies were mowed down while on patrol.

With Nyx starting to sweep across the Aureole Ocean, ringing in the next four weeks of massive storms, like clockwork, for some reason the CDF thought it would be a stellar idea to start running regular patrols outside of the five capital cities of the five houses where they believe they have control. Okay, so the patrols were supposed to be a show of force, or maybe they were sightseeing just for giggles? Who the hell knows but, whatever the reason, thanks to Mother Nature and terrible visibility it was a breeze for Giáp's people to get around unseen and coordinate their attacks.

See, the CDF, like many military organizations, have very predictable behaviors based upon doctrine imposed on their troops and command structure that borders on micromanagement mutherfuckery. Giáp, like the Steel Annex, have adopted the United States' view of military doctrine thinking that it's probably a good idea to establish a doctrine, detailed and complete, but their unwritten rule is to bend, flex and adapt inasmuch that in the real world—doctrine has a half-life of about 15 minutes in the field after your plans start to unravel or when the bullets start to fly. Whichever comes first!

The cookie-cutter company level mech-lite patrol, fifty-clicks outside of the City of Most, here in the House of Prague, was dead meat the second they rolled out of Most to take in the sites. They have an APC leading five open top lorries loaded with troops in combat field kit, miserable from the wind and the rain, with only one Revenant tank following as anchor. According to doctrine they have only one squad of troops in ACE suits lazily buzzing around their train.

Oh yea, it is those guys who catch the bullets first...

From an L-shaped ambush position, trigger time was only ten seconds. The fifties open up on the troops in ACE suits first and drop all nine of them within a second of opening fire. A micronuke grenade with a 500kg yield splits the APC open like a box of cheerios gutted by a chain saw. The Raven, the Revenant tank that is, takes one of the newly updated micropede missiles. The little thing arcs up and slams down on top of it, cracking the tank wide open with a 1,000kg blast. It bounces off the deck, spirals into the air, and lands upside down where a 500kg grenade hits the soft underbelly for good measure.

The troops in the lorries tried to jump down but they were shredded by railgun fire from the BR1 armed guerrillas. Most of the fire went low, as Giáp asked of them, but some of the strings of bolts went high, into their faces, which made a mess of things.

Seventy of the troops from the lorries were still alive so half of Giáp's people set about treating them all with trauma compound, tourniquets and pressure bandages while the rest start snatching up the free StG-810 railguns and bandoliers of ammo.

As General Giáp strolls through the killing zone with his exec and a ghost droid, surrounded by a squad of guards, he is a little annoyed because the mess he sees splattered before him is exactly the same mess reported at the other four skirmishes, so he says with a shake of the head, "Well, this is a cock up for sure."

The droid is being operated by Maggie Prather, who asks him, "Why, Sir? Looks textbook to me."

"Damned blue-balls! Too many head shots." He turns to his exec, "Colonel, please remind all our people that, right now, we need to pull our fire to the lower thorax or the extremities. We want the count of traumatic injuries to tally up, not the dead."

The exec says, "Yes, sir."

"Be assured the wanton killing will come soon enough." He then turns and smiles at the droid, "And that'll be about the time you people join us. Sound about right, Mr. Gudici?"

Anthony Gudici is linked up with the droid from the Ice Mesa, so through crackling static he asks, ["Think it will go south that fast?"]

"Ooooh, most assuredly, me matey!"

Maggie asks, "That your gut speekin', Sir?"

"Well, Maggie, since we last chat each other up, we now know they want to move on Orion and think they may have mistakenly committed too much to the Pleiades. They only 'ave sixteen divisions planet-side, so the short of it is—that won't make due." Giáp grins big, "I think we may 'ave bit 'em in the arse at the right-proper time!"

Gudici says, ["I'm inclined to agree, General."]

Looking at the gutted APC he grimly thinks to himself, "Sad to say, before this ends, most these knotty cunts won't be making it to Rissolle for Two-Up." With Maggie in her ghost droid nodding in agreement, Giáp turns to her, "Mr. Gudici, before we're off to the next tussle would you be kind enough to relay a message to Mr. Graves when you get a quiet minute aside?"

01001101-01000101-00110010-00110110-00110110-00111000-00110001

It's nearly 11:30pst and Cricket and Bill are running late. With Scott and Monique in the foyer, Jacob, Bill and du Conde are outside loading their glider into a HWG99 so they can get to Chicago inside the next half an hour, and shave off the extra hour it would take at over Mach 1.5 in the glider.

Scott, with Jade yawning in his arms, looks at her and says with one of his rare smiles, "Gawd, this never gets old."

Monique motions for Scott to give Jade up, "I do apologize, Scott, but I must get my...fix before they're off."

Scott hands her over with a snort of a laugh, "Had I a choice, I'd 'ave stayed with Adele and learn you some manners."

"*Père trop tard!*" Monique smiles to Scott, then suggests, "Just say the word and Adele will be here for New Year's Eve!"

"You do look like her."

"Many more than I can count think we are sisters, and she is still considered a desirable woman for a hundred and twelve."

"For me, no, but..." Scott is visibly torn then says, "You know, if she's still fun like she was, I think she and Angela would hit it off."

Monique blinks with surprise and says, "*Oui!* I will see to it."

Scott adds, "Yea, and it would be nice to see her."

From the Main Hall steps in Maria, Jessica, Cricket and Glados with Cricket saying to Monique, "Thank you for having us, Monique."

Monique smiles, "*Madame*, thank you for being had!"

du Conde has stepped in from the outside and hugs Cricket saying, "Your chariot awaits, *Grande dame*."

Cricket whispers to him, "It's Cricket."

He whispers back, "Need I remind you of your station?"

Cricket taunts, "Need I remind you who you work for, Abel?"

du Conde thinks with pursed lips, then chuckles, "I think you have me painted into a corner...Cricket!"

With a smile she gives du Conde a little kiss as Bill walks in saying to her, "We 'as gots ta go, hon!"

"So sad." Monique gives a little frown as she hands Jade to Cricket, then adds, "You three must come again soon. I insist!"

With everyone giving their goodbyes, Jacob comes in from outside while he has Gudici, from Taiji, linked into him through the tacnet saying through the static, ["Yea, FM, that is a no-shit!"]

Jacob gives a little laugh, "Seriously, send them to me! How are the Gurkha's doing?"

["Sitting around like it were just another day."]

Jacob shakes his head, "Well, that is to be expected."

["CDM, Thapa, asked Giáp to save some Homer for them."]

"The Sergeant-Major, he has the pulse of your people."

["And they are the nicest, most polite little people."]

"Yea, with their killer rep it's hard to believe."

["Okay, FM, I'll report in, in a few hours with the latest."]

Jacob nods, "Okay, out." He turns to everybody who is now looking at him waiting for what he has to say. He looks at Monique and, realizing it wouldn't matter, says openly, "That was Gudici on the line. I take it you wanna know what's goin' on, on Taiji?"

Bill nods, "Aaah, yea. Love to hear before we go!"

Monique asks, "Would you like me to step away?"

Jacob shakes his head, "Naw, stay put. You'll hear it soon enough. First off, Missile Tow is on schedule. All five of the Co-op patrols got whacked, one-hundred percent casualties with KIA hovering at sixty percent. They've already blown up forty-five CDF support facilities outside the five capital cities, and they are running from OP to OP in the field and are blowing them all to hell. So far they've trashed eighty of 'em and they have about another two-hundred to go."

Scott asks, "How's the weather?"

"Like they expected, it's shit! The clouds are socked in from about a hundred to a hundred and thirty meters. Visibility on the deck is down to a kilometer then drops to as low as eighty meters when it's raining or foggy...which it is when it's not raining! What we were bankin' on, their air power being grounded, it looks like that panned out and they are keeping it on the ground. The reports from the five houses say the CDF is preppin' their armor to roll out."

Maria shakes her head, "Idiots."

Curiously, Monique asks, "Would they not enjoy the same cover of terrible weather?"

Maria shrugs, "Ya'd think so, but no. The houses train in it, but the people there also party, golf and fuck in their shit climate, and it's four out of every twelve weeks. Where the Co-op has to navigate by braille the locals know every hill, dale, rock and tree stump by rote memory."

Scott nods, yes, "Also, on Taiji, infrared goes into the shitter."

Jacob points out, "Yea, but Giáp will use thermal for bait."

Bill asks, "How'er the micropedes working for 'em?"

Jacob nods, "One shot, as advertised."

Maria laughs, "I got a C-note sayin' they'll start off by using armor as the spearhead. Any takers?"

Bill laughs, "That's a sucker bet, there boss."

Scott throws out, "Gimme two to one an' I'll take it!"

Maria nods, "Okay, two C's it is."

Scott looks to Monique, "It would be smart for them to stay put and hunker down the best they can until the weather improves, but then Giáp would bring the fight to them."

Maria sighs, "The CDF will not want to start a fight from their fallback position. They'll be forced to come out and expand their perimeter but without air..." She laughs, "Damn!"

Scott nods, "But Giáp will let 'em come out to play."

Bill laughs, "And everybody gets the micropede!"

Jacob points to Bill, "Two things before you go. They are asking for an extra bot drop over the Kraj in Prague, Oblast in Kyiv, and in Anzac they want double that outside of Tareyton Meadows."

Bills says, "No prob, but we'll go ahead and prep two more drops of 'em just in case. For the third, right?"

"Noon, sharp."

Maria asks, "He still thinks it's gonna be Tareyton?"

Jacob laughs, "As he told Nelson, if he can't get them to come with a lure, he'll send 'im an invite by snail mail. As it is, the weather from the Mesa is shit so his armor is now three days out, but he was gonna keep it hid till after the first anyway." Looking at Monique he says, "We have a regiment dug in there waiting for the third, and we have eight more set aside in first reserve."

Maria nods, "All Gurkas...they wanted this fight, and being smaller than us that holds a huge advantage on that terrain."

Bill thinks quietly to himself, "What I'd give to be Gudici right now, especially leading those little fuckers. Planning sucks toads."

Maria apologizes with a shrug, "Sorry, dude."

Jacob points up into the air for a second, "Oh, the second item, Giáp's people, from target to target, are singing *sleigh ride*, but instead of a sleigh you ride..." he makes a slashing motion across his throat, "It's *slay ride* as in s-l-a-y!"

With everybody laughing, Cricket says, "As only Taiji can."

Jacob says, "He's sending me the lyrics for everybody."

Monique wonders, "I've heard stories of mythical proportions about the people of Taiji, are any of them true?"

Maria fields this one, "They're like anybody else. Pound for pound they are just like us, just as good, but they got this strange penchant for fighting. *Exempli gratia*, their greatest, most celebrated cage-fighter ever, he never won an A-string bout. Try as he might, training his ass off, he was just a smidge too slow for the cage. Jake and I were at his thirtieth and last fight and everybody wanted him to win, even the guy he was gonna fight wanted him to win, but..." Her eyes start to tear up, "He held his own at first but we ended up watching him get stomped into the ground."

Jacob, feeling Maria fighting back her emotions, picks up the story for her, "What followed next was absolutely amazing because the people..." Now with the exact same visceral memories, Jacob takes a second to compose himself, "The people scraped his broken and bloody body off the mat, and they hoisted him up on their shoulders as their champion. See, for Taiji it's not winning that matters it's, as they say, givin' it a bloody good go and not shyin' away from a blue."

Maria sniffs and gives a little laugh, "Kevin Vossler, from the House of Kyiv, the boy can't go anywhere on Taiji without people buying him drinks or asking to have a pic with him. Used to be our battalion exec but now he's a retread working for us in the Spike..." She laughs again, "And I get to put up with his shit every day!"

"Yep, and we love 'im for it." Jacob thumbs towards Maria, "Giving her shit, that is."

Maria says to Bill and Cricket, "You need to get it on the hump, guys! They're waitin' for ya."

000001001101

LCTN: BETELGEUSE (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271 (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-30-MONDAY
TIME: 10:15zulu

Long ago, the five Battle Stations of the Annex were created for a previous world. A simpler time where the old displacement drive systems dragged incrementally to get up to speed, and to spool for a jump took hours. Everything then ran in slow-mo and a huge station, bristling with particle, plasma and rotary cannons, with a shaker full of missiles, would have been a frightening thing to square off with.

The Annex was going to create a new Battle Platform series, double up the complement, and cut the number back to maybe ten at most. The idea was to rely on the stations to taxi the platforms to the fight, but in their wildest-n-wackiest of dreams nobody could anticipate how crazy-fast things were going to get a half-century later.

Pepperidge Farm remembers, as they say, and when people look up where that idiomatic phraseology came from—the mocking irony is not lost to them. What seemed logical and necessary then is now a quaint strategic fantasia relegated to retro scifi.

Or specifically, the alternate history genre.

As with the platforms the stations have also been upgraded, and even though they move pretty damned quick nowadays, they are not quick enough. They can take on two or three cruisers alone but past that it'd be death by a thousand cuts.

They were never to see their full potential, as envisioned back when they were first designed and built, but the truly invaluable benefit to the Annex is the mobility they offer and allowing them to refrain from relying on immobile planet-side bases. That is, nothing static that could be bombed from above. These five stations can sneak around from secret place to dark recess or hidey-hole unseen, and have become priceless to the Annex for both their stealth and the

mysteries surrounding them.

Everybody in the military intelligence community knows those things are out there, but nobody outside the Annex has seen one. Mention that there is an SA Battle Station somewhere and the Co-op mission planners will kind of avoid that region like the plague.

In contrast to 52, the best-kept secret everyone knows about, nobody in key military circles speaks of the stations except to call them an old wives tale or urban legend, and this is to keep the public and their political leadership in the dark. None of them want some budget crushing capital asset that would be strategically debilitating if it were lost. The Co-op finally has control of the Pleiades and even now, try as they might, they have failed to find the five *known* operational bases of the Steel Annex—which means one of two things. Either those bases are far outside of the Pleiades or those stations do exist. Then again, the question comes to mind as to why the Annex hasn't "used" the stations but, then again yet again, not using them may be the whole point. To actually use them in combat would reveal their existence as well as their shortcomings.

Finding Cocytus has only confused the intel community more.

Just recently, the SA quietly ran a new series of sims with updated modeling, and the results were shocking. They learned that if you are going to take a station on and fight at arms-distance you'll get your ass handed back to you because that works to its strengths. That being the Carrie Nation and the Mata Hari because those two are a tad smaller and nimble enough to put up a decent defense. It's the freakishly huge Lizzie Bordon, Annie Oakley and May West who now have standing orders to run like the wind and not look back because, for them, the new WECG cruisers are just too damned fast.

Last June, anticipating the Co-op zeroing in on Cocytus, the Carrie Nation moved from circling the planet, at a 93au orbit around Betelgeuse, further out to a 125au orbit—just close enough to keep an eye on things even though what they see takes 4:47 hours to see it. When the BDF recon and survey teams went charging past, bouncing from system to system looking for them, the station moved to the trailing orbital quadrant putting 158au and 22:45 hours between them and Cocytus. The added delay, now by almost a day, to see what's happening with one's eyes is challenging because with the nebula the best you can see outside of the infrared scale is just a fuzzy blob.

Here is where the wormtrac array, something that the SA has been sitting on for over ten years, comes to excite the senses because anything that dashes or jumps in or out of the area they can see inside a picosecond. Actually, it only takes an attosecond for the information to get to the wormtrac array but that added time is for processing it.

With the wormtrac the Carrie Nation can tell which direction a ship is coming from or going to by more than fifty lightyears, so for the CN's crew here to shout *woo-fuckin-hoo* is about right on!

Last week, anticipating today's business, the Carrie Nation moved to the other side of Betelgeuse, opposite Cocytus, and putting 226au, 31:57 hours, the star, it's corona, and the bulk of the nebula between them for obvious reasons. Totally blind from this vantage point with every sensor but the wormtrac—and with it they can see the star, what's going on in the star, and everything behind it in real time.

Last October there were daily jumps in and out of the system, but now the jumps are one ship that comes in every Monday that leaves the following day, indicating that these are weekly supply runs for their troops surveying the base. The most recent jump to Cocytus was two hours ago, so they'll leave in about 22 hours.

Clueless that they will never return.

01001011-01110010-01000001-01000111-01001100-01000101

Deep in the dome side of the Carrie Nation, we have Maria, Mooch, Snoopy, the station commander Nancy Yoon, and the station's SYLN-b who is an enchantingly beautiful and shockingly young looking brunette named Carrie, whose biological body was hatched alongside Artyom's body just over ten months ago. They are all sitting beside a control console manned by Mooch, and below them is a transparent floor that looks into the station's Axial Gun sump tank—a cylindrical cavity that's all of 400 meters wide by 400 meters deep with a 60 meter wide cylinder core that holds the "gun" component of the gun.

The gun has a vacuum receiver with two feeding ports that are mounted up near the transparent floor of the control room. This is followed by a long rail-accelerator called originally enough the barrel. The barrel leads up to a massive magnetic variable aperture called the choke. From the choke you have a muzzle that's all of 45 meters across on the outside of the station smack dab in the middle of the dome side. The weapon has absolutely no moving parts except for two tumbler-locks and a big red button used to initiate the fire sequence. Everything else is electronic and automated, and run by Carrie herself.

The weapon here was originally a plasma pulse gun. In that configuration, when the sump was full of plasma and ready to fire, the light coming through the floor would have been excruciatingly bright so the floor would darken to save the eyes of the operators as well as the paint on the walls and not trip the fire suppression system.

Where plasma was very visible in the sump, much like the interior of a fusion reactor, here there is absolutely nothing to see.

Inside the cylindrical sump the lights are on, but to the observer it looks like shadowy empty space with absolutely no activity.

Looking at the control monitor and you'll see a different story.

They turned the keys and launched the spooling sequence a half-hour ago and they are just over a thousand grams of quantum particles spiraling around in the sump, and all controlled by magnetic fields. By the time they reach the firing part of the sequence, fifteen minutes from now, they will have 1,441 grams ready to go.

The SYLN-b, Carrie, is sitting quietly with them as her larger mainframe-self announces to the ship's crew over the public address system, "The targeting calibration is complete. We are on schedule. Please continue to remain stationary throughout the firing sequence that will begin in fifteen minutes. Thank you."

Maria is looking through the floor into what appears to be an empty sump and starts chuckling to herself, so Nancy asks, "What?"

Maria shakes her head while pointing at the floor, "It just hit me, if this were a movie—below us the sump would be a spinning light show of God-damned fireworks goin' off! In the industry, it's what they call giving a root-canal."

Nancy goes, "Root-canal?"

Everybody looks at Maria strangely, so she says, "I know Carlos Sanchez, okay? The movie guy? It's what he describes giving an audience something that's visually painfully-intense."

Snoopy asks, "Cool enough, but what does it mean?"

Nancy adds, "Yea, where did that come from?"

Maria points to Carrie who says, "It's a dental procedure from way back that called for the excavation of nerves and blood supply of a tooth followed by capping. The last known instance of this technique being performed was over a-hundred and ninety years ago."

Maria nods towards Carrie, saying, "What she said!"

Nancy shudders at the thought, so Snoopy's feathers ruffle as he laughs at her saying, "Sounds like fun, hu?"

Nancy says, "I actually had a filling one time, 'till I could get my tooth fixed. That was intense enough for me."

"Hey!" Mooch turns and asks Maria, "I was wondering, why the extra two and a quarter tons of cargo this morning?"

Maria gets up and walks to the door while saying, "About that, let me ask you, does that little extra weight matter?"

"Calibrating here! It depends on where it's goin'?"

Maria has pulled a chest up on the counter and cracks it open, "I'm surprised you two didn't smell this."

Mooch thumbs towards the airlocks to the sump, "Everything in here smells like burnt metal, like the airlocks."

Inside the chest are two trays of KCMoe's brisket and tri-tips, along with three, one-pound single serving containers. One with pulled pork Maria hands to Nancy, and one with shredded chicken she hands to Carrie while saying, "I sprung for the crew walkin' on the flight deck a little snack while they waited. I hope that didn't fuck things up?"

Mooch sort of cringes as he thinks about it, "Sorta, not really but, because we are doing an actual burn, this walking thingy is the only really precise way of torqueing the station."

Carrie gives a little chirp of a laugh as she takes a bite of chicken, "As inelegant as this procedure is, you are correct." She looks at Mooch and says, "Doing nothing is okay, but we are trying to be precise here. On a first run through I can calculate six stupid-simple solution's to this so give it a whirl, Mooch."

With Maria handing tri-tips to Mooch, and mouthing the word *sorry* to him, then Snoopy the brisket, Mooch thinks about it and, "Okay, stupid simple, after the first fifty-second leg into the walk I'd hold back a mix of twenty-eight men and women. I want their mass in there to initiate the rotation but, on the last leg, I wanna walk 'em back to help retard the English we were worried about at the end."

With pursed lips Carrie hangs on her response, then says to him, "Make that seven stupid-simple solutions. Go with that."

Snoopy high-fives Mooch, laughing, "You got her again!"

With everyone trying not to laugh, and failing, Carrie looks at him and says with a smile, "Stupid-simple wins again!"

Mooch looks at her and laughs, "Asshole!"

Carrie laughs then says, "Ten minutes to the window."

After everyone takes a couple of bites of their food, Maria poking around in her single serving container of brisket, asks Carrie, "How are you with the new bod?"

After a few chews, Carrie says, "It's challenging. It's a blast being alive and all, but Glados was right! The demands this body puts on me makes it difficult but I have a small cadre of...well, helpers to get me over the hump."

Snoopy rolls his eyes, "Helpers? You mean a harem."

Carrie smiles, "You make it seem so...carnal."

Snoopy huffs big, then says, "D'ur, and it's not like we haven't offered a helping hand!"

Carrie blinks, "Helping hand?"

Nancy speaks up, "You guys are pervs!"

Mooch throws out, "No, wee'z guy'z are popular!"

Nancy looks to Maria and starts laughing, "Please, when this is over, please get 'em off my station!"

Maria rolls her eyes saying, "Maybe I don't want to hear this?"

Nancy points out, "These two are always at the free-for-all!"

Snoopy says, "Yea, it's free—for all!"

Mooch laughs, "Isn't that the idea?"

Maria shakes her head in disbelief, "So, let me guess, it's true. All that dino-fetish shit I heard about *is* a thang."

Snoopy says with a big laugh, "Like, double-d'ur! We got 'em lined up! We can go, an' go, an' go like the Timex Bunny!"

Mooch adds, "We got perma-wood and our Xhemal babes don't put out like you human babes do!"

Maria's shoulders drop, shaking her head, then says to Nancy, "Tell ya what, Nance, I'll do ya one better. How about you come to planning and I get someone else to deal with their shit?"

"Yes, thank you!" Nancy pumps her fist in the air, then asks, "Who's the poor dumb slob you're gonna throw in here?"

"Someone who wouldn't be bored like I was, and you are?"

Nancy blinks, realizing, "She's gonna hate your guts!"

"I need Sandoval to focus on her second job."

Carrie, accusingly says to Maria, "So, you're gonna leave me to fend for myself with these two rabid sex-crazed pigeons?"

Snoopy smiles, "You make it sound so...unnatural."

Carrie looks at him while pointing to her tight lips, shaking her head and not saying anything, but Nancy says, "Do I get to comment?"

Mooch says to her, "Since you are on your way out, no!"

Snoopy asks Carrie, "That one guy you are with a lot, Justin? Isn't he kinda short and shit?"

Carrie gestures to her body saying, "Tiny here! Everything is tiny! That guy is the right size and takes his sweet time so, trust me, I'm good with what I got! I'll stick with what I got, 'kay?"

Mooch laughs, "An' what's with all the chicks?"

Carrie smiles, "The boys are for kicks and those are for cuddling." She then gestures to Maria, "But, just so you know, all of us SYLN's are jealous of Glados because we can't replicate what she has and, also of you, for what you had."

Maria looks to Nancy, "Do I really wanna hear this?"

"I have a pressing question that has to be framed properly. You know that we SYLN have access to everything so, from all the files we have ran we see that, like you, her encounters with him are fun and physically rewarding however, yours were also at the extremes of hilarity and, surprisingly enough, visceral animosity—especially when there was no causative behavior or preceding event to induce it."

Nancy interjects with a laugh, "He was breathing."

Maria thumbs towards Nancy, "What she said."

Carrie shrugs, "I'm sorry, I do not understand."

Maria sighs with a smile, "Self-preservation, Carrie."

Carrie blinks, "Elaborate please."

"Sometimes it's better to walk away than to lose something." Maria leans in, "I hope to God you never know what that feels like."

Nancy adds, "Girl, given enough time you'll understand."

Carrie raises her eyebrows, "Accepting loss is part of life."

"And sometimes you can't live with that so, as an object lesson for you guys, Glados is your canary in the coalmine! She is in love with him so if he wonders off or dies...it will crush her."

"We'll be there for her, but what if he doesn't?"

"Then lucky her!" They are all quiet for a minute while eating, then Maria thinks about it and asks, "Snoopy, if you and Mooch are up to what you're doin' then...what is Caesar up too? I'm curious."

Nancy shakes her head in disbelief, "What, I know this and you don't? What's the world coming too?"

Snoopy huffs a laugh and says, "His personal assistant."

Maria says, "The photographer?"

"Her, yea, and that chef that comes over all the time."

Mooch points out, "She's cute!"

Maria nods, "Okay, I'll give ya that."

Nancy says, "I'd throw down on both of 'em!"

Maria asks Nancy, "You know them?"

She points to the Xhemal, "Yea, they took me there twice."

Snoopy then finishes with, "Then we have Jimmy, Shiela's assistant, his husband and his husband's brother." He then points up into the air, "And the doorman, Bill!"

Mooch throws out, "Don't forget the concierge, Gabriella!"

"Boys too?" Maria wonders.

Mooch adds, "He says they can be fun."

Maria looks out, not focusing on anything, then shakes her head while saying, "If Shiela finds out she'll have a shit-hemorrhage."

Mooch goes, "If she finds out."

Nancy laughs, "Yea, right. She'll find out alright."

Snoopy grunts to himself, "I wouldn't want to be him."

Carrie announces, "FYI guys, ninety second window in thirty."

Watching the clock, Mooch and Nancy take their time putting down their containers of food and reach for their keys, and when they do, Carrie says, "Ninety seconds at...three, two, one, mark."

With them turning their keys from the three o'clock to the six o'clock firing position, Nancy says, "For what it's worth."

After a few seconds, Carrie points to the big-red button and, "Let's close the circuit and launch the sequence, please? Anybody?"

Nancy nudges Maria, "You're the Big Kahuna so, go for it!"

"M'kay." Maria says while reaching out—pushes the button, and then quietly adds, "Deus ex machina, baby. On so many levels."

With that, Carrie activates the tactical hologram overhead. It shows the star, Betelgeuse, with a 3.95au radius from the core to the surface. Also showing is the proposed impact point at 0.5au from the core. From the surface of the star there is a scale that reaches out 125au to where the Carrie Nation is in orbit. On that scale, at the 10au mark is where they are indicating the start of the corona.

Now, this scale is actually the 'return of results' because along the same radii is the primary shot scale showing the 128.45au from their current positon to the impact point 0.5au from the core.

Then again, the Carrie Nation is no longer actually in orbit! It stopped its lateral movement in space along the star's equator three hours ago so it could hover and calculate the shot based upon that static position in relation to the star. Right before the shot is initiated they have to decouple from the hover to fire the weapon.

The ship will go into immediate freefall—from a thousandth of a millimeter per second at the point of decoupling to eight kilometers per second at the 16 minute and 40 second mark when they start the excavation sequence of the shot, but at 125au distance who cares?

Anyway, mainframe Carrie announces, "Initiate freefall."

Mooch looks at the data-points and, "Freefall confirmed."

Carrie in the control room says, "Thirty-five seconds."

The mainframe announces, "Axial Gun, Fire Point Procedures to cords zero-three-six-zero at ten-thirty hours. Nebula cut sequence part one, codename, Muffin. Q-P zipper line of four-point-eight-five grams at zero-point-zero-one g-p-s, for four-eight-five seconds."

Carrie, poking around in her chicken says, "Confirm, please."

Mooch says, "Muffin, confirmed, Zipper line in eight seconds."

Watching the clock on the monitor count down, there is a slightly different low-level hum from the walls as some of the quantum particles are redirected into the feeding ports of the receiver. This is followed by an imperceptible *tick* as the firing sequence initiates at 10:30zulu sharp, with a spider web thin string of particles spooling out of the muzzle at the speed of light—slamming into the nebula.

On the main monitor there are pairs of clocks for each stage of the shot with a graphic pointing to where they are in the shot. In the holographic display above them they have a conical chine racing away from the Carrie Nation at slower-than-a-snail geological velocity.

And this is actually representing light speed.

Mooch picks up his box of tri-tips saying, "And we're off!"

After a few seconds and a few bites of food, Maria looks from the main monitor to the overhead then back over to a third one which shows Betelgeuse in the distance. That one is heavily filtered to block out the extreme glare of the star, but what she notices is an itty-bitty slight whitish glow near the center of the image.

Maria asks, "What's going on there?"

Mooch says, "The chine, and right now it's about one-hundred and fifteen thousand petajoules of fuck me a-runnin'!"

Maria almost chokes on her food, "No shit!"

"Yup, it's doin' it's job as planned. Blowin' the nebula out of the way for the rest of the shit to come chargin' through."

Carrie adds, "This stage will cut through the nebula and the next zipper line stage will cut through the last ten-au of the corona, getting us to the surface."

Maria asks, "Here we spooled fourteen-hundred and forty-one grams, but what's the failure point for this thing to cascade out?"

Mooch says, "Fifty-six-fifteen. With the modeling we hit that every time so, to be safe, we're setting the max to forty-eight-hundred grams. We calculated it will take only six-hundred and forty grams to blow this star, but we went with nine-sixty just for giggles."

Carrie nods in agreement, "If you wanted a nova, this'll do it."

Maria asks, "All the stations are now set up like this, right?"

Snoopy says, "Yup, an' it was easy!"

Maria thinks about it, "I remember the spooling time you said was going to be ninety-eight minutes but you did it here in forty-five? How'd you pull that off?"

Mooch goes, "Oh, that! We used the barrel. Magnetic fields are magnetic fields so we used it as a generator! Doubled the output."

Maria shakes her head in disbelief, then asks, "What'll it take to set up the engines on the Trung and Mbande platforms?"

Carrie answers, "It's already done. It was a simple software update that bypasses the blades, spools and throws the particles out the back. The dump is laser straight but, like a laser, there is some dispersion. For the Q-particles it is tighter than a laser giving you a six klick spread at five-hundred-thousand kilometers distance."

Maria nods, "Okay, what's it throwing out?"

"A smidge over twelve grams. The spool is eighty minutes."

"That's better than the Fly Swatter by a long shot!"

"No, that's per engine. It's forty-eight grams per quad-pod."

Again with a look of disbelief, so Mooch says to Maria, "Yea, ain't that a head fuck. A hundred times better than the Fly Swatter!"

Carrie nods, "We know the Nefer Key's weapon will top out at point-four-eight grams. Maybe point-five if they push it? Oh, and before we forget, we have also designed new engines to replace the current quad-pods that will boost output by eight times *and* give choke capability to provide the platform a variable convergence."

Snoopy adds, "You can extend the range dramatically."

Mooch also adds, "They also cook *H-e*, way more versatility."

Carrie asks, "Would you like us to build a testbed?"

Maria thinks about it and, "Yea, let's puke one out and see what it can do. Can you put one in the queue without anyone the wiser or do we hide it?"

Mooch says, "We'll just call it a Helium testbed configuration."

Carrie adds, "Then nobody would give a shit enough to ask."

After another minute of sitting in silence, mainframe-Carrie again announces to the ship, "Coronal cut sequence part two, codename, Sausage. Q-P zipper line of twenty-five-point-seven-five grams at zero-point-zero-five g-p-s, for five-one-five seconds."

Carrie, taking a bite of chicken says, "Confirm, please."

Mooch says, "Sausage, confirmed, Zipper line in ten seconds."

Shortly they hear a slightly different pitch to the hum coming from the walls as the mass of the string coming out of the muzzle increases by a factor of five. Maria looks at the monitor to the outside and notices that the glow hasn't changed at all.

After three minutes of them watching the monitors and the hologram above them, the chine is still barely pulling away from the Carrie Nation, Maria says, "Nancy you are probably right."

"About what?"

"Muffin, and now the Sausage? You're right, they are pervs! Since what comes next is a pulse string I venture to guess that they codenamed it something stupid like the string-of-pearls."

Snoopy goes, "How'd ya guess?"

Mooch laughs, "Great minds think alike!"

Maria recoils, "Are you shitting me?"

Nancy just shakes her head, "I told you."

Maria then takes a stab at, "Let me guess, the final pulse is the butt plug, or is that just too damned obvious?"

Mooch looks to Snoopy, "Gotta hand it to her, she is good!"

Snoopy says to Maria, "At first, yea. If anybody overheard us they wouldn't have a clue what we were talking about, but we changed it from the Plug to the Billet. Then when we heard you were calling it the brick we thought, why the fuck not, and changed it to the Brick!"

Maria puts a finger up and is about to say something, then backs down—she then says, "Did anybody overhear you guys?"

Snoopy says, "Don't think so? We were careful."

Mooch puts his clawed hands out, "So, you got about a dozen different ways of shootin' this thing off. What we're doin' here today is uniquely different than our original vision."

Maria asks, "Which was what?"

"You know, like the Death Star!"

"Which is what exactly?"

"You know, run up and give it one big BLAMMO of a shot!"

Snoopy adds, "Which would have made a mess of things."

"Oh, yea, I remember now." Maria nods, thinking, then at the two of them she laughs, "Butt plug? Seriously?"

Mooch shrugs, "We were just being silly."

Mainframe-Carrie then announces to the ship, "Excavation sequence part three, codename, String of Pearls. This sequence consists of five, fifty-second stages of Q-P pulse strings. At six-pulses per second that parses four-five-zero grams starting at zero-point-one g-p-p progressing to a final stage finishing off at zero-point-five g-p-p. Sequence fire time is for two-five-zero seconds.

Carrie, taking the last bite from her package of chicken says to Mooch, "Confirm, please."

Mooch says, "String of Pearls, confirmed, Pulse string cycles for excavation to commence in eight seconds."

Mainframe-Carrie announces, "We have ullage. Burn initiates in six seconds."

At the point where the pulse sequence starts, the hum coming from the walls increases in intensity and is accompanied by a staccato of electrical pulses at six per second. At the same time there is a slight disorientation as the ship starts to imperceptibly move sideways. For the first time in the Carrie Nation's existence, the aerospike style blade engines, mounted in a slit along the edge on the aft part of the flight decks, are being fired—not as a test but as an actual maneuver.

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In the top flight deck on the dome side of the Carrie Nation, right below the hub, there are 4,000 of her crew and troops standing in formation 200 across by 20 deep. Having already policed the trash from the welcomed snack provided by Maria, they wait in formation for their queue to start the walk or, more specifically, a route step march.

The formation has 400 meters they have to walk in 4 minutes and 10 seconds. The route is broken up into five 80-meter segments, with markers, and the front line of the formation has to hit each one in their allotted 50-second interval. They have practiced this a dozen times and nailed it with the help from Oscar Peña of all people.

Peña was a Marine so he was temporarily attached to the

Carrie Nation for just this event. Oscar hated being yelled at by DIs when he was a rancid little maggot at nineteen, but here he enjoyed putting on his old campaign hat and dishing it out for the fun of it.

Noticing the clock ticking down, Peña snaps too and barks out over the public address, "On de line! Flight, atteen-HU!"

Mainframe-Carrie announces to the crew on the flight deck, "Pulse sequence to begin in five-four-three..."

"Flight, forward HUW!" Peña shouts, then calls out time over the PA, "Left-ayeee-leoo-loooo...loooo-ri-leeeft-heeee-loooo! Ke'p in time!" What follows in four-beats is an old Marine standard reprise-cadence, *Chuck Norris*, with Peña calling out, "I see the bearded ninja!"

...and so it goes.

Nobody here knew who Chuck Norris was before three days ago when they started drilling for this maneuver, but now they are all fans of the long-dead star after taking time to sift through the old videos, movies and memes that survived in the public domain. Yea, it is all comically terrible, but that doesn't matter. After 300-years the lyrics have changed, like *You don't fuck with the Chuck* in the refrain, but it remained pretty much intact as compared to the original.

When they hit the first 50-second mark, 28 of the troopers in the back-center fall out with half of them men and half women. They wait 150 seconds and start to march back.

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Back in the control room on the last fifty-second segment, at half-a-gram per pulse, the sound coming from the walls is five-times more pronounced than when the pulse sequence first started. All five of them are watching the monitor count down to the last stage.

Mainframe-Carrie announces, "Nova-impact sequence part four, codename, Brick. Single Q-Particle pulse of nine-hundred and sixty grams in a point-zero-zero-one-five second burst."

Carrie, sitting there with her fork in Snoopy's tray of brisket, pulls a chunk of meat out asking, "Confirm, please."

Mooch says, "Brick, confirmed. Nova-pulse in six seconds."

Watching the clock tick down, six pulses to each second, when the count hits zero there is a slight delay of a half-second, followed by a loud, low-pitched electrical screech—accompanied by what feels like the bump of a pile-driver slamming into the floor.

And suddenly it's over...

With mainframe-Carrie thanking everyone over the PA, giving special thanks to the crew on the flight deck, the five of them here look at each other in dead silence—not really knowing what to say.

Maria looks to Nancy, then to Mooch saying, "wow."

Mooch asks, "Was it good for you too?"

Snoopy laughs while throwing his clawed hands in the air, "THAT was the money-shot of the year, baby!"

Nancy laughs, "Can you not?"

Snoopy gut laughs as he and Mooch start chirping and clicking in Xhemal, with Mooch then asking Carrie, "So, waddya thinkin'?"

Mentally calculating, Carrie reaches into Mooch's tri-tips and takes a huge bite, and with them all hanging on her response she finally says, "Telemetry is on the money. Mooch...you did good."

Nancy and Maria both quietly agree, "You did good."

Mooch is suddenly swept over by emotions, so he swallows big and, not knowing what to say he nods and says, "Thank you."

Through the transparent floor, huge gushers of liquid Helium blow into the sump below them and swirls around while Maria speaks up, "All of you understand how big this is?"

Snoopy huffs, "D'urrr!"

With the Helium vaporizing into a gas from the heat, finally creating a huge *whoosh*, followed by crackling metal sounds, Carrie informs them, "The sump flush and heat purge is in progress."

Maria asks her, "So, what are we looking at, time wise?"

Carrie frowns and, "From Brick release to impact it will take seventeen hours, forty-nine minutes, plus between forty and fifty seconds? I am guesstimating time of impact tomorrow morning at four-forty and thirty-five seconds, zulu."

Maria points out, "Give or take five seconds."

Carrie nods, "Correct."

"How about from Impact to the nova event?"

Carrie shrugs, "This is an asymmetrical detonation so it will depend on the cavitation collapse behind the Brick at the point and time of impact. Mooch estimates that it will be less than point-five au and I am calculating that, based upon the pressures inside the star, the cavity will be between point-three and three-five au. The smaller that number the more uniform the nova will appear. Then, considering the pressure of the collapse after excavation, it may retard the nova

long enough to make it appear more uniform? This is virginal territory so there is no way for us to model it and know for sure."

Maria presses her, "How 'bout your best estimate."

"A guess is the best I can do."

"Then guess."

Carrie shrugs again, "Since the detonation expansion is at twenty percent of 'C' then I believe the nova will first appear at the earliest on the excavation side of the star two hours and fifteen minutes after impact. The star will shred completely between eight and twenty minutes after that. There are too many variables to give you a more accurate sequence of events. My apologies."

Maria asks, "But it's all gonna go explody, right?"

Mooch laughs, "Very explody!"

Carrie smiles, "Fear not, you got your supernova."

Maria breaths deep and, "Okay, you guys did good."

Carrie adds, "At a-hundred and twenty-five au, the proposed distance to the rendezvous and observation point, I'm guessing it will be at least seventeen minutes after zulu midnight. I can give you exact numbers tomorrow, by eight-hundred hours."

Maria looks up at the hologram display and, noticing that the chine has still barely moved a smidge away from the Carrie Nation, nods big saying, "Okay, we'll go with those numbers for now. We can adjust the orbit further out if it comes to that."

Carrie points up in the air, "If I can make one last minute recommendation, to mitigate potential damage to the station?"

"Sure! I'm open to anything."

"I recommend that we move our observation point in orbit to the other side of the star, somewhere behind Cue Ball. This nova event will be asymmetrical so, on the other side it will be just as spectacular, visually speaking, but there we will be exposed to a fraction of the gamma, U-V and x-ray as opposed to this side."

Maria asks, "We're only going to be here for a few minutes."

"Yes, the station can handle it, but considering what we are watching I believe it's better to error on the side of caution."

Maria looks at Mooch who says, "She's makin' a good point."

Carrie adds, "Visually, the cool factor will be higher over there because the edge of the star will shred towards the middle instead blowing out. It'll have a more dramatic effect."

"Okay, let's do that." Maria nods, then, "Anything else?"

Carrie shakes her head, "No, that pretty much covers it all until we get solid numbers tomorrow morning."

With Nancy and Mooch now having taken the keys from the consoles, Nancy looks up at the hologram display above them and says, "It's mind numbing to think we actually did it."

Maria nods in agreement, then asks Carrie, "The wormtrac can see what's happening in the star and we can tap into it, right?"

Carrie, points above them, "The data for this is coming from the wormtrac in real time."

"Really?"

Snoopy adds, "I busted my butt coding this thing! You can zoom in-an-out, spin it like a top and view from any direction, and the latency is only a half-a-second at worst. You can also pull the data points and bounce them against multiple systems in the display."

Carrie gestures to the hologram above them, "This totally blows the gravtrac away because...are you sitting down?"

Maria shrugs, "Spit it out."

"It's now tacnet integration ready. Thinking ahead, I already have it set up for a direct link up to any JACC or PBDi if needed."

Maria shakes her head, "I can't get used to that interface."

Mooch asks, "Which one? The seeing or knowing mode?"

"Both. I have a hard time with the interface itself."

Snoopy smiles, "Suit yourself, but it's there if you need it!"

"Ya did good, Snoop!" Maria looks over at Carrie and smiles, "You too, Carrie. Let's roll this module out after the third."

Nancy, standing beside Maria, looks down from the display and says quietly to her, "Can't believe the third is almost here."

"Yea, it's hard to believe." Maria then turns towards Nancy, "Everything we got going on is revolving around Taiji being settled. Can you wait for your transfer until after that?"

"Oh yea, no problem!" Nancy shrugs, "I've gotten used to putting up with these two feathered freaks, so what's a few more months? I actually love the shit out of them but if they ever catch wind of that—their heads will explode."

Right on que, Mooch and Snoopy put their clawed hands to their temples and act like their heads are exploding in slow motion, while saying, "BOOOOOM!"

As the Xhemal laugh at themselves, Maria rolls her eyes and asks, "Anybody you need transferred over with you?"

Nancy shakes her head, "No, I kept everything casual, so no."

Maria pats Nancy on the shoulder and turns to leave, "Okay, guys, I'll see you tomorrow night."

And as Maria starts for the door, Mooch calls out to her, "Marshal Ramirez, I got a question."

She turns and asks with a smile, "What is it Sergeant?"

"Ah..." Mooch looks up and around, and back at her, asking, "Why did I get the QP-Gun project?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Honestly, there were a lot of your people who would have been more capable than I was and, I might add, better suited for it."

Maria smiles, "Should I suggest that's a dumb question?"

"I know you had several others working on it behind my back in case I tripped over my dick in the process."

"Could you do it?" Maria holds her hands out, "Did you do it?"

Confused, Mooch says, "I did do it."

"And *that* was the point!"

"What was the point?"

"You'll see tomorrow night."

000001001110

79

short curls

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-31-TUESDAY
TIME: 18:01zulu (local 03:09mst)

"Holy shit!"

"Holy shit, what?"

"This shit!" Says Griego, handing the letter to Angela.

Angela reads it and does a double take, "No shit!"

"What?" Asks Mahko Ozo.

"Check this out!" Angela says while handing it to Ozo.

Ozo reads it and, "Holy shit is right!"

He hands it over to Butter Hewlett and Thomas Chase who read it together, with Hewlett saying, "Oh my Lawd!"

Chase laughs, "This is the nuckin' futtiest thing I ever read!"

Here on Cocytus the last of the ghost droids are meeting up on a Level-30 drift tunnel, four kilometers under the Arklay Mountain base called Raccoon City. Fifteen days ago there were eighteen droids who entered this fight but now there are only five left. In command is Griego and he is the only one still in their original mech. The others have significant combat damage with Angela, having booted up the last of the spare droids a week ago, losing her left arm yesterday.

An encrypted tar-file came in from the Spike at 18:00 right as Griego was opening the envelope given to him by Hershey, and this has been the only thing that has come to them from the outside since the BDF landed in October. Even though Angela outranks Griego he's been running this show, so his droid also serves as their share drive. After unlocking and bursting the tarball he posts their files.

Griego goes, "Ya'll got WADs, come an' get 'em!"

For a ghost droid a WAD file coming in for you is like the ultimate a mail call. There can be a bunch of different things in it, like texts, images and updates, things that they can't receive in real time because communication and bandwidth tends to be restricted, but the most important thing they upload from the WAD is a compilation of memories from all the other instances of themselves out on missions.

As a courtesy to the troops you are currently with, since you tend to work with the same people all the time, and on simultaneous missions, usually limited to five or six, everyone with you will stage their WAD to append—then hot reset their droids at the same time.

Waiting to reset with the others, Angela looks to Griego and, "Angel, want me to go topside with you, babe?"

Griego asks, "You know LC, Bristol, right?"

"Through Porter. Bristol was a captain back then."

"Yea, I figure you can grease the skids, but now that I think about it how 'bout you twist their arms 'cause these *mericon's* don't have the time to hem and haw over making a decision."

"No prob...and I figure you can use the emotional support."

"Yea Angie, I could use a huggy." Griego smiles big, and with everyone holding their hand up, he says, "Okay, let's reset!"

Their holographic heads in the droids dissolve then flash back.

Having just uploaded two and a half months of memories, some of them ongoing missions, they need a few seconds to absorb all the activity for that time, with Ozo saying to Hewlett, "Butter, baby! You got the highest body count on Ngāti Whā! Congrats, girl!"

Hewlett laughs, "Yea, ain't that a kick in the junk!"

Griego does his own double take saying, "*A toda madre!* We were GMi BERs an' fightin' on Te Aka Kāi! That was a blast!"

Angela realizes, "I shot MacKenzie's legs off!"

Griego points to her, "No shit, you did! *Tu vata* badass!"

Angela, with a long face, "I wonder if she'll ever forgive me?"

Chase laughs big, "Hey, we're killin' it on Nufa! I clipped me a hundred and sixty Homer there! By my li'l lonesome too!"

Ozo nods, thinking, "Taiji has been a tough nut, like here."

Angela, absorbing all the action they've been in over the last ten weeks, says, "I'll say, we peeps 'ave been fucken' busy."

Griego thinks about it and points out, "They've redacted what we've been doin' on GTB6. I wonder why that is?"

Angela nods, "I know why, but I can't say."

Griego wonders, "Why, is it bad?"

She shakes her head, "Naw, but I'll tell ya after the third."

"Fair enough." Griego pulls up an IFF text box and keys in
<THIS IS SA MSGT GREIGO. WE ARE CALLING A TEMPORARY TRUCE.
IT IS IMPORTANT WE COME TALK TO YOU INSIDE THIRTY MINUTES>

Angela worries, "I can't believe they did that to Alpha-O!"

He asks, "Think it has to do with the grays?"

"Oh yea! Most definitely it's because of 'em."

Griego turns to Ozo and says, "Ready for me to copy over?"

Ozo nods, "Ready-set!"

Griego grabs their files, including the WADs covering their last ten weeks here, drags them over Ozo's partition while saying, "Mahko, if they club us then send these to the Spike, booby trap the barriers they put up, seal the bulkheads to the tunnels and kill everybody in the tunnels and anybody who try to get in. We're now in murder mode."

Ozo goes, "Shoot to kill, 'bout damned time!"

Just then a text comes to them via the IFF saying <THIS IS
BDF LC BRISTOL. OUR TROOPS ARE STANDING DOWN SO COME ON
UP AND WE WILL HEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY>

Angela sighs, "All good things must come to an end."

Hewlett says, "Making this offer is kinda dumb if ya ask me."

Griego points out, "It's orders, and it is the right thing to do."

Hewlett laughs, "Right thing or not, I don't rightly care."

Ozo urges them on, "*Homie*, the clock is ticking."

01011111-00101111-00101010-01011100-01011111-01011111

Jordan Bristol, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the BDF, finds himself suddenly in command of the SOG Seventh AirCav Brigade known as The Reapers. Many of the Special Operations Groups of the BDF, just like the rank and file of the Annex, wear *all the hats* and this includes reconnaissance, interdiction, counter insurgency, and when it suits their fancy they have that air assault thing down to a pat. As recently as an hour ago Bristol was in command of its Forth Battalion, known as The Pale Horse, which is their dedicated shoot-'em-up "Delta Force" style conflict resolution element.

This is a job Bristol has loved—and his people love him back.

Bristol and his team were brought in a week ago to take care of the drone-n-droid infestation here on Cocytus after the other three Horses incurred an excess of casualties. After just five days of really intense and nasty fighting it was believed that The Pale Horse pushed the PacMan drones and their ghost droid handlers out of the swanky R&R segment of the underground facility. Impressed by the results, their Brigadier General, known to be a hands off sorta guy, thought it would be a kick to drop in, touch base and grab hands with the troops, then inspect the tunnels for himself—in spite of Jordi's protests.

That was yesterday-noon, and come about zulu-tea, on their way back from looky-looing at all the barricades to the many tunnel entrances of the mining operation, they get caught in a harrowing little ambush staged as a pop-up greeting card for the General.

Yea, nobody saw that coming.

It takes Griego and Angela almost twenty minutes to reach the surface, negotiating the labyrinth of lift and ventilation shafts that zigzag between levels, and even though all the BDF troops they stroll past seem pleasant enough—there is this weird, even macabre sense of relief in the air. The troopers of The Pale Horse have known that these ghosts, personality constructs that pilot the SA droids, are not out to kill them. Unfortunately, they do not know that their mission protocol has just now changed from mayhem to murder spree, and the fact is that killing has a whole lot less exposure to it.

On the way up the one thing that surprised them both, the thing that Hershey told them was going to happen, is that not one item was removed from the underground facility. The BDF troops surveyed, scanned and inventoried everything in detail where it sat. What was even more surprising is that not one of the pallets of bank reserve bullion the Annex was holding in trust on mining level 25 was messed with. Of the 288 tons of gold, 10 tons of platinum, 9 tons of rhodium and 23 tons pallidum, not one was disturbed. Not the wrapping, not the banding nor the documents affixed to the pallets were touched.

Now one would think that this would have been a huge score for the Co-op but the fact of the matter is—their hands are tied and they couldn't make off with any of it. The Bank of New Sydney, who is in control the Sapphire Au notes in circulation, is doing business in the City of New Sydney, which is surrounded on all sides by the much larger incorporated greater-metropolitan New Sydney.

And here is where it gets a little messy...

The City of New Sydney actually has familial political ties to the City of London and not with metropolitan New Sydney or Sapphire even. Back when Waterworld became Sapphire they were forced to abide by a treaty with the City of London that recognizes the political

autonomy of the City of New Sydney separate and apart from Sapphire or any municipality under the jurisdiction of Sapphire—which is why the City of New Sydney has a seat in the FIS.

What's more confusing is that the City of New Sydney is an indentured subsidiary to the *temps immémorial* City of London who is surrounded by the greater-metropolitan London—separate from that London yet under the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom.

Point is, the Bank of New Sydney has muscled in on old-fogies like De La Rue and now controls off-world currency note production, as well as circulation, digital block-chain, and also manages the reserve holdings for most of these governmental entities. Included in this odd mish-mash of treasury notes is the Sapphire Au and the SCC Dollar. The interesting thing of note is that gold is the single thing under treaty that has absolutely no fluctuating value whatsoever. Everything teeter-totters around gold and that value is high—and the Sapphire Au, the money of the Pleiades, is considered the "gold standard" of today becoming the primo reserve currency for pretty much everybody.

Yea, Special Drawing Rights is still a thing, but while on a war footing the valuation formulas for the Co-op tend to weigh differently and those have redefined what 'stretching the rubber band' means.

Anyway, with them stepping onto the airfield at 18:23zulu, Griego realizes that the last time he was topside here was shortly after sunset all the way back in early October. From the looks of things, the BDF took apart the wreckage of what used to be the pinwheel training facility, and the debris they sifted through is all over the airfield. Knowing how thorough Hershey said these people were, Griego is self-assured that the BDF found nothing of actual value. Miss-information is on the menu today, and pretty much every day.

There are twelve interconnected trailers by the entrance to Raccoon City, and with Griego and Angela walking towards the obvious command trailer, the one with windows all over it, two figures step out of the airlock and head towards them with a cheerful gait.

Jordan Bristol, in an ACE suit calls out over a universal radio frequency, "You're just in time for high tea, me cobbbers! I'm always up to throwin' on a kettle!"

With them approaching each other, Griego and Angela stop and give a snappy and proper salute, more of an American style, and this is returned in kind by Bristol and his exec.

Griego goes, "LC, I am very pleased to meet you, sir."

Bristol shakes his head, "No, sergeant, the pleasure is mine."

Angela smiles, "Hey, Jordan!"

"Angela? Angela Simmons!"

"Yea it's been awhile, how the hell are ya?"

With a startled expression, Bristol grins, "We've been having a grand time here, and a stonking great tussle this has been!"

"How is the General?"

Bristol points to her arm, "That was you! Sorry 'bout the fin."

"Neeea, no biggie. I just can't seem to keep it, ya know."

"The general, he'll live, but he's out of the game for awhile. Ya hit his spine below the navel an' that did a number on 'im."

"Tell the general I'm sorry 'bout that."

"The sad ending to this dreary day is that Com-n-Con just gave me the Brigade, and that I did not want."

"That means you'll become a Brigadier!"

"Brig-General and, like I said I did not want."

Angela shrugs, "If I would have known—"

Bristol cuts her off, "No, love, you were doing your job."

Griego points out, "So, you're catching up to *su padre*."

"*Si mi amigo!*" Bristol shakes his head with some amusement, "Me ol' man, as a father he's topper than notch, but as a general he can be a bit of a spastic poofter. I really wanted to steer clear of the sword-boards, ya know." He smiles at Angela, "Honestly, I'd rather you 'ave put me on the mend."

Griego hands him the letter, "Sorry 'bout that, mate."

Angela cringes, "I just heard about what I did to MacKenzie."

With him starting to read over the letter, Bristol gives a little huff of a laugh, "Oh, that. Truth be told she wanted time off to pop out a rug-rat so this was very opportune for her!" Visibly stunned by what he is reading he adds, "She did say to me she was delighted you didn't punch her time clock, so there should be no hard feelings."

Angela is relieved, "That's good to hear."

Bristol hands the letter to his exec, "Well, isn't this a pickle!"

Griego laughs slightly, "Yea, surprised the shit outta us too!"

Bristol holds a finger up and radios, "Sergeant-Major, please come on up to the airfield." After she acknowledges, Bristol says to Griego, "I want the Sergeant-Major in on this discussion. It should only take a minute."

"Time is important, sir."

He nods in agreement, "A precious commodity, indeed."

Griego then says, "I'm surprised your people didn't open the reserve vault on level twenty-five."

"Oh no, we did open it! The Bank of New Sydney contacted our government right as we landed. We were under orders to make sure it was all there, and send a snapshot of it to the Bank then close it right back up nice and proper!"

Angela asks, "Why didn't you just go for it?"

Bristol smiles, "I think you know the reason, love. Tempting, yes, but we are at war with you—an abstract entity. Touch that bullion and we'd be at odds with everybody. Not to mention we'd forfeit our reserves held by the BNS. No gettin' around that one."

Griego points out, "I heard your father was very vocal about wanting to raid the banks in the Pleiades."

Angela adds, "Everybody was expecting that."

Bristol laughs, "Very much so! Our Corporations Commission had to shout 'im down. For now our dollar is being propped up, and the IMF would surely snap that rubber band if we stooped towards the path to larceny. Snap it in our arse they would 'ave too!"

Angela then says, "I'm surprised your people left the rest of the place go mostly intact."

Griego nods, "Very disciplined people you have, Sir."

"Thank you!" Bristol shrugs, "You'd be surprised what you can get out of the dust bunnies when you put your mind to it. I have to say our intel services are a tad too thorough because what they collect is mostly useless." He points up in the air, "Case in point, your previous commander, Jackson, we found his flat here before they shut the place down, back when he was a freshly minted Deputy Marshal. We zeroed in on it from the dust on a ballpoint pen of all things. With that we confirmed many stories about him. He did have that cocker spaniel, the one that everybody here hated on, a Maine-coon cat that everybody here thought the world of, and that he had a bloody full measure of gentlemen callers."

Angela adds, "Nicole said he was a bit of a social butterfly."

"Yes, a jolly huge collection I might add. You'd be amazed by what you can gleam from all those buttocks ground into a mattress!"

Griego laughs with a nod, "Yea, like you we don't get a lot of 'guys only' guys in the Annex."

"Point being, we had a lot of respect for Marshal Jackson, which brings me to asking a little favor of ya."

"Depends on the favor?"

"It's a personal one and it has to be handled rather delicately so it does not come back to bite me. If I tell you what it is here, when you load up at the Stone Garden you will know there, correct?"

Angela says, "I can guarantee we will keep it confidential."

"With my father I was privy to a lot of things that I should not have been and...this one has troubled me. With our cloning program they were looking for the best soldier they could find that was both proven stock, and into blokes only! The reason I bring this up is that securing Marshal Jackson's blueprints was stupidly easy for us."

"They did shut that program down, right?"

"Yes, but they have several thousand of the little guys out there. It appears that his proclivities were spawned from the abuse he endured from the foster care system, and that the non-abused stock were into Sheila's, so chalk one up to the nurture column! Point being is that Command wanted to scrap them all when they found out."

Angela does a double take, "Why the fuck was that?"

"They wanted soldiers with no ties. If the ankle biters grew up to desire wives and families then it would have made a mess of things. Command was after cannon fodder—not family men."

Griego worries, "They didn't scrap them, did they?"

"Oh, no-no-no. Mr. Hartcourt, bless his heart, stepped in and took them all. He found every one of them good homes, and kept one for himself. His oldest daughter adopted that child."

Angela asks, "What do you want us to do?"

Bristol shrugs big, "It's tragic that Jackson's daughter died with him at Ny Hopen, so his granddaughter may want to know. Now, Scarab can't do anything about it but she may want to know, however, her knowing is not for me to decide."

"Marshal Ramirez."

"Exactly! It'd be her call."

Angela nods repeatedly and says, "Wow."

Bristol nods, "Oi! Here comes the Sergeant Major."

From the underground base emerges the Sergeant Major, with her warrant officer shadow in tow. They step up but both do not salute Bristol as is the standard practice in a combat zone.

Standing between them, she glances at Griego and Angela, gives them a nod and asks, "What'll be your pleasure, Sir?"

Bristol gestures with his head for his exec to give the letter to the Sergeant-Major, and as she takes it he says, "I think they may have us by the short curlies here, Sergeant-Major."

She reads the letter, blinks and then calmly says with a nod, "Well, if this is right-true this makes us toasty prawns on a stick."

Griego has pulled a tactical rolled screen, and while pulling it open it tears because of the holes incurred in combat, "We have a video from the Orion OP at twenty au...damn it!"

Angela snickers while hands him her tac-screen, "Here!"

Griego successfully snaps this one open and says, "This was the view from the Orion OP at nine-forty-two zulu."

On the screen they watch as the star, filtered for the glare, slowly expands then blows out from the other side. The filter darkens even more to adjust for light bouncing back from the nebula. They watch for a whole ninety seconds as the star starts to shred from along the edges then bursts apart on the side they are viewing from. Seconds later the camera snows out as the OP is incinerated from the light energy hitting it in full force.

The exec asks, "When does it reach us?"

"Photon pulse will hit at Nineteen-fifty zulu."

The Sergeant Major says, "That's in an hour and twenty minutes. That's not a lot of time."

Bristol asks, "Will there be terms?"

Griego laughs, "Oh, hell no! No terms of any kind! This is a doin' the right thing, workin' together truce, *Homie*. Just grab your kit and get your asses in the base before the shit hits!"

The Sergeant Major says, "We'll be facing away from it, sir."

Angela points out, "Yea, but this here will still get scorched to all hell. If you get your supplies and gear in the dock area those doors will hold for the time it takes us to break it down and move it into the mining levels before the debris field hits."

She looks to her WO shadow and points to the trailers, "Bear, have our people break the trailers down and wheel the automat, the recycler, the atmo-skids and the three supply trailers into the dock! If there's time we'll then grab the med trailer. Chop-chop!"

With her warrant officer running off and shouting orders over her radio, the Sergeant Major asks, "An' the big shit is gonna hit?"

Griego shrugs, "We're lookin' at tomorrow between thirty-two and thirty-three hundred hours, local time. That's in sixty-four hours."

With a sense of relief, she says, "So it'll hit the other side."

"They timed it so that we'll be on the night side, facing out."

Angela adds, "Cue Ball is believed to be the core of a long dead gas giant that got stripped down and captured. It's cold, mostly, but the core is made of iron and uranium so we're always fighting Helium leaching out of the walls. The problem here is air-handling. If we vent out from the R&R and living sections we lose the bulk of our atmosphere unless we seal every tunnel, bulkhead and shaft."

Griego adds, "We're still gonna be fighting Helium so we have to keep the O2 circulating constantly."

Angela goes, "What you're not gonna be short of is oxygen and food. We installed recyclers on level thirty and have sixty pallets of CWR-RATs in case that unit goes down."

The Sergeant Major asks, "Your recycler is rated for?"

"A battalion sized unit."

Bristol breaths easier, "That's good to hear."

Griego points out, "But, sir, to be safe and smart, we should get all your 'quip to level thirty as soon as possible."

It's the exec who asks the obvious question, "Sergeant, how long till we can get out of here, you think?"

Griego blinks and shrugs, "It's an asymmetrical blast from the *other* side of Betelgeuse so, we're looking at a possible path through it being found as early as...what'd they say?"

Looking at Angela, she picks it up with, "February at the earliest. It may take longer but no more than nine months. Twelve on the far outside chance, so I think we should start a pool! When it gets here we're guesstimating that the mass from Betelgeuse should pass inside ten hours. During this scouring-barrage they believe we may experience some acceleration like sensation. It could range anywhere from the feeling you get on an express elevator to maybe point-five G. That said, they expect Cocytus to remain intact."

Griego adds, "In seventy-five or so hours we should know for sure. With that, there are quite a few cases of scotch, bourbon and vodka in the R&R center. You should consider bringing it all down so your people can celebrate New Year's after the shit passes."

"That's a splendid idea!" Bristol nods, thinking, then turns to his Sergeant Major, "Sergeant Major, how many wounded have we incurred since the transport left?"

She says, "Three, Sir!"

"Have them loaded onto the Ute." Bristol then turns to his exec and gestures to the small transport ship they have on the airfield, "Major, you will fly them back to base and give our status. Tell my father I'll get back when I get back."

The exec says, "No, sir, you should fly it out."

"Ah, no. You have your orders." He then looks to Angela, "When do you think we will be picked up, again?"

Angela goes, "They say February or March, but if I were to put my money down I'd throw it at some time in July."

Bristol asks, "Sergeant Major, when are you splits?"

She knows where this is going, "I rotate in five weeks, Sir."

"Then rotate out now. You're goin' with!"

She snarls, "The fuck I am...Sir!"

"Paper, scissors, rank! You have your orders."

"Under protest, Sir!"

"Duly noted. Emily, we will throw you that duster and get everyone cronked when we get back." Bristol stands to attention and salutes her, "Thank you for everything, Sergeant Major."

Forced retirement is not a thing anyone wants when it comes down to it, and after forty-two years and two wars, the Sergeant Major here is suddenly thrown into an emotional tailspin, which breaches her granite like exterior, "I am gonna file for an extension, Sir."

"Then we expect you to hurry back, love!" She returns the salute and Bristol tells her to, "Now, shove off ya Pollard."

While watching his exec and Sergeant Major walk off, Bristol admits, "That woman has been a pain in my arse."

Angela nods, "As all good Sergeant Majors should be."

"Amen." He agrees, then looks to Angela saying, "I'm gonna miss her. She kept me honest and my people alive."

"In spite of what we were trying to do to them."

"Thank you for not killin' me peeps!"

Angela thinks about it, "Sorry 'bout The Black Horse."

Bristol almost laughs, saying, "No, they walked into that one."

Angela shrugs, "Kinda, I don't think we were that obvious?"

"No, they half-stepped their way in like a troop of idjits."

Griego says, "Aren't you being a little hard on 'em, *home*?"

"All those motion sensor red flags? No, call it clarity." Bristol then gives them the counts because they will not ask, "In case you lost count, between Black and Red Horses you put three-hundred and twenty-one of them in hospital. Only twenty-nine of mine."

Griego nods, "Sir, Pale Horse was kickin' our asses."

Bristol points out, "You were taking stupid-crazy risks."

Angela asks, "I got a favor to ask you. If we make it past the big shit-hit, our handlers wanted us to bring the bullion up to the dock so they can haul it out of here. If the dock is still there, that is."

"Say no more! Stand back 'cause I'll put my people on it."

"Just askin' for a little help."

Bristol huffs and shakes his head, "Angie, doll, consider it my people schlepping out of eternal gratitude."

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80

by their fruits

LCTN: SOL-3, MANHATTAN, NEW YORK
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.001au from SOL)
TIME: 21:30zulu (local 16:30est)

It is 4:30pm in Times Square and they are finishing the set up for tonight's festivities. With the stagehands wrapping up the sound check and the pens for crowd control having been roped off, all they need now is the Master of Ceremonies, the musical act and the regulation milling throng to set things alight.

Mikhail Popov has been the MC for as long as he has been on the Tonight Show and he is sick and tired of it. It is his last New Year's as MC and, at his insistence, they have The Cover Girls for tonight. Not say, Brittney and the Cover Girls—just The Cover Girls. This act is all about doing covers of other artist's work, while trying to best them, and with a virtual galaxy of pop and rock spanning three centuries in the public domain they never seem to run out of material.

The Cover Girls was Brittney's springboard to stardom, but she has kept in touch and in good standing with the band ever since her replacement took the reins. The two will be performing together so it will be like a time-loop paradox for the fans who'll be watching.

Because of that, the NYPD expects a huge crowd for tonight.

For three years now the New Year's Eve Event Committee has pushed hard to lure Adolphina Herrero here to activate the ball drop all because of the CMH. What Adolphina feared did come true, that being everybody has started to look at her differently after having been awarded the damned thing. In spite of it feeling like a boat anchor around the neck, her signature *Cubanaza* war cry is more popular now than ever—all because that's what everyone can hear her shouting over her body cam when she ran into that fight and while blowing the shit out of the Taliban and their guns from rampart to parapet.

Tía loca Adolphina is decidedly *personae grata* in spades now.

At first there were accusations that her CMH was a publicity stunt, and this incensed the US Marine Corp to no end because they take this shit very seriously. Against policy their Commandant had her body cam feed for that day released to the public which shot gunned those voices into silence. It's been said that her footage puts every version of *Hardcore Henry* to utter shame, and the same is said to be true for Queen Victoria. When queries were made there—her footage went out and that roundly put the smack-down to her naysayers.

There is absolutely no doubt in anyone's mind that Victoria earned her VC fair-an'-square that day, it's just that she didn't have too. Victoria, like pretty much everyone outside the SA, do not know their training regime, their tactics nor could they understand why the troops kept kissing the ground the way they were—which was to let the scorpion guns do their thing! The extra body and gun cam video from the fire team showed Victoria fighting like a lion, yes, and it was spectacular to watch, but those feeds had the data, targeting displays and tacnet audio channels redacted...for security reasons.

Only thing said by the fire team is, "*It was a hell of a fight!*"

Anyway, with Adolphina are her sisters, Agatha and Ophilia, who were asked to tag along, and with them came Mac and Léon. Where her sisters were thrilled to be coming here Mac and Léon had to be dragged, grumbling and whining all the way to New York. It's not that they were opposed to coming here, it's just that they are annoyed by the octodroid cameras following them everywhere they go anymore.

The production company's new representative was thrilled to hear that the three were opening a restaurant together, and she did suggest a spin off, but Léon put his foot down to the idea. With some arm twisting by Monique he did agree to allow the cameras to follow them, like tonight, so that they can get footage for the main show, and maybe do a special or two surrounding their project, but the bottom line is that Monique is right and you cannot thumb your nose at free publicity! This is especially true when he plans to simultaneously open three of the *olá* restaurants in Los Angeles, New Sydney and Paris on the same night this coming May.

Ever since Stewart Myers was found dead two weeks ago his most recent silent partner, who brought in a massive influx of capital, became not so silent overnight. Still, nobody knows who the guy is but his representative, this hot-n-feisty little skinny thing named Samantha, is going around to each production asking a metric fuck-ton of questions. Yea, their world under Stewart was pretty bad but how could it be better under people with absolutely no production or show business experience? Truth be told, Samantha's toothy grin, turquoise eyes, Aussie lilt and sardonic wit has cut through the bullshit like a flaming scythe, and where everyone has built walls around their IP out

of self-preservation, this pretty-little sprite of a dirty-blond has torn right through those barriers as if they were tissue paper.

Still, everyone was expecting the very worst from these new people because, bucking the system right out of the chute, they dumped the union crews in New York and brought in off-world scabs for tonight. While Léon and Mac were in the broadcasting trailer to touch base with Samantha, in comes three huge and intimidating union bosses who start by making veiled threats. With an attitude for someone five times her size she tells them to shove off, with a snort, and what comes next is where the little pixie wins over the crew.

Now making direct threats of violence to the production team and the scabs—Samantha steps up to them, kicks one of their legs out, hyper-extending his knee joint, smashes another's clavicle, then to the one who was making said threats, she breaks his jaw in three places with her elbow, followed with, "We don't make threats, love."

Mac and Léon led the applause...

In the top penthouse overlooking Times Square, taking the entire floor of his new hotel on Broadway, between 43rd and 44th Streets, Boxter gives Samantha a little kiss and hug, and as he pulls back he says with a smile, "Making friends I hear?"

"Making the most of the moment, me papa!"

Boxter notices Adolphina, her sisters, with Leon and Mac, so as he motions them forward he says, "You have a whole battalion down there, so let them handle the messy business, shall we? Try not to dirty your hands." He smiles asking, "Think they'll be trouble?"

She snickers, "To break the monotony, I certainly hope so!"

"You are sooo like your father. I'm gonna have to have words with him." He turns to Adophina and, "Madame Herrero!"

Adolphina offers her hand to Boxter, "Mr. Hartcourt. I'm very pleased to meet you, Sir..." While shaking hands, Piper walks in so Adolphina suddenly does a double take, "Piper!"

"Dolphi!" With Piper slipping in for a hug, she first points to everyone for Boxter, "Here we have Agatha, Ophilia, Mac and Léon!" After she hugs Adolphina, she looks to Léon and, "Just so you know, dear sir, we're gonna be neighbors on the Church Key! Tabula Pasta, it's a passion project of mine, and it's so good to finally meet you!"

Léon is pleasantly surprised, "*Bonjour madame, le plaisir est à moi! Et oui*, we are sharing the liquor license on the key!"

Piper nods, "Yes, at first I was opposed to that arrangement, but now that I crunch the numbers it's a smidge more profitable."

"Oui, madame, the numbers surprised me as well."

"If your menu is anything like at the quinceañera then I believe that my operation will be in serious trouble."

"Madame, we have no crossover, and I dare say we actually complement each other!"

As Piper chats everyone up, Adolphina says, "Mr. Hartcourt."

Boxter smiles, "Boxter, if you please."

Adolphina seems concerned, "Box-ter, you wanted to see us. Is there something you would like to discuss or maybe change?"

"Oh, no, your program is one of the few productions that is in very good standing. In fact, you have asked for no increase in share since its inception, and it is...ridiculously profitable."

"I had this same discussion with Stewie so let's not beat around the bush. Money I got. Stupid amounts I got. Here is how we look at it, this is ad time that we get paid for. Our business gets bigger and bigger each season we are on so, no. IF we take a bigger cut from ad revenue then you got to start charging more for it so, no, we do not want to rock this boat."

Boxter frowns with a huff, "I wish more people had their head on their shoulders as squarely as you."

"So, when are you going to be announced to the production company and subsidiaries? Everybody is talking about it."

"Oh, that...well, Samantha is actually in control of everything in your world. She's the boss, not I."

Adolphina rears back slightly, "Then why is she going around saying you are a dick to work for?"

Boxter gives a little laugh, then, "Oh, that, imagine her going around saying she is large and in charge? Pretty little nymph like that would get nowhere fast. Say she works for me and that I'm a bit of an arse then, well, when on common ground then everybody seems to feel free enough to open up to her, and they have!"

Adolphina blinks and says, "I think I understand."

"Imagine their surprise when my Samael is unveiled as CEO!" He points into the air, "I do hold seat as chairman, but she will be making all the calls going forward. My trust lies in her."

He gestures to the family pouring in to meet them, "The real reason for bringing you here is that the family, my wife and girls to be exact, their secret little pleasure is watching your program and they wanted to invite you up for chowders! We'll be serving grilled bumble

and yabby tails we brought in from the stumps.”

Adolphina wonders, “I’ve heard of yabby tails.”

“These are from my own stock pond. They’re well fed and very yummy! In fact, after harvesting we feed them fresh pineapple!” Noticing a link-up invite, Boxter points to his ear saying, “I must take this. It’s sad to say that Piper and I will not be here for dinner, but Samantha and the family would love to have you!”

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It may be 4:30pm Tuesday afternoon in New York but it’s 7:30am Wednesday morning in Sydney. That would be Sydney down under in Australia—where by comparison it is Wednesday morning, 7:51 local time here in New Sydney on Sapphire! The people here in New Sydney always love counting down with their namesake sister city and, even though they had to wait twenty-one extra minutes past local midnight, it was well worth the wait and a hell of a party to boot.

New Brisbane has to wait until next year for theirs.

The casinos and bars on the Church Key and New Darwin were filled to the gills and, like all of the joint city countdowns of the past, everybody here had a few too many. Joint countdowns average about every four years or so, so it makes it kind of special.

For the life of her, Jessica cannot understand why people get all psyched up and goofy stupid drunk over something as innocuous as a tic mark on a calendar. To her it’s just another day and she realizes that she is the odd-ball thinking this is all kinda lame.

Jessica rings the doorbell to one of the prized south-east corner apartments in the Spike, half a kilometer up and right under her own apartment, it takes almost a minute for the door to open and when it does Cyzk says with surprise, “Jessica!”

She blows past him and steps into the living room, and with the master bedroom doors open she sees Maroochy Dan laying in the bed. She can feel that her eyes are open a crack and watching her.

After closing the door, Cyzk steps up to Jessica while holding a towel around his waist saying, “This is unexpected!”

“Yes, it is, Kacper.” With a simple thought, Cyzk’s eyes roll up into his head, so Jessica pushes against his chest and he falls back into the sectional then slides off onto the floor.

Dan is up in a flash, she rolls out of bed naked, snatches her breezeblock pistol from the nightstand, and charges the door where she suddenly drops to her knees. The muscles along her spine spasm

and her back contorts and twists in excruciating pain.

With a yelp, Dan falls back onto the floor and is unable to move her now paralyzed body. Jessica steps over her and takes a knee between Dan's legs—pulling the weapon from her limp hand.

"You know, for a super-model, you're sure fast on your feet!" Jessica ejects the magazine, does a single hand press-check like a pro, then glances back at Cyzk, "Now I know why you're with Kacper! He's got a gorgeous package..." She tosses the weapon under the bed and flips the magazine under the sectional while saying, "So much so it makes me wanna muscle in on that action...and you can swallow it all the way down?" Jessica stands and nods, "Girl, that's talent!"

As Jessica steps over to reach up on top of a tall cabinet, she makes Dan involuntarily and painfully crawl to the sectional, and with Dan rolling over, her back up against Cyzk, Jessica continues, "So you pull your tongue back? Great tip! I gotta remember that! You know, I'm really into guys, one guy in particular, and sad to say I only have one girlfriend with benefits! Cloé Khumalo, ever hear of her?"

Dan hisses between her teeth, "Bullshit!"

From the top of the cabinet Jessica pulls a remote for the huge television-monitor, and brushes the dust off on her BDU pants, "Well, when have I ever lied to you!"

Jessica flashes into Dan's mind a memory of her giving Cloé head, and with Dan's eyes bugging out, startled by such vivid imagery, Jessica asks, "Convincing...no? How's this!" While pushing buttons on the remote she gives Dan a view of them naked, with Cloé crying in her arms as they kiss, "Happy tears! She gets so emotional...and I find it ironic that my boyfriend gives better head than she does, but ya gotta give her high marks for her many heroic efforts!"

With a subnet linking starting to spool up, Jessica tosses the remote back up on the cabinet while scoping her body out, "You know, where Cloé is like coffee and cream, you're more of a hot coco!"

Dan tries to move, "I wanna kick your ass!"

"Fucken-A, you are badass hot!" Jessica breaths deep, lightly stroking then pinching her own nipples through her t-shirt while saying, "Next time you see me, Coco Puffs." She exhales and breaths, "Feel free to pin me to the nearest wall!" Jessica then mockingly wiggles her hip towards her, "Maybe I'll just cave in or...maybe not?"

Dan hisses with a snarl, "Take that chance now, let me up!"

Jessica crosses her arms and touches her lip saying, "Is this where I tea-bag you? Seriously, I don't want to get somethin' started we can't finish before we, you know...get interrupted!"

Just then Boxter flashes up on the screen, "Hello, my dear Jessica, and how are you this fine New Year's?"

Jessica scrunches up with, "Ever so ducky, babe!"

"Major General, Dan. The Black Swan herself!"

Dan glances down at her naked body, then throws her head back and almost sobs at the indignity of the moment, "Please!"

Jessica takes the towel Cyzk dropped and pulls it over her body, "Better? I prefer eyein' the menu, but that's me."

Boxter huffs a laugh, "One should strive to maintain a modest dignity in all ways, especially at your lofty station, General."

Dan lifts her head up and says, "You're Chancellor Hartcourt."

"Pro tem, for the now." He breaths deep, "You know who I am but you do not know...who I am."

Dan almost snarls, "Riddles?"

"Not quite, my dear. Just a statement of fact."

"I take it you want something."

Boxter nods, "Yes, your life."

"Stop bashing me ears and get on with it!"

"Oh, no-no-no! We want to...preserve your life." Dan looks confused so he adds, "There are so many miss-understandings in our world that we want to extend a little, as one may say, olive-branch to you before things start to get out of hand. Which will be soon."

"What the bloody fuck do you want!" Dan nods towards Jessica and points out, "She's one of them!"

"Aaand, one of us." Boxter nods, "You'd be surprised how flexible and far reaching loyalty can be for some. How inviolable and unyielding it becomes when working towards a...mutual greater good."

"What do you want?"

"With the new chancellor coming on board next month, along with General Bristol at the helm—"

"That bang-fuck!"

"Yes, exactly my point." He then gives his stock evil-wicked frown, "See, it's saddens me to say there are going to be many attempts to rid us of both, especially to frag Bristol. Now, his son, who is remarkably competent at field command, will not turn on his father so they will steer clear of him. For the young Bristol I do not need to intercede but, for you, dear Maroochy, parties similarly injured as you

will be shortly, will actively seek your...assistance to reach him."

Jessica urges her to, "Listen up now!"

Boxter adds, "Your competence is a threat to Bristol and he plans to sideline you, to bury you deep under the general staff. Specifically, he is considering a bloody-colorful procurement slot for you, and I know this for a fact."

"I lose my field commission?"

"Oh yes, my dear. Those orders have been drafted."

Dan is pissed and snarls, "That nob!"

"See, General, winning this war is an illusion. I already know we are destined to lose to the Annex. Long ago that die was cast and what can we say of command but, by their fruits ye shall know them. This time next week you too will be able to come to that foregone conclusion without our guidance. Point being, I can extend to you an alternative to budgets and specs and pinching pennies—oh my!"

Dan's eyes roll up and her seething rage towards Bristol shines through, "I'm listening, Mr Hartcourt."

"Might I suggest you resign your commission and come hunker down with me in Security Services, for the time being. When this all blows over in a couple of years you will be instrumental in helping me pick up the pieces. What say you?"

"What if I say no?"

"If you don't take me up on my offer, when they fail to frag ol' bushy-tailed Bristol, and they will fail, he will find a way to implicate you and others. He seeks to rid general staff of those he perceives as threats in the worst possible way." Boxter then gives his signature evil-grin, "Aaaand firing squads are most effective towards that end."

Dan blinks and, "I need to think about this."

"To make a clean getaway you must resign your commission before Friday, noon. You do not want to be in the cross-hairs during the blame game that follows. Heads are going to roll after Friday, lots of them, and it won't be the ones who deserve said blame."

Jessica urges her to, "Think fast, Coco Puffs! In our post war world of holdin' hands, workin' together and kumbaya, if you smarten up and submit your resignation before the shit-flinging-n-fan fest comin' this very weekend—I can guarantee that you will get what you want more than anything else in the world."

Jessica is pointing towards Boxter who smiles warmly at Dan, "Of our post war goals, *you* will lead the charge against...the kOri."

Dan's eyes bug out and she asks, "We're not playing, right?"

"Oh, most assuredly, it's fangs out." Boxter nods, "Think fast, General Dan. Time is a luxury you do not possess!"

Jessica asks, "We done here?"

Boxter smiles, "Yes, my dear. I think we covered everything. Will I be seeing you in a short bit?"

"Yup!"

Jessica has pulled a small EMP node from her pocket, and now holding it out at arms distance she hits the button. All electronic and digital tech is smacked down and goes black. Unlike the military PBDi units, personal PBDi units cache and write after 20 minutes.

Realizing her body is back under her control, Dan pulls herself to her knees beside Cyzk, and as the devices in the room start to boot back up Jessica shrugs, "Your cache just got fried."

Dan says, "Thanks for cleaning up."

"No prob! And to cover my tracks with Kacper I gave him a memory from my boyfriend, Josav, sandwiched between me and Cloé. Yeeea, I finally gave in! Tried to tell Cloé it was more work than it was worth, but hey?" Jessica starts to walk out, "Don't be asking uncle Kacper 'bout it 'cause it'll make him feel unclean."

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It's now 4:45pm and Maria and Cricket are here and waiting for Boxter to finish with Jessica. Maria already knows what's going on there and this is the only way Jessica could get to Maroochy Dan. Yes, the Major General would be a huge asset for them if they can bring her around and keep her alive, so Jessica had her blessings.

Offering her the kOri was a concessional lure she could afford.

Maria was thoroughly surprised to find her mother and family here rubbing elbows with the Harcourt's, but she knew Adolphina was going to co-host tonight with Mikhal Popov, and they all met Piper last November, and Maria was going to pick Boxter and Piper up here at the hotel so—she shouldn't be so damned surprised!

What threw Maria for a loop, and shouldn't have, was to hear that Boxter, knowing who the Honey Badgers were gunning after, purloined Stewart Myers' majority production holdings by leveraging an investment portfolio to contractually swap non-voting proxy-shares for Myers' controlling shares if he were to die!

Gee, who could have seen that coming?

After hugging her family, Maria and Cricket were introduced to Boxter and Piper's daughters. Their oldest, also named Piper, is an exact carbon-copy of her mother in every way except the gray. The next three were uniquely their own people, but the fifth and youngest one was striking to say the least! It requires some mental gymnastics to envision this but, if you take our chiseled-weathered venerable Boxter and trans-morph him into a young twenty-something energetic female go-getter, then Samantha nails it!

Maria instantly sees the one difference—the underlining primal rage that drives Boxter is not here in Samantha. She has his wolf-like predatory focus for damned sure, but that righteous malevolence that courses through his veins is missing and probably for the better.

Boxter has suddenly switched his office walls from occluded to transparent, a common sign the occupant is now approachable, and as Maria slips away to see him she runs into Sheron Pilliod by his now open door, "I was hoping I'd stumble into you, Trooper."

Sheron nods, "Happy New Year's, Marshal Ramirez."

"It's Maria when off the clock but, unfortunately, we're talking business. We are rehydrating Mook but you and Clint turned down bumps to staff-sergeant because you both wanna fly fighters?"

Sheron shrugs, "You can't do both."

"Oh, yes you can."

"Depends on who you work for."

"You work for me. Everybody works for me." Maria shifts to a more relaxed posture saying, "See, you turning down a promotion like that is, like, okay only nut cases and narcissistic rich kids can think in terms like that."

Sheron huffs with a smirk, "Piss off, ya wristy."

"Okay!" Maria snickers, then, "Okay, how 'bout the two of you step-up and I guarantee you get your wings but...Cajun Rules?"

"They don't apply." Sheron smiles thinking, "See, everybody wants to be an ace, but after a week on the island I learn that spooky, we love Thumper! We are in rapture with Thumper."

Maria nods, "For CAS, we have great pilots."

"Ya think? Twice on the island my ass was in a sling an' those guys *somehow* managed to sneak in and got me out of a fucking jam. I really, *really* wanna make that kind of difference."

"Yea, I was right, nut cases and rich kids." Maria glances at Boxter then back at Sheron, "Just so you know, Zazueta is bringing a training company of Sikhs. It's the last cycle from Cue Ball and he was

the one straight up asking for you and Clint."

Sheron nods, fully convinced that what she said is a half-truth at best, "Okay, since it's Zaz, okay."

"Help me get Mook back up on its feet, get this company up to speed and you'll be on track to get those wings." Maria gives her a hug, "Happy New Year, Sheron."

With Sheron gone, Maria steps up to Boxter and shakes his hand, with him asking, "Is this...Zazueta a good leader?"

Maria nods, "He's smart, aggressive, takes the right risks and where he gets all his luck is beyond me?"

"All luck runs out eventually."

Maria shrugs, "Yea, I keep telling myself that."

"Before we go, I was wondering if what we are going to watch tonight is going to...change what we currently have going on?"

Maria shakes her head, "Nope!"

"That's good to hear." Boxter nods and then asks, "You took Fifty-Two off the leash. Eight informed me."

"You're wondering if that was smart or not?"

"You read my mind."

"No...no, probably not, but I had to take that chance."

"Like tonight."

Maria looks him in the eye and wonders, "We are not working together but...in a way we are."

"Common goals?"

"Yea..." Maria dares to ask, quietly, "why?"

Boxter digs deep and, "It's complicated."

"Jessica says she can trust you."

"Jessica can see me for who I am." He points up into the air, "To risk sounding cliché, blessed are those who believe without seeing and, yet, this is something you cannot afford to do by a long shot. For your peace of mind, do not turn your back to me." He then gives a little chuckle with pursed lips, "Stabby-stabby!"

Maria smiles with a suppressed laugh, "Well, just so you know here's a belated Christmas present for ya, cupcake five-eight-five is on standby. That Sword of Damocles thingy I told you about when I first met you? Remember?"

"How could one forget?"

"It's on permanent standby. We shut it down."

Boxter thinks about it, "Most appreciated, but is that wise?"

"No, probably not, but I've been taking crazy chances lately."

Maria smiles, "It's funny how you had a squad shadowing him."

"People originally assigned to him, to protect him. We wanted Kip to know we were there to...help." Boxter gives a little laugh, "It's a knee slapper how that beard and all the flowing hair and business casual, how...nobody has been able to peg him! For the life of me I never would have thought that possible?"

"He is the only reason FIS has not fallen apart, yet."

"Cricket Washington, she has proven to be...savvy. As for the rumor mill surrounding Wilkinson's replacement, well, what can I say about that but...your choice there is very bold."

Maria nods, "We need to get going."

"Yes." With Box shutting off his lights from the desk, he says, "Thank you for keeping Kip out of sight in plain sight but, truth be told, when this is over we may...want him back."

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81

sunk cost fallacy

LCTN: U-TURN/GORE POINT (Orion cluster)
CORD: SAO-113161.04012 (321pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-1-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 00:47zulu

For a lowly east side gang-banger, Maria has come far indeed!

The leaders and entourage of delegates for the most powerful countries on Earth, namely the United States, Russia, China, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Japan and Australia are here. It was reported this was to be an Orion Nebula sightseeing junket on Air Force One and, for all intents and purposes, it was.

The demo was a resounding success but you couldn't tell that by all the long faces of the people wondering around the floor of the stadium—at the very bottom of the dish side of the Carrie Nation. Everyone here is still in a palpable state of shock by what they just saw a half an hour ago, as well as by what they are standing inside, so chalk one up on the big win column for lil' Maria!

Everyone is milling around trying to digest everything as well as trying to swallow what Maria has just dished out to them, and has generously offered to them equally through the CXi, which she says has changed its status from an *initiative* to an *institute*.

Through the transparent floor below their feet they can see six brand new Trung class platforms, as well as a carousel like space station holding twelve more of these ships near completion—seven of those slated for the CXi at no out of pocket cost—and all this at the tail end of an off the beaten path compound dual-binary star system.

A system outside the thousand light year limitation zone.

The main star, what the Annex calls U-Turn, is the largest and scorchingly bright star of a binary pair that is over 1,800au away. Surrounded by a veiled nebula is the local dim binary pair that consists of a red dwarf called One-Eighty and a brown dwarf named Gore Point,

so if someone from the SA happens to be talking about U-Turn then it's actually Gore Point they are talking about. Now, normally one would think that the Annex would be in violation of the UN treaty but, splitting hairs, the Annex did not set up any permanent planet-side colony, base or settlement which would violate that treaty so, basically they would be in the clear if it were to be put to the question.

Everyone's done it, it's just that the Annex went all next level.

There is nothing around U-Turn worth a tinker's damn but here behind the dark nebula, and out of sight from the partitioned zone, are the red and brown dwarfs, and hundreds of rocks, asteroids and planetesimals spinning around them in crazy-ass orbits. There is enough complex raw materials in these objects to build thousands of the Trung platforms, and to do so all they have to cart in is stuff like solvents, urea, acids, petroleum and water which is easy to fetch.

Today, where the UN was expressly not invited to this shindig, Cricket and Paris are here representing the FIS with Ranch Kiplinger along for the ride, but what threw President Mofid and members of the US delegation for a loop was Chancellor pro tem, Hartcourt and his wife in attendance. They know the full story behind Boxter since he and Mofid worked together at the UN, and now with the Honey Badgers on the sly, yet him being here makes them feel all kinds of uneasy because Maria and Boxter are at war—yet here those two are shaking hands and bro-hugging as if they were old school chums! Go fig?

The amazing thing to note is that during the demo, when everyone else was in a state of jaw-dropping shock, Boxter and Piper were applauding—even giggling at the sight of Betelgeuse exploding. Anyone else in Hartcourt's position would have wiggled out over such a sudden and massive change in power dynamics, but President Mofid realizes that Boxter correctly senses how this does not change much of anything between the SCC and the SA.

The war will continue unabated...

With Charles Washington and Aat remaining behind, to join in the discussion on the CXi, the bulk of the Nefer Key delegation, which consists of Luc, Lilith, Robert and Jacqui Graves, move to the stadiums mid-point egress ramp with Boxter, Piper and Scott following Maria.

Jessica steps out of the portal to the ramp wearing an armed JACC with canopy occluded, and weapons consisting of a penta gun in 4.16mm on her left forearm, a BR1-M2 in a tactical sling on the right shoulder, and as Scott holds the group at the foot of the ramp, Maria steps up to Jessica who asks, "How are ya feelin'?"

Maria looks to make sure the others are out of earshot, then back up at Jessica while nodding, "Pleasantly surprised."

Jessica nods in return, "Guess you won this round."

"You were right." Maria shrugs, crosses her arms and touches her lips in wonderment, "This is all so surreal. Who'duv thought?"

"You've sure come an impossibly long way for a little clover."

Maria starts laughing, "Yea, ya got me there!"

Jessica nods at her, "Single-handedly you...*you* have changed *everything* and I have to say, I am proud of you."

"Not changed yet, I still have to cinch this deal."

"Don't hard sell it. They all want what you offered."

"Okay, and thanks for taking Box and Piper back for me." Maria nods towards Eight, Copper, Peanuts and Cap on the other side of the stadium, "The girls can yank their chains if I need it."

Jessica pats her shoulder, "Go win 'em over easy, babe."

Maria turns and at the foot of the ramp she shakes hands with the four Nefer Key delegates and the Hartcourt's, and as she walks away, towards where Carrie, Mooch and Snoopy are being introduced to President Mofid by Nancy Yoon, Scott motions for the six of them to follow him up the ramp. Stepping past Jessica, with her canopy still occluded they have no idea who is inside the fighting suit.

Walking past her, she turns and starts to follow them.

In silence, Scott leads them all through the concourse towards an elevator bank where there is already a lift waiting for them. They pile in and Scott presses the button to the first level flight deck, and even though the lift is fast, it still took almost a minute to reach it.

Stepping out into the elevator lobby, they turn and walk out to the flight deck that is under the central hub of the Carrie Nation. Walking past the massive Air Force One, the Super Guppy model of Boeing's Trident Star Clipper series, it has three times the capacity of the old 747 Jumbo Jet. Sitting beside Air Force One are four white USAF, F308 Bulldog fighter-escorts, and sitting by them is an HWG83, Javalina drop ship tagging along in case of an emergency.

Heading towards Jessica's HWG101, she flies ahead and lands by the ladder. Walking up, both Luc and Robert are almost tripping over themselves as they bodily turn around to look at everything.

Scott stops at the ladder and motions them to, "Grab a seat!"

As they climb up, Jessica gestures for Boxter to hang back with her. In the ship, Lilith and Jacqui take the left rearward facing seats across from Piper, while Luc and Robert take the right rearward facing seats across from Scott.

As they buckle up, Scott says to Luc, "I am still Abeeku."

Luc does not look up while adjusting the belts, "Jason, you and now Zach. Every one of you who joined the Annex, turned on us."

Scott shrugs, "Not exactly, but we'll talk after the Alter."

Luc looks up and, "We have a lot to talk about."

Scott shakes his head, "Not really, but what's going to flip your lid is realizing that our loyalty...never wavered."

Luc just shakes his head, "If you say so."

Scott's eyes stab at Luc like lasers, "We told you not to have us give 'em some nebulous ultimatum but would you listen? Then you came around sticking your nose in *their* fucking business and got your ass handed back to ya! Then, all butt hurt, you took that God damned Fly Swatter out and did, what, twenty-seven test shots and you didn't think it was going to get back to them? Seriously?"

Luc points out, "We wanted it to get back to them."

Scott points at Luc, "Today was your doing! This is on you."

Luc's nostrils flair out with a little huff, so Robert says to Scott, "I've been tryin' to tell 'im that all along." He looks towards Luc and smiles big, "You gonna listen now?"

Luc asks him, "Do I gotta choice?"

Scott reaches deep to pull out his old mixed African/Jamaican accent, "Luc, why change your style now, *mon?*"

Across the isle, Boxter steps up to Piper and thumbs towards the cockpit stations behind him, going, "Hon, Scarab just invited me to ride along with her as the WiSO!"

"Oh, dear, go...go have fun!" Boxter leans in and gives her a sweet little kiss, after which she waves him off, "Toddle off, now!"

With the ship starting to roll forward into the elevator-airlock station, and as they buckle up, Piper looks over at Lilith and Jacqui with a smile, "Alpha Orion goes boom!" She then gives a wicked little snicker, "Wasn't that smashing, ladies?"

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It's still Tuesday 8:35pm here in New York when they land on top of Boxter's hotel. It took Jessica only a half hour to touch down on the landing pad after jumping from Gore Point, and because they are way ahead of schedule, Jessica takes a quick twenty minutes to go down with Boxter and Piper to say hi to the families. When Jessica

steps out, still in her JACC, she is followed by Scott who stands guard with her BR1 in hand, and he is joined by six ghost droids who deploy from their stowage compartment under the nose. The droids surround the ship with one stepping up the ladder into the passenger area.

In the ship Luc, Lilith, Robert and Jacqui are watching various live video feeds from Times Square including one news report showing their ship landing on the Hotel, and on the feed they can see the droids and Scott outside. On the screen next to it is Mihkail Popov, Adolphina Herrero and their BBC cohorts. Shortly after celebrating the London countdown the story broke on Betelgeuse going supernova right when the BBC was about to close out so, instead of signing off, they put on their news anchor hats and remained on the air to cover it together.

The ninety-second time-lapse video from the Orion Astronomy Outpost will have to suffice until they can process the real time video from the science station that got destroyed, and that will take at least a day for them to clean it up for public consumption.

With Jessica showing up at the penthouse with Boxter and Piper, the Hartcourt's didn't even bat an eye at her in her JACC when they exchanged hugs and kisses. At the other end of the reaction spectrum is her family. The world of the Steel Annex always seemed like a fiction to them, they have never even seen Maria or Jacob in one of these things, and Jessica has always come across as a free spirit with no apparent goals in life, but here she is in one of their super high-tech fighting suits like it was old hat.

After running the Hartcourt gauntlet, Jessica finally reaches Ophilia and Agatha, who is shocked by what she is wearing, so Ophilia asks, "*Mi pequeña roja*, what is up with this?"

Jessica deflects the question, "You guys having a great time?"

"Si! The Hartcourt's are a welcoming, very traditional family!"

Agatha whispers, "You know that Boxter is Chancellor of—"

Jessica nods and cuts her off, "Yes, I know."

Ophilia asks, "We don't understand what's going on?"

"*Mi abuela y mi tia*, the Hartcourt's are our friends and I know they adore the shit outta you two!" She laughs, "And, you can say that Adolphina now works for Samantha."

Agatha laughs, "*Conejito rápido es ella!*"

Jessica nods, "The thing is, Boxter is my friend, and Maria and he have a...a working relationship!" Ophilia and Agatha roll their eyes and laugh at that, so Jessica asks, "Where's Mac and Léon?"

Ophelia shrugs, "Léon cooks—Mac eats!"

Agatha adds, "In the kitchen with the oldest daughter creating a dish for their pasta *restaurant*."

"Give 'em hugs for me. I really gotta run!" Jessica kisses them both and, "I love you guys!"

Charging back through the Hartcourt gauntlet, Jessica reaches the door and stumbles into Samantha last who goes, "Oh my!"

"Hey, Samael, happy New Year!"

Samantha bumps her hip against Jessica's and snickers like Piper, "Ooooooh, murder tech! It's definitely you!"

"It's in season."

Samantha snorts a laugh as she runs her finger over Jessica's armored shoulder, saying, "Well, *mi roja*, in this here thing you can frog march me anytime!"

Both laughing, they give each other a little cheek-kiss, and as Jessica walks away Samantha calls out, "We must do lunch...soon!"

Now at the top of the hotel, stepping out on the landing pad, Jessica suddenly picks up on Samantha's thoughts and realizes that she wasn't kidding about being frog-marched—and then some, and she is aboveboard ravishing, and they are the exact same age, so Jessica shakes her head and quietly mutters to herself with a self-mocking, "Flap your wings...expand your horizons he says."

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It's 5:56pm when they land on top of One-Klick. Jessica slips out of the cockpit and backs up to a bulkhead on the other side of the ladder. While everyone starts to unbuckle from the 5-point harnesses Jessica pops her helmet and points her arms down at a steep angle to her sides. The suit blossoms open and peals down below her waist.

Luc and Robert are eye-struck by the sight of this gorgeous redhead reaching up and pulling her naked body out of the JACC.

No longer the soft buxom teenager they last saw a handful of years ago, Jessica is now lean with muscles rippling under her skin and this exaggerates her hips, full chest and the hourglass taper around her waist. She is so different now they don't recognize her.

From the neck down she looks more like her mother, Nicole.

Jessica can feel their eyes drinking her in so she sighs big while setting the helmet on top of the open cavity of the JACC, saying, "Get your tongues back in your mouths, grandpas!"

Scott steps around the bulkhead and goes, "Hey, Jessie!"

Respectfully not gawking at her naked body, Scott gives her a sideways palm-slap as he steps down the ladder to the landing pad.

Luc and Robert look harder with Luc asking, "Jessica?"

Jessica shrugs, "Yea, I kinda grew up, didn't I!"

Both are visibly startled, and embarrassed, so looking down while they finish unbuckling, Jacqui and Lilith step around the bulkhead as Jessica slips into a thong and her t-shirt with incredible speed.

Jacqui ventures to guess, "You are Jessica?"

"Purdy much!" Jessica says as her head pops up through the t-shirt, then, "So, I take it you're Jacqui?"

"Last time I looked, yea."

Jessica pulls her BDU pants and shoes from her bag hanging on the bulkhead, "They say you're my great-great grandmother but, if you asked me, you don't look a day over thirty."

Jacqui smiles, "Good genes."

With an approving nod, Jessica leans in to give her a hug, then turning to Lilith, "How ya doin' hot stuff?"

Lilith shrugs, "Doin' okay! Today has been an eye-opener."

"Sorry 'bout that."

"Nope! This was inevitable." Lilith then laughs, "I just didn't expect it to be this much of a smack-down!"

"That smackerooni wasn't just for you."

"From the look on all those faces I kinda picked up on that."

With her pants buckled Jessica leans against the bulkhead to slip on her shoes, "With you in the FIS we'll be seeing a lot of each other, Lilith. If you need anything you just say the word! 'kay?"

"How many staff members will I need, you think?"

"Three, maybe three or four of your people? We'll provide security for all of 'em. I'll also assign you one of the clones we call Fifty-Two. Her name is, Fey, and she'll stick to you like glue."

Lilith huffs, "What, is she gonna spy on us?"

Pulling the straps over her shoes, Jessica stands and looks long and hard at her, then nods, "Ya, to be honest, yea. Until you learn how to do things here she'll hold your hands and guide your steps. Everyone is gonna try to get in close and everyone is going to try to use you so we'll be runnin' interference."

"Until the novelty wears off."

"For people it'll wear thin, but never off." She points down as Luc and Robert step up beside them, "So you know, this is Earth and here it's dangerous as fuck for you and the Xhemal so, tonight, if you and Luc approach a place you can't go you'll bump into a ghost droid. We got 'em all over! We also got Secret Service on point in front and walking perimeter, and a bunch of Delta snipers in the hills."

Luc asks, "All that security just for us?"

"Nope, we have the First Lady, Esma Mofid, Victoria from the UK, Caesar and Shiela. It's the same security you'll be getting when coming to Earth after the big reveal...next month maybe?"

Luc asks, "I'll be talking to the UN, right?"

"Yes, but you'll have no mission there. No need to play that political game with you." She points at Luc, "On that note, we'll have to get our lies in order to make sure we're all on the same page!" Jessica looks over at Robert and cracks a little smile, then twirls her hand at him, "Hey Robert...come on, get in here already."

After they hug, Jessica goes, "Let's get up the hill, guys!"

Outside the ship, on top of One-Klick, they can see the entire basin, far into the Pacific Ocean, and where the sky is extremely dark to the east, the sun in the west has blazing red streaks radiating out as it starts to plummet below the far horizon. Lilith and Luc are stopped in their tracks by this sight—their own double red dwarf stars when setting doesn't hold a candle to the intensity they see here.

Jessica prods them to get in the limousine, saying, "Hop on in, you two! Just wait until you see the sunsets on Sapphire."

Outside of One-Klick, when on the street level uphill would be referentially correct but on top of the building it's actually a shallow descending glide path to Monique's. Instead of setting down at the front of the chateau they land on the pad above the main hall.

Piling out of the limo, they walk around the dome over the entrance towards the gas fire pit where they run into Monique standing there with Diego, Connie, Angela, Brie and Mini-Mon. They're looking south-east towards the Orion constellation that is low on the horizon.

Monique tells the girls, "Ladies, the star, Betelgeuse, will be overhead in about three hours, but it will be another five-hundred years for us to see the supernova from this vantage point."

Upon seeing Monique, Jessica calls out to her, "Hey, Monique, sorry we're early. I did contact McElroy."

Monique turns and hides her surprise, "Yes, but we had no details on your arrival time."

"My bad." Jessica notices Mini-Mon and Connie do a slight double-take when they see Luc and Lilith but follow Monique's lead. Angela, on the other hand, runs and hops into Scott's arms. Jessica looks to Diego who glances at the aliens then almost scowls back at her, so Jessica asks Scott, "Can you make the introductions?"

Scott nods, "Sure, go talk to her."

With Diego following Jessica back around the dome to the pad, Angela kisses her father then, as bold as bold can be, she leans out towards Lilith and, "Hey! What's your name, toots?"

Both Lilith and Luc laugh and delight in her fearlessness.

At the pad, Jessica tries to find the words, and with tears welling up in her eyes, because she feels that she's been lying to her sister all this time, Diego puts her hand up and says, "Don't say shit."

Pained, Jessica whispers, "I'm sorry."

Diego goes, "Look, it's stupidly obvious you work for mother. You flyin' all their shit and sneakin' around to talk about shit got old but it wasn't for me to know so I didn't ask. We'll talk later but if you tell me anything—you tell me everything or don't say shit!"

Just then, Seth speaks up beside Diego, "I think it's time."

Startled, Diego jumps, "God damn it! Why do you do that!"

Jessica huffs a laugh as she asks him, "Everything?"

Seth looks up at Diego and, "Yes, spill your guts about you."

Diego looks at Seth and asks, "What about you?"

Jessica points out to Diego, "What I can say about our brother is that I don't talk about him. Maria does not talk about him."

Seth says, "Nobody talks about him because...there is nothing to talk about?" He kisses Diego, "Sorry to disappoint you, Sian."

Diego nods, fully aware that she is not to press further, sees Monique, Angela, Connie, Brie and Mini-Mon heading for the stairs, so she steps off to follow them saying, "Okay then, hurry down!"

With them gone, Jessica turns to Seth, "Ready for this?"

Seth points up in the air saying, "Give me a sec."

Thinking, Seth looks out at nothing in particular, blinks and nods so Jessica finally throws out, "Whaddya doin'?"

"I find it tragic that we can queue up a file set, an entire body of work, a life's work and simply wake up remembering it all."

"What's so bad about that?"

"Okay, for text, reading, fine, but last year I pathed a man's work, a radio personality named Harvey, and what gives me a frowny face is realizing that I did not get to enjoy the media in the medium."

Jessica asks, "The point is?"

"Well, he came to mind just now because, finally I am in close proximity to Luc and...now I know the rest of the story."

"Come again?"

"The missing piece of the puzzle. Let's go chat them up!"

Jessica says, "You're sounding more like Boxter every day."

As they start for the fire pit, Seth asks, "Is that bad?"

"From him it's cool, but from you it's kinda creepy."

"Sorry 'bout that, big sis."

They walk around the dome and Jessica steps up to the fire pit and looks at Luc, "You know the conditions. Ask *no* questions."

Jessica steps aside so that Seth can enter into the glow of the fire pit. He slips in and sits in a non-threatening sideways position to Luc and Lilith. He may be a ten-year-old boy but his beauty makes him seem rather underwhelming, that is until he opens his mouth.

Seth first looks to Robert and Jacqui sitting across from him, "Hello grandmother and grandfather. I'm very pleased to finally meet you. I had a thousand questions but now that you are here...I already have my answers so there is no need to even ask now! You've had very colorful-fascinating lives but we are here for Luc and his people. So, we'll get to the huggies and talkies when we take you down to meet the family." Seth turns to the two aliens, "Hello, Lilith...Luc."

Luc quietly says, "Hello, Seth."

"Ever hear of a...sunk cost fallacy, no? This conversation may illuminate that, conceptually. The Nefer Key have, for one million and eight-hundred thousand years, worked incrementally yet diligently to create...well, me! You couldn't achieve it with your own species so you dabbled with it in ours. Problem is, Jessica and I were unforeseen accidents. See, your genome had all the right elements of telepathy and acute premonition, but your eugenic practices preceding this effort had so homogenized your bloodlines to the point where you eradicated actual uniqueness and a key element. That being aggression."

Luc points out, "Our males have aggressive traits."

"Very much so, but when that trait flips back into the female population they are prohibited from breeding. Isn't that right, Lilith?"

Lilith nods and gives a bitter, "Yes."

"Truth be told, with aggression comes things like curiosity and progress which is something your species has failed to embrace. You'd create and sit on something where we humans think of it as a spring board towards the next big thing. Case in point, quantum particle generators. You are still on what we call gen-one where we humans are on gen-four and are bypassing gen-five for gen-six! What is the size of a three-story building for you is now the size of a beach ball for us. From the demo tonight you were forced to come to grips with the fact that...our progress can be shocking." Seth sneers ever so slightly, "Do you know the one thing that hurt your people most when you became a technological society, what, two million years ago?"

Luc shrugs, making sure his response is not in the form of a question, "At this point I couldn't begin to venture a guess."

"Oh no, *you do know*." Seth leans in and, "Here is a spoonful of sugar before I give you the bitter pill. Your species is at the precipice. You are at the threshold of a golden age, but to grasp and hold onto that future you have to do so blindly...in the dark."

"That is not what we worked for."

"It is what you get."

"I am curious as to what the thing was that hurt us."

"C-Section." Everybody there recoils slightly, not expecting that, so Seth elaborates, "Motherhood was a death sentence before learning of the Caesarean procedure. Before technology males and females worked together equally, harmoniously and, like us humans, sexual contact is a form of entertainment however, females controlled pregnancy by manipulating caloric intake. If they ate at normal levels, fertilized eggs would not mount the uterine wall. On the other hand, if they were to more than double nutrient intake, and fucked their brains out, and continued to eat big to term, when the day of emergence came the little ones would claw their way out through the abdominal walls. As this event approached the other females of the tribe would begin to lactate, and it was up to them to nurse the litter of anywhere from five to nine as the mother herself...slowly dies from the trauma and blood loss. Lingering days or maybe a week even?"

Jessica wonders aloud, "The six to one ratio."

"Yes, my sister, and the direct result of saving the life of the mother is the formation of a matriarchal caste that rules the Nefer Key tyrannically through the guise of kindness and conformity. Why our Lilith here will never bear children in their society is because she is an outlier. She is independent and a free thinker so...she becomes a dead end in their eyes. You see, because of your exceedingly long lives to start with, increased fivefold with the technology you possess,

the Nefer Key now has an expressed fifty-eight to one female to male ratio, but that number is solely based upon dedicated breeding stock." Seth glances at Lilith, "This does not include the uncounted and marginalized three-hundred and twenty-one outlier females to each male who, just like Lilith, lose all access to males—not to mention the exclusion from high social standing awarded for child bearing."

Luc quietly says, "We were sitting on a powder keg."

"Yes, female intimacy as a stopgap is common for all castes but for the outliers it fell far short. For Prima to bring in human males to pacify them faced little opposition. You see, Prima was the missing puzzle piece." Seth nods towards Luc, "She took the most aggressive male of her progeny, twelve generations down, and coached *you* into becoming a non-threatening emo soy-boy par excellence. With her life coming to an end, when she chose you to inherit her office nobody from the tippy-top risk-aversion caste batted an eye. None of them wanted the job and to them you were utterly controllable...oopsie!" Seth sits back and, "You are here at the helm by her design. See, she had the sight, not with the clarity I possess, but she had it so it begs to be asked, why-oh-why didn't she share?"

"I believe you'll be telling me that right now."

Seth nods, yes, "I call it the *prescience falsification paradox*. It doesn't roll off the tongue like the...*oh fuck, don't ask shit paradox*, but it'll have to do!" With them chuckling, Seth shrugs, "I hate some lexicon, like in business, *strategic* is back in vogue, and in the sciences the word *singularity* has been folded and spindled and cocked-up out of proper context, and far enough to lose all substantive meaning but, here, the only elucidation available to me that works is *paradox*."

Lilith smiles, "You are a funny little guy!"

Luc counters with, "I'd say he's a funny little asshole."

Seth shrugs, "Considering what I'm about to say, I'd have to side with Luc here." Seth leans in again with a small card in his hand, "By your nature your species has developed an almost pathological risk avoidance. What you are faced with is a paradox of such an insidious nature that if one were to inform you of a perceived outcome—it would immediately falsify said outcome, and it only gets worse for each iteration! Follow-on alternate outcomes never improve on themselves, and you cannot dig yourself out of this hole once it starts. It's so bad that to even ask a specific enough question—that act in itself will negate the currently known outcome before it is revealed."

Without even thinking, Luc blurts out, "Why!"

Where everyone catches their breath, Seth raises the card and turns it over for them to see—in hand written text, *Why?*

"The answer to your *question* is that back then, Prima could see us sitting here now." Seth hands Luc the card, "The choices made today were forced on you, but how are you going to fare on your own? How about a story!" He looks towards the fire, "My sister and I waited years to see our mother die. We knew the exact moment and we saw it so many times looking for a way around it but...there wasn't one." He turns to look at Luc, "We could have stopped it, easy, but how does one reconcile the fact that, as a child, I manipulated events to make damned sure that our mother was delivered to that end. She was the one thing in this universe my sister and I loved more than anything else so, it beggars the mind as to...what brought us to that choice?"

Where Luc keeps his mouth shut, Lilith has a sadness in her voice when she says, "That must have been difficult."

"No, Lilith, the choice was elementary. When faced with the prospect that the end of a single life was pivotal to changing the course of the war and saving billions of lives, well, it was all too easy! Excruciatingly easy." Seth peers into Luc, "See, it's all about choices. The ugly truth is that the Nefer Key is encumbered, handicapped you might say, by a mentally-crippling all consuming...fear."

Luc blinks, looks away in thought, then back to Seth he says, "The feeling I get is that *you want us* to reach that golden age."

Seth hangs on this word, "Desperately."

Luc nods, "We got a lot to work on."

"Lilith." Seth looks over at her and smiles, "You've now come to the end of your quest."

Lilith says with a sad quiver, "I want to see my husband."

Seth nods and says, "While we go down and meet the family, dine and enjoy New Year's, Jessica will take you where you need to go. I already know it will be short and sweet so hurry back! Everyone here will be dying to meet you."

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In the Blue Room, the ornate bedroom at the top of the stairs by the main hall, Jessica is reclining on the bed with pillows bunched up around her. She motions for Lilith to curl up to her side.

As Jessica wraps her arms around Lilith, "Where we're going I'm an admin, so just clear your mind and let me pull you in. You'll automatically synch up to the model we made of you."

"We're going to your Stone Garden, right?"

"Yep, from here! That's the idea."

Lilith looks up at Jessica, "What am I going to say to him?"

Jessica gives her that look, "I'm not the one to ask, but I'm sure the right words will come to you. Now relax." As Jessica settles in she sniffs the air, "You smell like...cinnamon and cookie dough!"

Lilith gives a stressed little snort, "Sorry, I need to bathe."

"No, you're fine, honey! You smell good...you do."

She gives a sad smile, "Jay said that a lot."

After a long minute Jessica says, "You can open your eyes."

Lilith opens them and, instead of the cobalt blue draperies of the bedroom, she is on the moonlit beach near Bob and Michal's glass chalet. Jessica puts up a finger and the sound of the breaking waters start to build up with her asking, "Can you hear me?"

Lilith nods, "Yes. Are we close?"

Jessica points to the chalet, "That's my grandfather's home. On the other side is Field Marshal Kay's home."

"Where that noise is coming from?"

"It's New Year's!" Jessica shrugs, "I can't seem to get into the swing of things, but that's me. Here they have parties that count down with New Sydney, London and New York, and Field Marshal Kay celebrates them all." She puts a hand out to Lilith, "Ready?"

"I've been waiting too long...for this." With a deep breath, Lilith takes Jessica's hand, "Thank you for being here for me."

Walking past Bob and Michal's chalet they approach the party. With a bon fire, BBQ pit, horseshoes, volleyball, open bar, and the sand peppered with ice chests and Tiki torches everywhere, this is a perfect beach party setting for the two hundred attending. Outside the house they have monitors receiving the broadcasts from Times Square, with the largest one showing the Cover Girls performing live.

Everyone here has a data-tag that anyone can pull up on a whim, and everyone knows Jessica here as an admin, but when they see the beautiful gray-skinned Lilith, her huge-black eyes twinkling by the light of the Tiki torches, the people talking, partying and playing are stopped in their tracks—in awe by the sight of her.

They didn't have to go far. In the light of the distant bon fire Lilith sees the familiar silhouette of her husband, Jason. She looks at Jessica and lets go of her hand so she can close the distance on her own, and Jason is clueless that Lilith is approaching him from behind.

Now just yards away, seven decades of pent up emotions and loss percolate to the surface, compelling Lilith to simply say, "asshole!"

Bob and Michal were talking to Jason, and when they hear Lilith they stop and stare at her, but Jason is still oblivious so she starts shaking and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, Lilith shouts over the din of the party, "Asshole!"

Jason turns and is shocked by the sight of her, "Lilith?"

Unable to breathe, her face now contorts wildly as she finds in her the spare breath to shriek, "ASSHOLE!"

Jason hurries to her where she pounds on his chest while wailing and screeching through the tortured cries, "Why...why...WHY!"

Lilith crumples into his arms, and with seventy-years of loss, emptiness, abandonment and agony pouring out with each tormented sob, this hits everyone who is witness to it like a sack of bricks.

Standing beside Jessica, Seth taps his chest while saying, "You know, for closure, this kinda gets ya right there doesn't it?"

Startled, Jessica looks at him and, "What are you doing here!"

"Multitasking? Angela has got everybody there laughing their butts off, so I thought I'd come sneak a peek with you!"

Jessica, wiping away her own tears with her hands, asks him pointedly, "How did you get in here?"

Seth looks up at her, "I'm me, or did you forget?"

"Asshole!"

"That appears to the theme here this eve." And now that Lilith has been relegated to simply crying her guts out, Seth observes, "You know, there's a certain elegance, a raw beauty we can distill from the sentient expression caused by tragedy and despair."

Jessica rolls her eyes, "You *are* an asshole."

"Well, Jess, by default I've become a connoisseur to tragedy. An appreciation not by choice so...I wouldn't hold it against me."

"Okay, I'm being the asshole." Jessica nods, and after a few seconds she looks at Seth who is looking at her, up and down, so she asks, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Can't decide if it'll be dusty rose or charcoal pinstripe, but that depends on if you want to be the maid of honor or the best man?" He points at her, "That is, *the best guy* if you opt for that job!"

"For who?" Seth gestures to Lilith, so she asks, "Too who?"

Seth closes his eyes and projects into Jessica's mind an image of Lilith at the alter in a wedding dress—with Syleste officiating and an Adonis as the groom, so Jessica goes, "Oh, my God...gorgeous!"

Seth nods saying, "And a stunning bride she'll be."

Snapping out of it Jessica goes, "Yes, but I meant the groom!"

"Thank you! That's after my up-n-comin' Quasimodo stage."

"Eeeeeww!" Jessica turns to Seth, with a look of surprised horror, so she comically starts to brush her hands off on her t-shirt while going, "No-no-no-no, bad thoughts! That's not right!"

Seth cracks up, laughing, "I guess impure thoughts of your little brother doesn't set well with you!" He then sighs big and points out, "But did you not think Diego made for a fantastic maid of honor?"

"That was her!" Thinking about it she says, "Yes, she did."

"That's good, because she'll be your maid of honor too!"

"No, don't tell me who! I do NOT want to know."

"It's just as well 'cause *the who* would fuck with your head, but what you do want to know is...is it gonna be worth it or not."

Jessica wonders and asks, "Will it be the right thing for me?"

"This I can answer and the answer is yes. Obviously, we both will be building alliances by getting married but, just so you know, we both will marry who we marry out of love. Surprised?"

Jessica nods, yes, "That's good to know."

"You know what just came to mind?" Seth huffs a little laugh, "Whatever would I do with myself if I were actually...happy?"

She nudges him, "You'll figure it out."

"Of course." Then with a little spark of excitement, Seth says, "I see you gave Lilith, Fey to work with? How unexpected!"

Concerned, Jessica looks at him, "What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just that she's packing, and in the Nefer Key spirit of collectivist sharing her stuff...will be passing her around."

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82

you gotta be shitting me

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-3-FRIDAY
TIME: 04:01zulu (local 14:18mst)

In Maria's new north-east corner office, near the top of the Spike, Jacob and Vossler have joined the meeting Maria was wrapping up with Scott, Bill and Glados, "Good, you guys are here!"

Vossler asks, "What's up?"

Maria shrugs, "I have to give Luc über-props for being a real quick study. Since the DPKO op for Fifty-Two has terminated—"

Jacob snorts, "Yea, I hear the under-secretary was livid!"

"Ya think?" Maria chuckles, "Well, he suggested we bypass talking to the UN altogether! Cut them out and invite who we want from Earth to his FIS speech here—then do a diplomatic tour of those countries there, and I have to say he's making a great point."

Bill huffs, "That'll get a rise outta 'em."

Scott nods, "Exactly!"

Jacob asks, "Media tour?"

Glados says, "I don't know about that yet."

Maria adds, "Glad and I were talking about it. We may want to put that off until shit settles down. The Xhemal were primitive but the Nefer Key are not, so people will need time to acclimate."

Vossler nods big, "That sounds like a good idea."

Maria throws out, "We got Jessica and du Conde working with Luc on sweeping the last two centuries under the carpet, and figurin' out how to spin the *probatus* gospel truth to the public."

Bill says, "Yup, best git our lies in order!"

"Also, in case you all haven't heard, du Conde has tendered his resignation, well, more of a fuck you to the UN and walked. I hear the French president is rippin' pissed, but who gives a shit what he thinks? Anyway, Tristin is comin' to the FIS to work as the hand-holdy liaison between the FIS and the Nefer Key—whose job is to actually smooth the hackles of the Nefer Key back home for Luc."

With all of them looking at each other, wondering what to say, Maria asks with wide eyes, "Can any of you think of a better nob for the job?" With them shaking their heads, *no*, Maria nods and smiles, "Good, 'cause we're runnin' with it! Okay, before you go, Vince Stiller has gone full retreat and Green is now heading Paper Cuts and, before you freak, it's all delegation so he keeps the little league team."

With sighs of relief all around, Bill says, "That's good to hear!"

Maria adds, "Stiller is on permanent leave for us in the civilian market and is representing the five houses. He'll file the action this morning and the first hurdles will be an attempt to quash followed by motions for change of venue. You know, all the standard bullshit."

Vossler asks, "What's up his sleeve?"

"He'll settle for New Sydney as the neutral venue but approve of their judge *only* if it's all under the standardized uniform rules of civil procedure—which, except for a few tweaks, are the same as their rules! Discovery will start in February, and our document production is already packaged for them with a nice little bow on top. That in itself will be like a curb-stomp to the teeth so...who knows what will happen after they get that? Okay, *vámonos!*" She points to Scott and Bill, "You two, I'll see you at U-Turn! Glados, you got the Key!"

With those three stepping out, Maria says, "You two, park it!" They sit and she asks Vossler, "Training, what are our options?"

Vossler shrugs, "Our options are shit until the war is over. There is a nice little cryo-nightmare of an ice cube out past Second Hand, but it slips out of the neutral partition in twenty-four months so there's no point in setting up shop there yet. We won't be able to hide it and they'll just bomb it out of spite. Post war it would be fantastic to bounce them between there and Led Myach."

"What ideas you got until then?"

"How 'bout New Darwin?" In confusion, Maria and Jacob look at each other, so Vossler elaborates, "Look we train our peeps just like theirs for the first six months so I say set up shop by New Darwin for the now! We'll drill and run patrols around there and go blow up shit on Black Stump when it's our days."

Maria looks at Jacob, puts a finger up, then turns her chair a

quarter way around to look out over the sunny mid-day sky to the north. After a few quick seconds of thought she asks the sabre-tooth tiger skull sitting on the credenza, "Whaddya think, Smiley?"

Jacob laughs, "Whaaa?"

Maria looks at Jacob and shrugs big, "My sounding board!" She nods towards Vossler, "Okay, you run with that, and work with Hershey on the config since it's his gig, but you lose the office."

"Hu?" He waves it off, "You can have it!"

"No, dude, I like this one way better, but the whole point of you being here as a chief done fizzled and went out the window when they didn't take the Church Key! We'll find new digs for you when we get back 'cause today you'll be going with us to U-Turn for a little consult. We need ya to help figure out how to unfuck their sitch since losing DM Jones who was in command of their recon company."

Obviously pissed, Vossler asks, "Why me?"

"You know Taiji better than anybody! We'll figure everything else out when we get back. Who knows, maybe you'll move in next door? An' as neighbors we can swap cat pics and recipes!"

Vossler laughs, "Oh, I sure as fuck hope not!"

Laughing, Maria points to the door, "Bill and Scott already know you'll be riding with 'em. See you at U-Turn, babe!"

Vossler stands and, "Maybe I just wanna go back to being an everyday retread like before? What about that?"

"Anything is possible, but you're keepin' Ground Round for the time being." Maria waves bye to him, "Toodles!"

With Vossler stepping out, Jacob asks, "Does he suspect?"

Maria shrugs, "You'd think it would be obvious?"

"Not with you, and you know that."

"Good, it'll surprise the fuck outta 'im." Squirming in her chair she puts a hand out, "So, Pete wanted me to tell you he resigned his commission. He walks as a full-bird with twenty-five years."

"He was talking about that."

"Well, it's a done deal now and he agreed to come work for me in the CXi. He'll be taking a leadership role on the ground floor."

"And you were gonna tell me when?"

"First opportunity like...now?"

"Oh, okay!"

"Shit, I just found out yesterday! We've been busy, dude." Maria squirms a little more as she asks, "Is there anything you can think of we missed before we head out to U-Turn?"

Jacob shrugs, "I dunno? We just gotta wait and see how it all unfolds—and, thanks for giving SEAD back to me at the last minute!"

"Your people have the most experience at it."

"The SEAD cherry on top of CAP and CAS!"

"The air over that AO is your baby, and it was the original plan! Did they say it when you threw SEAD back in their laps?"

Jacob laughs and, "Yup...you gotta be shitting me!"

Maria looks up and shakes her head in praise, "Ya just haf'ta love the people who do that job! The balls they swing." She looks down at Jacob and nods, "I'll be praying for 'em."

"Thanks for the positive vibes, babe!" And then with a serious face he adds, "I put the platform SEAD assets back on standby reserve and thank you for finally seeing it my way. This is a better config but, remember, *all* of my people's asses are on the line here."

"Had to crunch the METT-AI again, Mission Ops in command of that AO always gave best results with the fewest casualties."

"You put too much stock in that fucking, Delphi system."

Maria stares at him and, "It's been nuts-on at every step."

Jacob nods, "I say fuck that Alter of Chains shit! I believe in good old fashioned spreading the love around *then* rolling the dice."

"Hum, normally I would agree, but..." Maria slaps her hands on the desk and stands, "I got another pressing issue here to resolve."

Jacob just stares at Maria as she stands with nothing on from the waist down, and as she flips her t-shirt up over her head he quietly mutters to himself in a poker-faced, "You gotta be shitting me."

Eighty is the new thirty they say, and as the now sixty-six year old Maria, sultry and shockingly hard-bodied, steps from around the desk she is brushing her fingers back through her hair. Jacob full well knows he should make a run for the door, but then...why?

Maria, realizing Jacob is mentally stuck trying to weigh his options, huffs a laugh while saying, "You know, for shit I don't have to pay for I hate playing the budgetary bullshit for the CXi."

Jacob asks, "The CivX interceptor?"

"Yea, I gotta make a fuckin' decision..." Maria then raises her foot up to Jacob's chest and shoves him back hard!

Judo is an interesting skill set—once you learn something like, how to fall, it does not ever leave you! With his chair pitching back he tucks his chin in and rolls out of the chair when the back hits the floor, and he is instantly up on his feet as if he were a springbok.

Jacob may be sixty-eight, but it's the white of his beard and non-metro straight-guy chest hair that gives away his age when his own t-shirt goes flying off like hers, "Ain't you feisty!"

Maria slowly steps up to him while he unbuckles his BDU pants, "I can't give 'em the forty-seven or the seventy-four, and the three-eighty is a CAS platform and not mission suitable." She reaches in the BDUs and seizes him by hand. Pressing her body up against his, and brushing her lips against his chest, "God-damned technicalities."

Jacob maintains his stoic façade as he points out to her that, "The A-model three-eighty doesn't have the chin-gun an' the PADF use it as an interceptor and, honestly, it does the job like a champ!"

Maria looks up and, with her lips just out of reach of his, she hovers there saying, "That cock...pit makes the three-eighty twice the price of the three-oh-eight and the endowments...won't cover it."

He takes her free arm, wrenches it behind her back and lifts her up slightly—allowing their lips to almost touch while he toys with her, "The three-eighty fuselage is half the cost of the three-oh-eight. So, how 'bout you use the old three-oh-eight cockpit?"

Wide-eyed, Maria laughs in his face, "Yea, way ahead of ya!"

Jacob spins her around and shoves her against the desk and, bending her over, he maneuvers his way in, "Paleo again?"

"You bet! He's got the time to think of this...shit!"

Driving himself ever so agonizingly slow into her, Jacob is holding most of himself back as he throws out a little laugh, "I have to admire the little fucker! He comes up with some great ideas!"

Having difficulty keeping a clear head, Maria says, "We're calling it the X-model. Since the fuselage...of the Cerberus is...half the cost of the Bulldog's, with this...cockpit...oh, fuck!" Frustrated, she then barks back at him, "Stop playing with your kill!"

Jacob drives it fully home and Maria goes into convulsions while trying to say, "It's now...point...six the cost of...the G-model!" Catching her breath she bucks him off, spins around on the desk and, face to face, she pulls him in saying, "Yea, this mod is very doable!"

Now working it torturously slow and shallow, driving her nuts, he looks deep into her eyes and says, "You just say the word, and—"

"Nooo!" Maria protests, and hisses, "Don't ruin the moment."

He snarls back at her, "I thought you wanted—"

"Don't think!" Then smiles, "Consider this a sympathy fuck!"

Jacob snorts a little laugh, "Full dance card, remember?"

"FOR ME!" Maria shouts, and now panting she says, "All I get is coochie anymore and, yea, it's mostly blue blood but I needed this! When talkin' shop, like now, you just may hav'ta put out?"

Pinning her down, Jacob starts to pull back slowly, "Oookay!"

Maria moans and, with her feet peddling in the air, she wraps her arms around his neck and begs, "Hey, fucktard, have a heart!"

With their foreheads touching, Jacob gives her a wicked little smile, then lets her have it after saying, "You asked for it."

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At U-Turn, in orbit around Gore Point, the Carrie Nation is oriented so that from the transparent stadium floor one can see the eighteen new Mbande class Battle Platforms they've built and have been sitting on—waiting for this day. With only two flight decks the Mbande class platform is forty percent smaller than the Trung class, which are massive with four full flight decks like the Iron Maiden.

Maria emerges from the mid-point egress portal and steps onto the ramp leading to the stadium floor. On the floor are the Field Marshals and Deputy Field Marshals for all twenty-one battle platforms. Also here is Jacob and Peña, Nancy Yoon, the station SYLNb, Carrie, along with Bill, Scott, Cricket, Green, Jessica and Kevin Vossler.

She looks up and she sees the massive tacnet holo-display filling the air above the stadium floor. In this you can see the new Mbande ships with all the old surviving platforms as well as the station they are standing in, the Carrie Nation. Not shown above them is the Iron Maiden, in orbit around Sapphire, and the Phoenix-Marauder and Pandemonium who are both out near Second Hand.

Maria stops at the end of the ramp. Since she last walked it the lip of the ramp was removed and this new termination has side steps and handrails installed. Maria turns and goes down the three steps and, with her thighs cramping, she rubs the top of one with a few strokes from the ball of her hand. She looks up at Jessica who is shaking her head with a little smirk on her face, but standing next to her is her father. Jacob is innocently looking up at the display while giving a quiet little whistle—whereby Jessica subtly elbows him in the arm. Maria just rolls her eyes away from them and steps out onto the floor then looks up to study the holograph.

Maria raises her arms wide and, connecting to the invisible virtual controls, pulls her arms together, which shrinks what is in view, and this pulls in a slice of the brown dwarf, Gore Point, the carousel assembly station and the six new Trung platforms they already built for themselves into the display. She rotates the image up and over, then around, and then resets it back where it was.

Five meters in front of her, and still sitting undisturbed in the middle of the transparent stadium floor, Maria notices a masonry brick, the fired red clay brick she threw out there a couple of days ago. Nobody has touched it, then again—nobody dares touch it.

Maria steps over to the brick and picks it up. She tosses it in the air, catches it, then lobbs it back and forth between her hands a few times. Staring at it, she huffs big and looks up at her people who are standing around, watching and waiting for her to say something...

"We've already beaten the plans for today to death, so I can't think of anything we missed, anybody?" Maria looks around and all she gets are them shaking their heads, *no*. "Okay then, twelve-noon, fifteen-thirty and twenty-forty-six are still good to go, right people?" With everyone now nodding, yes, she does too with some satisfaction and, "We know Taiji is expecting us so let's not disappoint them! We know Polaris is not expecting us so let us make the most of it."

Maria looks up at the display saying, "There is nothing else to say at this point except that there is a lot of wiggle room in the plan, so when the bullets start to fly—work the problem!" She looks down at them and almost shouts, "Adapt the best you can and, if in doubt, motherfucken ask for motherfucken help, okay? That's what reserves are for!" She then points to Bill and Scott, "That's why these two are where they're at, and that is to fix yur shit for ya!"

Sandoval couldn't resist, "Yaaays, mum!"

With everyone chuckling at that, Maria smiles and tosses the brick to Sandoval who then tosses it back to her. Maria catches it and holds it up, "Ya'll watch this yet?"

With everybody nodding yes, cheering and applauding, one Field Marshal says, "It changes everything."

Maria nods towards him and, "That it does, Robbins, and now we have to make good on it. Today...is baby step number two." She looks up at the display one more time then back to them, "We had an hour set aside for this but, since we really don't have anything to go over, we should break it up early how 'bout?"

There is a table on the other side of the ramp, so Maria walks over to it and takes one of the shot glasses of whiskey that Nancy and Scott poured for all of them. She picks up the closest one and, with

her stepping away, everybody else comes over to each take a glass.

With them all maneuvering into a crescent around Maria, she takes a moment to look at the faces of each one, where she then turns back to Vossler to ask, "We have one thing in the queue for after this so, Voss, what would you have done differently on Taiji?"

"The way I see it?" Vossler asks, and with Maria nodding, yes, Vossler says, "I'd 'ave worked the terrain differently? Jones ran recon by the book but that's what got 'im dead. Nobody knows how to work the land and weather there unless you are from there."

"Okay! How 'bout you go show us how's it's done."

Vossler rears back, "Hu?"

"Angel's share." Scott says as he takes the shot glass from Vossler and pours it onto the deck, then, "There is a new waldo sitting up in the C-deck armory for you. You and a squad of droids will HALO into the AO from about thirty or so klicks up. They need you to bring twelve M2's and as many bandoliers of eighty-eights that you guys can carry without goin' splat! Gudici will see your ass to the company." He pats him on the shoulder saying, "Have fun...lucky bastard!"

As Scott steps away with the empty shot glass, Vossler's jaw goes up and down not knowing what to say, so Maria goes, "Chief, it's your company until you're dead or the fight is over with. You good with that? We hope you're good with that!"

"Yea..." Vossler nods big, "Yea, I'm good!"

Bill adds from the sidelines, "They be waitin' for ya!"

Maria points to the ramp, "Will you get outta here, already!"

Now, Vossler may be in his late-eighties but he vaults over the rail and high-tails it up the ramp as if he were a kid, so Maria shouts, "And stay alive, ya stupid fuck!"

Everyone starts laughing as Vossler spins to double-flip her off while vanishing into the portal. With that, Maria shakes her head with a smile as Cyzk says, "Christmas came late for ol' Kev."

"Ya gotta love that son-of-a-bitch." Maria sighs big, and as everyone nods in agreement, she thinks for a second then laughs at herself, saying, "You know, when I first thought this thing up, what, thirty years ago now? I always pictured myself buttoned up in a CIC, or in the C-Three, or in some bunker somewhere in the thick of it all, but for the life of me I never envisioned myself going...shopping?" She chuckles, "I'm a diversion. Doing my part is taking my girls out fricken-fucking shopping of all things!" Maria shrugs then holds her shot glass up and says, "Nancy."

Maria, Scott and Bill may own this mission, but Nancy Yoon is the commander of the Carrie Nation, so it is up to her to give the toast to send them off. Nancy takes a step out and raises her glass, but she pauses for a second then lowers the glass to think about it. With a nod she then raises her glass to say, "People, here's to the first baby step, Jackson, Burke and Chang...never forget."

That toast was unexpected, and it hit them all hard, so like a Greek chorus the whole of them repeat '*never forget*' before they knock back their shots of rye.

Each one of them now step up to the table to stack their shot glasses upside down, in turn, one on top of another, and while they do this, Bill calls out, "Tee time is in five hours and fifty minutes."

Scott laughs, "Shit flies at zulu-noon, people!"

With everyone now making their way out, shaking hands and giving well wishes to each other as they do, Maria gets Sandoval and Cyzk's attention and pulls them aside with Cricket and Green.

As Jessica, Jacob and Peña step away to powwow with Scott and Bill, Sandoval says to Maria, "I understand the priority."

Maria cringes, "I'm sorry Beth, but we need you elsewhere."

"Couldn't ask for a better mission than this as a last mission!" She then looks at Cricket and asks them both, "Does he know?"

Cricket laughs, "My boy is clueless."

"*Ninguna pista!*" Maria nods, "Again, I am sorry, Beth."

Sandoval shakes her head, "Will you shut up about it already! Tell ya what, how bout I get back at you when you least expect it?"

Maria worries, "I don't like the sound of that."

Sandoval leans in to give Maria a bro-hug while laughing and saying to her, "I am hating you!" And as she turns to walk away, "Next week, I'll be hating on you still. Next month...maybe just a tad? After that, fuck'd if I know!" She spins around to throw her hands out, "It's a God damned mystery!"

Cyzk knuckle taps Maria as he follows Sandoval out, so Maria turns to Cricket and Green saying, "FIS is gonna flip when we hit Polaris so, remember, you guys don't know shit."

Cricket smirks, "I have no idea what you're talking about?"

Green throws out, "Plausible deniability is my middle name!"

"Good!" Maria then asks Cricket, "You gonna be okay with Bill being gone a lot? I was expecting you to put up a fuss!"

Green snorts, "You saved his ass."

Maria looks at him and, "Say wha'?"

Cricket just looks at Maria and, "I love the man, all my heart I do love the man! Couldn't ask for a better man! He is the most giving husband and amazingly attentive father you could ever hope for, but the trade-off is that he's the most overprotective mofo you could ever imagine! If Jade cries he thinks she's dyin' from something and if she sneezes or coughs in his pea-brain she's got pneumonia or the plague! There is a limit to this level of meddlesome motherfuckery!"

Maria is trying not to laugh, "Yea, I kinda picked up on that. Get 'im the fuck outta here before you strangle his ass, right?"

Green laughs, "Oh, god, you know she will!"

Cricket looks at her and "Being gone a lot will hopefully break him of it or...I'll break his face! If he spoils our Jade, you know I will kill his ass, and deader than dead!"

"Okie dokie!" Maria laughs, then, "Your wish—my command."

"Good, 'cause talkin' sense ain't makin' no sense!" And with Jacob, Jessica and Scott stepping up to them, Cricket asks Maria, "Where are you all gonna be again?"

Maria cringes saying, "Kansas City? We're goin' to a mall."

Jessica rolls her eyes and corrects her, "The Plaza!"

Maria turns towards Jessica with a flat deadpan expression, then turns back to Cricket and says, "The mall."

Cricket asks Jessica, "Isn't KCMoe's from there?"

Jessica nods, "Yea, we took Eight to The Plaza to visit José, surprised 'em both, and I fell in love with the place."

Maria points out, "Yea, we did a fly by on the way in to the hotel last night and, it's January, right? They still had their Christmas lights on...in January!"

Jessica points out, "You have to admit it was pretty!"

Maria nods, "Okay, I'm not one for that shit, but it was."

Scott asks, "Angela is with?"

"Sharing a room with Monique and Peanuts! I got 'em all at the hotel! Jordan and her girls are in one room, Diego an' Cap is sharin' one with Paula and Brie. Eight and Copper have a single and, come to think of it I'm sharing a room with Jessica Burke! You've heard of her, right? Don't say this aroun' the skank but, if she has two too many—she snores like a god-damned chainsaw!"

Jessica goes, "The fuck!"

"Sweetheart, yea, you do!" Jacob laughs, then he asks her, "Where is Seth gonna be? He's with Carlos and Josav?"

"Yea, du Conde and them are goin' to a KBOS shoot. They get to watch them film a fight sequence with Cloé in it. And since it's a closed set, McElroy is taking Luc and Lilith too!"

Jacob looks at Cricket and Scott, saying, "For the camera they fight like in slo-mo, Tai Chi style, and speed it up in the edit."

Scott goes, "That's gotta be fucking hilarious to watch!"

Jessica nods, "It is."

Maria turns to Jacob, saying, "Hey babe, love to chat but we paid for those nice-cozy beds and my ass needs to be in one of 'em!" She pokes him in the chest, "I'll be goin' to the rendezvous in Jessie's seventy-four. She'll have the one-oh-one and she will bring everyone back to the Church Key on Sunday."

Jacob gives an uncomfortable smile, "Diego read me the riot act. She was demanding that I show up on Thursday." Maria grits her teeth so Jacob points at her, "Act surprised, will ya, please?"

Maria shakes her head, "Sixty-fucking-seven, like uuugh."

"Everyone is gonna be there and Pete will man the barbeque!"

"Since Peter's barbecuing I won't bitch!" Then, thinking about it, Maria says, "About the time you're staging for Polaris I'll be picking through a Cob Salad so, for me, for once, manage the shit and stay the fuck out of the fight for my peace of mind, okay?"

Begrudgingly, Jacob nods, "I'll do my best."

Maria throws her hands out, "Your best is all I can ask for." She then pats him on the shoulder, "Fly friendly, Buzzard Chow."

000001010010

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
TIME: 12:00zulu (local 12:00act)

Here on Taiji the last ten days have been non-stop chaos for the troopers of the CDF. With the conditions perfect for a hit-and-run guerrilla campaign, Giáp's people have been running roughshod over their armored patrols, and with twelve-noon-zulu fast approaching the CDF knows that it's only going to get worse when the Annex shows up to add to the madness. What they're bringing to this fight is unknown, but the Co-op planners think they are ready.

The problem here is that the Co-op finds itself blind in a world enveloped by heavy storm clouds and shit visibility. They are battling an invisible enemy that commands the field, who picks and chooses when and where they want to fight—so this would not be considered a winning formula in anyone's playbook!

Still, prepared they have...

Over a thousand spider missiles are lying in wait in low orbit, and if anybody is stupid enough to pop in and hover to drop above 180 kilometers, which is the spider's operational floor around Taiji, it will not turn out well for them if they loiter past six seconds. Below that is a count of 352 Djinn fighters buzzing around in a constant CAP above the storm clouds. Then to top it all off, in a geo-equatorial orbit, which looks like a polar solar-synchronous orbit around here, are eight Epée cruisers hanging-ten above Taiji at 32,000 kilometers. On top of the six-second lag to confirm an enemy ship, they can't shoot accurately at this distance nor can they shoot down using the planet as a backstop because of civilians meandering on the surface. From here they can zip in and snap fire their cannons when a fight actually starts and the commercial traffic clears.

For a defensive posture this ain't exactly half bad but defense, in and of itself, is almost universally considered a losing proposition.

Even though defense here is pound for pound the same as on Scorch, *id est* GTA5, to better accommodate the Taiji Air and Space Control the CDF agreed to bunch their spider missiles up into twelve clusters to keep the busy low altitude approaches and tracks clear for commercial and civilian traffic. It goes without saying that this little favor made it stupidly convenient for the SA when at 12:00:01zulu a whole butt-load of their monstrous Valkyrie missiles streak in—completely ignoring the Epée cruisers above for the Co-op spiders below.

Seventy-two, fifty-megaton Valkyrie missiles blossom into a dozen “bouquets” of multi-million degree superheated-plasma fireballs that wipe out the spiders in their entirety.

At 12:00:12 over two thousand SA spiders race in with half of those spreading out over the lowest orbital tracks to snap-fire along the elliptical in case any of the Epée cruisers opt to drop down to play. The other half scatter along higher tracks poised to fill in any gaps.

At 12:00:25 nine Annex battle platforms, what the Co-op and greater intel community believes to be the last of the SA capital ships, streak in and come to a squealing dead-stop 160 kilometers altitude above *Rakija Oblast*, in the House of Kyiv. Just like at Tura-Tau-4, but here each platform drops an Annex battalion in three slicks along with three Warthog gunships hauling in a total of twelve of their new Pazuzu tanks crammed in their holds. Each platform also catapults eight Thunderbolt fighters who race ahead to run interference.

All fifty-four Razorbacks and seventy-two Thunderbolts drop straight down towards the storm clouds far below and the second they are clear, inside five seconds, the nine platforms rip away only to stop ten kilometers out to do it again—delivering a whole division to Taiji.

It is at this second drop that the Iron Maiden, since it has sixteen of the catapult launchers, also punches out seven of the new Thunderbird fighters to escort an HWG101 who, like the 99, is just flat enough to be shot out of the catapults with the fighters.

Now, with 109 Razorbacks plummeting straight down, and an escort of 151 fighters racing out ahead, between them and the storm clouds are sixteen of the wickedly maneuverable Djinn fighters who are only 120 kilometers away.

The F51d Gryphon-Djinn flying CAP have been split up into 22 flights to patrol the storm clouds over the Lettuce Belt that encircles the entire planet along the equator. So, with only one squadron of the Djinn between the SA shit-rain coming down and the clouds just seconds below them, the Co-op flight leader instantly realizes that his only sustainable option is to shoot and run—and he has do that long before the minute it will take for the Annex to reach them is up.

With the ships from the Annex hitting the thirty-second mark the Djinn pull their noses up, pickle off three centipede missiles each, then pull a tight one-eighty to dive for the clouds. Yes, the SA fighters all have the new Hydrapede missile/droids now in their quivers but for a high-speed chase like this the thirty-two closest Thunderbolts each launch a single centipede missile after them.

Unfortunately, in hindsight, these are their new Centipedes...

Weapons development is one of those quirky-like incremental processes where divergent paths can scissor back and forth, and the venerated Centipede family of missiles is a primo example.

After sixty-years of frontline use, the Centipede was originally steered by a gimballed-nozzle attached to a single-stage motor. Over the second half of its operational life it had two-stages and was steered by a Gravity-Rotor flywheel like gimbal in the nose. With massive improvements in solid chemical motors this latest SA Centipede is now a three-stage design with a new Gravity-Torque drive replacing the old rotary gimbal. The original missile had a twenty-eight second burn, the two-stage had a combined forty-four second burn, but this one has a total of sixty-six seconds of thrust between the three motors.

Problem is that when the old two-stage red Centipedes were updated with the navigational utility for Taiji—the powdered satin-pink Centipede-M3u block of missiles, called the *Mew*, because after three centuries there are still Pokémon fans fricken everywhere, and boosted with a count of nine secondary Micropede missiles, were neglected to be added to that navigational upload queue.

This little 'oopsie of an oversight' was compounded by the fact that Taiji, with two axes of rotation, has a magnetic field that is problematic for navigation. Its dual core has a dynamo Barycenter that tortured and twisted these fields into two observable southern poles and three competing northern poles, and one of those is emanating dead center over Rakija Oblast! So, when these Centipede wipe out the forty-eight Co-op Centipede with Micropedes and fly into the storm clouds after the Djinn their not so little brains lose both the thermal signature of those targets as well as their up/down orientation. Now, the *Mew* actually talk to each other so they decide to hold off on the second stage burn until they can reacquire their targets, or maybe figure out where they are, and it's when this *murder* of missiles burst through the clouds all but one lawn-dart into a grape vineyard below.

That trailing Centipede, fired by Kacper Cyzk, pulls out of the dive just enough to clip the edge of a lateral irrigation ditch—only to cartwheel across rows of grape trellis for a whole kilometer, and where the other 31 missiles opt to self-destruct on contact with the ground, to the tune of 31,000 kilograms of explosive force, this AI brain gets

cold-cocked out of whack when it smashes into a portable toilet and fails to go off in hari-kari mode. When the techno geeks from the CDF recover what is left of this mangled Centipede missile what details they gleam from it re the Gravity-Torque drive will come back to bite the Annex in the ass, but that's a story for another day...

01001010-01110101-01101110-01100101-01100010-01110101-01100111

Kacper Cyzk has not been in the cockpit of an ASF47 on an actual mission for quite some time, the last being over five-years ago right before he lost his company but now, as division commander, he realizes this job comes with some gnarly perks. He is so high up on the totem pole now that if he chose to fly into harm's way in an old Sopwith Camel biplane then who's gonna stop him? His favorite N2 gaming aircraft, the Camel was more of a hazard for the pilots than its intended victims, but if one were to master the instabilities caused by weight distribution and its rotary engine then it was lethal as hell.

In Cyzk's mind the ASF47 is as much of an anachronism, and even though the bisE mod is now considered the second place meanest son-of-a-bitch in the valley, he is pushing back on the 74. Cyzk thinks as warmly of the Thunderbolt as he does the canvas covered Camel, but where the Camel tries to kill the pilot, in his mind the 47 is way too forgiving. At least the 47 beats the 74 on loadout by a mile.

Cyzk and his flight of Thunderbolts break through the thick clouds south of Rakija Oblast, along the coast of the Aureole Ocean. The four fighters land on a flat spot by the rocky cliffs where the rivers start to cut deep into the jagged rocks on their way to the coastline which is over six kilometers out and a kilometer down in altitude. The light from Nyx makes the thick clouds above them glow slightly giving the area a nice romantic nautical twilight feel to it.

A sergeant in an ACE suit, motions for Cyzk to follow him into a small domed hut that is surrounded by randomly placed trees and covered with camouflage-netting and brush.

Entering the hut, Cyzk is amazed that below him is a hundred meter wide spherical underground complex. Looking through the grated decks, he sees over a dozen screens for a CIC where Giáp's people are tracking their teams and the CDF in the field. The sergeant picks up an old style phone receiver and hands it to Cyzk, and while hitting a button to open the line, "It's General Giáp, Sir."

On the phone Cyzk can hear the shots and explosions in the back ground while saying, "Well, ain't this primitive as fuck!"

["Hey ho, Matey! Glad you could make it to the party!"]

"I see you're at Novyy Rylsk?"

["A lovely day 'ere for a dust up!"]

"I hear your regiment is surrounded by two divisions."

["Yea, we finally got 'em right where we want 'em!"]

Cyzk huffs a laugh, "I bet you do!"

["Just so you know, Gudici is coming up from the southeast and half of your battalions are dropping to encircle Homer from behind. In 'bout twenty or so it's gonna get right nasty for 'um."]

"I take it you want me to sit it out at Tareyton."

["Yeppers! Wait for me to yomp 'em over to the Meadows for ya! It'll take six weeks maybe? By then you'll have the order of battle and yur peeps all prep'd and ready for the fun!"]

Cyzk nods, "Beee the anvil."

["That's the spirit, mate!"]

"I got one question...why me?"

["Well, you are both the moral and the morale choice! If I go down you got the reins, and after Wycombe my people will follow you anywhere."]

"To win I'll probably make a lot of your people dead."

["To win my people will expect no less."]

"Just so you know, if I go down Graves will replace me."

["Yea, I figured...problem is ol' Buzzard will win this too fast. Our goal here is to punish them."]

"I'm behind ya on that one."

["And that, fine sir, is why we asked for you!"]

"By the way, do we have anyone up by Rakija Oblast?"

Giap starts howling-laughing over the phone, ["You wiped out a bloody winery just outside of town! That was great shootin', mate! My favorite label too!"]

"Can we scout the place for a wrecked Centipede?"

["In the words of Cowboy, no can do buckeroo!"]

"Kinda wanna keep it out of their hands."

["*That's* the problem with improving on shit! Tell ya what, I'll toss it in Vossler's court. See what he can do, that work for ya?"]

"It will definitely shut me up!"

["Well then, me mate, fuck the shut up! We got this!"]

"Thanks, General."

["Voss is dropping on in now so I best get back to work. The Sergeant will get you to the ops in Tareyton so you and your people need to skedaddle. The site you're standing in was compromised the second you landed so I expect an air strike inside a half-hour."]

Cyzk is taken back slightly because the hundred or so people below him do not look like they are making any effort to evacuate, "What! Why aren't your people getting the fuck outta here?"

["We dropped that dime and must make a good show if it! Gotta make 'em believe they got both you an' me."]

"You gonna tell your people, right?"

["They volunteered, mate. It's time for you to shove off!"]

Cyzk notices the sergeant is looking at him and pointing at his wrist, "We got to get out of here, Sir."

"Okay, General, we are outty."

Cyzk hangs up the phone and suddenly realizes that all of the staff down below is well over seventy years of age, and with a Colonel stepping up to them the sergeant snaps a salute, "Sir."

The Colonel returns it with a warm smile, "It's been my honor working with you, Sergeant. You two need to go, they'll be here a smidge less than twenty-five minutes." With the Sergeant nodding, he turns to Cyzk, "Marshal, can you leave one or two of your fighters top side for their target practice? It'll be a might more convincing."

Cyzk is amazed he agrees to it and says, "They can identify mine by the tail number. That's what you want, right?"

The Colonel smiles, "That would be perfect, my good man! We'll make doubly sure it gets blown to hell."

01101111-01101101-01101111-01101100-01100110-01100110-01100110-01100010

Kevin Vossler and a squad of six ghost droids, joined by thirty PacMan drones, jump from the HWG101 Fastback at twenty-eight kilometers above Novvy Rylsk. Diving out of the back of the ship Vossler and each of the droids are carrying two of their stupidly lethal M2 railguns along with eight bandoliers of ammo however, the PacMan drones are overloaded with twelve bandoliers each.

With the PacMan struggling to keep the speed of their drop below 180kph, Vossler and the droids race ahead at 250kph straight down. Admittedly this would be a lot more exciting if one could see

where they were going, that is watching the ground racing up as if they were skydiving, but here on Taiji everything is pea-soup thick. To get around in the clouds the navigational utility designed for Taiji simply shows a wireframe construct of the planet surface approaching with an altitude counter spooling down on the tacnet display.

In other words, meh...

On the other hand the first half of this trip, riding down in the Fastback, was all kinds of exciting because they were way out ahead of the slicks and warts. Point being, when the pink Centipede Mew flicked a few Micropede out to destroy the baby-blue Co-op Centipedes, those missiles fired their mini-missiles and one of them barely had the range to reach the Fastback where it slammed into its fuselage.

Way up here in the thin air, and with the impenetrable armor of the Razorback drop ships, the warhead felt like a dull thud when it went off on the hull. To Vossler this was all kinds of eerie because when he was a kid the armor of their older HWG83 drop ships would have buckled under a 1,000kg blast but that was then!

The Fastback and the seven Thunderbirds decelerate and pull up before hitting the clouds, and where all the slicks and warts dive into them and scatter, mostly towards the west at low altitude with half moving out around Novyy Rylsk and half swinging out wide for Tareyton, the Fastback high tails it for Novyy Rylsk.

One would think that to stay out of sight while flying around in the clouds one should keep things in the subsonic range, but at low altitude, with layer upon layer of broken storm clouds above you, you are just as invisible while flying at low Mach speeds—which is what the slicks and Warthogs are doing. The Fastback is making it look like they're racing out for Most, on the far opposite side of the planet from Rakija Oblast, but this route takes them right over Novyy Rylsk.

At Mach 3, while skipping over the tops of the clouds, this is where Vossler and the droids dive out the back of the ship and into the slipstream. Mercifully falling out behind the dual Mach waves, it only takes a few quick minutes for them to slow down, accelerate, then slow down again to land. A minute-twenty after them stepping away from sticking the landing, half of the drones smack into the mud at low velocity with the others stopping to hover just short of it.

With a light drizzle, and the snap, crackle and pop of distant battle all around, General Giáp steps up to Vossler with an Ortho-boot on his foot, and puts out a hand with a smile, "Any good fights lately?"

Vossler takes his hand and almost laughs, "Fuck you."

Giáp snorts with a grin, "Hated doin' that to ya, me cobber, but they didn't call ya'll the Kung Fu Koala for nothin'!"

Vossler smiles and nods, "I got a few licks in."

"That ya did, babe." Nodding back, Giáp's eyes then go big remembering, "Blimey, you hit like a Mantis Shrimp!"

"You were a wiry little fucker." Vossler hands him one of the M2 guns, "Anyway, I've finally come for me pint!"

Giáp blinks while admiring the M2, "Been waitin' to pay up."

Vossler hands him four bandoliers and shrugs, "Kinda hard to enjoy your suds with a mouth full of blood."

"True that, mate." Giáp takes the ammo looks up and smiles, "Well, pints and sheilas when this is over!" He nods over his shoulder at a ghost droid standing next to him, "Maggie 'ere will get you to your command squad."

Vossler looks at the ghost droid operated by Maggie Prather and asks, "Are they at the Sriracha Mu terminator?"

She nods, "Straight north from here."

He shakes his head, "Get them out of there!" Vossler jabs a finger at her. "No more coming into the shit from the sun, got that?"

She delays and nods again, "Okay?"

"Have them meet us at Zmeya Rapids. That's southwest of here. There's an old nuke crater on top of a hill called the Punchbowl. That's five clicks east of the dam."

"I'll send the orders."

Vossler looks at Giáp, "The tunnels are still there, right?"

Giáp smiles, "Waitin' for ya an' stocked to the gills!"

"Perfect! That is now Recon's base of ops."

Giáp gives an approving nod and nudges Maggie's droid in the arm, saying, "Recon is in good hands, love!" There is suddenly the sounds of a massive firefight coming from the southeast so Giáp gives a surprised look, "Well, that'd be Gudici and the Eighth-Reg, an' right on time! We got these rat-bags caught in a mosh now."

01000001-01100001-01111001-01101111-00101110-00101110-00101110

For Anthony Gudici and Zach Nelson the last ten weeks in the ice caverns, on the edge of the Mesa ice cap, have been as boring as all get-out. It was doubly so for their regiment of Gurkhas, and even though the Nepalese are always an insufferably polite and cheerful people, they were getting antsy so the waiting was taking its toll on them. Thank God their old Sergeant Major kept a lid on it.

Because of this fight, Ganju Thapa has gone from a Battalion commander, a Chief Deputy Marshal, up one-step to a Senior Chief Master Sergeant slot becoming a co-silverback exec to Guidici. Point being, he was next in line to take command of the regiment but this arrangement frees Nelson up to take a front line command of troops for today's festivities. Yes, this is somewhat unorthodox but they are fighting under the auspices of General, Ngô Văn Giáp. Now, very few realize that Giáp happens to be the General's given name and not his family/clan name. It's kind of like calling someone General Bill, but it stuck and he thinks it's funny and has never corrected anybody.

Anyway, this encirclement parameter is three kilometers deep with field platoons patrolling the rear desperately looking for any sign of spooky, but what happens here is that two of the battalions from Gurkha Regiment 3608 slither in high overhead, and from the clouds they drop in a string three kilometers long—bisecting the encirclement from the southeast in a spectacularly bloody one-sided fire barrage.

From one-thousand meters altitude, and dropping fast, each Gurkha empties a tube of five 2,000kg yield grenades. That's a total of 8.76 million kilograms of explosive force spread out over an area three by two kilometers—wiping out almost three whole battalions of CDF troops. They land in a ragged line and split into two groups with one rolling up the encirclement towards the north, and one rolling out to the west, and blasting everything that moves to hell as they do.

Guidici and Nelson with their command squads, and Thapa with his control squad, land in the middle of the destruction and bodies lying askew, and as their troopers are spreading out, many shouting and laughing "Aayo Gorkhali" or "Aayo Gorkhe" as they do, Guidici looks at Nelson and asks, "Well, you ready for this, Hedge?"

Guidici and Nelson have never really liked each other but they have always supported one another one-hundred-and-plus percent. The reasons for the hate have faded over the years but sometimes animosity can go hand in hand and co-exist with admiration.

Now with Third Battalion dropping around them, held back in reserve, Nelson smiles, "As I'll ever be, Wopper!" He looks at Thapa, "Hate to say it but your hands are gonna be full, dude."

"It's my job!" Thapa shrugs, then thumbs behind him going, "I got five Battalions of Gurks landing here in just a few minutes. I'll get them split between you two in short order."

Nelson nods, "I want to thank you for everything, Ganju."

"You can say that with a pitcher of suds after this is over."

Guidici stresses to Thapa, "Make sure those pallet drops don't stop and we'll keep the ball rollin'."

"Aye-aye, Marshal." Thapa smiles as he notices the reserve troops moving from dead body to body, "And, just so you know, it may be bad form for our people to leave death-cards, but they do sprinkle those they kill with poppy flower seeds now."

Gudici and Nelson start laughing, with Gudici saying, "That's so SAS!" He then looks at Nelson, "Okay, we're kinda useless until shit starts to bog down. Let your people do their job. You'll know when you're needed, and..." He then points up in the air, "Sandy wanted me to let you know that, at this very moment, you are now an SDM for Gurkha Regiment three-six-one-one! With these new troops droppin' in you've got yourself your own command."

Nelson is surprised, "Shit serious?"

"It'll go to Ganju here, after this fight, they have other plans for you so, have fun with it while you got it! And..." With him and then Thapa shaking Nelson's hand, Gudici follows with a slightly guilty look on his face, "In spite of us locking horns all these years, looking back it *has* been my privilege working with you."

Thapa smirks, "You're in your own time now, son."

Nelson nods, "Got'cha five by five, don't fuck this monkey!"

He and Thapa openly laugh when Gudici shrugs and goes, "Well, yea, it's mine to fuck!"

01 100011-01101111-01110110-01100110-01100101-01100110-01100101

Under strict radio silence, with all EM emissions muted, it took an hour for the Sergeant to fly Cyzk, his wingman and five others out to a place called the Salt Mine here in Tareyton Meadows. The trip in a suborbital 'zoomie' coach started at supersonic speeds, but the last twenty minutes dragged along at subsonic.

Mining salt, being one of Taiji's top mineral exports, resulted in a thousand kilometers of massive excavation tunnels in and around the Tareyton region, but the one secret C3 facility that does the actual command and control ops for General Giáp, code named Salt Mine, is here smack dab in the middle of the famous, Tareyton Greens.

Nine courses, one-hundred and sixty-two holes, if there were ever to be a Mecca for the sport of golf then Tareyton Greens nails it.

Known worlds over, this place has an 18th at *Whistling Straits* vibe to it. Now, most holes have just a smidge of difficulty, but every course here has a handful of fairways that are claw your eyes out, wrist-slashingly Dye-abolical. Golf on Taiji runs east and west, for obvious reasons, but the ninth hole on the ninth course, dead center in

the middle of this complex, by the main clubhouse, has been coined Nine-Iron Smash and not without good reason. It's over five-hundred meters of a par-six, one-eighty switchback, chipping-fest!

If there be a doorway into a "vortex of rage" in golf, then the tee-up at Nine-Iron Smash is the doorknob—so when not playing best ball, your short game and loft had better be nuts-on.

Landing three kilometers away from the Nine-Iron Smash, in the cloudy dark and drizzle, all eight of them pile out and slip into a service tunnel that's just one in a labyrinth of over ninety tunnels that crisscross and weave under the entire golfing complex. As they run into employees and passersby, nobody acknowledges them. Not one person waves, smiles or even looks up—it's like they're not even there.

So, for the box marked discipline...check!

Entering a maintenance bay, they take stairs down to a lower level complex of tunnels, but these have been carved out of solid rock. At a ramp they descend into a third level of storm drains and pumping stations and entering a lift at a bank of elevators, below the main clubhouse, they drop two-hundred meters to an industrial bilge sump.

They enter into a spherical C3 complex that is exactly like the one they just left, but here they gain access from below via the sump, and when they reach the main CIC level the watch commander, a Colonel, Sally Rand, throws her hand out to Cyzk, "Oi'ello, Marshal!"

Cyzk does not react to how ridiculously cute this petite-blonde officer is, in contrast to her thick Rough-Nut accent, and while shaking her hand, "Colonel Rand. I'm curious, did anybody make it out?"

She cringes slightly, "Sorry, mate. Nobody made it."

"Did they find the tail-no?"

"Rudders and toes, they say!" Rand starts to nod and smiles, "They found your tail number a naut-mile down in the rocks."

Cyzk wonders, "Toes?"

She shrugs, "The big toe! It'd be one of the few body parts that consistently survives a bombing or a buildings collapse. An' that is why the General gave 'is up."

Cyzk looks surprised and throws out, "You're kidding me!"

Rand nods with, "Gob honest, mate! He 'ad it cut off an hour before you blew into the system. You can say that the General will yomp the extra klick. They found a few and already matched 'is up!" She then grins big, "So, luv, me little chunk-a-hunk, the Co-op bastards now think the two of you be goners!"

"They think we're dead, already?"

"Pushin' up posies, right and tidy!"

"That was fast."

"Surprised all us as well! That's the kind of turn 'round one would expect from the Squirrels, not 'omer." She points to him and his wingman, "Okay, you two, we 'ave no direct COMs from 'ere! Ya copy? Everything is 'ard lined into optical that run out to the three local cities where signals packets are untraceable. Yea, real time connects are gonna be muddy as poo, but that's the price we pay for invisibility."

Cyzk blinks and, "We're good with that."

Rand adds, "You got another divvy droppin' in throughout the day and we got a 'ome for 'em! The salt mines south of 'ere. The lower levels and entrances are all flooded, but the upper levels are bone dry an' stocked up for a ten divvies cave romp!"

Cyzk nods with approval then asks, "Fast egress?"

Rand shrugs, thinking, "Blow the ceilings and... 'bout thirty seconds they're out an' in it for the win!"

"Cool! I really want to get to work on the order of battle and the tactical layout for Tareyton."

She shrugs, "We a'ready got 'eaps of OO-Bees an' tac-maps to choose from. That'll keep us busy for 'bout a week...if that."

Cyzk asks, "What do we do on down time?"

Rand leans in, and waggles her eyebrows big while saying, "Well, luv, popular 'round 'ere is strip-Gleek an' suds!"

01001101-01100001-01110001-01110101-01101001-01110011

Leaving the ghost droids and drones behind, Maggie delivers Vossler with his M2, to the tunnels below the Punchbowl inside a half an hour. To his frustration it took both the command and control teams coming in from the North almost two hours to get there, but this gave him time to catch up on status from both General Giáp and Cyzk, review the battle at Novvy Rylsk that's winding down, and collect detailed reports on Co-op unit movement at all the five houses.

Maggie brought the command and control squads down then went back into the field to continue shadowing General Giáp.

With twelve SA troopers before Vossler, intermixed with six ghost droids, one of Giáp's guerilla fighters stationed there on the mend, with a bandaged face and forearm, asks Vossler as he gestures to an open crate holding twenty-four of the Security Services StG-880 railguns, "Want me to tell 'em 'bout this, Voss?"

Vossler nods, "Yea, Eli, you tell 'em."

Eli nods, then says to everybody, "For those who didn't 'ear, 'cause we're keepin' this on the down-an'-low, they, whoever *they* are, landed a Dragonfly topside last week. The pilot hopped on a Djinn that came in with 'im and they tore out of 'ere like a scalded ass ape! They didn't even shut the Dragy down, they just left it in the bowl whirring on idle." Eli points to the paper in Vossler's hand, "That was pinned on the crates when we opened it. As I breath, mate, that's Deuteronomy twenty-eight : fifty-three, UK New International."

"How would you know that?"

"My day job I'm clergy, an Archdeacon."

Vossler looks at the paper and reads, "Eli, Because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb...so, let's not do that! We're even, Deacon." Vossler looks up and, "This mark, I take it you know who this is."

"Aye, mate, an' we don't talk 'bout it. I take it you know?"

"Yea, mate, and we won't talk about it, but I do have one question, how in the hell do you know him?"

"He sought me out back when for a consult, an' I 'ave to say tha' Tall Poppy sure knows 'is scripture! UK New International fell out of favor centuries ago. Problem I see 'ere is that payback for a squiz over *the word* would maybe be a sixer of Four-Ex, if that. Fifty crates of these, with ample feed, that be a godsend."

"How many four-fifty-eight shorts he send with 'em?"

"Three-mill, an' tha' Dragy was draggin' it's keel comin' in."

Vossler looks up at every one and announces, "So, story is this shit came from the black market! We all on the same page?"

With everyone nodding, yes, Vossler says to Eli, "Thanks, Eli, but I gotta talk with these guys for a minute before they shove off." With Eli stepping out, Vossler goes, "Okay, I know of Jones and he was a good guy, but what was it that sent him to a dirt nap?" Everybody looks at each other but nobody answers, so Vossler almost shouts, "THAT was not a rhetorical motherfuckin' question! Someone had better puke up an answer before I beat it out of you all!"

A PFC4 makes an obvious statement, "He was spotted."

"He came in from the fucking sun!" Vossler shakes his head, "I wrote a report on how to do recon here on Taiji over fifty years ago, and nothing has changed! I just posted it on the unit net so pull it down and learn something for once! Nothing has changed! The new way of doin' shit is out the fucking window because old school is the

only school that'll work here on mutherfuckin' Taiji!"

One of his platoon leaders asks, "Highlights, boss?"

Vossler almost laughs, then, "Okay, cliffs notes, stay out of the sun, which means stay the fuck out of the sun! Stay out of eye level! Get low, get in the shadows or, better yet, get your ass high!" Vossler points up, "It's Tuesday's soup of the day everyday up there! Bacon-lobster cream bisque for as far as the eye can see, but here it's forty or thirty meters up—*not* five hundred! Here you had better be getting your camo right and floatin' along with the soup doin' flybys or they will spot you! What happens then?"

"I'll wanna work with our people when they come in."

"Recon here is a battalion sized company so that means *all* hands on deck." Vossler thinks about it then breaks the 'need to know' silence to let them know, "Look, another thing nobody is telling you, cloaking is done for! The photo-mechanics are going to be kaput in a few weeks. We're lettin' the cat out of the bag when armor tangles here at Tareyton so it's better to say goodbye to it now." Vossler then points to the JACC he is wearing and smiles big, "We tend to forget that in these things we used to be chameleons out there! That's old school shit people forgot and...it's an art we're gonna bring back."

His staff sergeant speaks up, "I don't know how you did it back then but I have to agree, we have no choice here."

"We don't." Vossler shrugs big, "Worse yet, all ya'll have to learn the old way of doing this shit on the clock."

A corporal points out, "We're fast studies, chief."

Vossler nods, "We have six weeks to spread the love."

000001010011

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-B6 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93868.0207 (49pc from SOL)
TIME: 15:25zulu (local 10:07mst)

When your expectations are so low, it is nice to be surprised!

The last four weeks stuck on this Warthog, slithering in and around the rock formations of Zemlya Dva with David Gilroy, an avowed bottom by day, ended up being a lot more fun than she ever could have hoped for. Problem is, Michelle Kiel dreads the fact that their daily dance and horizontal-mambo seasons have come to an end.

Even though she was amazed by how masculine he could actually be when she was on her back, the thing she'll miss most are the long-long conversations with him....mostly about nothing.

Michelle can't be jealous of Scott, like she has been of Maria, Nicole and Cricket all these years, but she realizes that she can only kick herself in the ass for falling asleep at that wheel.

With a few minutes to go before launching the mission, Gilroy, sitting across from her in the WSO seat, looks up and asks, "Have you picked one for 'new roflstomp shimmy' yet?"

Gilroy has this strange penchant for naming the fire-missions he designs, as well as playing music as he and the HWG pilot sit and wait it out—all while the ship's AI runs the program by launching the weapons as well as zig-zagging the ship all around to avoid any return fire, and today is no different.

Michelle nods, then reaches out for the transparent alon wall between them and taps on it. Her desktop pops up and she touches a file, swipes across the screen and drags the file from the desktop to drop it on the open wall separating them. He leans in and reads the file name as 'NRS.'

"WebM format, it's an oldie I take it." Gilroy looks up and his eyes focus in on Michelle as she nods, yes, so he smiles, "Well then,

it's a mystery we'll take to the queue!"

Michelle shrugs and says, "It defines our last four weeks here better than anything else we've danced to."

He wags a stern finger at her, "It was your one task for this mission today, so it had better not disappoint!"

01101001-01100100-01101011-01100110-01100001

From the bridge of the Iron Maiden, with the CIC above them, Bill Nguyen is standing there with Beth Sandoval. Outside the thick-layered window they see Phoenix-Marauder, SA15, and Pandemonium, SA33, streak out of the system for Taiji. Left behind are the beloved Dante, Xerxes, Apache and the Basilisk. Where the Hannibal and Tamerlane are already being set upon by an army of maintenance droids, to be reconfigured for the PADF, these four are going to be pulled apart so that their constituent elements can be incorporated into the next twelve Trung battle platforms currently in the construction carousel floating in orbit around Gore Point.

There happens to be six Trung for the Annex in orbit but they have not been fully outfitted so, when they are, the Phoenix-Marauder and Pandemonium will join the Hannibal and Tamerlane.

With the eighteen new Mbande platforms spreading out to leave, Bill gives a quick huff and says, "Well, Sandy, those two are off to drop on Taiji, and you have two more drops before meeting the Mbande at the rendezvous. So, I hav'ta say, my work here is done."

Sandoval points out, "You and Scott have earned your keep."

With him looking up and around, admiring the surroundings, he says, "That may be, Lil' Missy but...you get the fun part."

"I can't lie, it is, but it's also a daily migraine."

"I wouldn't know." Bill glances outside then turns back to Sandoval, saying, "Okay, Captain Kirk, go get 'em!"

Sandoval rolls her eyes, "Please!"

As the Mbande shoot away, Bill asks, "Tell me, is it like that?"

"We've already carted a bunch of science dweebs around for the CXi on the side and, well...with them it kinda is, sorta?"

Bill asks, not so jokingly, "Wanna trade jobs?"

Sandoval shakes her head, "Aaaah, no. Make that fuck no."

Bill huffs a laugh, "Doesn't ask to hurt!" He then high fives Sandoval with, "Go get 'em, Koopa! Leme git outta your hair."

01010010-01011001-01001110-01001111

Because of all the noisy commotion, prevalent while flying in combat, when a pilot is in a bind and they hit WEP, for War Emergency Power, they never really notice the sound of the cryogenic valves as they strain and creak while twisting open, nor do they hear the shriek of tiny turbines pumping cryo-nitrogen into their razor engines—where it is exposed to a shower of quantum particles that annihilate each other thus expanding violently into a blisteringly-hot gaseous state which can dramatically increase thrust out the tail [okay, breathe].

These mechanisms kind of boosts your speed...a lot.

Nowadays, with the safety-razor engines, it's cryo-helium in your tank for WEP but He in a liquid state is really cold. Like -269°C cold which is right above absolute zero at -273.15°C. It is a bitch and a half managing liquid cryo-He, but for those rare moments when your ass is in a sling, and by chance the bad guys happen to be climbing up said ass, liquid-He gives way better results than liquid-N which is far easier to bottle and store. In the last four weeks the ship has leaked out over twenty-percent of its cryo-helium, because it's helium, but what they have on hand is more than enough for today.

Sitting here in the middle of a wide mesa on top of a high bluff, in the vicinity of the cities Livingston and Blaxton, with the last of the targeting adjustments made that morning, David Gilroy looks up at Michelle Kiel and huffs, "Well, sugar, we is doin' it!"

Michelle nods, "Cool!"

Gilroy smirks, "Eva'h hear of Katyusha Artillery?"

She shakes her head, "No?"

He laughs, "This is Stalin's stiff-one right up the tube!"

Seconds later, with the mission clock rolling out to 15:30, the firing program starts off by opening the cryogenic valves and spooling the turbines to pump helium to the missile farm pods—which is critical for cooling them down during the firing sequence.

At the exact same time they notice on the tacnet the three anti-air sites around their targets going up in massive explosions.

Gilroy sighs, "Droids, ya gotta love 'em!"

With the one and only token flight of two F51c Condors on patrol over a thousand kilometers to the west, they are now at liberty to fire away without any enemy intervention.

He then points toward Michelle and says, "Two-minutes and fifty-five seconds of let 'r rip as of...now!"

With the rocket powered cluster bombs being punched into the air, rotating and then shrieking off towards their predetermined targets, they launch sixteen missiles per second between the two missile pods. Outside it sounds like the iconic Katyusha rockets, yes, but from inside the Warthog the boost phase of the rockets hammers through the fuselage and sounds more like the unending-tremelo roll of a kettle drum, but here it's sort of muffled and not loud at all. What both of them do hear loud and clear is the song Michelle picked as it starts to play, with the video itself filling the wall beside them.

As a sunflower flashes on that wall, and the percussion intro starts, Gilroy's jaw drops in bug-eyed astonishment, "You did not!"

Michelle, taken aback slightly by Gilroy's extra flamboyant over the top and dramatic reaction, asks, "Bad call?"

"Oh, hell no my little honey pot!" With his hands going up, rocking out the best one can from the confines of a JACC fighting suit, in the WSO seat of a Warthog, Gilroy sings along, "I'm headin' down the Atlanta highway! Lookin' for the looove, getawaay..."

Love Shack was not the something Gilroy was expecting from Michelle, but the song and video is apropos, and perfectly frames the fun they did have over the four weeks stuck here on Zemlya Dva.

While these two groove along, they monitor the attack as the 20/20 cluster bombs scatter their bomblets, or hit in MOAB mode, all over the many storage and distributions facilities out and around the industrial zones by the cities of Livingston and Blaxton.

Most of the heavy work at these facilities is done by robots, all driven by AI overseers, so any collateral damage, *i.e.* civilian deaths, should be minimal at worst.

01000110-01001001-01001110-01000101

The first time one hears about the Country Club Plaza, in Kansas City, Missouri, they think, *whatever*, but if one actually goes there they are shocked by how gorgeous everything is. In a Moorish style akin to Seville, Spain, this place is street upon street chock full of stores, restaurants, sculptures and fountains everywhere you turn.

Considering that this is the heart of America, and even though many of the stores here are exclusive to Manhattan and Rodeo Drive, the exceptional \$\$\$\$ setting actually serves the \$\$\$ budget.

It is winter here in KCMO but surprisingly it has not been that cold this week. Unfortunately, a snowstorm is charging in from the northwest and should be rolling in, in about twelve hours, but Jessica and Monique believe they'll be long gone before it hits.

What's unbelievable to Maria and everyone is that it is cold, yet sunny without a cloud in the sky. Stepping outside in the chilly morning air to walk from the hotel to a café, at a corner crosswalk while heading east, Jessica tells everyone to stop, close their eyes and point their faces up towards a sun that is still low in the sky.

With the cool-nippy air swirling around them their faces are embraced by the warmth of Sol, but it was Angela, the six year old, who came to the realization, "It's like the sun is kissing my face." And with everyone nodding in agreement, touched by the sentiment, she then wrecks the moment by saying, "An' he got *big* lips!"

In the café, across the street from the Giralda Tower, they are hitting up on the pastry bar, and with everyone else taking a seat with their food, Angela steps up to Maria and Jessica, puts down her plate then wiggles her fingers at Jessica as if putting a hex on her.

Jessica asks, "Wha'?"

Angela points to a huge-sticky cinnamon roll with a mountain of cream cheese icing on it, "You're gonna help me with this here."

"I'm watching my girlish figure."

"Small world, that's two of us!" Angela picks up the plate and then says, "But where you're worried about wearin' that high-tech stuff, I'm saddled with stardom!" With both Maria and Jessica giving her a deadpan-scowl, Angela shrugs, "Yeeeee'll ain't buyin' it."

Maria tries not to laugh, "Nope."

Angela nods and walks off, lamenting, "It's salads! Salads an' salads an' more salads foreeeever! My kingdom for a burger!"

Jessic calls out to her, "That's for lunch, babe!"

With Angela out of earshot, Maria asks, "Carlos regret it yet?"

"No, she's killin' it with the ad libs." Jessica snorts a laugh, "Let's put it this way, they don't know what to do when she actually gives a line the way it was written! Carlos says she is magic."

Maria nods, "On Diego's special, the public's consensus is that someone has gotta be writing her lines. They don't believe she's real."

"Not surprised... Oh ya, Carlos wants to cast Eight as Bishop." With Maria gritting her teeth, Jessica asks, "Ready for status?"

"Nope." Maria then asks, "Do I need to hear it?"

Jessica shrugs big, "No, no need to really."

Maria nods, "Okay then, spit it out."

"Scratch two divisions."

Maria takes in the news and bobs her head in understanding, and after a few long seconds she quietly goes, "Fifteen-thousand."

"The wounded and captured will be traded tomorrow."

Maria then shakes her head slightly, "What a fucked up honor system. It's like Giáp is banking on them tripping over their own dick." She then stares at Jessica and, "But you know, don't you." Jessica's guilty eye-roll says it all, "Twenty-four divisions each. It's even-Steven now, but you know how many the general has in reserve, right?"

Jessica nods and quietly adds, "Ten-twelve million."

"I don't want a blood bath, but you ain't tellin' me shit."

"Pleasantly surprised, remember?"

"Fuck off."

Jessica smiles and, "General Alcock's floater went down."

Maria nods with a huff, "I'll bet."

"The others are in New Darwin. They'll detour to Calar-Three when they leave after the inspection. Box tends to be prompt."

"Yup." Maria nods again, and after a long silence she says, "The girls can't wait to go to that God-damned art museum."

"Yeeea, Eight won't shut up about it."

Maria wonders, "Is it that good?"

Jessica, with a sly grin, "Pleasantly surprised, remember?"

01010011-01101110-01010011

With the last of the 2,808 cluster bombs and 312 of the short vertically launched Centipede missiles, known as the Millipede, being fired, things didn't become 'suddenly quiet' as one would expect. The last bomb punching out in boost phase is followed by a huge flushing sound accompanied by crackling metal as liquid-He is blown into the pods to purge any residual heat caused by the boosting motors.

A lot of the tubes in the pods will be damaged by the flush but with cryo-helium they can double-time the firing sequence. A normal fire barrage like this is hairy-scary because of all the return fire the AI has to dodge. Targeting the sources of that fire is the one thing the humans can do because it does not require split-second reaction time, and it does keep them busy while the AI labors over the sequence and all the flat two-dimensional angular-serpentine maneuvers.

With no enemy forces here to contend with, all Michelle and Gilroy did was ride out the fire mission while bobbing their heads to

the music. The last maneuver the AI does is to execute a standard E3 program before handing off control to Michelle. With the pitch up, entering the jinking-sequence, they leave nine distribution centers and over three-hundred storage facilities in smoking ruins.

With stick in hand, Michelle cancels the crazy-rollercoaster like escape and evasion program, and after leveling the ship out she does a quick mental checklist and, with their six ghost droid fighters racing up behind to escort them out, she starts a shallow climb for space.

Hearing the singer on the video laugh out, 'Tin roof...rusted!' Michelle looks at Gilroy and asks, "What's that mean?"

Gilroy shrugs, "Fuck'd if I know!"

Michelle smiles while admitting, "Thank you for the *not* boring mission, David. Honestly, I didn't want it to end...so soon that is."

"Shared sentiment, blondie." Gilroy then points up with an excited look on his face, "How 'bout a consolation prize! When Mister Throw-Me-Down ain't around, and you're in town, I'll come put a smile on that face of yours so, how's that sound?"

Michelle starts laughing, "Shut up!"

Gilroy feigns indignation, "Wha' you don't want?"

"YES...yes, I want."

"I be lookin' forward to it, good buddy!"

Angela Simmons, the ships ghost co-pilot for the mission, cries out, ["Enough already! Christ, don't you guys ever shut up!"]

Gilroy asks, "Wonderin' where you've been!"

["Watchin' you two fuckin' around for the last four weeks!"]

Michelle gives a knowing smile, "Have you been watching us?"

["Aaaah, had to fap to somethin', but why I'm butting into your cloyingly-sickeningly sweet, hurl-tastic of a conversation, we got those two Mothera racing in. Like, d'uh!"]

"We'll be long gone before the M&Ms would be any trouble."

["Don't we have something we could be, you know, testing?"]

Michelle and Gilroy look at each other, blinking and frowning in confusion, and suddenly they both realize, "The Pazuzu gun!"

["Like, double d'uh!"]

Gilroy asks, "Angie, the Griffons are sluggish at Mach what?"

["All of the Fifty-Ones can't turn for shit at Mach three. These bastards are comin' to ya on a silver platter at over Mach four."]

Michelle levels the ship out and, "Breaking radio silence."

David calls out, "AP up!"

As Michelle radios the six fighters behind them, Angela says, ["David, it's all in your good hands...good buddy!"]

They have to wait three minutes until the Condors are in range so as Michelle keeps the ship steady David monitors the shot. The Pazuzu gun under the nose of the razor has a built in tray where it can stage three of the smart, maneuver on the fly, arch-penetrator sabot rounds for a quick triple tap. On Black Stump they tested these as well as the micro-nuke plugin and, lo and behold, here we have three of those things in the tray!

Also in the nose of the Razorbacks is a binocular optical scope that Michelle deploys. On the screen the Condors show up as little dots but increase in size, pixel by pixel, and at 120 kilometers they are now ninety-eight pixels across, from wingtip to wingtip, where the railgun fires two of the penetrators at a half-second interval.

Like at an Arkansas Turkey Shoot, working it from back of the line to the front, in quick succession the two Condors are hit squarely in the nose. Due to cavitation their fuselages puff up slightly as the arc-penetrators rip on through, but it is when the 1,000kg micro-nuke bombs goes off, as if it were an afterthought while exiting the back, the two ships explode from behind and blow apart exactly like one would envision giant-Kaiju confetti poppers.

With big-eyes and slack jaws, shocked and amazed by these results, Gilroy, Michelle, Angela and the six droids trailing behind them shout and cheer as Gilroy howls, "THAT's what I'm talkin' about!"

After a good-long hearty laugh, and wiping away the tears, Michelle pulls the Warthog back into a lazy egress for space, while saying, "People, I think this here thang is a keeper!"

Angela chuckles, ["You can kiss the baby hammers bye-bye!"]

000001010100

85

let me sing to you the song of my people

LCTN: POLARIS-B4 (Ursae Minoris)
CORD: SAO-308.0202 (133pc from SOL)
TIME: 20:45zulu (local 35:52mst)

Javan, also known as Yawan, was the fourth son of Noah's son Japheth, or Yapet, or *Yápet* if you want to get all crazy with the accents. Okay, Javan, pronounced "ha-vuhn" around these parts, is also the fourth planet orbiting the star Yapet—which is the most recent codename for the star otherwise known as Polaris-B.

Nobody here liked Noah as the codename for Polaris, that is Polaris-A when splitting hairs, but Yapet stuck for Polaris-B. Javan, in orbit around Yapet, is the only habitable world around here, which means that by the roll of the dice it could have been Gomer or Magog or Madai, Tubal, Meshech or even Tiras, but Javan it is!

The Rains, the push for Orion, has been pushed out to May.

The greater intel-community has been referring to Javan as the *Fondue Pot*, a random name pulled out of someone's ass when the two-letter prefix of Foxtrot-Papa was issued by the CDF back in 2313. This was far better than Village Inn, their old codename for Nu Ari, or Nu Ara depending whose map you're using, but that operation didn't stay Village Inn for long. With the intel sense of humor they started calling it things like Virtual Indigestion or Vacuous Infidel—anything so that they would never have to say 'Village' and 'Inn' together.

Oh-oh-oh! ...Verbose Idiots.

Anyway, when taking delivery the CDF did not know what the contractors here were talking about but since it was Boxter footing the bill, for what his people were calling *Tevat Noah* during the planning and construction phases, he thought the biblical references would have been obvious. All the meetings to establish a schema crosswalk were infuriating, but once in place it was simply a matter of a few weeks before PB and B4 were dropped for Yapet and Javan being adopted into CDF taxonomy. It goes without saying that Tevat Noah lost out to

Fondue Pot but, to Boxter's delight, The Rains stuck.

The CDF planners thought that it was just too catchy to nix.

As it is, calling Javan "habitable" is kind of a long stretch in anyone's textbook. It is hot around these parts, and not because of all the CO² in the air, which is 96% of the atmosphere—it's the water. As the most aggressive of the greenhouse gases, the air is saturated with water. At 100% humidity for most of its year, from pole to pole the whole planet is a scorched and steaming wetland. It's been said that it would be kind of okay if there were an overgrown jungle to go with it, a nice visual to match all the wet and hot and drizzle, but Javan is just way too new and is completely barren of any and all life.

As it is this system can't hold a candle to the Kirby/Dedede relationship, in orbit out at 37-Tau, but it's bad enough. Polaris-B is bigger than Sol, and even though Javan is 3.5au away it's still pretty toasty by comparison. Temperature can range from a low of 15-40°C between the night side and dayside but that's when Javan is on the far side away from Polaris-A. During its six-year orbit when Javan's night side is squarely facing *Stella Polaris* from 2,400au, like now, that side is illuminated more than the dayside and this cranks things up to a nasty 50-65°C range with a 5° variable and that all depends on the mood Polaris-A happens to be in.

If it wasn't for the clouds and daily rain it'd be a might hotter.

Polaris-A is big, hot, painfully bright and a Cepheid variable to boot, and it's this variable luminosity that accounts for the 5° range on the surface during that double-sunny time of year. In contrast the underground city of New Nippur maintains a balmy but tolerable 37°C, or 98.6 for the many Fahrenheit aficionados, which is breezy-easy to AC down to a pleasant 22°C in the habitable sections of the city.

As a planet, Javan has a surprisingly low gravity at 0.65g but is enveloped by a super thick primordial atmosphere ending up with a surface pressure of 1,110mb, and even though they have all the O² they could possibly want, extracting it from the ambient CO², we all know what O² can do at 16psi. Because of the obvious hazards they ship in liquid Nitrogen to release into the city and offset the O² down to a safe 20% and this is a surprisingly easy and cheap fix.

While setting up shop here, the Co-op did away with floaters and most gravity-repulsive technology because for more than half the year the civilian and industrial grade tech cannot take a load for shit with all the high temperatures. Between New Nippur, the centralized spaceport docks and the one-hundred and eighty-two storage facilities, excuse me...mining operations, spread out far and wide they use wheeled vehicles to get around, and because of the endless tracks of mud everywhere they had to build a network of elevated-paved

roadways to connect it all.

It was a subsidiary of Wallace-YanZhuGu Industires, the Fluor Corporation, who designed these facilities to look and function like an actual mining operation with an affiliate, Sundt Corporation, winning the excavation and roadbuilding contracts.

All this under the watchful gaze of the Steel Annex from afar.

As we know, the SA secretly owns the controlling shares to the Wallace conglomerate, as well as all their subsidiaries, so it was no toughie for them to know all there was to know, in bitter detail, about Tevat Noah during development, and as the Fondue Pot now that it is in operation. Point being, they got to lock in Simon Interplanetary Transportation Services, the grandmaster of the "round-robin" circuit, and witness them bouncing their roll-offs from Javan to Zemlya Dva, to Scorch then out to Prypiat and back to Javan.

It goes like this, Javan to Zemlya (GTB6) where they drop off the mining ingots and bullion and take on produce. They deliver that around the corner to their neighbor, Scorch (GTA5) where they pick up a load of "commercial goods" destined for Prypiat. At Prypiat they actually do a touch and go for Javan—that is with a thirty or so hour layover between the touch and the go! This last leg is reported to be a deadhead leg in the circuit but, truth be known, they simply swap the BIC-n-chip plates. Any idiot can see that these *empty containers* look pretty damned close to max-load or even over-max when offloaded by Simon on the docks and trucked by Sundt back out to the mines.

Now, because Security Services has been playing footsie with Blackstone all these years, Ndoza Khumalo knew since day one that it was Scott and Bill in the SA Planning group who were involved with the design phase of the anti-air defenses through their Blackstone proxies. Blackstone was handling this part of the project for Fluor and Boxter knew all of this because Khumalo kept Boxter apprised of what the Annex knew about the facility—but the Annex did not know that Boxter knew that they knew.

Got that? Okay...

Problem is, to be hidden in plain sight is a tough little nut to crack because, like out at Betelgeuse, nobody stops by just for giggles however, New Nippur has a quarter million residents, mostly family and support for the operation, so people do show up. Fly over any one of the 182 mining sites here and, with mountains of tailings and fill piled up outside they actually look like mines. The kick is that they are functioning mines producing product for shipment to Zemlya where the ingots of random metals like iron and zinc are tossed aside until prices go up but the bullion is divvied up between the drivers, excavators, foundry, road and dockworkers as payment for their quiet touch.

They are so well paid they know nothing about the two-million pallets of ration packs, medical supplies, uniforms, field kit, ACE suits, railguns and ammo and even more ammo! They know nothing about the 115,000 combat droids, 2,900 tanks, and the 11,000 mix of field lorries and floaters. They know nothing about the 275,000 Centipedes, 36,300 Centipede-Azul, 48,000 cluster bombs and over 565,000 spider missiles and most of those are in bundled-deployment nodes.

They know nothing about the fat division of CDF troops with rotating platoons for each mining site, nor do they know anything about the 556 assorted anti-air robotic gunnery-mechs and tracked mobile missile launching platforms.

It's 20:45zulu and there are 9,926 employees working this operation and none of them know shit. In about one minute that won't matter anymore.

01010100-01100101-01100101-01010100-01100101-01100101-01100101

Where the HWG41 was one of the early SA creations, being both an assault ship and utility vehicle able to lift the bazillions of small Intermodal containers on the market, it fell out of favor for the HWG83 long before the last war because that focused on the assault mission. With the HWG99 both of these leftovers were unceremoniously tossed into the commercial market and were snatched up because they are way overpowered when compared to most of the industrial offerings.

Back then the 41 was named the Dragonfly^{LT} after the colossal Dragonfly^{GT} which is the top-tier shipping grip-transport that handles the gargantuan Type-30 interplanetary containers. These boxes are twenty-meters wide, thirty-high and vary from thirty to one-hundred meters in length. There are eighty 120-meter exception-containers and these are what Simon contracted out for the Fondue-Pot circuit.

Simon uses the high-end Dragonfly^{GT} that is both MDDSH and jump capable which is not uncommon but a pricy config nonetheless. There are a lot of single-box interplanetary transports out there but the Dragonfly^{GT} is the Volvo-White in this industry. Looking like a mutant Sikorsky Skycrane on steroids, it has so much room in the forward section that a deck has been configured for passengers much like the old USAF-MAC/AMC services.

Blackjack-1108 happens to be the top driver on Simon's rolls, originally flying their "freight-train" circuit, aka The Figure-Eight, but he is now one of three pilots on their lucrative Fondue-Pot circuit. He is also an SA retread-operative, like all the pilots working for Simon, and when he left Prypiat at 19:50zulu he raced down one of the many secondary shipping corridors out of the system, like he does every

Friday, where commercial ships are required to drop off before they jump anywhere from between 10-12au. For safety the pilots throw in a little English at the end of their dash, a little right angle flip out of the lane where they can begin to spool, but instead of a 0.05au spike, like most pilots, he always throws in a third of an astral-unit on the flip.

The Simon pilots have always done this same flip so nobody thinks twice about it, so when Blackjack blows into orbit around Javan, fifteen minutes behind schedule, the New Nippur controller didn't even think to ask why. Load-mass always determines spool time and with Simon this happens to be all over the place—for what's reported to be empty containers on this leg. He could already surmise that Blackjack was way overloaded for his jump here today, and this passing thought by the controller was right on the money.

It's exactly 20:45zulu when Blackjack finally pops into orbit around Javan at fifty-thousand kilometers altitude which is actually safe because Simon is the only traffic to speak of at this time of day, ["New Nippur, this is Blackjack One-One-Zero-Eight, you read?"]

With a Thunderbird and a Cerberus fighter, both starting to AG vector away from Blackjack's ship, the New Nippur Controller says, ["We read ya, Black, guess you're running lite today."]

["Yeeea, purdy much like every day."]

["We copy. You are number one on the approach."]

["Roger that. We'll be hittin' the pink line in ninety seconds."]

Blackjack switches frequency to a short-range freq, then calls out to Jacob and Peña, ["Looks like the coast is clear, guys."]

On the passive sensor arrays, Jacob and the others see that there are no Epée cruisers, no spiders nor any satellites in orbit other than the small navigational cubes that are the same around every frontier planet. At this distance, New Nippur's passive ground based sensors are a commercial standard and will not be able to distinguish Jacob and Peña's ships apart from Blackjack's until they put at least eighty or so kilometers between them. Because of the low traffic here, like most of the frontier outposts, New Nippur simply relies on their passive sensors, and the transponders of the incoming ships, and don't even bother with firing up the radar. By all appearances, there is no CDF presence here and this is what they expected to see.

With nothing to report all Jacob and Peña have to do now is to push away from Blackjack as quickly as possible, so Jacob transmits, ["As expected. Forty-seconds. Let's make some distance, Dog."]

As they speed away, Peña adds, ["Thanks for the lift, Black!"]

Blackjack says, ["My pleasure! We're spoolin' up."]

All the container ships Simon procures have been modified with additional QP-generators used on the HWG99, so spool time with a load is a tenth that of a standard Dragonfly^{GT} without a load, so as the ship finishes its spool for a jump, Jacob and Peña are already twenty kilometers away.

Breathing, now that they cut acceleration, Jacob transmits, ["An' away we go, Dog...twelve Mississippi, 'leven Mississippi—"]

Peña throws out, ["It's Piccadilly, *homie*, like eight, Piccadilly, seven Piccadilly—"]

["When'd you become a Brit-fag?"]

Peña laughs, ["*Pinche maricón*, let's go south of the border with three cerveza, two cerveza, one cerveza and...any second?"]

The mission clock has rolled past 20:46:00 and seven seconds later nineteen SA battle platforms, eighteen Mbande and one Trung, the Iron Maiden, blast into the area—making a dead stop right over New Nippur at two-hundred and twenty kilometers altitude.

With all of the ships starting their drop, Peña shouts with glee, ["*Mi chingón*, we got ourselves a rumble!"]

01011001-01000111-01000010-01010011-01001101

Dante Sergio was originally slated to command the overhead FCAP for today, but that coveted job was handed over to Kati Connors when SEAD got tossed back into his lap at the last minute. Connors is the better pilot, yea, but this is Sergio's niche specialty.

At least on CAP she'll fly the T-Bird and not the hated Dip.

In air combat circles it is widely known that the Wild Weasel mission is definitely not playing it safe and, thanks to Sergio, all of the RRF pilots on the five stations are expert at baiting and killing anti-air defense systems, and the special on the menu today just so happens to be an all you can eat Triple-A buffet!

Now, the Weasels dropping in already know exactly where all 556 of their hidden anti-air units are located but, the thing is, they can't fire on any of them until they make themselves known. That is, the Weasels have to get swept with radar or painted with a ranging laser, get fired on by either guns or a missile launch, or they can opt to troll with 23mm bombs and try to push them out of their hidey-holes. Sergio's people have to make them flinch or force their hand, and to do this means that they have to get in real low and lure them out, wiggle like a craw-tailed jig in the mud or, in their face, they can twerk away all fat and sassy—double daring them to take a bite.

The AO is spread out over an area the size of Colorado, and of the 182 targeted underground storage facilities, each of the Mbande platforms has been assigned a cluster of nine. On the other hand the Iron Maiden itself has been assigned twenty sites, the ones closest to the docks by New Nippur, as well as the docks themselves.

The vestibule-habitation assembly and massive doorways into the mines are at a right angle to—and set back by at least a hundred meters from the access-way cut into the stone hill or mountain. With no direct shot you can lob 1kt bombs at these cuts all day long and get shit results, so the troopers of the Annex have to fight their way in and set charges by hand to collapse the roof over the vestibules.

For each target a company aboard a slick is coming down to set those charges, and with them is a Cerberus fighter for CAS to help them defeat the CDF platoon defending the mine they've been assigned but, first things first, to get them close are two Wild Weasel pilots from Jacob's RRF operations flying Thunderbolts. These guys have to defeat the hidden anti-air assets, and for each site this will consist of two walking mechs and a tracked mobile missile platform. Watching overhead as the 'clean-up batter' is a Warthog gunship to bring the hammer down if things go to hell. That is, if both Weasels get shot down they will automatically blast what's left of the robotic AAA, revealed or not, and let the assault company get on with it.

Sergio has assigned himself the docks, and with three other Weasels they are facing seven mechs and three missile bots. At least here they have no ground troops to scatter or vestibule to blow, so this should be a cinch to get the mechs to snap by shooting up the docks.

With the attack force clear, and the platforms having zoomed away, Sergio radios out, ["This is Split-S. Guys, you know what to do, so call out if things turn to shit for ya."] With hundreds of clicks on the channel, Sergio smiles and huffs a laugh, ["Y-G-B-S-M, motherfuckers! Rapid React is off the leash. Happy hunting!"]

Leaving a third of the FCAP forces above the atmosphere, to fight in MDDSH mode, the rest drop with the attacking force until about 15,000 meters where they break off and spread out to cover them. What would be weird for an outside observer is that there are virtually no voice-coms during the drop. Nobody is saying anything because everyone already knows what to do. At 10,000 meters the assault force and Weasels spread out to hit their nav-points outside the AO where they drop to the deck and race back in towards their targets.

It has been 35-minutes since the drop initiated, and with an additional two-hundred ASF47 and 74's swarming the low orbital tracks with Kati, Sergio's people are just now entering the AO to press their attack—and it's here when the Co-op finally makes a splash.

01000110-01000011-01000001-01010000

High over Javan, little batches of Co-op Djinn and Condor fighters are just now swarming the space above Kati's people who are dominating the lowest orbital tracks around the planet. Coming in groups of eight, sixteen and thirty-two, they are probing for an easy way past the FCAP forces. Problem is, if they try to charge past them for the deck, Kati's people would have no problem running them down.

After twenty-minutes, over eight-hundred F51's have blown in for this impromptu cattle call, stage-right from the Hyades. Now at a numerical advantage, 816 against 360, they are pooling together, looking to Naruto-rush the CAP, and it is at this very moment another 400 Annex fighters blow into Javan's geostationary zone at 22,000 kilometers. Suddenly becoming the creamy center filling between the SA fighters' makes things for the F51's very complex indeed.

"An' here we go!" Says Kati to herself, then transmits on the command channel, ["Okay, CAP leaders, it's no more fuckin' around time. Mark priority targets and let's see what these things can do!"]

Jacob radios up to Kati, ["Go get 'em, Orc-Kestrel."]

With increased chatter on this frequency, she replies to Jacob, ["Sit tight, Buzzard! We're bound to push some your way."]

Kati knows Jacob wants to be up here with her, but where he is now, five-thousand meters over the docks in the middle of the AO, is where they have the last two-hundred kilometer wide *circle of wagons* ready to protect the Weasels and the assault force—who have been winding their way through the AO, like synchronized swimmers, and are just seconds from simultaneously hitting their assigned targets.

Jacob gruffs, ["Ya sure as shit had better share the fun!"]

With Kati's people starting to launch spider missiles towards the Co-op fighters above, intent on breaking them up, she thinks about it and radios, ["I have to say you were right again, dude!"]

["About what?"]

["We did catch 'em with their pants down."]

["They were expecting us at noon, not nine hours later. Homer thought we were gonna be a no-show."] Watching the spiders spread out on the tacnet, significantly below light speed, Jacob adds, ["Okay, Orc, get to work an' I'll just sit here whackin' my pud."]

With the Co-op fighters now scattering, and firing in return, Kati snorts, ["If we do our jobs right that's all you'll do today!"]

["KMA Orc, you can KMA."]

Kati chuckles, ["Ya gotta pay for the privilege! Out."]

For the longest time the spider missile had the smarts of a Tex Avery hound dog, a la Mel Blanc's, "Which way did he go, George, which way did he go?" Zipping along beyond light speed if they miss their target they have to stop, get their bearings, require and shoot off again! Their small mass is very effective against large-capital ships, but they have to be going close to or better than "c" to have the right affect when they connect or simply graze them with their displacement field which itself hits like a brick. In a fighter-vs-fighter engagement that tactic will not work. When facing small-nimble ships in MDDSH, at high speed their interception solutions will amount to dick when their targets are pulling coordinated twists and turns as if they were spitfires in the skies over London—maneuvers not possible with any propulsion system but it's a *can do* in a spacial displacement soap-bubble.

For the spiders, the perfect time to jump a fighter has always been that sweet spot between the lower orbital tracks and their own operational floor. That region where the fighters are forced to exit MDDSH...at that uneasy moment of weakness when transitioning back to the realm of relativistic space and atmospheric flight.

Before today the odds-out chances of any one spider bagging a fighter in a MDDSH displacement field was like rolling a solid eleven, a one in eighteen odds, and that depends on them not running away. If that pilot is situationally crippled, target fixated and gormlessly blind to everything else then those odds will narrow down to one in six, like when rolling a seven, which is still crappy odds.

Distances are too distant, speeds are way too fast and when that target is a fighter, which are way-way too fricken small to begin with, the magical accuracy depicted in scifi cannot be replicated in the real world. Yet today, in counterpoint to the Centipede-Mew being stupidly goat-roped on its first outing over Taiji, here in the sizzlingly bright mid-night skies over Javan the Spider has been reborn...

Saddled with an old Xena AI mod from a century ago, the SA spiders had to be convinced to work together like the Mew, to slow down and think *Pride* instead of *Cheetah*, and for the first time the Annex can finally put these new algorithms to the stress-test. Going after the Condors and Djinn, they are not stabbing at them at high speed like they have always done in the past. Here they are riding the breaks considerably, avoiding the overshoot, and are working together to coral their targets by twos and threes—and when one scores a kill the others race off like *Felis leo* for the next victim in line.

While in MDDSH, fighters on both sides are constantly jinking around by hundreds of meters along their flight path. This means that it is next to impossible for a spider to actually "hit" a tiny fighter, but

on the rare occasion they do—it is catastrophically fatal for the pilot. In counterpoint, if the spider missile and target come into close proximity, that is if their displacement-drive fields actually make contact, the weapon will pop its one-kiloton warhead.

Okay, we all know that a small nuke in the vacuum of space is nothing to write home about but when contained within a MDDSH field, for just a few short milliseconds that is, the blast will lens like a shaped charge through the point where their MDDSH bubbles touch. This jet of plasma and pressure has a *crunching* or sometimes a *cutting* effect on the fuselage that will knock that fighter out of the engagement. Through the IFF transponder such a newly “destroyed” ship will flash the equivalent of a “KO” alert to the local AO flagging them as combat ineffective and no longer a threat. *Id est*, no longer a target.

Here is where the pilot just sits it out and waits for a pick up.

This is what happened to Kati’s wingman and eighteen others when most of the 386 Co-op spiders that were shot at them failed to connect and pancaked on the Mesopause above New Nippur.

Hence that stabbing at small craft at hyper-velocities problem.

The SA fighters on the top CAP were forced to run off with only ten of their own getting “crunched” during the scatter but, in between them, the Djinn and Condors didn’t fare so well. After about two-minutes of running around with their heads cut off, and failing to make the spiders break lock, the Co-op fighters high-tail it out of the system—leaving 198 Condors and 48 Djinn destroyed and tumbling out of the AO in oddly chaotic parabolic trajectories, and those depended on how fast they were going in the direction they were going when crunched. The three Condors and two Djinn that were actually hit left five rapidly expanding debris fields high over the planet.

With Kati’s people here in the low orbital tracks picking up their buddies who lost their ships, and the top CAP returning to the fight, a dozen SA razorbacks enter the AO to recover the enemy pilots so Kati radios them by their call sign, [“Knights Templar, lets attend to their pilots who are at risk of reentry first. I’ll flag ‘em for ya.”]

After a couple of minutes on the tacnet doing that, Kati then takes stock in the progress Sergio and his Wild Weasels have made so far. The net shows they have already destroyed over twenty percent of the Triple-A throughout the AO. Sitting here, Kati realizes that this unexpected inactivity is a welcome respite after trading all those spider missiles with the Co-op, and everyone flying around like circus clowns evading them, and after twelve minutes with nobody in sight, she gets a report that the eight Epée cruisers around Taiji have just vanished.

While gnawing on this little tidbit of intel, the quiet is suddenly

shattered when, right in front of her, at a distance of thirty kilometers an Epée cruiser pops in out of nowhere—and with its nose oriented down towards the planet's surface it fires it's particle batteries and plasma nodes out at Kati and her people.

"Oh shit!" Laughs Kati as the FCAP channel comes alive with everyone making the same sighting. All four of the particle beams and two plasma nodes shot from the cruiser miss, and inside five seconds the thing streaks up and away—only to be replaced by another one a hundred kilometers to her left that repeats the process.

With the fifth Epee zipping in and out, with no results, Kati calmly transmits, ["Okay, guys, lets settle down! You're doin' good. Keep jinking an' don't give `em a chance to get a fix."]

After another minute and a half of this stupidity, all the shots from the Epée missing and the SA spiders failing to get a lock on them, the cruisers simply stop coming, so after a good twenty seconds Kati radios to her people, ["Heads up, people! That can't be the end of it."]

In retrospect, Kati thinks she spoke too soon.

All of a sudden, right in front of her, over the docks by New Nippur an Epée pops into sight but, instead of wasting its shots at the FCAP forces it turns its attention, and particle batteries, downwards towards the Weasels far below. Here they can only manage one volley inside five seconds but these shots are connecting.

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Usagi Yamamoto, who goes by the call sign Wabbit, is the only five-time Ace Weasel flying for Sergio and the RRF, and even though Usagi is a PFC3, as is Sergio, she's in command of the SEAD mission over the twenty sites assigned to SA36. For the Weasel pilots, terrain and weather is everything and MS-182, the site closest to the docks by eighteen clicks, is the most difficult target they have to deal with today. The entrance faces a wide-open plane, and where all the other targets have rock formations jutting out every which way, and mountains of tailings and gravel waste to help break AAA line of sight, here at 182 the soft fill from this mine has been washed away by the rains leaving three small mounds and an ocean of thick-sticky mud.

Difficult targets go to the best Weasels, and here it's Wabbit.

On the deck it is local midnight, with broken water-logged stratocumulus clouds for as far as the eye can see, but with this side of Javan facing Polaris-A, from 2,400au, its intense light breaches the gaps and gives the underside of these huge cloud formations an eerie mammatus look to them. The Area of Operation is toasty at 62°C with

a slow but constant drizzle coming down, and a hot-translucent vapor rippling back up, yet these conditions work in the Weasels favor by trashing the electro-magnetic spectrum. Line-of-sight targeting, finely tuned in the visual, infrared as well as the microwave ranges, are critical for modern Triple-A. When tracking fast moving targets anti-air assets must rely on passive mechanisms or get a bomb dropped in their lap. At a distance, under these conditions, they can only resort to active radar for positive lock while on the run whereas human pilots can substitute all that for good old-fashion eyeballs.

None of that mattered over the docks because Sergio and his other three Weasels come in and start off by chunking 23mm bombs all over the facility from outside six kilometers. They blow the docks, the containers, tractors, forklifts and cranes all to hell, but the Triple-A mechs and launchers only react when they finally step inside six-klicks. What they did not expect was for them all to react at once.

Sergio transmits on the freq for his local team, ["Holy shit, guys, we hit a hornets nest! I got the left launcher!"]

With his team acknowledging the call, Sergio rolls and yaws into a skid and punches out an old run-of-the-mill red Centipede. The missile launchers are the priority targets because they have a long reach and have over nine-hundred missiles on hand. The Centipede in the anti-anti-air mode, twists and spirals around the five missiles fired at it, and right at two kilometers it sprouts its six on-board micropede missiles. Even though a nearby gunnery mech was able to blow this weapon out of the sky, the micropedes got through with six-thousand kilograms of explosive force—leaving a massive jagged crater that quickly fills with water and a brown slurry of excavated fill.

The other two launchers fared no better.

Sergio turns his sites to that 70-ton Ryazan-Tottori robotic mech and wastes three more Centipedes trying to get close. For the average TBolt and TBird driver the 23mm cannon is kind of useless, but for the Weasels it's a must have. With the monster mech stomping through a meter thick layer of mud, slogging it at only 15kph, it takes a half-second string from Sergio's 23 that finally drops and guts it.

With the four of them bronco-bucking through the strings of fire from the six remaining gunnery mechs, they quickly slip out of the lethal range of the 7.62 "long-legs" and, once clear, Sergio tells his team, ["Baitin' the one on the right, you guys git 'im!"]

Sergio twists and turns his way towards that robotic mech, taking a few hits from the long-legs but evading most of it. With three Centipedes charging in behind him, Sergio pitches up and corkscrews away, and the short four seconds the mech is fixated, tracking him up and out makes the difference. It pulls down and shreds two of the

Centipedes but the third one hits the thing square in the midsection, right under the empty cockpit where humans used to drive it. The blast is a total of seven thousand kilograms of explosive force that blows this mech into three distinct segments. The lower one with the chassis and legs tumbles forward into mud. The two shoulder segments, with both guns and launchers, fly off and spiral away landing some hundred or so meters from where it was blown apart.

Sergio swings out wide in a climb, and he is already aware of the Epée cruisers hammering at Kati's people above, but he now gets an alert that they've changed tactics and are now firing down at them! Opening the prompt provided in the message he wonders if he can see a pattern forming. With the eighth point of attack showing up on the display, and two more of his people getting knocked out of the sky, he quietly grumbles to himself, "Well, this ain't good."

With over fifty percent of the Triple-A targets now destroyed, and seven of his Weasels already flagged as shot down by the Epée, he realizes there is nothing he can do so he clicks on the command freq, ["Hey, Buzzard? This is gonna be a costly little speed bump!"]

Jacob radios back, ["We got a fix, dude. Just hold tight!"]

It was then he hears from Usagi, ["Hey, Split, got a sec?"]

Where Sergio had no problem getting the Triple-A to jump right on in, for Usagi and her wingman it's been like pulling teeth. The Triple-A has not reacted to any of their normal baiting maneuvers so after five minutes of this nonsense, Usagi fires a pair of 20/20 cluster bombs. The weapons drop their warheads along the base of a rock formation where she already knows a mech is in hiding, and with her following those things in, at just below supersonic, that mech finally decides to take a crack at her.

Usagi is two-kilometers out when tracers of long-legs rip past her canopy by a hundred meters. The lead is too long so as the mech starts to walk the string back, Usagi's Hydrapede missile, the one she launched when they entered the zone for 182, streaks in silently along the ridgeline. Usagi rolls and skids her ship like Sergio did, which cuts her speed and pulls her ship out by another half-kilometer, and with the string of bolts again coming towards her she then hits the reverse vector on her Thunderbolt at full power. This is like hitting the breaks, and with the line of tracers again pulling far out ahead the Hydrapede makes the kill with three of its micropede missiles.

She kicks her bis-E Thunderbolt into high gear and starts to climb out, and as she breaches supersonic—Usagi feels a slight bump as everything drops off and goes dead like an electrical grid blackout. Now gliding powerless, the one working grape sized QP generator far out on her starboard wing instantly reroutes what little power it has to

her critical air-control surfaces.

Because the Thunderbolt is dead even her IFF unit is down so, with a glance to the right she notices a Co-op Centipede reaching out for her. Instinctively, Usagi pitches up and easily rolls over the missile, but this cuts her energy by half. Now heading back towards the mine, she dives and opens flaps and air-breaks to kill forward momentum. Pitching up to maintain lift, the fighter shudders to a stall and, with a sploosh, her ship noses over and drops into a sea of mud.

Usagi's TBolt may be down but her JACC is fully functional. She launches the tacnet and pulls up the overhead tactical display while compiling the links for today's com-frequencies.

"*Chikushou!*" Usagi grunts, watching the Epée attacks adding up on the tactical display, and annoyed that her CAS pilot is also down but alive. Now with her canopy half buried in the mud, and IFF not responding, she starts rerouting power to her stinger cannon as she links up to Sergio, ["Hey, Split, got a sec?"]

By sheer luck, at that very second, Usagi gets power restored to the cannon—just in the nick of time.

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It's 3:30pm here in Kansas City and, with a gray overcast and a light-planar snow just starting to fall, Jessica's ASF74 silently touches down outside the north entrance to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

Securing the perimeter are two squads of ghost droids.

Everyone is outside to meet the ship when it lands. They all circle around Maria while she quickly strips down, then help hoist her above and into her JACC fighting suit. Now with it sealed, warming Maria up, Monique and her girls follow Angela, Diego, Brie, Paula and the clones as they stroll about looking up in awe and wonderment of the delicate icy crystals as they drift slowly from the sky.

Jessica, standing by Maria, nods towards them while saying, "I forgot that the girls have never seen snow before."

"Neither have I." Says Maria, and with Jessica giving her that look, Maria adds, "I went from Clover right into the Annex." She looks up and around saying, "It's also a first for me."

"Oh! Never would have guessed it."

"First time in a place like this too." Maria is thumbing behind them towards the museum and a sculpture of a gigantic shuttlecock, "You were right. We are comin' back."

Jessica smiles, "Told you it was somthin' right?"

"Yea." Maria nods slightly, "I gotta git going."

"Things to do?"

"Sure, people to see an' thangs to blow the crap out of."

"Remember, on the outside they'll be keepin' a straight face, but on the inside they'll be freakin' the fuck out of their minds."

Maria points out, "All but Boxter."

"Yup, he'll be havin' a blast with this."

"Did you or Seth ever tell 'im what *this* is?"

Jessica looks Maria in the eyes and, "I asked him if he wanted to know and, well, he told me he wanted to be surprised."

Maria is taken aback slightly with, "No way!"

"Ya! He wants his response to be natural so..." She bumps her hip against Maria's, "You go surprise the shit outta 'em."

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When you fire a particle beam, you know...protons, orphaned subatomic particles with a positive charge, it's kind of like a nuclear bomb going off—all in one direction. These weapons tend to be huge, ungainly, power-hungry and since their use is primarily relegated to the vacuum of space, when fired it is invisible to the eye yet, if you can manipulate them by throwing them at a point of convergence, then the results they offer in return can be absolute.

The Co-op Epée cruisers have two cannons each and, like the problems experienced by the Annex with their Hammer turrets on the battle platforms, they are an infuriating bitch to aim.

Time is everything in a space battle and, when you're in close proximity to the targets, targets that can appear and disappear inside five or even four seconds, the three-seconds it may take to traverse and lock is three-seconds too long. This gives you around one-second to identify what an object is, and decide to maybe fire or not?

If you put your mind to it, that's not a lot of time.

What pisses off the Red-Leg fire teams is that spiders in M3 mode have a faster response time than they do!

Around Taiji the civilian traffic made a mess of things so the Epée could not engage there. Extreme distances means that it takes advanced AI systems at least five seconds to identify weather or not you can squeeze that trigger so they were forced to sit it out, but here over Javan their hands are not tied.

Anyway, the Epée are experiencing the same distortion in the infrared range of the spectrum as the Triple-A assets are challenged by on the surface. The trick up Red-Leg's sleeve is that they can opt to fire in a wide dispersion instead of a convergence—and they are.

The area of dispersion has a radii of five-hundred meters and, yea, Red-Leg would prefer to get that viscerally satisfying burst of feedback they so enjoy, like when watching a fighter explode but, when you think about it, killing Spooky's power and dropping their ships from the sky doesn't exactly provide that bawdy-orgasmic kick yet, admittedly, it does have a way more sinister vibe to it.

When the Epée arrived and started blasting away with particle beams and plasma nodes, Kati's people threw themselves into tight banks, twists and spirals all to slither out of their sight picture, which was a breeze, but the spiders they launched against them could not connect in turn. When the Epée started shooting down at the Weasels, Kati and her FCAP realized they had no hope of running them off.

After ninety-seconds and eighteen Epée attacks against an Area of Operation that covers over a quarter-million square kilometers, and with twenty-one Weasels and three CAS pilots down, and with no possible counter from FCAP, the cavalry finally shows up.

All eighteen of the SA Mbande battle platforms blow into the AO from house-left at 0.35 of a second before the next Co-op cruiser pops in to launch particle attack number nineteen.

Now, setting a convergence takes time, like a half-a-second, so the Mbande have preset that point out to one-hundred kilometers. Point being, this configuration is better than going at it smooth bore with no choke like convergence, so with the eighteen battle platforms scattered randomly about, each with twenty-four Hammer turrets that can alternate between particles and plasma, pointing in all directions, they can cut that traverse time down to less than a half-second.

Three particle beams hit this Epée amidships, shots layered one on top of another, and even though WECG cruisers have been shielded as well as can be expected, nothing the Co-op has in terms of armor can protect it from such an onslaught. The beams slice the Epée squarely in half. The Annex has never shot at a WECG cruiser with Hammer turrets before now, it just never came up, but what they see next teaches the SA a rather valuable lesson.

The Epée and Rapier WECG cruisers are long and slender needle-like spikes, and even though this ship is now cut in half and hemorrhaging atmosphere, with debris scattering every which way, it is the ship's rear six-hundred meters that has all the critical power generation, MDDSH engines and flight deck elements—so the thing shoots back up and out of the fight like it was just a scratch.

With it gone the Mbande instantly zig backwards by twenty kilometers, and right in time for the next Epée appearing on the far perimeter over MS-003. The cruiser gets two shots off, dropping only one Weasel, but it gets hit by one of the Mbande particle beams that punches a hole right through it. Even though it is critically damaged the thing also boogies it up and away without a problem.

The Mbande zag sideways by another thirty kilometers and wait, but they soon realize that the Epée have stopped coming.

Katie contacts the razorbacks that are picking up Co-op pilots, ["Knights, can we get one of you guys after that spike. Let's start rescuing any of their crew that abandons ship."]

While waiting for the next jump scare that's bound to come, they watch as the forward half of the bisected Epée starts to slowly fall from space—and picking up speed as it does. Since it never had an orbital momentum then falling towards Javan is about the only thing it can do at this point. The atmosphere below is thick and the gravity is low, and it will heat up as it goes down but it won't be anywhere near the heat from reentry.

Then, a minute later, it happened...

See, this was bound to happen. Sooner or later it was going to happen but nobody could conceive that this would transpire on the Mbande's first day out. All eight of the Epée, the two damaged ones included in this mix, pull off one hell of a maneuver by genie-blinking into a ring all at once over the docks by New Nippur. Oriented so that both particle cannons on each ship is facing out, they take a second to aim and fire all sixteen of them in one single volley in all directions at whatever Mbande is closest to them.

Snap firing over long distances means you're gonna miss most of your shots but the two platforms that were close, the Litvyak and the Gouyen, were hit by particle beams, and what happens next leaves the crews on the Epée in open-mouth shock...

Nothing happens.

One should also note that when they fired those weapons they also fired eight of their plasma cannons but only one of those nodes finds its mark. It also hits the Gouyen in the dome side over the stadium. Again, the crews in the Epée cruisers experience even more shock and awe as the thing simply splashes off the platform's hull like a lead bullet against a steel plate at the shooting range.

Tomorrow morning the maintenance crews out at Gore Point will inspect the Gouyen and Litvyak and where the particle beams hit they will see that maybe three millimeters was ablated off a composite armor that is over six-meters thick. As for the plasma node hitting the

Gouyen at 30kps, if you look hard, like really hard in the right light you may see a dimple in the hulls plating.

All those years on Dedede, and all those new technologies developed as a result, has finally paid off.

Right at five seconds the Epée zoom up and away, totally disengaging from this fight but—in their wake comes four hundred Condor and Djinn fighters making one last push.

0101101-0011010-0010101-0111011-0111100-0010101

It was a beautiful sunset when they landed in New Darwin some five hours ago. It is also an amazing sight from all the cliff-side casino's, restaurants and hotels in the adjoining city, but from the airfield at the Security Services base, on a stubby peninsula called the Polyp, it's more picturesque with the sand and breakers under foot.

Some of the best beaches on Scab surround this base.

The inspection tour of the SS base at the north end of Scab, on Sapphire, has become old hat for Boxter. He does this for all new Chancellor's when they first come on board. Noah Wanganui will be swearing in next month so the joy of being able to walk freely about in what is considered enemy territory is kinda bonkers.

It may be 21:40zulu, or 00:35 past local midnight here on Scab, but for Boxter and his guest they just got done with lunch.

They are still on New Brisbane time.

The city of New Darwin was built on a rugged hillside terrain over the bay across from the Polyp. Above the city is a mesa where the civil and private air traffic is served, and the one five-star hotel and casino here, one of many Boxter himself owns, is the *Sapphire*. The east entrance empties out to the airfield and sitting next to the hotel is Boxster's Trident Star Clipper.

Entering the ship from the forward ramp, he and Noah walk to the back where they hear General, Lionel Bristol, the commander of all Co-op CDF forces, going off in a tantrum, "I don't give a bloody wank! Ya smarmy git of a bellend! I demand that you take—"

And just like that, the general clams up when he sees Boxter emerge from the shadows and steps into the observation salon at the back of the ship, where he quietly asks, "General Bristol, entertain my curiosity, please. You demand what...exactly?"

Bristol blinks and looks over at Lieutenant-General, Alcock, who looks at him with a shrug so, both of them look back at Boxter where Bristol swallows hard and, "Nothing."

Boxter nods and turns to Porter Macquarie, who is standing there with a three-man fire team, and smiles, "Hello there, Colonel."

Porter nods, "It be a right ripper of an afternoon, Sir!"

"I must agree, and since we have our three guests I think maybe we should make haste for our rendezvous, yes?"

Porter says as he hurries forward, "We'll kick it in gear, sir!"

Bristol balls up and asks, "If I may speak freely, Sir?" Boxter gestures for him to do so, so Bristol breaths deep and, "I really do not take kindly to being abducted without knowing what this is about."

"What this is about...well, that'll be a mystery for both of us, General." Boxter motions for Nigel to take a seat, "Honestly, I've stumbled upon an invitation and thought—the more the merrier! I am so glad the two of you could join us on such...short notice."

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The Stinger cannon at the tail end of Usagi's Thunderbolt is sticking up out of the mud so it has no problem destroying the missile shot at her from the Triple-A missile platform.

As her wingman fires back at the launcher, Usagi calls out to Sergio, ["Okay, Serg, I'm in the mud and... Holy shit!"]

Sergio calls back, ["What the fuck? What's your status!"]

After knocking a second missile out of the sky, she calmly says, ["I'm down! My IFF is out and that makes me a sitting duck! If you got anyone free, can you send them my way, maybe?"]

["I'm comin'!"]

["No, fuck no! Send someone else."]

["Hey, asshole! Deal with it! I'm next door so I'll be scootin' right on over."] Sergio switches over to the CAS command freq, ["Dog, we got one of your guys in the mud over at one-eighty-two. Got anyone available to cover that?"]

Peña calmly radios back, ["Already in route. One minute?"]

Jacob was monitoring and asks, ["Want me to jump in?"]

["No, if fighters get through you'll need to be there."]

Jacob is not happy, saying, ["Okie fuckin' dokie."]

Peña huffs a laugh, ["We got this, dude."]

["I'm here! I am right overhead."]

["And you stay right there."]

Jacob protests, ["I liked it when you did what I wanted."]

Peña laughs while quietly saying, ["Reap what you sow!"]

Jacob grumbles, ["Fucker."]

Peña points out to him, ["Just keep those skies clear."]

Jacob knows Peña is right, so he says, ["I'm on it."]

It takes Sergio a few long seconds to get to Usagi, and when he does he sees that her wingman has fired two Centipedes at the missile launcher that is struggling to make tracks in the thick mud. The pilot is also coming in behind them daring to make a risky 23mm cannon run. The launcher has fired two of its own missiles to intercept his missiles and right before they connect his Centipedes pick off a combined total of twelve micropedes that instantly turn in and close on the launcher.

All the launcher can do at this point is to fire off as many of its missiles it can in the short three seconds it takes the micropedes to smash into it. With fourteen missiles going up, six left stuck in the tubes because of the residual heat, the weapons rotate in the air and, with two heading towards the wingman, the other twelve arc up and then nose down for Usagi.

["God-damn it!"] Shouts Sergio as he throws his Thunderbolt between the missiles and Usagi—whereby two of the missiles from the launcher blot him out of the sky.

Usagi has been trying to get the canopy open, but seeing the missiles launch, and watching Sergio get vaporized, and with ten more racing towards her face, there is nothing that Usagi can do but close her eyes and quietly say to herself, "*Kuso!*"

Seconds later Peña's ship is decelerating with a shudder as he enters the arena for MS-182. Noticing that two of the Triple-A units have been destroyed, Usagi's ship is now a rolling mushroom cloud, and the debris from Sergio is still raining from the sky, he realizes that one mech is still hiding, so he links up to the local freq.

["How ya'll doin' Gumball?"]

["Hey, Dog! Engines seven and eight are down. My top right rudder has been sheared off."]

Peña nods, ["That must'uv been close."]

["Yup! It was real close, but I'm still in this fight."]

Pena drops a Hydrapede from under his Cerberus and says, ["Okay, I'll bait for ya. If you don't get it, this Hydra will."]

Pena swings his Cerberus around wide and charges in low at six meters above the mud. As he passes through the smoke cloud that was once Usagi, the remaining mech jumps at this chance.

Slipping out from under the rock overhang, the mech is in a dead run and fires at Peña with its rotary cannons. Peña already had his ship in a partial corkscrew-loop that goes up and over the stream of long-legs as he slips over the short rocky hill. At the same time the wingman, Gumball, is racing in and starts hosing the thing down with his 88. A maelstrom of 8.80mm bolts shred its outer extremities, so the mech tries to swing one of its cannons around towards Gumball. At the exact moment it is pulling down on him, the Centipede already fired at it hits the thing dead center—obliterating the robotic monster with a combined total of seven-thousand kilograms of explosive force.

The two Razorbacks that have been lapping around MS-182 this whole time now turn in and lazily follow the ridge out of eye-shot from the access-way cut into the rocky hillside—with the slick dropping the assault company in two strings below the peaks.

Peña pulls alongside the wingman, ["You good?"]

["Yea, I'm good."]

["Okay, empty on the cut if I go down."]

["Roger that... Just don't go down, how 'bout?"]

Peña laughs at that as he banks his ship back up and around to prime CAS altitude, and when leveling out he ties into the IFF voice coms saying, ["*A mi la muerte me pela los dientes*, motherfuckers!"] Peña noses in, ["Now, let me sing to you the song of *my* people."]

From the cockpit of Peña's ship one can hear the rhythmic *chucka-chucka-chuck* from the 23mm cannon that sprays both hillsides by the access-way. This is followed by the comical *bloop-bloop-bloop* of the 30mm firing into that cut.

000001010101

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"To reach said target."

"Yes, Sir."

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

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

Boxter asks, "Up to two-thirds?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria interrupts, "Yeeeee, about that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

matter to you two...gone."

Bristol glares at her, "You did not."

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

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

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

Bristol flashes indignantly, "The nerve!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was costly but 331 got past them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

01010111-01000111-01010100-01001111-01010111

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

on the IFF fast enough.

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

Today, the Annex lost only five Weasel pilots.

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

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

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

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

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

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

["I'll second that."]

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

["Yea, I saw it happen."]

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

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

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

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

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

000001010110

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-4-SATURDAY
TIME: 00:18zulu (local 03:36mst)

Along the edge of the cliffs, between the Spike and Orb West, overlooking the mouth to Bludger Bay, is a network of outdoor patios and a micro-amphitheatre that are served by an underground lounge that is frequented by both locals and tourists. The lounge is expanding to accommodate a new bar to serve two brand new restaurants under construction that will flank it, those being *olá* and *Tabula Pasta*.

If you are not at the casinos then this lounge is the only place on the Church Key that serves drinks all day, every day and through the night. It's called Twenty-Four-Seven—even though Sapphire has a 32.4 hour day divvied up into 36 hours of 54 minutes each or, more specifically, 60 minute hours with a 0.9 of a second-second.

Twenty-Four-Seven just seems familiar and cozy.

There are always people here, a constant stream of people from different worlds and different time standards, and for them it can be breakfast, lunch, or midnight or whatever. Most everyone goes by what is referred to as E-Z time, or the Earth/Zulu standard, and they do this because it is easier when traveling. What they don't realize is that they are referencing UT8 and not zulu itself—and these clocks can be off by a half second or more but who's counting?

A pair of fighters, a Thunderbird and a Cerberus, drop from orbit and descend along the eastern approach. They level out coming around the pyramids and Orb South, pull a one-eighty and silently slip over the cliff-side lounge. Slowing to a near hover, they land and shut down by the grassy knoll in front of the Spike.

In their JACCS, Jacob and Peña fly back to the northern most patio, the one permanently reserved for the SA, and set down across from Maria who has been telling Scott and Bill stories while waiting.

"Give me a sec!" Maria says to Jacob, and while he and Peña are taking off their full helmets, with the canopies attached, Maria continues, "Scott, your daughter, the entire day her mouth was pukin' out crazy shit and would not let up!"

Scott cringes, "I'm so sorry."

Maria puts her hand out, "No, don't be, it's not what I meant. We were all busting a gut the whole time because of her!"

Bill wonders, "I can only imagine!"

Maria snorts a laugh and, "Get this, an' this was the best one of the day. Because of the quinceañera the museum staff recognized us so the director came out and asked to give us a tour, and Monique said yes before I could tell her to shove off." Maria thumbs to her right and, "So, there were these marble statues of, like, you know, maybe David or Atlas or whatever, and there was your daughter staring up at one with that look, ya know, that look she gives—"

Scott goes, "That little scrunched up brow she does."

"Yea, that's the one!" Maria throws her hands out, "So, the Director leans in towards her and asks what she thought of the statues and Angela points to 'em and says to her, 'You mean him, Theodore?' The Director asks, 'Theodore?'"

Scott is shaking his head, "I don't know if I want to hear this."

"Oh no, motherfucker, you are gonna hear this!" Maria points over her shoulder, "So, Angela goes, 'Yea, and that's Alvin over there! I mean, with the squeaky chipmunk voices they got, what else would they be called?' So, the Director asks, 'How did you come by these names?' So, Angie, points to them and says, 'Okay, you really wanna know it's the chipmunk junk! They're too small even for me!'"

With everyone cracking up, Scott shakes his head, laughing, "She's just like her mother. Exactly like her mother!"

Bill nods big, "Oh yea, we remember!"

Maria laughs with, "An' later, comin' out the modern art wing she said, and I quote, 'Scream of Nature? Looks like he screamed while wiping his butt with the canvas and went, *Well, looky there!*'" With everyone laughing even more, Maria goes, "The painting was on tour and everyone was ogling over the damned thing but, uh-uh, Angie was right! It was a dumb-ass painting."

Jacob asks, "Was the Director offended by that?"

Maria shakes her head, "No! The Director quietly pulled us aside and told Monique and I that the kid had good taste." With them all nodding in wide-eyed astonishment, Maria asks, "If you and Scott

want to come along, we're all goin' back."

Jacob mockingly points out, "An art gallery...at a mall."

Maria snarls, "It's a museum...by The Plaza."

He smiles and asks, "Hear about Taiji?"

"I just got an earful about Taiji. Shit I did not want to hear."

Peña adds, "Yea, Taiji has become a genuine murder fest."

Bill agrees, "No shit."

Maria laughs, "Right now you got my undivided attention so, waddya got for me, chuckle-fuck?" She sits back and braces for the bad news, "I took myself out of the status loop for a reason today so, here I am! Give it to me both barrels."

Jacob asks, "You want the money shot?"

Bill leans in towards her with a grin, "You know you want it!"

She scowls at Bill, then throws her hands up, "Why not?"

"Okay!" Jacob looks at Peña who shrugs so he turns back to Maria saying, "Thirty...that's it, thirty!"

Maria does a double take, "Shit serious?"

Jacob continues as Green approaches with a bottle of rye and shot glasses, "Yea, it's unexpectedly low. Kati's people did shoot down hundreds but only seven of 'em were killed. Homer gave up the sites without a fight so they lost only eighteen by our CAS pilots when some of the sites didn't throw in the towel fast enough. We did shoot the crap outta two Epée. Even blew one in half but it keep goin' like..." Jacob accurately mimics Leon's accent with, "*It ti'z but a scratch!*"

Maria's brow scrunches up, "We lost...what, five?"

"Yea, that about sums it up!"

Maria's eyes blink in surprise, then, "Anyone I know?"

"Ya, Dante."

"Sergio?" Jacob nods yes, so Maria shakes her head and grunts, "God damn it, that sucks! Anyone else?"

Jacob nods, "Yamamoto."

"Hu? Who's that?"

"Usagi."

"Still don't follow."

Jacob points to the dais by the cliffs, "Wabbit."

"Oh, fuck no!" Maria's face is genuinely pained as she shakes her head, "Son of a bitch! That really...fuck!"

"Yea, it sucks." Jacob agrees, then adds, "We were about to tangle with their fighters that got past Kati so, if you were the one that got that cease-fire called up then you were the one that saved a lot of asses. If we would've gotten it on, the KIA would have been a whole lot higher for both sides."

With tears in her eyes, Maria shrugs, "Yea, whatever."

Green has stepped up and as he sets each shot glass down he says, "Alexander, Caesar, Tamerlane, Napoleon, Zhukov...Ramirez."

Maria huffs, "Green, how 'bout you fuck off!"

Green shakes his head while saying, "Uh-uh, Tiger Bitch, no can do! The net is abuzz with every crazy-quilt wearin' mil-fag singin' up your praises, and nobody in the media has a clue how to spin this! You have blind-sided the motherlovin' skittles outta everyone."

Bills adds, "Told ya they were gonna flip their shit."

Maria had a carryon bag next to her chair, so she pulls it up and slams it into Bill, "How 'bout you get the fuck outta here!"

Bill is laughing, "Where? Ya'll haven't told me yet!"

"Anywhere but here would be a good start!" Maria grumbles, and with Green pouring the shots, she says to Bill, "Okay, my orders are for you to go to the Iron Maiden and relieve Sandoval. She is to report to the Carrie Nation and relieve Yoon. Yoon comes here and takes your job! They know you're comin' so...you okay with this?"

Bill is in bug-eyed shock, "Don' be pullin' my leg!"

Maria hands him a crested silver-star, "The Iron Maiden is yours, Field Marshal. Cricket packed your bag here, and we'll figure on gettin' you back to the Key every couple of weeks to see her and Jade. Sound like a plan?" With Bill nodding yes, and Green passing out the shots she adds, "The red-eye for U-Ey is leavin' at two, be on it."

As Bill takes the shot glass, "Hot damn!"

With Jacob taking a shot glass, Maria says to him, "Graves, you are now off the leash." Looking at him she nods repeatedly then, "You know what to do."

Jacob glances at the shot in his hand and quietly says, "Yup."

Green holds up his shot glass and gives the toast, "Here is the first of many toasts to Marshal, Maria Lynn Ramirez." He laughs and then adds, "And as ol' Vossler would say, you didn't fuck this monkey. Oh, hell no! You've done fucked King Kong!"

Laughing, they all knock back their shots except for Jacob and Peña. Jacob reverently holds his out and pours it over the ground.

Maria quietly says, "Angel's share."

Scott asks, "For Dante?"

As Jacob nods yes, Peña reaches out with his shot glass and pours it out while saying, "For Wabbit."

Bill asks, "Weren't you two close?"

Peña shrugs as he leans in and is the first to set his shot glass upside down on the table, "We were regular."

Maria whispers, "I'm sorry."

While standing Peña says to her, "Don't be."

As he steps back she asks, "Want some time off?"

Peña shakes his head, "Naw, that shit comes with the job."

After Bill, Scott and Maria, Green stacks his saying, "No shit."

Jacob has the last glass but he hesitates in closing this ritual, and as he places it on the top, Bill calls out, "Hi-hooooo!"

Green and Scott join in with, "Hi-hooooo!"

Peña also sings along, "Hi-hooooo!"

Jacob gives a little smirk as he lets go of the glass, all the while saying, "Hi-ho...hi-ho...it's off to work we go."

After Peña and Green butcher the whistling part, they all quietly sing along, "Hi-ho...hi-ho, hi-ho, hi-ho—"

Maria cuts them off, "You guys are stupid!"

They all start laughing with Scott saying, "Forget thee not."

Green nods in agreement, "Not while we're still a-breathin'."

Jacob nods towards Bill, "You wanna lift, FM?"

With Jacob, Bill and Peña heading to the fighters, Scott asks Maria if, "You want us to hang out for awhile?"

She shakes her head, "No, why don't you take the red-eye and go spend some time with your daughters."

"Seriously? I got work to—"

Maria cuts him off, "No, ya don't. It's out of our hands now."

Green huffs a laugh, "She just let Ol' Carrion out of his cage."

Scott agrees with a wide-eyed look, "God help us."

Maria looks up at Scott, "When Yoon settles in we need to go over the contingency options if he gets whacked."

"We gonna limit the instances if they manage ta ghost 'im?"

Maria shakes her head, "No, we're not gonna tie his hands." She looks away and, "He asked me not to tie his hands."

"Damn, that's asking a lot."

"Just so you know, the tradeoff for this is Security Services withdrawing the bounties on his, mine and Peña's heads. In fact, all personal bounties have been walked-back by Hartcourt."

Scott nods, "That's good to hear. What about the CDF?"

"Hartcourt has no say there but...they'll soon get the hint." Maria then turns to Green, "With Vossler gone, I was wondering if you can help me with Ground Round?"

Greens shrugs, "Not a problem."

"Tomorrow I wanna go over with you how to expand the FIS foot print on the Church Key. Vossler is good with the plans as is, but I want another set of eyes...your eyes."

"The office buildings?"

"And the apartment complexes, and the food courts, an' retail and we gotta make it all pretty and shit. Also, I will acquiesce to the PADF having policing responsibilities on the Church Key."

"They want to start that this March."

Maria points to herself, "Under our rules."

"They already said that was acceptable."

"In writing."

"It's in the contract."

"I'll sign it after Cricket."

"Cricket will sign only after the Alliance signs."

Maria smiles at Green with approval, then suddenly she goes off, "Oh, yea, fountains! I want to push some stuff out from around the central court and throw in some water treatments just for giggles. We are on a water planet so let's use it how 'bout?"

Scott starts chuckling, "Where'd that come from?"

Green asks, "Ya'll were at The Plaza, right? Kansas City?" Maria nods yes, so he says, "We should give this project to Cricket."

Maria agrees, "Sure, we'll take her with us when we go back."

"I was there when I was a teen, she'll get some killer ideas."

"While pokin' around the webs I saw this one in Arizona that shoots a stream up into the air some thirty-stories at the top of every hour. It's kinda cool."

Scott raises his eyebrows, "I like that idea!"

"It sits in the middle of this small lake, but ours needs to be some kind of...wading pond with different patio levels and, you know, those jets of water kids can play in, an' shit."

Green nods with surprise, "Family friendly! I like that."

"I really want it to be a place people would want to come to. Cricket is on board with making the FIS approachable, and this would definitely be a good start."

Green points out, "We have nine-square clicks to play with. Think we can expand this idea and squeeze in an actual park?"

Maria shrugs then says, "Yea, but if I see one fucking clown doing balloon animals I'll shoot the cock-sucker myself!"

Scott laughs, "Get in the back of the line!"

Maria has pulled Jacob's shot glass from the stack and, as she pours a shot for herself, she says to Green, "I'll see you at eleven after I sleep this bottle off but, before we meet, let the Muckrakers in the GA know that, in no uncertain terms, will the Annex or the CXi switch from an observer mission status. Make it crystal clear that, in spite of us being permanent members on the Security Council, we do not carry a vote nor the power of veto. So, the operative word to convey is?" She then touches her lips in a mocking, "Oh yea, period!"

"I'll remind them of our status." Green smiles, "But when you really think about it we wield the greatest veto of all."

Maria nods, "Yea, we don't have to do shit."

With them gone and a starry sky above, Maria was looking to enjoy the tide coming in, the waves crashing below and spray shooting up but, as it is the lounge and patios surrounding it are jumping. The Church Key Junket flight from Las Vegas landed a half an hour ago and they are still on Mountain Time. To these people it's around 5:30pm and in Nevada that happens to be time for dinner! Unfortunately, the restaurants here are in the middle of their four-hour switch to morning fare and prep for the next day's lunch menu. Here at the lounge they can at least grab something other than cold cuts and pastries.

What Maria finds humorous is that most people are constantly surrounded by and riding around in floaters and gliders but here, with Jacob and Peña flying back over the lounge, fighters will always draw

the people's attention like a moth to flame. It's like everybody has to stop and gawk—reason being is that there is an honest to god pilot flying it that can actually fight with the thing so, when you think about it, the coolness factor is completely off the scale.

The northernmost patio is reserved for the Annex, and it is considered the best patio here with the best views. When the lounge is crowded, like now, people always approach this patio and if there is nobody here the ghost droids will allow them in even though it is roped off. The three droids standing guard around Maria are maintaining a respectful distance because they can tell she wants solitude.

An SA trooper in a JACC looks wickedly-evil on their own, but the skinnier ghost droid looks flat out sinister by comparison. Maria watches as two couples step up to the rope. The droid that is guarding it flashes into view for just a second so that solves that problem! Maria feels a twinge of envy because where normal people can be scared the troopers of the SA have learned to turn fear into aggression and, in this world, emotions not under the thumb means death.

To her the greatest luxury would be to feel normal again.

With all the people there, Maria finds it difficult to enjoy the patio, the tide and the view, so from the tacnet she pulls up the patio's entertainment screen and here she selects her favorite recording.

A lifelike hologram of Usagi Yamamoto materializes on the dais, sitting cross-legged with three metal pan drums, and next to her is Oscar Peña with a pan drum of his own.

He wonders out loud, "What'll we start the set with, Wabbit?"

Usagi smiles at him, "Let's try...how 'bout Sleep Dirt."

Peña starts a rhythm and asks, "Tempo right?"

She nods and after a few bars Usagi jumps in—tapping out a sorrowful melody with her fingers on the cold steel drums.

After slamming a shot, and a minute of them playing, Maria is unable to hold back the tears that are now streaming down her face, nor the fitful sobs that are making her gasp and choke.

Trying to compose herself, Maria looks down at her hands and, with a frown, she wipes them both off on her t-shirt.

Looking down again, Maria recoils inside.

What she sees is not coming off.

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village idiot savant

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2198ce-APRIL-1-SUNDAY
TIME: 19:18zulu (local 41:50mst)

Charles has been waiting for this day now for ninety years...

Dolphin Reel is a binary system of two tidally locked planets, Sashi and Imi. They are almost exactly the same size and mass, and their orbital barycenter point in space is pretty much dead center between the two. They orbit around the red dwarf star, *Rouge Deux*, which is the smaller of the local stellar binary pair of it and the notably larger red dwarf, *Gros Rouge*.

Gros Rouge is actually a borderline K type star, but Charles can only guess at its surface temperature, and since it's very red to the eye he classifies it as a red dwarf by default. The thing he can tell at simple face value is that Rouge Deux is probably old and Gros Rouge, with its spastic solar flares, fitful magnetic prominences and high metallic content has got to be a much younger body. They've been together for tens or maybe even hundreds of millions of Earth years but, one thing is for certain, they didn't hatch together. Then when you really think about it, Rouge Deux may be the older, stable and boring one but that's kind of a good thing.

From the city of Ipet Hah, on the side of Imi facing Sashi, Sashi has an angular diameter of 2° in the sky. Rouge Deux, with an angular diameter of 1.5° is currently being eclipsed by Sashi, which is common, but Gros Rouge is nowhere to be seen! Dolphin Reel has an orbital inclination of 6° to Rouge Deux, and its orbital plane has an inclination of 12° to Gros Rouge, and from Imi you would usually be able to see at least a slice of the zany younger brother from a different mother but they are currently aligned four in a row.

Not exactly unheard of but this event is rare.

Dolphin Reel has a year that runs precisely 1,008 Earth hours

and this consists of 12 days of 84 Earth hours each—making their months and days interchangeable. To put this in perspective a year here takes 42 Earth days to complete with a month/day that spans 3.5 Earth days each—parsed into three 28-hour sleep cycle days. The year for Dolphin Reel may be a bit short but the stellar binary year between Rouge Deux and Gros Rouge runs about 180 Earth years.

Charles has looked for some harmonic in the orbital dynamics in this crazy system but nothing makes sense to him however, the tiny planet that orbits close to Rouge Deux, called Nascar, has a year that tops out at 28 Earth hours. This is a three to one ratio against the Sashi/Imi day so maybe there is a correlation there somewhere?

Anyway, if you're interested in astronomy then this system is a dyed in the wool, cock-blocking pain in the ass. When Charles first got here the very first stellar observation he made was of the M46 star cluster, and that was dead center in the night sky. From Earth M46 has an angular diameter of about 23-arcminutes, but from the far side of Imi the thing takes up a whopping four (4°) whole degrees.

That's eight times the width of the Earth's Moon in the sky.

Every 42 Earth days, Charles sets up on the dark side of Imi, out of direct reach from both Rouge Deux and Gros Rouge, and takes what images that may interest him and most of those are timed exposures. Over the years, little by little M46 moved away from the center of the sky and finally vanished from sight by cycle 499. It was on observation cycle 522 when he finally made some decent images of the Calabash Nebula as well as the planetary nebula, NGC 2438. That last one with its faint double halos appears to be notably closer to Imi than from Earth, but the Calabash is shockingly up in your face. When you pull your focus in short on the digital photographic plate and hold it long enough in a very dark sky—the thing leaps out at you with structures and detail unattainable from Earth's observatories.

One of the problems with astronomy here is that light from Gros Rouge always finds a way of bouncing off the faint nebula that surrounds this system—and at just the right angle to encroach on many of Charles' most hopeful timed exposures. This allows for maybe a 110° to a 130° slice of the sky to work with but, tonight, which is actually noon here on Imi, is observation cycle 782, and this night sky is especially dark with the double eclipse. Charles has all 180° of the sky available to him, which is a first in 90-years.

But he only gets it for 35-minutes.

What is comically absurd is that he has all of his telescopes, that being his hard mounted two-meter wide Maksutov-Cassegrain, his 32" Ritchey-Chrétien, and beloved Celestron 14" Schmidt-Cassegrain all trained on the same faint star—dead center right above them.

One of the side jobs Charles took on is teaching astronomy to anybody who would be interested and the class he gives, including the workshop taking place right now, is as popular as ever! He had to parse the seats in thirds with one third being actual human students born of Imi, one third of Nefer Key students born on Sashi, and any adult human and/or Nefer Key who has an interest in it.

There is a waiting list for sure, but the kids are priority.

They are currently set up on a flat mesa, two kilometers from sea level and, much like the Tepui, the table-top mountains in South America, they are cut off from the forest and wildlife below. Ipet Hah may be on a continent that has been rendered safe for humans to live but the other four continents are still pretty dangerous—which is why they have a battalion of troops stationed up here for guarding the site as well as for advanced scout and stealth/recon training.

A deep blue light emits from outdoor lamps that are low to the ground, necessary for lighting the pathways and not throwing your eyesight out of whack, and with this Charles is able to find his way back to The Bunker, an astronomy office-complex. Here he steps inside an expansive workroom whose interior is also bathed in the same blue light. In it are dozens of two-seat workstations occupied by pairs of students and many of them are mixed human and Nefer Key. Here they can remotely control, that is traverse and elevate, focus and alter the settings to their assigned hard mounted 12" scopes. They could do this from their classroom in Ipet Hah but, the thing is, coming here and doing it hands on is the fun part of the graduation exercise.

The barbeque and camp out that follows is a bonus.

Normally Charles would be going around and small-talking with his students but Yvette, his Nefer Key wife and a senior leader in their cultural hierarchy, is doing that while he steps in to monitor his own personal project he has been waiting decades to run.

In walks Luke, his 38-year-old son and the last hurrah with Rachel before they separated, and he is accompanied by his wife, Rachel Kay, a daughter of Jason. Rachel is obviously with child, and as they approach Charles, Luke says to him, "Hey Pop! I guess you want to know who was in the shuttle that just landed, right?"

"Read my mind, Luke." Charles turns to Rachel and smiles, "Hey, Rachel! Is the bun still squirming in the oven?"

Rachel nods and, "Yep, she's kicking up a storm today."

Charles looks to Luke, "Let me guess, Luc, Lilith an'...Maat?"

Luke just stares at him, "Damn, you're good!"

Charles shrugs, "I know what it's about."

"Gonna clue us in?"

"You and Rae can sit in." Charles motions for Rachel to hand him the rolled design drawings in her hands "Let's see!"

Rachel hands them over and says, "We could still go with the original seven-mirror config, but this is the new segmented hexagonal design we told you about. They'd be a little easier to make than the round mirrors but with these we'll get more real estate."

Charles has quickly scanned the drawings, and as he nods with approval he asks, "Think the Glaziers could pull this off?"

"Thirty-six mirrors...actually, they'll take less time to polish."

Luke adds, "The telescope could go up a lot faster."

Charles reads on the drawing, "Keck mount?"

"It'll give us a full ten-meter aperture."

With a nod, Charles rolls the drawing up and hands it back to Rachel, "The trusses and bearings would be lighter."

Rachel asks, "You good with this?"

Charles shrugs, "Guys, this is your project, not mine."

Luke wonders, "But you're—"

"I'm your father, not your boss. I say run with it." Charles then points in the air saying, "And if a hex-mirror is off it's a whole lot easier to un-fuck that than the big-round ones."

Luke nods, "That it would."

"Hey Rae, Luke!" Yvette steps up, gives Charles a quick kiss then asks him, "You sure it's not burning this time, hon?"

Yvette, like most Nefer Key, when they are adults you cannot tell their ages except for their tongues. After a few thousand years the tongues start to turn gray and get lighter with each millennia, and Yvette's has just turned dark gray. Then, where most Nefer key have naturally cut/athletic figures, like Lilith, Yvette has had three litters of children so her figure is curvy by comparison—and Charles likes that.

It's not close to Claudia or his ex, but it makes them popular.

"It's smokin'." Charles kisses her in return then, "Like you!"

"I hate waiting." Yvette grabs his shirt and pulls him in close, with that 'oooh baby' look, but she says loudly in his face, "Feed me!"

With Luke and Rachel laughing at that, Luc, Lilith and Maat have already entered the bunker and step up to them with Luc saying, "For once you weren't hard to find!"

Charles shrugs, "If I knew you were comin' I would have hid." He thumbs back at the screens while turning towards them, "This is actually auto-running on its own."

Lilith asks, "Pictures of home?"

"What used to be home." Charles points to the conference room in the back, "Let's go back there and talk."

As they all start for the conference room, Luc and Maat respectfully nod towards Yvette, with Luc saying, "Madame."

Yvette points down and corrects him, "Here, it's Yvette."

With Luke, Rachel and Charles entering the conference room, they are followed by Luc, Lilith and Maat. When the door is closed and the normal lights go on, Charles looks like he has reversed aged by thirty-years. Compared to his son you'd swear they were brothers.

Maat speaks up first, "We think they're heading for war."

Charles confirms with a nod, "In the Hyades, yes."

"The United Nations Security Council approved of the MAD last week, so it looks like they'll be going in for sure."

Charles shrugs, expecting that, so he looks to Luc and asks, "And you still think we should have a response to this, really?"

Luc shakes his head and says, "Yes, we should!"

Charles almost rolls his eyes with, "Why?"

"Because what they're doing is wrong?" Luc then gives him a goofy face followed with, "Like, d'uh!"

Everybody laughs at that but Charles has his serious face on, "That would be from a perspective. That is from your perspective. Look, there are about ten hot zones surrounding Earth with the biggest being Kapa Orion and the Hyades. They're all gonna go up in flames eventually, but Kappa Orion is kind of a ways off. Mark my words it will blow up, and I did tell ya'll that the Hyades was gonna be the first to go hot, but..." He shrugs, "I'm just the village-idiot-savant here."

Lilith knows what she is about to say is going to be countered by Charles, but she says it, "What the UN is doing is stupid."

"Well, what the UN is doing is what they are obligated to do!"

Luc says, "I don't get it?"

"You got all those little shit cooperatives being gobbled up by corporations under the table, so what do you expect? That new one, the Steel Chain Cooperative, they're out to consolidate everything and they've even weaponized eminent domain as—"

Luc wonders, "Can't anybody just tell 'em, no?"

Charles huffs a laugh, "I wish it were that simple."

Maat asks for the benefit of Luc, "Didn't your contacts confirm who you think is funding both the insurgents and the pirates?"

Charles nods, "Yea, the SCC, they're playin' both sides."

Lilith wonders, "Why would they do that?"

"Market manipulation? Look, they're basically stealing from themselves and this thins supply and makes the market prices go up. The pirates, people that *they* control, those guys are from a place called Taiji and they drop what they swipe into the black market which means the SCC is double dipping. Their losses are covered and their cut from Taiji is under the radar. What's on the black market is way above market value to places like Kappa Orion who are sanctioned out the ass. There are dozens of places out there that have crippling UN embargos on them, but the UN's hands are fricken tied. They can't stop anyone from delivering to them, so the MAD will give 'em teeth to cut 'em off. Bottom line, the SCC is pushin' hard for this war an' they want it real bad. This'll change the political landscape in their favor."

Maat adds, "Don't forget, they are funding the insurgents."

"Purdy much!" Charles puts his hands out, "Look, everyone knows the SCC has got a hard-on for this but...prove it?"

Luc shakes his head, "I don't like this."

"Don't take offence, Luc, but who in the fuck cares what you think?" Luc, is astonished, and while opening his mouth to protest, Charles cuts him off, "You gave them that space to do with as they please so they are doin' exactly that—what they please. The dumbest thing you can do now is to stick your nose in their business."

With Luc stewing over that, Lilith asks, "Hate to ask, but is there anything we can do?"

"Yea, simply sit back an' pop a suds and watch the fireworks!" He then points to her and, "MG, this is the perfect laboratory for you to learn by because this will be a war of attrition, and from this little workshop of horrors we'll be able to study their tactics, logistical failings and screw the pooch with their dumb-ass doctrine!" Charles turns to Luc, "What we learn from them will get us ahead of the game. You always want to be ahead in this game, Luc."

Luc reluctantly says, "Then we're to do...nothing."

Charles smiles, "The best thing in the world we could do!"

There is a knock at the door followed by Yvette calling out, "Chucky! Your spot has appeared!"

Charles shouts back, "Awesome! Be right out!"

Luc nods towards the door, "I know you want to get out there. You've been waiting a really long time for this."

"Okay, cool, but before we go..." Charles turns to face Lilith, "MG, you are now LG. You have third Army."

Maat hands his two, three-star bars over to her while saying, "Congratulations, Lilith." He nods big and, "Lieutenant General, Lilith. I like the sound of that!"

In shock, Lilith blinks and says, "Third army is yours!"

"Yea, well, now it's yours!" Maat puts his hand out to Charles who hands him his two, four-star bars, "His job is now mine."

Charles slaps them in Maat's hand and asks Luc, "You okay with this, dude? I know it's kinda sudden, but they both earned it."

Luc, wondering what to say, "Aaah, it's outta my hands?"

"I'll talk to the Council for ya. They'll see things my way."

They pile out of the conference room, and in the blue light they stop at the four large flat monitors at the head of the workroom where Yvette points out to Charles, "There it is! You finally got it!"

Charles leans in and huffs, "Well, I'll be damned."

Luc jokingly says, "You gonna tell 'em where we're at now?"

Charles kisses Yvette and turns to Luc, "I could, but I knew exactly where we were decades ago around cycle five-fifty. In fact, I knew the vector towards this system by a quarter degree of angular diameter the first night on this plateau ninety-years ago."

Luc swallows hard, "And you told them."

"No...I haven't told them shit."

"That was your mission!"

"That was *their* mission. I had a different mission in mind." Charles then points out on the screen, "Here is Rigel, the first star I identified. Here's Betelgeuse and Naos. This is Sirius A and here..." Charles then points to a little faint blemish on the screen a pixel wide, "By Sirius, is Sol. It used to be my home but...this is home."

With big eyes, Yvette says, "Well, *that's* good to know!"

Luc mentally pulls back and looks deep inside himself while Luke, Rachel, Lilith and Maat are congratulating Charles for capturing this pixel on the screen, and with Yvette giving Charles a huge hug and fawning over him because of something that seems trivial, Luc reaches back to when Marcus was with Prima—then it hit him.

When there is a gap in the celebration over a pixel, Luc gets Charles attention and simply asks, "Why?"

With everybody having stopped to listen, Charles asks Luc, "Remember when I first got here and we talked about, what I called, Segementary Lineage? Remember what that was about?"

Luc nods, "Yea, I do."

Yvette asks, "What's that?"

Luc says, "As I recall, the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Charles throws out, "It goes a little deeper than that."

Lilith wonders, "I'm curious."

Charles looks to Yvette who shrugs, so he goes, "Okay, it's referred to as the Principle of Segmentary Opposition. A dead-nuts on perfect example of this is from my family! My brothers and I fought constantly, but at family gatherings we would bind together and fight with our cousins. One day while playing football in the neighborhood a fight broke out, where my cousins and my brothers and I, well, we teamed up fought the neighborhood kids."

Yvette is laughing, "Really?"

"No shit! I loved my brothers, even though I could not stand being around them. I hated my cousins but, by god, they were family so if anyone fucked with them—then they were fucking with me too." He points to Luc and, "The problem with the Nefer Key is that the concept of *tribe* does not translate to a global population well. There is very little here that can be compared to human familial dynamics.

Maat adds with a nod, "There is a difference."

Charles then gestures to all three Nefer Key, "Just in case we didn't clue you in, you three, to us—you three are family to us."

Noticing Lilith almost in tears by that, Luc says, "Thank you?"

Charles laughs, "Not to be an ass but you don't say *thank you* to a fact! You are family." He looks to Luke and Rachel, "Right guys?"

With those two nodding in agreement, Charles then thumbs over to Maat and rolls his eyes, "For clarity, he's a cousin!"

Maat quietly laughs, "Kiss my what?"

Charles points to him and, "See!" He then turns to Yvette and says to her, "The point is that Luc and I have a standing agreement. You do not go talk to anybody from Earth. If you have a beef, I do the talking. Reason being is that I'm Charles Washington! They'll listen to me, and if they don't dig it then no harm done. If Luc goes puts his thumb on the scale they'll be like, 'Oh, hell fuckin' no!'"

Yvette asks, "Even if they were at war?"

Maat points out, "Congrats, you just unified them."

Yvette looks to Luc and asks, "This is your agreement?"

Luc cringes and sheepishly nods, "Yea."

In thought, Yvette blinks repeatedly then, "I approve."

With Yvette turning to ask Rachel and Luke to show her the plans for the telescope they are building on the plateau, Charles suggests to Luc, "You are staying for brisket and brew, right?"

"Sure, why not?" And with the two of them watching the pixel become brighter on the screen, Luc asks, "So, Chuck, if you haven't said anything to them, I kinda wanna know...what is your mission?"

Charles starts laughing and, with his hand he motions back and forth between them, saying, "To make this work."

Luc shakes his head in wonderment and, actually surprised by these revelations, he asks, "So...I'm family, hu?"

"Yea, ain't that a hoot an' a half."

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Glossary and Design Plates...

The glossary, drawings and designs that were developed for the screenplay are available at: <http://jaccinthebox.com>

About the Author...



Nicholas Ralph Baum is only getting grayer as the clock continues to tick away. Minion (above) is now racing to catch up to her sister, Monster!

Okay, I got two more to do...

the floor is lava



04 sunk cost fallacy

Scott Rutledge, formerly an Ashanti warrior named Abeeku, his freedom and birthright was taken from him off the Gold Coast of Africa by the Islamic Slave Trade. Ending up in the sugar cane fields of Jamaica—he was having none of that.

Abeeku escapes and joins the Maroon but, as thing go, they catch him and flay him and leave him for dead. Rescued by the Nefer Key he was offered a new lease on life in a world full of curious pleasures and new possibilities...

Virtually immortal, Abeeku now wanders through the centuries at the behest of these startlingly beautiful creatures. For all of his successful undertakings he is left empty but in this latest mission, to infiltrate the Steel Annex, he blunders into purpose, belonging and family.

As this second war with the Cooperative comes to a head, he is torn between his duty to these aliens and a new found love of humanity. Now approaching the turnaround battle at Polaris, Scott comes to the self-realization that his loyalty to both never wavered.



ISBN

