

violent delights

nicholas ralph baum

jacc in the box

JNTB PART
05



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PART 05

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PART 05
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DEDICATED TO
MY GRANDFATHERS:

Lloyd Frank Baum
(never knew ye)

Wilbur "Bill" Alanzo Ireland
(the bestest evah)

Ira Joel Cripe
(funniest evah)

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Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue
— Barry Goldwater

89

brainless trust

LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2248ce-FEBRUARY-28-MONDAY
TIME: 23:22zulu (local 63:30mst)

The first time you lay eyes on the Nefer Key it's like you're an American G.I. in 1946 occupied Japan—they all look exactly alike.

For the first few months here on Imi you'd swear they were cookie-cutter fembot gingerbread babes, insomuch as you really can't tell the differences between them. After eighteen months the opposite holds true and the calliope of nuanced dissimilarities in their faces and figures stand out and none of them look the same ever again.

As a whole the female Nefer Key have this neotenous, almost *kawaii* vibe to them, where even those who are many thousands of Earth years old still have the cut, build and beauty of a nineteen year old prima ballerina from the Bolshoi. That is unless you glance at their tongues, which is jet black through their first five or so thousand years transitioning to dark gray by six. The long and short of it is they are all gorgeous and in freakishly great shape for life.

Here at Port Royal, hovering motionlessly over the water by the docks, is the first morning shuttle from Sashi that is disgorging three-thousand Nefer Key ladies into the city. A fair majority head on out to the central city temples to get their freak on early, but a growing number take their time by hitting up on the retail shops and coffee bars before they trek out to the burbs to hook up with their regular human guy, or gal for that matter.

Charles is sitting here by the ramp of the saucer with his ex, Rachel, along with Jason, Lilith, Aat and three of their three-star army commanders, Belle, Alexi and Zora. Aat now has the four-star bars that were her husbands and Lilith wears the five-star clusters plopped on her by Charles. Long ago he and Maat have both been elevated to Tribunes by the Nefer Key, and before the end of business day today,

overhead on Sashi, Lilith will be joining them.

Funny thing is, she is the only one here who doesn't know.

With Charles watching the Nefer Key women debark, and as the others small-talk over the new infantry railgun they're developing, Yvette slips onto the bench seat and bumps into Charles, all-the-while holding her hand out—admiring her ring, "Oh, my god! It came!"

With a snort, Charles adds, "Good thing, I guess?"

"Ebay, ya know I love Ebay." She holds the ring out for the others to see, "Gawd, how I love Ebay!"

With the girls drooling over it, a gold sprite with emerald eyes, kneeling two-centimeters tall on the band, while balancing two huge strawberries made of red coral, Jason shakes his head and says, "That...is the ugliest thing I have ever seen!"

Yvette waggles the ring in Jason's face, "You're just jealous that you didn't get the jump on this for Lilith!"

Jason looks over at Lilith, who innocently shrugs at him, so he turns back to Yvette, asking, "That's a one of a kind, right?"

Yvette blinks, then, "Waddya think? Of course!"

Jason smirks, "Good to know I'm off the hook."

Shaking her head, Lilith rolls her eyes, "Ass."

Jason smiles at Lilith, gives her a warm little kiss, then turns back to Yvette, "Want me to fetch ya a coffee?"

Yvette's eyes go wide, "Yea, sure! Lots of crème and sugar!" Jason gives Lilith another little peck, hops up, and as he steps away Yvette calls out to him, "Thank you, hon!"

Zora leans in towards Alexi and Belle, and quietly whispers, "After all this time, he's still whipped!"

While Lilith grimaces at that, biting her tongue, Charles and Rachel both chuckle, and with Jason out of earshot, Yvette looks to Lilith and, "Now that I got you cornered, how do I convince you that what you want to do is the dippiest-of-shit options?"

Lilith scowls at her, "Need I remind you that, as the Princes Censor of the Council, you already gave this mission your blessing."

"All I have is the power of *no*, but I can option it any time."

Rachel points out, "*Intercessio* is the greatest power of all."

Yvette glances at Rachel, who now looks maybe twenty-two, "Claudia concurs wholeheartedly." She again stares at Lilith and says, "This mission you cooked up rocks, but why not send Zach first?"

Rachel adds, "Zach just got back from one and Jay has been training his ass off for this, purdy much ten straight solars now."

Charles notes that, "He wants this mission bad."

Yvette nods, "Yea, I know, but twenty Earth years is a real long haul for him to be gone, don'cha think guys?"

Lilith sighs, "He's been away before."

Yvette comes clean with, "You're my great-granddaughter, okay? This is not what I want for you."

"Well, Luc did promise that this would be his last if he did it."

Yvette laughs out-loud, "I was hoping you'd forget that!"

Aat throws out, "Evie, you don't got shit for leverage."

Lilith nods, "And I am holding grandfather to it." She then reminds Yvette that, "Look, we've been entrusted to do a job and, for good or bad, like it or not, we're obligated to do our job."

Yvette shrugs, "But, you are not a brainless trust, get me? What is talking for you now are those stars on your shoulders. What I wanna know is, as a woman, what is it you want?"

Lilith leans in, "For this to be his last mission...forever."

Charles quietly says to Yvette, "I told you to let it go, hon."

"That ya did!" Yvette laughs and, "You're right again, Chuck!" She sits back with a huff, "Okay, Lilly-Doll, you got what you want! I'm not gonna pull a last minute fast-one on ya. Jason goes but, be honest with me...you really don't want 'im to go, do ya?"

Lilith mimics surfer Jay with, "Like über cowabunga d'uh!" She thumbs towards Charles, "But we're thinkin' that first in gives Goofy Foot a better chance to get out before things blow the fuck up."

Charles notes, "An' their shit is gonna blow the fuck up."

Yvette nods big, "I hope he has an uneventful trip."

Rachel interjects, "That's the joy in planning and projecting risk, you really don't know squat until after the fact."

"I'll give you this, hubby, you've been right about everything."

Charles shrugs, "Always about the things, but not the when."

Rachel again adds, "His educated guesses is not crystal ball omniscience. Might as well be, though."

"Being right all the time sucks. This time I wish I was wrong."

Lilith nods, "My fingers are crossed."

Everyone sitting here has executive seats for this shuttle, making them last on but first off, and with thousands of Nefer Key ladies now starting to board the ship, moving up the ramp, Lilith asks Yvette, "Not to change the subject, but any word on the vote?"

Yvette smiles, "Ya'll here will be the first to hear when I hear!"

Rachel speaks up, "This is my last day as a Novitiate so, Yvette, no matter how the vote turns out I want to thank you for the opportunity. This has been a kick-an-a-half."

Yvette thinks and nods in agreement, "As long as we have had you humans here, not one has been invited to become a Censor. Point is, the members of the Council cooked it up and summoned you on their own. I did not have a hand in their effort."

"But you could've vetoed it. Why didn't you?"

"Honestly?" With Rachel nodding yes, Yvette struggles to get this out, "I learned from my son and realized it was time."

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Iret Nwt, that being the Eye of Nut, is the Nefer Key city permanently overhead to the human city of, *Ipet Hah*. The planets of Dolphin Reel, Sashi and Imi, are tidally locked so both cities constantly face one another, and where *Ipet Hah* consists of many mixed building styles spanning millennia, *Iret Nwt* is something altogether different.

Jason Kay once described *Iret Nwt* as the love child popped out by Net Basha and Disney's Tomorrowland, that is if Tomorrowland bent Net Basha over and fucked her silly during an Iron Butterfly concert—specifically on the second set featuring In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida while on psilocybin. Point is, the eclectic quirkiness, textures, colors and the gravity defying architecture of *Iret Nwt* is both impossibly surreal and shockingly beautiful.

The oldest building here, smack-dab in the middle of the city and surrounded by a perfectly coiffed garden-park that is two-leagues wide, is the Procuratio. Nobody could understand Jason when he came back from Earth and started calling it Space Mountain, of all things, but this iteration of Space Mountain is sixty stories tall.

That said, it's the shortest building in *Iret Nwt*.

The shuttle from Imi drifts over the lake beside the Procuratio and, coming to a hover at a causeway that terminates along the edge of the lake, it drops it's ramp perfectly level with the deck.

Charles, Yvette and the rest step out from the bottom of the saucer and are met by a rifle company of Praesidio troops. The guards

are in camo-gray BDUs, which is in sharp contrast to Lilith and her generals who are wearing khaki green day-uniforms, yet the one common item between them is their garrison caps.

The command squad faces Charles and Yvette. The captain of the guard places a gold laurel wreath on Yvette's head, an indicator of her lofty station, but for Charles the corporal of the squad is carrying his fasces made of a halberd pole-arm bound with rods.

The captain and the Praesidio's Sergeant Major, who also functions as the Council's Sergeant at Arms, turn and lead Charles and Yvette to the Procuratio, with the corporal trailing Charles at his five o'clock between them. Jason, Lilith and Rachel fall in, with the three generals and the rifle company bringing up the rear.

As they pass the half way point to Space Mountain the passengers start to pour out from the saucer onto the causeway.

Inside the building it is hollow, just like the old Luxor hotel in Las Vegas, with offices and flats going all the way up to the top. At the bottom of it is an open amphitheatre that serves as the Chamber of Censors. Three quarters of it is seating for the Council of Censors themselves, with the last quarter functioning as a peanut gallery for anyone who comes under summons, or simply stops by just to watch. As the only seat of government for the Nefer Key, it serves as the judicial counterpoint to their one dictatorial Consul.

And that just so happens to be, Luc.

As they step onto the floor of the open chamber, they are met by Luc and Maat, who is standing beside Maat's fasces mounted to a stand. As the command squad helps Yvette undress and don an ivory white kaftan wrap, Charles' fasces is inserted in a stand near Maat.

Now dressed, Yvette steps up on a shallow dais and drinks in the eleven-hundred and ninety-nine Censors standing in honor of her. The Censors here are all in black kaftan's with ivory embroidery along their necks and sleeves. Nefer Key women wear a galaxy of different styles of clothing, much of it sheer and revealing, and these kaftan's may cover most of their bodies but, since all of the Censors are from breeding stock, the kaftan wraps actually accentuate their centerfold quality curvature rather well.

With the senior Censors at the top row and the rookies on the bottom row near the dais, closest to Yvette, to the left of Yvette's seat is the only empty seat in the chamber.

All of the Censors sit except for one at the very top row, who puts her hands out and announces, "*Nostrum suffragium quod sic.*"

As Yvette slowly turns back around, Jason leans in towards

Rachel and quietly says, "I think you're in with the moomoo crew!"

Lilith heard that and starts to snicker, while Rachel snarls under her breath, "Moomoo? Fuck you!"

Gesturing to the open seat, Yvette says to Rachel, "It's time for you to take your seat in the choir, Censor Rachel." With the entire chamber applauding, Yvette then motions for the Captain of the guard to help Rachel change her wraps while she announces, "Before we head out to the banquet, in honor of our new Censor, we have one little itty bitty item we'd like to squeeze in today."

Luc speaks up, "Madame Princeps." And with Yvette pointing towards the ground, visually correcting him, Luc cringes slightly and, "Mother, did you discuss the mission on the way here?"

"Not the item I had in mind..." Yvette laughs, and with the Sergeant at Arms and Captain now helping Rachel don the black wrap of a Censor, and the command squad slipping in behind Lilith, with her new fasces in hand, Yvette goes, "But, to answer your question, yes, the missions to the Annex and the Co-op will go as planned."

Luc rears back, pleasantly surprised, "Oh, okay! Cool."

Lilith is still oblivious to the command squad standing behind her when Yvette says, "General Lilith, we rarely see you here."

Lilith shrugs, "Busy? Not to be an ass but, I am kinda busy?"

"We've noticed. You have done a wonderful job creating our Nefer Key army, but we think it's time to lighten your load...Tribune."

Confused, Lilith wonders, "Hu?"

Next to Lilith, her newly bound fasces is dropped into a stand with a hollow thud.

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90

concha like a stradivarius

LCTN: SOL-3, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.998au from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-8-SATURDAY
TIME: 10:30zulu (local 10:30gmt)

From inside the famous Australian State Coach, surrounded by the last horse cavalry unit on Earth, known as the *Blues and Royals*, Maria asks, "What's with Alastair's apology yesterday morning?"

While waving to the cheering crowd overflowing The Mall, Victoria glances at Maria and, "Me Nippers happens to be an astute practitioner of what the royal family calls, Dontopedalogy."

Maria huffs a small laugh, "The fuck is that?"

Victoria cracks a smile, "The art of foot in mouth speechcraft."

"As a professional myself I am kinda curious, what'd he say?"

Continuing to wave, Victoria goes, "The bloody media won't stop banging on about our VC's so, in a snit, he straight up says to this hackette that he'd rather pitch the medals in the loo if he could."

Maria notices a young girl pointing at her, so as Maria waves back, "The third and fourth squads you ran into, you went at 'em like god-damned Judge Dredd so waddaya expect?" She looks at Victoria, "As long as you live, *carriña*, you'll never hear the end of it."

"Afraid of that." Victoria rolls her eyes and resumes waving, "By Sod, I do wish your people would'uv yanked me chain."

Maria reaches up and touches a white, gold and green wreath Star Ribbon, the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, dangling around her neck, "How 'bout you'd take this thing back?"

"Not on your life. You earned it, darling."

"The order still kickin' up a fuss?"

"After Polaris those toffs, as you would say, fuck the shut up!"

Victoria again glances at her and snorts, "Also, *ipso facto*, Maria speak, you happen to be a citizen of the City of New Sydney so—"

Maria corrects her, "Resident."

"Well, when splitting hairs my ruling stands, so be a good subject and maintain a stiff upper lip how 'bout."

With the coach circling the roundabout onto Parliament street, Maria starts to chuckle, "I got a stiff upper lip for ya."

"I bet you do!" Victoria breaths deep, then her eyes go wide while saying, "Oh, we haven't yet chat 'bout this but you giving 'em all Majin Buu, as many as they can take on, and at no out of pocket! Well, I have to say that you have gobsmailed the lot of 'em."

"We're building the Trung platforms at virtually no cost, so we might as well pass the savings along, right?"

"Capital kit that is beyond everybody's reach, and here you are giving them away!"

"There are strings attached."

"Yes, as long as they taxi science missions around for your CXi, and I'll have you know that my Air Chief Marshal says that you getting everyone to dance to your tune is bloody genius!"

"That's a bit of a reach, don'chya think?"

"Overnight you go from the Co-op's bog-roll to Admiral Yi incarnate, and with the Kid Buu Wrecking Crew running wild, word is every one of us will be jumping on that CXi bandwagon!"

"That's good to hear."

Victoria laughs, "An' that demo made Cobalt Bluer all twee by comparison. You've leveled the playing field giving it to all comers, but command thinks you're off your trolley by offering it to the grays."

"That's the price for peace."

"Everyone talks big on working together but now...now they have too. Now they all work for you, Maria Lynn Ramirez. On this very day you swing the biggest stones in the universe."

Maria gives a smug, "But you always thought that."

"Nooooo, those are the exact words from my Air Marshal."

"Correct me if I'm wrong but, as I recall, they always thought I was beneath the crown."

"That was The Ton! My command staff however, thought you had something up your sleeve." Victoria stops waving to glance at Maria, "And you did. He said he's going to enjoy working for you."

"That's not what this is about."

"True 'nough...but what he says has clarity." Victoria nudges Maria in the arm, "Everyone way underestimated you, love."

"Keeping 'em in the dark was the goal."

"An' pulled the wool you did."

"Purdy much, 'cept for the intel community."

"Nobody there knew for sure what you were up too, but our joint SOCOM with the Yanks had a pool on you for the third."

"Based on?"

"Time of day!" She points over her shoulder, "And, by Jove, it was my Corporal of Horse who made off with that pot."

Maria thumbs behind them, "You mean Chess, right? The guy with that crazy psycho-spikey hatchet?"

"The very one!"

"Seriously, would he really use that thing on a horse?"

Victoria shrugs, "Farrier Axe and, yes, he has."

Maria rears back and, "The shit!"

"That 'e is." Victoria then adds, "I would have considered Chess but he's from Catholic stock...more the pitty. The Nippers, however, is from the family Neville and he does know his place."

Maria shrugs, "It helps that Alastair is fricken hot."

"What also helps is that he's a bonkers of a shag."

Wide eyed, Maria says, "That's good to hear."

Victoria cringes, "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

Maria throws out, "No! No, that is good to know, actually."

Victoria comes clean with, "I wanted to share this with you earlier but...well, when I proposed to Alastair he had this odd look on his face, and I thought he was going to leg it. Instead he throws me down and has his way with me where, afterwards, trying to catch my breath, I say to 'im...I take that as a yes.'"

Maria snorts, "That's a scream!"

"I thought so!"

"Is he going to be okay with us?"

"He has his boy-toys and, be assured, he knows his place." Victoria leans in, "But then, I'd trade 'im for your consolation price."

"Aaaaah, ya heard about that."

With their carriage approaching Parliament square, Victoria says, "Word is you snatched Sasha out from under ol' Chuckles."

"Like to think so but Sasha said that after six years they were on the outs. Him now being gone all the time was the final straw."

"I say, that would be a catalyst, yes."

Maria then shares, "But, fact of the matter is, on New Year's she tried to put the screws to him. Wanted to tie the knot, and that actually gave him the opportunity to hit the brakes."

"Yea, and you the opportunity to slither in." Victoria then snickers, "Is it true? Jacob said she has a concha like a Stradivarius!"

"That's my line! Motherfucker owes me royalties!"

Victoria thinks and, "So, you said that about me, no doubt!"

With a guilty look, Maria shrugs, "Well, d'uur?"

With them circling the square, Victoria asks, "So, is it true?"

Maria gets her digs in, "You bet it is, but the way I heard he played it, it was more like nails on a chalkboard."

"Harsh!" Victoria laughs big, then points out, "Yet, I find that difficult to believe the way you keep going back for it."

Maria huffs, "Yeeea, ya got me there."

"Intel says that she's connected to the grays." With Maria nodding, yes, Victoria then asks, "Is she POTUS fifty-eight?"

"You gotta keep that to yourself." Maria then smiles as the carriage comes to a stop, "And, yes, she is curious about you."

Victoria leans in with a smug, "A three-up? If it ever comes to that we dare not be shy." As the door to the carriage opens, she looks at Maria and sighs, "Well, duty calls."

Victoria is helped from the carriage by one of the footmen, followed by Maria handing her modestly short elliptical train off to an attendant. Maria slips out of carriage as Victoria is handed a cascading bridal bouquet by the wedding director, and with the crowd going wild Maria takes a few quick seconds to drink Victoria in with her eyes.

Victoria's wedding dress is a beaded-laced mermaid design. It is so form fitting it dramatically accentuates the hips and looks like she had to be sewn into the thing. An off the shoulder cut, the lace that spirals about and cups her breasts seamlessly wraps around her arms like vines on a branch. Where the color of the dress is off white, matching Victoria's long blond hair, the pencil thin silvery compound

that fills the scar on her face looks like it is flowing from the platinum fringe tiara sitting on her head.

In sharp contrast Maria, in her formal charcoal-black dress suit for the SA, has the knights star around her neck and a tiny silver star on her left lapel—and this look frames Victoria perfectly.

Because the groom, Alastair Neville, is a Major decked out in his finest military red and black dress uniform, loaded with medals and braided frogging galore, Victoria was asked to don her VC for today, and pinning it up under her left breast as an attempt to minimize it actually makes it stand out even more.

Before they step into Westminster Abby, three RAF, HWG99 Razorback gunships conduct a low speed, low altitude flyover from the north. They followed the parade route along Parliament Street and banked right at the square, and as they fly overhead the cheers from the crowd reach a crescendo.

These ships were from her old active duty squadron.

What Maria notices overhead, and probably no one else does, is Jacob's Thunderbird dropping in towards the SA landing platform in the City of London, just three kilometers away at the Annex tower on the south-east corner of Cannon and Dowgate.

Through the tacnet Maria laughs, <"Ain't you late!">

Jacob responds with a click, <"Sorry, shit blew the fuck up.">

<"Take your time, dude. We're at the Abby.">

<"I know you wanted to walk Vic.">

<"Thanks for being late, this means a lot to us.">

<"Just draggin' my feet! See you'z guys at the reception.">

Victoria takes Maria's hand and she is walked to the west portico that leads into the Nave, and at the open double-doors they run into the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Dean of Westminster and the Bishop of London. It's these three gentlemen who will lead the procession and officiate for the wedding.

The Archbishop says to them, "*Regina meis*, it is a beautiful day for a wedding!" Then to Maria, "Marshal Ramirez, welcome."

As Maria nods, Victoria smiles, "Thank you, Primate."

The Dean was the chaplain attached to Victoria's regiment when she first got her wings, so he asks, "E'ello Vic, any last words?"

Victoria huffs a little laugh, "How've you been, Captain Kent?"

"Can't complain, I do miss the service though."

"We fully agree, Captain! In the reserves, they short us pilots on stick time. Even me!" Victoria then says to all three, "If you vicars don't mind us queuing up? We would love a quick word with the girls before we get this on the yomp."

They step into the Nave of the Abby and head directly to the left side of the tomb of the Unknown Warrior. To their left are seven groomsmen, pilots from Alastair's squadron, and to their right is Seth, Angela, Peanuts, Minura, Copper, Eight, Cap, Jessica, Michelle Kiel and Diego trailing at the end.

Seth is the crown bearer and Angela is the ring bearer, but Minura was a last minute filler, squeezed in between her Honey Badger missions. Michelle and Diego are both the Matron and Maid of honor, all because Victoria couldn't decide between the two.

Victoria says to them, "My god, you all look so beautiful!"

Peanuts nods to her left, "You mean, these bags of ugly?"

With everyone chuckling, six year old Angela rears back and says to her, "Nuts, you gonna be stiff competition."

Victoria rolls her eyes while saying, "You two are terrible." She then smiles and addresses each one but when her eyes land on Diego she jokingly asks, "You going to make a scene this time, doll?"

Diego wonders, "They gonna play, Zadok the Priest?"

Victoria shakes her head, "No."

"Then you're in luck! I'll be on my best behavior."

"One minute." The Archbishop says to Victoria as he and the Dean set the pillow up for Seth to carry the Imperial State Crown. With that done, and them lining up for the procession, Seth looks over at Victoria with his angelic puppy-dog eyes. When in character he only makes eye contact with Jessica and Victoria, of all people, and always taken by these eyes, with a wistful smile she blows him a little kiss.

As the music starts, Victoria splits her bouquet into two parts, and as this slow procession heads out—first with the Dean followed by the Archbishop, Seth, Angela, then one by one the groomsmen step around her and Maria—each to link up with a bridesmaid.

In a graceful curtsey at the foot of the tomb of the Unknown, Victoria goes, "Top of the morning, my good man!" And as she lays the largest part of the bouquet on the tomb, then slowly stands, she adds, "Hope you like myrtle."

Maria links into Victoria via the tacnet, <"You are gorgeous.">

Victoria nods slightly, and as she looks up from the tomb with an unexpectedly sad face, <"I'd rather be walking towards you.">

Maria's nostrils flair just a smidge as she nods in return.

As Jessica steps away with her escort, with Michelle and Diego waiting to anchor three abreast with the last groomsman, Maria puts her hand out and says to Victoria with a wry, "Shall we?"

Burying deep what she truly feels in her heart, Victoria grins big and takes Maria's hand, "Arse over tits we go!"

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Of the royal family, Victoria was late to the alter and, since everybody close to her by blood was already married, nobody had grounds to bitch when she selected her bridal party. The press and social commentators coined them the 'ginger procession' and even though Angela and Michelle are actually blond, matching Victoria, they pointed out that Diego, with her bronze skin and raven hair, was the "square peg" of the lineup. Ever since the quinceanera broadcast, Diego has become the most famous 'nobody' ever, so on social media those reporters caught the blistering ire of the viewing audience.

It helps that her mother, Mar, is super popular here.

The wedding was as beautiful as it was opulent, and also surprisingly fun for the girls since they could all crack jokes and make lewd comments about the pilots standing across from them without anyone the wiser—except for those moments when they had to purse their lips to suppress a laugh or two or an obvious drool.

Jessica linked Angela, Diego and Michelle in for the fun, but it was Angela who kept repeating, "Twelve years." And when asked what she meant, Angela goes, "In twelve years I'm gonna muscle in on every one of you bitches. You've been warned!"

They all had a hard time suppressing the laugh from that one.

The reception and Indian-curry themed banquet in the Ball Room at Buckingham Palace was an astronomical success, but it was the much smaller private party in the Music Room that followed for the wedding party, family and friends, that was the most fun.

Since the Annex controls all flights into Second Hand, Jessica and Michelle will be flying them, along with Victoria's two sisters and their families, on Jessica's Fastback—which just landed on the garden grounds outside on the west side of Buckingham.

Jacob is currently sitting at what was the kids table in the State Dining Room, just a Gallery's throw from the Ball Room. Jacob is hiding here because after five days on the jolt meds with no sleep, he is nursing three fingers of a medicinal single-malt Scotch, with a

handful of buzzkill in his pocket. In three hours his next drop-n-swap mission is going to launch and he's sitting here debating on whether he's missed anything or not.

Maria, Jessica and Seth step into the room, and as Jessica parks Seth in the seat across the table from Jacob, with a cup of tea, Maria says to him, "Eight and I are catchin' a ride with Esma and Piper to DC to meet with President Mofid. The girls will be by for Seth in a few. He'll be staying with Diego and Cap until I get back."

Jessica has stepped around and gives her father a hug while saying, "Gotta go mount up. You be safe, pop!"

Jacob gives her a little kiss and asks while she hurries away, "Flying them to Prypiat next week?"

"Yup, and Thirty-Two Squadron will take 'em from there!"

With Jessica gone, Maria just stares at Jacob—where she shakes her head then asks, "Ya'll got that drop in a few hours, right?"

Jacob nods, yes, saying, "Ninety-Five Tau."

"What's the deal there?"

"Swappin' out a recon for a pallet of droids."

"That'll fuck with 'em." Maria reaches over the table for a quick fist-bump and, "Get some sleep, dude. You look like shit."

Maria gives Seth a kiss on top of his head as she steps out, and with everyone else seeing Victoria and the family off—here we have Jacob all by his lonesome with Seth.

After a few seconds of silence, Seth goes, "Ooooooie-long."

Jacob watches Seth take short sips of his tea, looking away as usual, and he wonders what he did to deserve such a sweet boy.

"I am proud of you son. You did good today." Jacob takes a moment, swirling his scotch in the glass, not expecting a response, then, "I really wish there was a way you and I could connect."

After Jacob stares at his drink for a good half-minute, Seth speaks up with a normal voice, "You know that guys...guys don't drink whites but...you do, father." In shocked surprise, Jacob turns to look at Seth as he continues, "Pinot Grigio! Not just any label, one specific house, but I know why you suddenly stopped imbibing in it."

Jacob clears his throat and, "I'm curious, why?"

Seth shrugs slightly and, "Tastes like Sasha. In fact, ya add a little twist of oro-blanco and you've got Glados." Seth turns to look Jacob in the eyes, which has never happened before, "Ya gotta give it up for girls who excel at personal hygiene."

Jacob's eyes squint as he throws out, "In spite of that being true, that is...very asshole of you to say, son."

"Yea, I get that a lot."

Jacob's eyebrows rise. "Who else knows?"

"That I'm the Alter?" Jacob nods, yes, so Seth blinks his eyes in thought, "Jessica, Stepmother, Glados, Fifty-Two, Delphi and, well, you're not gonna like this one."

"Ah, try me."

"Boxxy Babe...Hartcourt!" Jacob gives him a perplexed look so Seth adds, "Trust me, ol' Box Cutter is not what you think he is."

"Can you elaborate on that?"

"Nope! You are not in the *need to know* loop so, no." Seth puts his cup of tea down and, "Sorry 'bout the autistic façade, but I'm finally off the Co-op's radar." He then laughs, "And sorry for all those visions of Mini-Mon dancing in your head. For me that was real."

Jacob scowls, "And...Peanuts."

"Yea, and you gotta admit, that's kinda where we connect."

Jacob cringes slightly, "Let's not."

Seth is tickled by his father's discomfort, "Have it your way!"

Jacob's eyes drill through him, "Why now?"

"Well, as Admiral Ackbar would say, It's a trap."

Jacob almost laughs at that, "Now can you elaborate?"

Seth, with a cheshire grin, "Yeeea, they're waitin' for ya. See, they picked up on a thermal dump by one of the troopers and were able to pinpoint the recon team, so you'll have to cancel the drop." Seth jabs a finger at him and, "No! Bad! You're thinking that since you know there's a trap you can counter it on the fly but, no. They're not waiting for you with troops, their waiting with nukes."

Jacob shrugs, "Nukes, yea, and?"

"Megaton level nukes. Everybody dies if you guys show up. You should know that your idea on keeping recon teams on the move until pickup is the best idea. You should consider dictating it as SOP. So, for the time being, have recon go get lost until Tuesday."

Jacob breaths deep and exhales with a huff, followed by him staring at Seth and saying, "Okay...okay, thank you."

Seth leans in, "Can I offer you a tidbit of advice that'll help?"

Jacob shrugs, "I'm listening?"

"No, you're not listening. You're hearing, but not listening."

"Okay, point made. I'm listening to you now."

"Stepmother was right, you need to sleep. When you do not sleep and try to get by on jolt, you start making dumb-ass choices. You tend to knee jerk yourself into bad situations and, the problem is, our people are going to start dying if you don't knock it off." Seth puts a hand out and, "No, okay, lets rephrase that! Let me convey this to you in words you'll commit to memory, okay? ...Knock it the fuck off."

Tight lipped but amused, Jacob says, "Message received."

"That's good, but you still got a big fuck up comin' up."

"How and when?"

"Not gonna tell ya." Letting that sink in he adds, "See, father, sometimes bad things need to happen all because—"

Jacob finishes his thought, "Good may come from it."

"Yes...it is a tragedy how much bad must happen for the little good that it does. I have to be careful about what to change and how I go about it." While sitting back, Seth spins his finger towards the ground to emphasize, "This...rabbit hole runs deep."

"Anything you can tell me?"

Seth puts his fingers to his lips, filtering through all the new possibilities and nods, "Okay, this I can tell you...you're gonna get hurt bad, like real bad. You'll be laid up for quite a while, *and* you are also going to lose Glados because of it."

Jacob throws out, "I'm surprised she an' I lasted this long."

Seth nods in agreement, then, "Just so you know, you'll do a bang up job managing the fight while on the mend but, it's when you get t-boned by Missis Right that...well, now you won't be so shocked."

Jacob wonders, "Anyone I know?"

"I ain't sayin' shit! What I can share is that you've been with her once before but you and she were too stupid drunk to remember any of it, and in re what's a-comin', oh, the hilarity!"

Jacob doesn't know what to say, "Oh, great."

"You won't see the humor but the rest of us will."

Jacob grimaces slightly, "Whatever that could be?"

"The kicker is that you just might find yourself surprisingly?" Seth struggles getting this out, "Oh, yea, the h-word...happy."

Jacob shakes his head, "That I find difficult to believe."

Seth cups his mouth with his hands and gives a raspy breath while saying, "I find your lack of faith disturbing."

Jacob again shakes his head while rolling his eyes, then, "Whatever you say, Seth, but I'll believe it when I see it."

"You'll see it...soon enough." Seth suddenly perks up, saying, "And don't worry, father, you'll be in good company! I already know who I'll be marrying and I'll be afflicted with the same intellectually numbing blight, right along with ya."

Jacob smirks with, "The h-word?"

Seth subtly shivers in pain, "uuuuuh, can't bear the thought."

Amused by that, Jacob waggles his finger back and forth between them, asking, "So, how does this work going forward?"

"It doesn't. We're done here. As it relates to you, *mi padre*, we're coasting along from here on out. You just do your thing. If the Alter needs to guide you it'll come from Stepmother or Jessie."

"Because we must keep appearances, right?"

"This conversation never happened."

"The others don't know?"

"Not a clue."

0101001-0101011-0101111-0101011-0100001-01010010-01000100

Jessica's fastback drops into Second Hand and lands at the newest aerodrome facility called, Sky Cove. As part of the expansion of the operations here, this place is quickly becoming an actual city with nine fortress-like wards that are connected by a web of monorails and utility tunnels that link into the original SA facility, code named The Foliot, that has been built out into a ward now called the Bronx.

Only the far off Delta-Ward is not yet tied into this network.

The UK heir apparent is usually prohibited from flying with the sitting monarch but, since they're riding in a Razorback, these things are considered stupidly-reliable, even indestructible, so for the first time her two sisters, their husbands and two of their older children, ten and twelve, got to ride along with Victoria.

They disembark, and after the twenty minute orientation that instructs you on how not to die on this planet, they take a monorail to the Iko Festival Grounds and it's 5-star hotel.

The twenty-six from the fastback, that is the royals, their assistants, the RaSP security team, the two reporters and their camera

operators, along with Michelle, Brie and Jessica, had a blast sucking down wine and rubbing elbows with the Annex station commanders, as well as the current Xhemal leader, Chell, and eighteen of her staff.

Five juvenile Xhemal, Chell's own kids, hit it off big with the two children from Victoria's second sister but, in spite of the raptor youths being way overpowering, the human children ran circles around the Xhemal when playing football, or soccer as they call it here.

It's now been seven hours after everyone turned in and here we are, at the posh conference room by the lobby of the hotel. In this meeting we have the Annex station Chief, Billingsley, Chell and two of her Xhemal staffers sitting across from the Nefer Key representatives Luc, their new Tribune Aat, and an army commander, Alexi.

Jessica and Victoria enter the room with their coffee while Luc talks with overly-animated hand gestures, "You know what I'm getting at? We like your set up here as long as nothing escapes and chases after us bipedal entrées while we're crying out, 'oh nooo!' and the critters going 'nom-nom-nom' on our screaming corpses!"

Alexi laughs, adding, "You know, Jurassic Park!"

Chell shakes her head, asking, "Jurassic, what?"

Rubbing his eyes, Billingsley huffs a laughs, "I'm the only one here old enough to get that reference." He drops his hands and says, "Luc, the thing is that the critters on Second Hand don't break out! Here those critters are looking to break *in* and, because of the constant construction, that happens about two or three times per quarter."

"Hey Jess!" Luc waves to Jessica as she and Victoria take a seat at the table, so he continues with, "Okay, Chief, you mean to tell me it happens *that* often and nobody has died?"

Billingsley shakes his head, "No, we haven't lost anybody yet? Look, try as we might to stop the security breaches, they find a way. So far the science dweebs have tallied up over two hundred and twenty alpha level predator species, and God knows how many subspecies there are on this planet? The raptors, as a genus, are lower mid-tier alpha hunters, but the Xhemal are *the* Apex, top of the heap killers on Second Hand. They're not the biggest by a long shot, nor the fastest, but what they are is the smartest."

Aat points out, "That counts for a lot."

"Here it does! I can drop you guys in a field with a platoon of droids and the animals out there have no fear of them yet. Point is, in that sitch, they're gonna make a play for ya." Billingsley then thumbs over at Chell, "If I put these three in the field then, hungry or not, every meat eater will high tail it out of there and let you be."

Chell smiles big, "That's how the math works here."

Billingsley asks, "So, how 'bout a hundred of you to start?"

Luc wonders, "I was under the impression that you can handle up to three-thousand of our people at any given time?"

Billingsley turns towards Chell, "I'll let you deal with this one."

"Yeea." Chell nods, then, "We don't know how the local fauna will react to you." Luc shrugs, so Chell sniffs the air then elaborates, "Okay, let's make a comparison. Human beings would be a convenient morsel to the carnivores on Second Hand. Something to snack on, but nothing to write home about. Your scent, your...let me put it to you this way, I already know that, here, you'd be on the desert menu."

Luc rears back, "Whu?"

Aat is laughing, "Oh, my god!"

Alexi snorts, "You wanna eat...us?"

Chell puts her claws out and, "No, it's not that! Look, we import cows, Angus beef from Earth so, now we don't look at humans as food. I mean..." She looks at Jessica and asks, "I'm not getting this across right, am I?"

Jessica laughs, saying, "Chell, you're on a roll, babe!"

Luc motions for Chell to, "Keep going! I wanna hear this."

Chell shakes her head and, "I don't know how to walk this back but, hear me out, okay? Do...you have any prey or domesticated stock we could possibly, I dunno, maybe sample?"

Fighting the laughter, Luc says, "Yes...yes, Chell! I think we can maybe get you people hooked up there." He turns to Aat and Alexi while asking, "*Vache noire*?"

Aat asks Chell, "Fresh or dressed?"

Chell looks at her staff and one says, "Fresh would be good!"

Luc then points towards Victoria while asking Chell, "Can we squeeze them in for a sec, then get back to the fun?"

Chell throws her claws out, "Oh yes, please! Before I say something else stupid as fuck."

Jessica asks with a smile, "How ya doin', Chell?"

Chell blinks and, "Making a mess of things this morning."

Luc reassures Chell, "I'm having a blast here!" He turns to Victoria and, "When I was informed that I'd be meeting with *you* I was stunned. I was under the impression that you were apolitical?"

Victoria was in the middle of a sip of coffee, so she pulls back and smacks her lips, then, "Yes, in the public's eye the Royal Family *is* apolitical. Without question we have no voice out there but, behind closed doors, we carry the voice of neutrality. Makes us useful!"

Luc asks for clarity, "You don't take sides, hu?"

"What use would be of us if we did?"

"Then let's hear that voice."

"Today, under the table, our voice carries for both the United States President, Mofid, as well as our Prime Minister, Edwards."

Victoria gestures to Jessica who says, "I'm here representing the Steel Annex as well as the City of New Sydney, on Sapphire."

Victoria continues, "Your current plan is to join the FIS as an observer mission to start and, in turn, thumbing your nose at the UN. However, as for the UN-GA, their trousers are up in knots over that but the perma-members to the Security Council are behind you."

Jessica adds, "They're loving every minute of this."

Luc points out, "But they're complaining about it."

Victoria notes, "It's all for show. The problem here, you see, is that you want a physical presence on Earth but, because of how our interstate treaties are worded, without a seat at the General Assembly none of the members would be in the position to offer you the grounds for an actual physical embassy."

"Okay." Luc points to himself, "Luc is not happy about that."

Victoria cracks a smile, "We think we have a work around."

Jessica speaks up, "We anticipated this last month and that's why we pushed back on some of the locations you wanted for your embassy. That's why we insisted on the City of New Sydney locale."

Luc thinks about it then, "New Sydney? City of New Sydney? I recall the discussion. I believe that nuance may be afoot?"

"You guessed it! The City of New Sydney is not a part of the larger metropolitan New Sydney, nor is it under the jurisdiction of Sapphire. It happens to be an enclave, a territorial municipality apart from, but under the yoke and jurisdiction of the City of London."

Luc points at Victoria, "That's where you live!"

Victoria shrugs, "Not exactly, the same nuanced difference that holds true on Sapphire applies there as well. The City of London is not part of Greater London. By acts, *in inceptum*, it is an English territorial lieutenancy that enjoys a special status of semi-autonomy and, since we are behind closed doors, we will admit here that it has

historically been a pip-squeak, pin-prick of an annoyance to the crown! Not because we are compelled to petition the Lord Mayor of the City for permission to enter...we do...it's just that this entity benefits from many unmerited privileges and regulatory exemptions, however..." Victoria points up into the air, "Today is the payout for all parties being faithful to insufferably long-in-the-tooth and stale traditions."

Jessica playfully mocks Victoria, "But, that's your job."

Victoria rolls her eyes, "Thank you for reminding me, doll."

Jessica smiles as she says to Luc, "Here's the squeal, the Annex owns a tower in The City of London that they've leased out to the City of New Sydney who has leased half of the floors back to us, follow?" Luc nods, yes, so she throws out, "So, we're gonna sub-lease two floors to you, with access to the landing on top of the building. We'll also add a small ground floor reception nook, throw in your own personal elevator, and there you have it! Y'all got yourself a bona fide consulate!"

Luc frowns and takes a stab at it, "The consulate would be a satellite to the embassy in New Sydney, right?" Jessica nods, yes, so Luc throws out, "The complex lease an' sublease arrangements are all to complicate...frustrate litigation, right?"

"Exactly!"

Victoria adds, "There is an old Scottish saying, possession is eleven points in the law when there are but twelve." She nods towards Aat, "Ambassador, the Annex will cloak and dagger your people in, you throw up a shingle and, as Red Love here would say, blammo!"

Jessica asks Victoria, "RaSP?"

"No, SAS, we're not taking chances."

Jessica says to them, "Like on the Church Key, there you will have ghost droids..." She nods towards Victoria, "Her guys, and we'll be throwing in one of our clones, named Ruth. Half of one floor will be the consulate and the rest will be apartments. Your commute at worst will only be fifteen feet vertically. We'll also get you hooked up with Leon Green to work out the décor so, sound good?"

Luc looks to Aat and Alexi who nod big, with Alexi saying, "Since it'll be my digs it sounds perfect to me!"

Victoria then says to Luc, "The word is, you have a ninety-two percent positive rating so far in the minds of the public which, I might add, are stonking good numbers. Better than mine! We'll continue to work with you and look for opportunities to improve on those ratings, but we can't mollycoddle you. Be aware that every little moment on the street matters and the only time you can be yourself, falling out of

character, is behind closed doors in your flat."

Aat smiles, "We've been practicing on our poker faces."

"Your mugs are surprisingly expressive! We done here?"

Both Luc and Chell nod, yes, and as Jessica and Victoria stand to leave, Victoria suggests to Luc, "If you have the time, dear sir, you should consider joining us here for a day or two? And, you'd have to admit, the photo opportunities out there would be legendary!"

Luc's eyebrows rise, "That it would!"

After Luc and Victoria have taken a minute to go over her schedule, Billingsley says to Jessica, "Sorry to hear 'bout your mom."

Jessica goes, "Thanks...how are the A-n-O's doing?"

"The Omegas are fantastic, but the Alphas are why I'm here!"

Jessica laughs, "I heard they can be a bit of a handful."

It is here that, Alexi turns to Chell and her staff and, not so quietly she asks, "I gotta know...how would you do it?"

Chell wonders, "Do what?"

"Eat me! Like bar-b-que, or broasted, or fricasseed, how?"

All conversations have stopped for this...

Chell simply closes her eyes and shakes her head, and the one next to her nods whole-heartedly, as the Xhemal at the end of the table volunteers, "Sushi?"

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stranger danger

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-10-MONDAY
TIME: 05:22zulu (local 05:22act)

Back in the old days, before the hot mess that was Saiph-6B, the troopers of the Steel Annex were referred to as ghosts and even shadows, but that was way before they adopted holo-cloaking tech. Camouflage then was from a chroma-diffracting skin that changed their appearance like a chameleon or, more specifically, mimicked the cellular mechanisms of cephalopods such as octopi or squid.

As a CYA this digital-chromatophore pixel matrix that covers the JACC is still in use today, with the AI dialing in the appropriate camo-combo under the cloak, but everybody forgot about that. When not cloaked the normal skin is perfect for dusk, when the local star is dropping below the solar horizon, and at night.

When not cloaked or camo'd up the JACC has two distinct settings to choose from, one being a variable matte-black scale from a sooty gray to charcoal black, depending on the lighting conditions, and the second being an active photon absorption mode referred to by the troopers as *shadow à la mode*.

The cloaking-tech has been strictly relegated to daytime use because it happens to be a radiant technology that projects light. Turn that shit on at night and you suddenly become as conspicuous as any Spy Boy on Fat Tuesday in the French Quarter!

Point being, the cloak in the real world has never been 100% effective like it is in scifi worlds, and the three things that'll disrupt the photo-mechanics are water, motion and proximity. Proximity, *id est* distance, is the easy fix 'cause all you gotta do is to give a wide berth. As for motion, well, this is another no-brainer of a fix simply by going at things slow. The standing rule is 5x50. That is, invisibility to the human eye is achieved at about five kph outside of fifty meters.

Go faster or get closer puts you at risk of becoming deadier.

Then there is water, by way of precipitation or standing body of, because when “wet” is encountered while cloaked then you sort of stand out from all the crazed polygonal razzle-dazzle rainbows of photons refracting through said water. Which means your only option at this point is to turn that shit off!

Then there’s the pesky little 15x30 rule! This ratio applies to both the camo and cloak within the 5x50 rule—where one’s cone of invisibility hovers at around fifteen degrees vertically by thirty degrees horizontally. Point to where you want to be invisible too and the suit does the rest! Problem here is that the troopers of the Annex have always had a complete *suspenders-and-belt* confidence in the cloaking tech where the camo by itself sort of freaks them out.

Anyway, after five and a half weeks of busting their asses, getting past the fear and gaining confidence by learning from *the OG*, that being a living and breathing Original Ghost, they come to the most eerie of graduation exercises that is making all of their balls and ovaries climb up into their throats. At this very moment the last of the nine platoons in the recon company to finish their camo-only training is flying over a Co-op field division in the bright of day, that being dusk here in the Civil Twilight zone, without the cloak.

At 99° Latitude, just past the Sriracha Mu terminator by one measly degree, the perpetual sunset from the little red dwarf, arcing over the local horizon, lights up the clouds two-thousand meters overhead. Right under those clouds their JACCs have dialed in what looks to be Mountbatten Pink, and as they drift along with the clouds, in the never ending south to north convection circuit...it starts to rain.

With three F51 Djinn fighters fast approaching, a whole kilometer below them, and the platoon and command squad quietly losing their shit inside their suits, Vossler laughs and says on channel, [“Confidence is key, kids!”]

One trooper asks, [“Chief, give me one good reason why we shouldn’t be high-tailing it outta here like...now.”]

With the rest of the platoon vocally stirring in agreement, Vossler asks the platoon leader, [“Waddya think, Gunny?”]

The Gunnery Sergeant comments, [“Sorry to say, Chief, but with those Fifty-One’s comin’ at us I...feel a little bit exposed.”]

The first trooper quietly adds, [“Can we go now?”]

Vossler is laughing, [“What do you think they see when they look up from down there? Our cloaks are off so in the rain we don’t print, and any shadows we got are miles behind us!”]

The Gunny asks, ["Point is?"]

["Believe it or not, you are truly invisible for once. From the deck or the cockpits of the Djinn you are not here!"]

["Have to admit, nobody in their right mind would be flyin' overhead in the bright of day—especially while it's raining, right?"]

Vossler throws out, ["Exactly! The cloak has been a crutch, an' we're better off without it. Trust me, when you get the hang of this you'll wonder why we ever optioned it in the first place."]

With the three fighters zipping past, far below them, another voice on channel says, ["We're actually getting away with this!"]

["Told ya, everything changes!"]

Another trooper says, ["This is insane, but we're doin' it!"]

["Remember the rules on Taiji, stay low or high, but stay the fuck outta eye level and, above all, stay out of the sun! And, in the TOZ, you'll stick-figure against S'Mu for at least four clicks."]

Another voice goes, ["Yea, all this has been an eye opener."]

Vossler then asks, ["Want an eye opener? I've been savin' this but now's good! Look north towards Sriracha Mu."]

Vossler sends a command and five kilometers out a Pacman drone drops from the clouds. The thing is cloaked but through the tacnet they can all see the data-tag indicating where it is and that it is dropping towards the deck, so Vossler adds, ["That drone is just two kilometers beyond their lead elements on point. It's cloaked and the rain has not reached it yet, but it's there to prove a point."]

Slowing as it approaches the ground, reaching the horizon between the CDF point and the red dwarf, the troops notice its fuzzy shape against the star and open up—blasting it out of the sky.

After a few seconds of silence, Vossler adds, ["That was how Deputy Marshal, Jones bought it. S'Mu is not Sol or Electra. It is not bright enough to wash out *your* silhouette."]

The platoon's Gunnery Sergeant says, ["Chief, I think you finally won us over with that lil' demo."]

["Okay kids, you're on your own now! Ride the clouds till you're six or seven clicks past their point elements and *then* you can drop to the deck. I'll be back at the Punchbowl by the time you regroup and mosey off to your assignments."]

["I wanna thank ya, Voss."]

A trooper asks, ["We be old school recce now, right, Chief?"]

Vossler hasn't heard that reference to old school recon in decades, so as he and the command squad start to rise up towards the clouds above, ["That you all are, newly hatched Recces!"]

A few of the troopers make chimp sounds on their recon channel as others call out with *recces!* and *oorah!*

With the ghostly dull pink-gray of Vossler slipping out of sight, ["Go thee forth an' blend the fuck in!"]

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Back at the Punchbowl, in the underground facility, Vossler steps into the CIC and is surprised to see General Giáp standing there, "Oi, General! Twentieth of Foot is zig-zagging their way west to The Greens, with Sixtieth Armor trailing be'ind 'em."

Giáp, with a cup of tea in hand, continues to study the tactical display while saying, "Well now, the knotty cunts are finally smartening up for once!" He then turns towards Vossler and while offering his hand, "We gotta stop meeting like this! People may talk?"

"Joke 'em if they can't take a fuck!" Vossler gives his hand a shake and, "They've now got six Divvy's moving onto the Meadows."

"Bet'ya next week is gonna be a rip-snorter of a good time!"

"Yea, you would think that." He nods towards the next room, "Our deacon still here?" Giáp nods, yes, so Vossler asks, "Did ya talk 'im out of it yet?"

"There's no talking 'im out of this. The Ref's mind was made up the second Colonel Plunket got ghosted."

Eli, in a referee shirt, steps through the doorway while saying, "Whatevs—the general, 'e gave it his best shot."

Vossler says, "You don't have to do this, Eli."

Eli shrugs, "Step away for a slash an' on the walk back I watched dear Maley turned to pink mist right before me eyes."

Giáp says to Vossler, "They're using Artie like a sniper rifle."

With the general handing Eli an open bottle of Four-Ex, Eli says, "They caught the dog-cunt who zero'd her in, and it took about three hours for that rat-bastard to die."

Giáp blinks, "That was too quick."

"I should've cark'd it with me wife."

Giáp now hands him a StG-880 with a short CQB rail and a drum magazine, "You're the only one that thinks that."

"Loaded up with Sputnik?"

"Four-fifty-fours, for those stranger danger encounters."

"I'll drink to that!" He holds the bottle up for Vossler to see and announces, "Me last pint!"

As Eli slow-chugs the bottle, Giáp says to Vossler, "They're shooting anyone they find carrying a four-fifty-eight."

Vossler points out, "But, it's loaded with four-fifty-four?"

"It's an eight-eighty! Even though he'll be cleared to carry a weapon at the prisoner exchange, they'll grab him if they notice it."

Vossler turns to Eli and, "They may kill you."

Eli belches and hands the empty bottle to him, "What better rallying cry than a dead deacon, aye?"

Giáp again stresses, "You don't have to do this."

Eli shakes his head slightly and, "Matthew, ten : twenty-eight, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Follow? I'm doing my part here."

Vossler asks, "We don't get a vote, right?"

"Glad you're seein' it my way, so let's bow our heads, gents!" With them looking down, Eli prays, "Oh Lord, bless me with humility in victory, peace and perseverance in defeat, and gratitude in learning of your wisdom by whatever outcome. In this I pray, Amen."

Eli then safes the weapon and cycles it into battery as Giáp asks him, "You think this will make the people rise up?"

With a snarky grin, Eli says, "Like the Kraken." He gives the general a quick salute, slings his weapon then steps through the door while crying out, "Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly... Cheers, ya buggers!"

They can hear Eli whistle *The Mickey Mouse Club* theme song as he exits the facility, so after a few seconds, Vossler looks to Giáp and asks, "You got that hack goin', right?"

Giáp nods, "In living color."

The general reaches over to a huge monitor and taps on an icon that pops up into a window. On it they are receiving feed from Eli's visual cortex, as well as him whistling his happy tune as he climbs up the side and out of the Punchbowl.

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-18-TUESDAY
TIME: 02:30zulu (local 25:54pst)

On Second Hand, Victoria's friends and family had a blast with the Nefer Key, and of all the photos that hit social media it was the videos of Chell's kids acting out a few choice action sequences from Jurassic Park, with Luc and Alexi, that blew all of their approval metrics through the roof. The one scene where they get caught and eaten alive by the juvenile raptors was the biggest hit of all when their mock screams turned into hysterical laughter—because the kids mercilessly tickled the crap out of them with their teeth and claws.

Many in the general public had concerns about the Nefer Key, but any lingering doubts have died with these antics.

On Sunday, Wednesday here at 83-Tau, Jessica and Michelle delivered everyone to the Jacoby's Stump airfield and left, but on the way out Jessie kicked two of their six ghost droids overboard. It was Maggie and Paleo's job to guard Victoria, with orders to stay out of sight while shadowing her—and no one else.

Jessica and Seth assured Maria that Victoria was going to be fine but Maria wanted to be doubly sure about her safety. They didn't clue her in on what was going to happen to Piper because that would have made a colossal mess of things.

So, the die has been cast.

Jessica had clearance to fly low over the Queensland Vista on the way out, and with Michelle piloting they enter Julia's Other Creek, a seventy-kilometer long by twenty-five wide valley in the middle of the savanna that's five-hundred kilometers north of New Brisbane. At low speed, they are following a lazy-shallow river that snakes down the entire length of the valley.

At this moment it's high noon here on Prypiat, in the middle of Twilight 360, so it's surprisingly easy for Michelle to fly in VFR mode but Jessica, with eyes closed, has cleared her mind for this admittedly odd search. What surprises Jessica is that it took only a handful of quick seconds for her to zero in on the Jabberwocky's and then link into Blue Boy's mind, "One o'clock, Guns, an' Piper was right! There are four of 'em, maybe thirty-clicks out?"

"I see 'em." Michelle has locked onto them with her scope so, knowing the extent of Jessica's abilities, she asks, "What do you see?"

"Us, from Blue Boy's eyes. They're like mantis-shrimp eyes, an' their vision is crazy as shit! I'll let you path this when we're out."

"What's he thinking?"

Jessica opens her eyes and looks up at Michelle, saying, "Plotting, patience...meticulous and, oh shit, Piper was right again! They can't spot anyone in her Ghillie suits!"

"Don't the beasts see in infrared?"

"Yes, but they can only spot the residual heat at close range, and they can also sense movement." Jessica looks away, digging, "They're here for the Pale One, that's what they call Piper." She looks back up, "He's gonna come at her out of the clouds, straight down!"

"Why'd the Alter send us out here if we can't say shit?"

Jessica blinks her eyes, looks at Michelle and slowly shakes her head, "We're here for my benefit."

"I don't get it?"

"A lot is riding on this. You'll know when it happens."

Michelle turns to watch the video feed from the optical scope that continues to track the animals as they whiz by, with Jessica pointing out, "The smaller one, the one on the right, that's Blue Boy's daughter. And, just so you know, her name is also Pale One."

Michelle blinks and, "One can deduce a lot from that."

"Yea...the short of it is, she's why I'm here."

"Anything you can tell me?"

"No, but you can watch it all for yourself. You'll be there!"

"Whatever there is...fair enough."

A minute later they slip out of the valley, and as they climb towards space, Michelle asks, "You seeing David anytime soon?"

"Next week. You tryin' to get a hold of him?" With Michelle nodding, yes, Jessica asks, "What's the message?"

Michelle thinks about it, "Keep it to yourself?"

"You have to ask?"

"I know, stupid question. Look, the Family Kiel is kickin' up a fuck-ton dust-fuss about my safety."

Jessica huffs a laugh, "I spook 'em that bad?"

"Yea, ya sure as shit did. You have that effect on people." Michelle hands control of the ship back to Jessica, "Got it?"

Jessica nods, "Got it."

Michelle continues, "On 54-Tau, he and I became...close?"

Jessica smiles, "One can deduce a lot from that."

"And all that it implies." Michelle throws caution to the wind, "Okay, can we keep this between us?"

Jessica nods, yes, "What's got you so spooked?"

"Do you remember, awhile back, when I told you it took a couple of months for me to figure out I was having Brie?"

"Mom said you didn't show for shit...wait a second, you and he did it?" Jessica already knew this was coming, but acts surprised when Michelle nods, yes, so after a fit of laughter Jessica sighs big, "What a lucky kid!"

Michelle wonders, "Ya think so?"

"Yea, Dave's is gonna dig it!"

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Here on the southernmost third of Julia's Other Creek, just three kilometers from a huge s-bend in the river, where many species of animals come to drink, we have Piper's personal dropship silently landing on top of a long sloping rise.

It's late night Wagyl day, just a mere 18 minutes short of local midnight when the clocks roll over to Prypiat-Thursday—as compared to the SNN and act-zulu clocks that are showing 2:30 hours (gmt) early Tuesday morning. Right now on the Queensland Vista they've just past the darkest part of night, with the glow from the star, Zmeu, building in the far off western horizon. It takes quite a long time, seven hours in total, to transition from Nautical Dawn to full-on sunrise with the far distant 83-Tau breaking free of that horizon.

The dropship is an HWG41 Dragonfly^{LT} that has been tricked out with an aftermarket *safari mod* config, designed by Piper, and serves as her mobile hunting lodge. With the ramp in the back slowly

opening, the interior emits a faint blue light that is absorbed by the landscape instead of reflecting off of it.

Victoria, along with two RaSP guards, step down the ramp in Piper's custom fast breakaway Ghillie suits—each with an SA, BR1-M2 rail gun in hand in 8.80mm. All three are tied into the ships Security Services N2 tactical system that scans the valley and outputs real time data. From their visual cortex one can touch any data tag and get instant thermal or direct starlight video of the object.

Here it's tracking local fauna.

Hundreds of two legged bactrosaurus like creatures, what the people here call *bumbles*, are in the valley with most heading towards the river following many hours of grazing on the grassy scrub off the valley floor. After a few seconds of them surveying the area, Piper comes out of the ship in lite desert pixelated-camo BDUs which makes her stand out all because tonight, Piper is the bait.

In Piper's hands is an antique Barrett's M95 bolt-action rifle that fires the old .50BMG round. On the housing above the pistol grip she has the word VORPAL etched in a Gothic script, "Well, Vic, I 'ave about five of these rifles but this one is my favorite. All twenty of the Jabbers I've bagged was with old Vorpall here." She turns to the RaSP agents and, "Okay, you two stud muffins stay a football's pitch behind and don't crowd us. Now, don't mind me, I'm in my element, you're here to cover Vic. On this outing, it's Vic who covers me!"

The lead RaSP, an ex SAS operator, says, "Righty'o mum!"

"Now, I'm gunning for Blue Boy, Bobby I like to call 'im, so after I bag Bobby the rest are yours!" Piper points to Vic while saying to the RaSP, "Let Vic get her shots in. Stick your tockley out only if they're about to eat her."

"That's affirmative, mum!"

"Their's a good lad!" Piper gestures up river, "They're killing one human around Julia's Other Creek every orbit during night-night, but not eating 'em. They've been comin' to the river to feed. They kill four jar-jars a week—and they've been doing that in a string along the bank of the river, each about a klick apart. The bumbles steer clear of the kills so the Jabbers naturally do this, but they started at the top of the valley four months ago, and kept to tha' pattern, which brings us to this bend here."

Victoria asks, "Seriously, you think this is premeditated?"

"They're not dumb animals, love. I'm the only Jabber hunter still alive. They bagged the other two while they were hunting banders up north. Oh, the Jabbs also hunt banders, for the fun of it!"

"For the fun of it?"

Piper nods, "We got video of 'em capturing a bander and tearing it up slower than slow, then pinching a big shite on the corpse."

"Bloody fucking brilliant!"

Piper smiles, "We're of hive mind, we both hate the banders!" She then announces, "Okay all, I'll not be on the N2 so don't clue me in or help me no matter what happens out there."

The RaSP agent is shocked, "That'll be crazy talk, mum!"

"Bobby and family are here for me and...well, they deserve a fair shot at it. It's time to lock an' load and hit the road!"

They check their side arms first, with Victoria and the RaSP agents cycling their 10mm long-slide breezeblocks while Piper loads an ancient revolver she has in a chest hugging cross-draw holster. From it she pulls a Ruger-Alaskan snub nosed in .454 Casull and drops in six cartridges with fat 360-grain flat wide-nose bullets.

With the three charging their M2s into battery, Piper stuffs a five-shot magazine into her rifle, then pulls a green and white tipped round from a pocket that she holds up for them to see, "First up we'll opt for a Raufoss, for those intimate moments, and when taking a long shot I'll cycle past it for a proper ball cartridge."

With the RaSP agents nodding, impressed by her, Victoria says to them, "Told ya tha' woman is hard core, aye?"

Piper drives the round into the chamber and starts to lead them out, "That's enough gobbing off, you chatter boxes!"

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The two RaSP agents set up sniper positions a half-kilometer from the bend, and with Piper and Victoria approaching the bank, we have Victoria quietly telling her a story from under the hood of the Ghillie suit, "I so adore pipes and drums, it's a beautiful racket it is."

Piper nods and says, "I love 'em too, but I have to admit the drums tend to be a little tinny for my ear."

"I so agree, but when you're the queen you can never get away from it all! Anyway, last August I was inspecting the guard at Balmoral, like I do every summer, but the year before, in a private moment, I mentioned to the Argyll Colonel that all the pipe bands can get wearisome, and I pray for some cheeky pillock to surprise us all by whipping out a penny-whistle or a kazoo as a changeup."

"So that's why that happened! I saw the footage."

"The entire corps brandished penny-whistles and kazoos, and I was laughing so hard I don't remember what they were playing!"

"Ye Banks and Braes, if I recall?"

"Yes! Then a dash of Scotland the Brave to finish it off!"

Piper snorts a quiet little laugh while she scans the sky and, "It caused a stink! I 'eard a fair majority wanted his head on a pike."

"They did, but he 'ad his twenty years in so I hired him onto my staff! First day on board I walk into his office to invite him to high tea, and there he was shagging my secretary! ...The little trollop."

"The first day you say?"

Victoria nods, yes, "The Colonel an' she are getting married next summer so he'll be making an honest trollop out of her."

"Good man!" Piper motions for them to stop, and gestures towards the north with a huge grin, "There be dragons, says I."

Highlighted against the glow of the star Zmeu, bouncing off the distant mountains in the north, they see three of the Jabberwocks spiraling in to land on a small hill by the river. They are just four kilometers away but out of reach of Piper's Barrett.

Victoria pulls up the N2 feed and opts for the starlight scope from the dropship. A window pops up in the vision center of her brain and, like in the bright of day, the three land on top of the hill and then turn to look directly towards them, "You were right, Piper."

Piper snorts, "That'll be a first!"

"They're watching our every move 'ere. I believe you're right! These are not dumb animals."

Piper looks around and asks, "You 'ear it?"

Victoria thinks about it and, "It's like I've got tinnitus all of a sudden. That them?"

Piper nods, "It's not a steady pitch like with echolocation, it fluctuates. It's jumbled up, much like a conversation, so it makes me wonder if they communicate in the ultrasonic range?" Piper smiles big, "If so that means they're living up to their namesake!"

"Which one?"

"Hum...take your pick!" Piper's smile fades as she ponders, "Okay dearie, drop down by me and crawl fifteen north to those rocks for a hunker down. I'll move out west about forty." Piper takes three steps, stops and looks back at Victoria, "Ol' Bobby is going to come at me low from any quarter those three are not." She then nods with an eerie realization that, "Methinks I'm the one being hunted."

Victoria urges her to, "Keep your head on a spindle, love."

Piper nods with a big smile, "Sage advice!" And as she steps away she adds, "You best keep 'ur head down, Vic, or they'll lop it off."

With Piper heading out to the riverbank, Victoria has the video zoom in on the three Jabberwockys—and she is suddenly taken aback by how unreal they look. The bumbles with the eye-stalks on top of their heads are surreal enough, but these monsters are clearly on a different evolutionary path. From a distance they look like what you would imagine a run of the mill flying dragon would be, *a la* huge bat wings glued onto a Utahraptor, but when the camera zooms in on these creatures is when Victoria realizes the Fibonacci sequence may have stepped things up just a tad more than necessary.

It's got that Utahraptor vibe, yes, but here it's with four eyes and four huge ears, along with four arms and four legs! Two arms are massive bat like wings with five fingers in the wing structure, and three clawed-grasping fingers at the pivot-point midway up the wing. The second set of arms that sprout from their chest are small and have a combination of five fingers and three thumbs that are obviously for grasping and stabbing and tearing...oh my! The primary pair of legs appear normal enough for running, jumping, kicking and slashing, but the back pair, mounted high up on their hips, evolved into a trailing set of wings that are one-third the size of the arm-mounted wings, and appear to serve for lift, trim and maneuvering.

On Earth these beasts wouldn't be able to fly for shit, walking would be troublesome at best and running would be totally out of the question, but here in the low gravity and dense atmosphere of Prypiat you get a completely different set of performance points as a result.

Victoria, now sitting in front of the rocks, having practiced Piper's breakaway technique from the Ghillie suit yesterday, is ready to spring into action at a second's notice. She hears the increasing whir of the insect life from the Vista buzzing around her, and she thanks god that Piper had each of them drink that beaker of apple-cider vinegar before stepping out of the ship. The bugs are now steering clear of her because of the acidic now leaching out of her pores.

Watching Piper, Victoria sees that her head is indeed on a spindle, where she methodically checks each dark quadrant while simultaneously tracking the three Jabbers. Victoria then sweeps the area with the N2 where she notices the bumbles winding their way through the low brush towards the bend. She realizes that this may be a problem—or a blessing depending on how it plays out?

Victoria also realizes that if Blue Boy is as smart as Piper says he is, then he would want the bumbles here to make a mess of things and distract Piper enough for him to take his shot.

After twenty minutes the Pale One lifts off from their hill and leaps straight up into the sky, and it only takes five huge pumps from her powerful wings to get airborne. She swings out wide, around the bend, and towards the slice of Zmeu that is now peeking over the horizon in the distant west. Against the light of the star the Pale One does a handful of figure-eights over the valley floor. On the fifth one the beast pulls off a couple of axial rolls followed by a barrel roll and finishes off her performance with a tight corkscrew. Obviously, these acrobatics are to draw Piper's attention away from the east.

Piper doesn't fall for it and keeps an eye out.

The increased buzzing in Victoria's ears from their ultrasonic banter is probably them communicating this to Blue Boy.

Victoria links in with her RaSP team, "You watching this?"

From the N2 her RaSP team leader openly worries, saying, ["Your Majesty, I don't know how you roped us into letting you do this, but it's not safe 'ere. Not by a long shot!"]

Victoria smiles, "That may be, Corporal, but right now the safest place to be is right where we are."

["That it would be, mum! So, would you do us a kind favor and not twitch a muscle? Tha'd be a-might helpful!"]

"You gents don't see 'im?"

["No, the beast has to be somewhere in the clouds."]

"Have to agree...that is unless he walks in with the bumbles."

["Mum, the story of this Blue Boy walking in and biting that Big Gamey's head off in camp, I find that a little hard to swallow."]

With the Pale One landing back on the hill, Victoria tells them, "Yet, that's how the Xhemal managed to get into Orpheus Eyot."

The other RaSP laughs, ["You can't be serious, mum!"]

"Shared a pint with the breach team, I did!"

["Well I be gobsmaked!"]

"Let's keep our eyes peeled, gentlemen."

After ten minutes of the beasts watching them, they give a shrill call, that Victoria can feel in her face. One of the medium sized male Jabbers lifts off and takes a quick three-minute lap around their perimeter, again out of range of Piper's rifle. Even though this forces Piper to keep an eye on both where he is and where he's not, she maintains calm and effectively scans the sky in all directions with an open ear—without showing any panic whatsoever.

When the Jabber lands back with his friends the RaSP leader comes on line, ["Mum, your friend out there wears trousers of steel! In her shoes my knees would be knocking like castanets by now."]

Victoria gives a little huff of a laugh, then, "Steel they are, Corporal, but I kinda feel something may be amiss here?"

["What would that be, mum?"]

"The way that Jabber was playfully drifting and skidding on that lap has got me thinking...but I can't put my bloody finger on it!"

["Please share when it comes to mind!"]

After another fifteen minutes, with the bumbles now trapesing through Piper's killing zone, making their smelly way towards the bank of the river for a drink, Victoria can hear Piper getting annoyed when she calls out in frustration, "Come-on ya fickle cunt, where ye be?"

Suddenly there is a huge ultrasonic burst that Victoria can again feel, which tickles her nose, but this time she can't tell where it came from to trace a vector. The three far off Jabbers launch into the air with the two big males orbiting out west, and the littler Pale One heading north then looping back around towards the east.

The bumbles recognize this sound so, in their confusion, they frantically start to stampede and dive into the river. Piper has to weave between and around these panicking animals or be trampled by them. With the noise and dust kicked up her situational awareness has just been greatly reduced to a mere thirty meters at best.

Now, down here in the valley it's still dark, but above them the clouds are bright enough to throw your eyesight out of whack so Piper has been scanning above through her peripheral vision. With all the activity down here Piper and Victoria are not able to pick up on a low-pitched whooshing sound that is building up until just now—and it is at this very second they both realize the attack was not coming from the horizontal, like they expected, but the vertical.

In only a few quick seconds, Piper stumbles back as she looks up towards Blue Boy just as his wings snap open to break his fall. The beast lands hard but this breaking maneuver stops him from pile driving into the ground. He was expecting Piper to be under his feet to help cushion the landing, but here he is face to face with Piper.

Piper realizes she can't get the Barrett around for an aimed shot so, as it starts to lunge at her she pulls the weapon back along the side of her body for a sloppy retention shot and fires.

The concussion slams her onto the ground just as the Raufoss bullet hits the prominent *latissimus dorsi* muscular structure under his left wing and explodes in a half-meter wide fireball.

The almost silent high-pitched shriek that Blue Boy emits, mostly out of anger, rattles Victoria's face as she watches him engulf Piper's head in his mouth. With his teeth slamming into her ribcage below the collarbone, and in her back across her shoulder blades, he starts to lift her up with the intention of shaking her apart.

Victoria has already pulled her BR1 up to fire on Blue Boy's center of mass but, realizing the concussion would kill Piper, she pulls down on his lower torso. On the first snap of his head against Piper's body, his body twists around, so Victoria's shot misses his core pelvic region—but the beast's back left wing explodes into spiraling tatters.

With that, Blue Boy stops shaking Piper to see where that shot came from, but this gives Piper the opportunity she needed.

While in his mouth, Piper pulls the Ruger revolver, shoves it up to contact, and starts yanking on the trigger. The first bullet blows through his neck, the next one punches him under the jaw and rips out his eye socket, but the third shot blows up through the top of Bobby's skull where his body goes slack and drops like a sack of bricks.

Victoria is already up on her feet, having pulled the Ghillie suit away with her free hand, just as the two males land a few short meters away with the intent of shredding Piper. With Piper continuing to fire the last three shots from the Ruger, Victoria pulls down on the first one and lets it rip into his midsection. The explosive bolt blows his legs out from under him, and as they go flying away the upper half of his body drops straight to the ground.

The second male turns towards her just as she places the shot in the middle of his chest—which leaves only empty space behind as his detached head and two short arms swirl lazily through the air.

The first beast she shot is left screeching and clawing at the air for her, so Victoria snorts, "Get pegged, tosser!"

The bolt she fires here completely vaporizes his head.

Victoria can hear her two RaSP agents call for the dropship to launch as they high tail it for the bend but, just twelve meters in front of her the small female, the Pale One, lands with outstretched wings and threatens her by bearing her teeth and claws.

Victoria shouts, "Get outta here!"

The beast takes a menacing step so Victoria fires the weapon into the ground in front of her—where the blast from the explosive bolt knocks the Jabberwocky backwards three whole meters.

As the beast rights itself, regaining her foothold, Victoria takes two steps forward and pulls down on her with the BR1, while gesturing with her head and shouting, "Go on, git!"

While shrieking, the Pale One drops her head in submission.

Victoria links up to the RaSP agents on the N2 and orders, "Don't shoot this one! I'm letting her go. We're going to let 'er live."

The beast glances back at her dead father, Blue Boy, then starts to slink away backwards, and when she puts fifteen more meters between them, Victoria shouts, "Now, shove off ya slag!"

The Pale One turns and launches into the sky just as the RaSP leader reaches Victoria after a dead run. Satisfied that she is flying away, Victoria says to the huffing agent, "Cover me."

Victoria turns for Piper and kneels down beside the mess that was made of her new friend. Piper is still pulling on the trigger of the revolver, with the hammer dropping on empty cartridges in the cylinder, so Victoria puts her hand on Piper's to calm her.

Piper looks up, "Oi, Vic! Did we get the beastie?"

With Victoria lifting her head, "Yes, you did. You got Bobby."

"I 'eard more shots and splodies, did you bag any?"

"Two, but I let the little Jabber get away."

"That's right sporting of you! She was a might pretty one at that, with her blue and green scales." Piper's eyes look around, taking stock and then realizing, "I take it we're to perform a death scene now, oh how bloody dreadful." She then sniffs the air and dares to ask if, "Did I soil myself, madam?"

Victoria smiles grimly, "No, Blue gutted ya."

"Good to know, saved me some embarrassment." She then smiles, "It appears to be a race between bleeding out and me lungs collapsing. Care to make a wager?"

Victoria's voice breaks, "I'm sorry, Piper."

"Good heavens, whatever for?"

"I should have known they had vertical in their bag of tricks."

"Oh tosh, dear, we both should have. Live an' learn they say. Well, you at least." Piper then grasps at Victoria, trying to hold on, "Thank you for being a friend, love."

With tears welling up, Victoria says, "One of me best."

Breathing hard and shallow, Piper adds, "Tell Easy to run."

"I'll let her know."

"She should run. Let all the girls know...I adore them, and tell Boxy he's been a godsend. He must finish what we started."

"I'll see to it."

"Me life with Boxter has been tits, but putting Blue Boy down is more like...giggling tits." Victoria smiles at Piper's wit, but with Piper fading fast she adds, "My love will understand."

Victoria leans in and gives her a kiss on the cheek, then says, "I'm here with you, Piper." A few seconds later, with the Dragonfly coming in silently to land on the riverbank close to them, Victoria asks, "The dropship is touching down, think you can hold on?"

"No...but I didn't think checking out would take...this...long."

And that's it.

Her pupils blow and quickly glaze over, and while Victoria quietly sobs over her, Piper's body goes into full shut down with the obvious signs being the cessation of agonal breathing and her muscles going completely slack inside a short minute.

After another minute, Victoria manages to collect herself and gently lays her head down. She gives Piper another kiss then stands with her own hands and legs drenched in Piper's blood.

With the dropship crew and EMT standing by to collect the body, Victoria turns and says to her RaSP team, "Corporal, this lady is to receive full honors. Please relay my wishes to Colonel Bean."

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Just fifty meters away, near the rocks Victoria was sitting in front of, are the two ghost droids piloted by Maggie and Paleo. With the light from Zmeu starting to fill the lowest parts of the valley floor they switch from *shadow á la mode* to active cloaking.

Maggie continues to track the Jabberwocky female and search for targets as Paleo says, ["The marshal is pathing the file now."]

Up close, one can see Maggie perceptively nod in the suit then shake her head as she says, ["What a cluster-fuck."]

After watching them scrape Piper up, and then carry her into the ship, followed by Victoria and the RaSP team, they notice another ship coming in to take the remains of the dead animals, and it's here Maria gets on channel, ["Where's Vic now?"]

Maggie goes, ["She's on the ship and they're leaving."]

Maria says, ["Good. Did the SEG guys take a shot?"]

Paleo grumbles, ["Yes, but they didn't connect. Their shots grazed the animal as he went for Missis Hartcourt."]

Maggie adds, ["No human alive could have gotten a snap shot like that off in the time they had."]

["We're crazy overclocked! We could have taken him—"]

Maria cuts him off, ["It pains me to say this but thank you for staying on task. Still tracking the female?"]

Maggie says, ["She's thirty clicks north, at twelve hundred an' coasting at about eighty knots. Give or take?"]

Paleo asks, ["Follow and dust her?"]

["Yup! Go follow her and find her tribe or coven, or whatever the fuck they are, and dust three of 'em. Make sure you dust her, then a male and an elder! ...Or, a shaman if they have one?"]

Paleo laughs, ["The fuck, a shaman?"]

Maggie starts chuckling and, ["Okay boss, can do *if* we can have a little of what you're smoking."]

Maria snarls at them, ["Just do it! I am in no position to say what's going on...no, on second thought, I'll fill ya in when I get back tomorrow. I'm gonna need you two as part of this little enterprise going forward! Okay?"]

Maggie and Paleo both go, ["Okay!"]

["And since I got my CXi hat on I got a lil' side-job for ya..."]

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LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 04:10zulu (local 17:05mst)

It's late afternoon here on the Church Key, and at the flight line outside the Spike there is a mixed cargo and passenger build of the HWG99, an *a4* configuration, that is not close to being ready to launch. On the deck at the top of the ramp, outside the cockpit, are twelve pallets of cargo destined for the City of London facility that need to stowed, that being secured in the hold, before they can take off.

This is a load-master's job but the crew is not here yet.

There are forty-eight seats at the back of the hold, towards the front of the ship, and passengers are already starting to load up. Forty-five passengers are on the manifest to be dropped off in London with the cargo, but another passenger was added an hour ago and now the ship must detour to Los Angeles to drop them off first.

At the top of the ramp, among the pallets, Maria is on the tacnet and talking to Paleo and Maggie who are on Prypiat, "You two still have that PacMan tagging along with ya, right?"

Maggie says, ["Yea, an' we each got three of those micro recon droids they gave us with the nanoids."]

"Good, okay, Blue Boy was their leader and the female is his daughter, so we suspect that there may be a power play between them when she gets back up north."

Paleo laughs, saying, ["I don't know if you've been keeping up on what's going on here but, last time I looked, these Jabberwocky's happen to be animals?"]

Maria throws out, "I know, I know, intelligence is not always an indicator of sentience, but we have reason to believe that there is a lot more going on here than what we've been told. Why Prypiat covers up the existence of these animals, well, you're gonna find out why!"

["So, we're sluthing, hu?"]

Maria has been going from pallet to pallet to check on their marked weight while laughing, "You got it, scooter!"

Maggie asks, ["Animals, plural? There's more?"]

"Yup! After you dust the Jabbers and put that to bed, come back down and look for two critters. One is an ugly fucker called a bunyip, an' then an even uglier fucker they call the bander."

["As in Bandersnatch, seriously?"]

Paleo says, ["Yea, they got a Lewis Carroll fixation here."]

"No shit!" Maria takes a pallet jack and starts to move pallets around and up against the wall for strap-down, "Piper's granddaughter showed Jessie a pic of a bander she drew so, okay, think of a prehistoric smilodon the size of moose. An' here's the fun part, they've got two eyestalks like sunflowers and a huge mouthful of those smilodon fangs that pivot independently. The incising teeth are on the actual jaw, separate from the fangs, so there is a lot of incentive to keep some distance, but they usually steer clear of people!"

["Why would that be?"]

"Most everyone on the Vista is packin' heat."

Maggie says, ["Mutual incentives, so where do we find 'em?"]

"At night, on the Vista! Let's say wherever the jabbers are *not* you should be able to find the banders. I bet they'll return to that valley by the time you get back." Maria has dropped a pallet up tight against the wall and pulls the jack out to go for another while saying, "Just settle the Jabber situation first. Then the banders."

Maggie then asks, ["The bunyip, isn't that, that hairy croc with a bundle of tentacles sprouting out of its face?"]

Maria slams the pallet jack into another one and, "Yea, look for those if you got the time. They've got spider eyes, eight of 'em, and rows of freakin' mako shark teeth. The eight tentacles around its mouth are a meter long so don't be kissin' the bitch."

Paleo laughs, ["Purdy lil' thangs, hu!"]

"The indigenous animals on that planet are seriously fucked up, so I guess that's why they're popular to shoot. I've heard there's a huge underground market for doin' that."

Paleo points out, ["Hunting and defense shooting are legal."]

Maria adds, "Yea, you're right, but trophy hunting is *verboden*. Wildlife Management in New Brisbane has dropped all tags and fees and declared open season on the herbivores because their numbers

are exploding—and I bet’chya that correlates with a lot with dickheads out there shooting the predators just to get their jollies.”

[“Okay, cool, I see where you’re goin’ with this.”]

“I want a couple of each found and dusted. Also, if you see any groups of people out there that are engaged in, oh, I dunno, hunting maybe? I want you to confirm what they’re bagging.”

Maggie says, [“We’re on it, boss!”]

Maria slams a pallet against the wall of the hold and stops to say, “Keep me apprised if anything really stupid happens out there, otherwise I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Paleo throws out, [“One last thing, Missis Hartcourt had droid cameras deployed all around the bend here. I pulled up her channel and she was livestreaming every one of the cameras in real time.”]

Maria stops and takes a huge-deep breath in an attempt to contain her rage, “You’re not kidding are you.”

[“No ma’am, one kush-edit is spreading like wildfire.”]

Maria takes another deep breath and asks, “Do you feel it?”

Maggie laughs, [“Yea, buddy! Right now, inside, I bet you’re hopping up and down, kicking the shit outta everything and screaming motherfucker at the top of your lungs...that about right, boss?”]

“Yea, Maggie, you know me too well.” Maria hoists the next pallet up and pulls it around, “Let’s chat tomorrow, guys. I’ll send you both a text when I’m free.”

Paleo adds, [“Hey, the upside is, so far, the response by the public is overwhelmingly positive. In that sad-emoji sort of way.”]

Maria almost laughs at that, “How ‘bout you fuck off, hu?”

Laughing, Paleo says, [“Can do, as ordered!”]

With them offline, Maria shoves this pallet and two more against the wall of the hold, and as she pulls the jack around for another she squats behind the pallets, out of sight of the passengers walking by, while the tears flow for Piper. Struggling to regain her composure Maria wipes them away and hops up to finish this. Clearing her mind, Maria focuses on the job and inside ten minutes she has them weight balanced between both sides, and as she starts to strap them down, Deputy Marshal, Jesus Zazueta enters the hold, recognizes Maria, so he stops to ask her, “Hey, marshal, need some help?”

“Naw, I got this.” Maria then stands and, now realizing its Zazueta, she laughs, “Zaz! Jesus, babe, how the hell are ya?”

“Mook is comin’ around so I can’t complain!”

"That's really good to hear." She then gestures towards the passenger seats and asks, "London?"

"*Mi nanna* is a brit."

"No shit! *Mi homie* 'as got a limey in the woodpile!"

"Yea!" Zazueta laughs, "You should see the culture shock on her face when she comes to LA! The Heights ain't her style."

Maria nods with a laugh then says, "God, what I wouldn't give for King Taco about now."

Zazueta shrugs and adds, "Yea, or how 'bout Tommy's?"

Maria pokes him in the chest while snarling, "You know, you're the second person I've told to fuck off in five minutes!" With Zazueta laughing, Maria looks around saying, "Who else we got?"

He points to the back and asks, "Save ya a seat?"

Maria nods, yes, and as he turns and heads in she calls out to him, "Would you mind grabbing me the number-three breakfast burro from the automat and a joe?" He nods, yes, so she adds, "Black!"

Zazueta gives her a thumbs up, so she gets back to putting the anchor straps on the pallets. With the straps on she starts popping the tensioners on each one to tighten around the pallets—and it's here when the crew finally shows up.

With the pilot and crew chief stepping up the ramp, the pilot is bitching way to loudly, "I don't know, chief, some stupid fuck decided to reroute our trash run to London for LA, and all to drop some dumb ass off at the Klick! Now I'm gonna lose my pink line and..." Stepping onto the top of the ramp they see Maria finishing with the anchor straps, so he throws his hands out, "What the fuck is this?"

The chief asks Maria, "Why you dickin' with my load?"

Maria has just set off the last auto-tensioner, so she stands and turns towards them, "Just helpin' out guys!"

With the chief off to check on the pallets, the pilot motions to her, "Whaddya doin', hu? You don't have the stack sheet, so we may end up having to redo the whole god-damned strap-down!"

Maris shrugs, "Didn't mean to make a mess of things."

The pilot then calls out, "How'd princess load master do?"

The crew chief shouts back, "Actually, Zam, it ain't half bad!"

"I used to do this job a really long time ago..." Maria says as she pulls her clip on insignia board, with a die-cut silver star on it, out of her back pocket and adds, "In fact, a long-long time ago."

The pilot's jaw drops when she clips it on, "Oh shit! You're—"

"Two in one! I'm the stupid fuck that rerouted your trash run, *as well* as the dumb ass you're dropping off at the Klick."

As the crew chief steps up, the pilot throws his hands out, "Ma'am, I'm sooo sorry! I didn't mean to—"

"Drop it!" Maria turns to ask the chief, "Is it okay?"

Nodding, *yes*, he goes, "Yea, we can run with it."

Maria throws her hands up, "Then let's run!"

As they turn towards the cockpit, the pilot whips back around to apologize more, "Ma'am, again I am sorry!"

Maria starts laughing, "Fuck off already, okay! Let's get this on the hump, Zam!" And with them hopping into the cockpit, Maria goes, "Oh, and Zamboni! We got'chya a new window over London! NATS will hand ya the pink line in about ninety-six minutes, so let's see if you're as good as they say you are."

Maria slips past the bulkhead and into the passenger cabin where she finds Zazueta in the back, and plops down in the empty seat next to him. He hands her the burrito and coffee, and as they both unwrap their food and take a bite, Maria says, "That's three in ten."

Maria nonchalantly offers Zazueta the bird after he snorts a laugh, saying, "Only three? Damn, you're losin' your edge."

01000111-01000001-01000010-01010011

It is now 5:30zulu Tuesday the 18th, but here in Los Angeles it is still 21:30pst Monday the 17th of February. Or, in the alternative, one could say it's 9:30pm if they happen to be one of those people who still reference the old Ante/Post Meridiem timekeeping devices like most non-space faring civilians continue to do.

Anyway, Maria was impressed that Staff-Sergeant, Zamboni lands the ship with the gear in the squat position, and doesn't allow the gear to compress—leaving a ten centimeter gap between the bottom edge of the ladder and the deck. Point is, when Maria steps off the ladder, at the top of the Klick, the ship starts to rise slowly up into the sky when her own mass was removed from the equation.

One could say it was a remarkable feat of *almost* landing.

Jessica was waiting for her, and as she steps up beside Maria, both watching the ship climb steeply towards the north by northeast for space, Jessica quietly throws out, "Sorry 'bout Piper."

Maria huffs, "I'm not ready to talk about that."

Jessica nods, then asks about Zamboni, "Can we share 'im?"

Maria looks up at her, "I'm gettin' the fastback, right?"

"Yup!" Jessica nods her head towards the ramp beside them, and as they start down, "Sandoval will have the babyback delivered here this Friday, so take the fastback now if you want."

"Sure, don't need to be told twice!" Maria thinks, then adds, "Okay, we can share Zamboni until you find a WISO you can work with. I need a pilot, you need a sidekick. Ya oughta make sure it's someone you wouldn't wanna fuck, so I'd pick a chick."

"You do know I dabble in those."

"But you wouldn't marry one."

Jessica nods, "Point made!"

At the bottom of the ramp they enter the top floor of the Klick, which would usually be a utility floor in most buildings, but when they cross through the elevator bank they step into what everyone calls the staging room—which is actually a glorified game room, bar and lounge. Here is where people from the Annex wait to board ships heading out of Los Angeles, or hang out when they got nothing else better to do, but tonight it's reserved for Maria and friends.

Stepping up to the bar, beside six pool tables and rows of console games beyond those, Maria and Jessica run into the three protest leaders from last November, with Maria shaking each of their hands while saying, "Professors, Wyandotte, Dowds, and Stockmyer! I do wanna thank you three for coming. Now, we have three more joining us that are flying in from DC, they'll be here shortly, but to get new intros out of the way this is my stepdaughter, Jessica Burke."

Jessica, reaching out to shake hands, "Yea, I work for her."

Dowds says *hi* and Wyandotte says *hello* to Jessica, but when Stockmyer takes her hand, "Pleased to meet ya, Scarab!"

Maria smiles at Stockmyer, "My, we've done our homework!" She then slaps her hands together and goes, "So! How 'bout we rack 'em up and down a few pitchers while we wait?" She then points to the floor then at the robot behind the bar, "Now, from here on out we're on a first name basis, cool beans? We got chow comin' in an hour, an' if ya'll want somethin' other than brewskies, our bar-bot here will bring you anything you ask for!"

With Jessica hopping up on a barstool to watch, they split into two teams with Maria and Wyandotte against Dowds and Stockmyer, and after a few minutes of pouring beer and polite small talk, Wyandotte makes the break—and says, "Maria, we've talked amongst

ourselves and, considering what happened last New Year's, we realize that we're not here for you to listen to what we gotta say."

"Sure about that Lloyd?"

Stockmyer adds, "We were all going to bow out but, then, curiosity got the better of us so...spit it out!"

With Dowds stepping up to make a shot, Maria nods, "That's what I like, I like smart people. I like people who can cut through the bull and get right to the point, and that's you'z guys!"

While looking for a shot, Dowds asks, "Anyway to end it?"

Maria looks at him and quietly says, "No, Bill, there isn't."

Wyandotte points out, "We know you didn't start it."

Maria's eyebrows rise, "I dunno 'bout that?"

"They blasted your ships, right?"

Maria turns to Stockmyer, "Whaddya think, John? You boned up for today, being a historian an all...wat'chya got on me?"

Stockmyer puzzles over Maria and realizes there is no beating around the bush, "Considering what went down on the third of January, well...anything anyone thought they knew before the third is now down the shitter. I can only offer speculation at this point."

"Then spit it out, dude! I wanna hear what you're thinkin'!"

Stockmyer's shrugs, "Boning up on your history, I now realize this war was unavoidable." Maria motions for him to keep going, so he throws out, "It's obvious to me now that you set it up, you baited them to attack when you wanted them too, all to control the outcome."

Maria nods yes, then asks, "Aaaand?"

"Aaand..." Stockmyer points at her, "What's got me confused is why you haven't destroyed their means of production yet?"

"Okay, if I simply bomb their shit then, yea, I could bring the hammer down on them, easy! They'd sue for peace but then we'd be back where we are now, twenty or thirty years down the road, and *that* I don't want. Oh, an' all ya'll wouldn't want that either!"

Dowds asks, "I don't get it, why can't you work things out?"

Wyandotte says to him, "Why ask why, Bill?"

Maria points out, "Well, Lloyd, it's not obvious to everyone. I think John, here, can attest to the fact that the vast majority of modern war is supported, engineered even, by financial interests who lurk in the shadows providing for their side's budgetary excesses."

"You're going after *those* guys!" Stockmyer realizes, then says with amusement, "I didn't think I'd ever see it! This is not just a war of attrition you're waging here, but a war of derivatives."

Maria smiles big, "Ding-ding-ding! All right, John!"

Dowds almost takes his shot, "What are you talking about?"

Stockmyer goes, "Each Co-op operation is budgeted for under contract by its own hedge fund. The problem each fund faces is that variance and loss is covered out of pocket if it exceeds budget."

Maria glances at the other professors while thumbing towards Stockmyer, "Professor smarty-pants here hit the nail on the head!" She nods towards the professor with a smile of approval and a voice of praise, "You got it, John, the big picture plan is to red ink their asses into oblivion and *then* bomb their MOP into the stone age."

Wyandotte points out, "You blew the hell out of Polaris."

Stockmyer nods, "An' that's the red ink, Lloyd."

"I heard that was set aside for Orion."

Maria sighs big, "Yep, we stopped 'em from invading Orion, an' that was the real prize in their minds, but this whole time we've managed to stick it to 'em by giving them the Pleiades—just to fuck their budgets up with whoppingly huge variances. The debt will be so overwhelming it will take next to forever to pay it off. And, because of how they finance each mission, or acquisition as they call it, they can't extricate from current gains nor can they defend it all."

Stockmyer rolls his eyes, "Wow."

Maria nods, "Wow is right, dude."

His face scrunches up a bit, "Then, why are we here?"

She leans in, "Ever hear of the CXi?"

They all look at each other, so Wyandotte asks, "That's you?"

Maria grins, "Yea, it's my baby!"

Dowds, having just made a clean shot, claiming stripes, asks, "Why would you be doing this? I mean...you're the SA!"

"I know this will make your head spin, Bill, but peace *is* our profession! Only idiots think you can maintain peace by forging swords into ploughshares. The purpose of the CXi is twofold. The primary focus is exploration for science, and under the banner of academia. Science will determine how we go about that and governments will stay the fuck out of it."

Wyandotte goes, "Seriously, science for the sake of science?"

"Crazy idea, hu?" Maria shrugs, then adds, "The second part is to control human expansion an' that's because, you have to admit, we kinda fucked up our little three-hundred parsec radi bubble of space! Going forward, the Thousand Light Year Limitation Treaty will continue to be enforced and going outside of it will be supervised."

Stockmyer reaffirms, "So, we *are* limiting free rein human expansion to only the one-k limit. Not beyond it, right?"

"Anyone going outside the three-oh-six partition will need to justify being there, and anyone blasting past the three-thirty parsec partition will be run down like dogs." With the professors nodding with approval, Maria adds, "So, I now have three space stations and three Executive Director positions I wanna fill with you three guys."

Dowds says, "We're not in the natural sciences! Why us?"

"Ya really wanna know? I have all these sciences, biology, astronomy, geology, plant-ology, whatever, and none of 'em see eye to eye! I need people on top that don't have their dick in the mix." She then points to Dowds, Wyandotte and Stockmyer, "Here we got Philosophy, Political Science and History. You are all nightmarishly smart, published and, to top it off, all of you are honest and morally upright, financially solvent *and* ya got no weird kinks to speak of."

Wyandotte asks, "Still doesn't explain why?"

"Honestly?" With the three nodding, *yes*, Maria throws out, "You've got big personalities, and brainiacs from *all* the fields respect you, and you can motivate the shit outta people! For three years, you've motivated thousands of couch potatoes to crawl out from their parents basements to protest my ass! Who's can top that?"

With Cricket, Paris and Caesar now stepping through the door into the lounge, Maria gestures to herself then points towards them, "But, if I can't convince you, maybe these guys can?"

01010111-0101001-01001100-01010100-01001011-01001101-0011111

With a tacnet com-alert on standby, Maria steps out into the elevator lobby with a cabeza King Taco in hand. Behind the glass the professors are having a blast laughing it up with the Xhemal, Jessica and Cricket, so Maria launches the com link as she delights in taking a bite from the three-hour old, cold taco.

Paleo comes online, ["Sorry about bothering you, boss. We talked about it, and Maggie and I thought you'd wanna hear this."]

Chomping away on the taco, Maria shrugs big, "I figure you wouldn't be bothering me if it wasn't good enough, so wazzup?"

[“We followed the female up to a small encampment about four-hours north of the valley. We’re compiling the video for you, and you’ll have it for show-n-tell in ten minutes, but the short story is that when she lands several come out to meet her. In that high-pitched squawk they do she goes blah-blah-blah, and they go blah-blah, and then she says something that makes them react as if she just told ‘em Blue Boy was killed or somethin’. Best as I could surmise!”]

“Did you get good audio for us? We’ll need that.”

[“Well, yea, but what happens next is that this real big guy, almost the size of Blue Boy, he comes out from these trees and gets in her face. He goes blah-blah, and she goes blah-blah, and he pushes on her. So she gets right back in his face—and while looking up at him her hind leg whips around and fucking guts him on the spot!”]

Maria does a double take, “What? You gotta be kidding!”

[“No! His shit, intestines and everything, spills all over the ground and, in disbelief, when he looks down at it, she rips his head off in a single snap of her jaws! I mean, Mag and I started laughing our asses off! You know, like, what else were we going to do?”]

“Like, call me?”

[“And, here we are! The others just simply bow their heads to her, so if there was a power play here then I guess that was it!”] Maria shakes her head as Paleo continues, [“Maggie is dusting the last one now, and the PacMan will follow them with an extra micro droid. It looks like they’re pullin’ stumps for wherever north they’re goin’.”]

“Okay, thanks for keepin’ me apprised! Let’s chat tomorrow.” With Paleo disconnected, Maria just shakes her head and then starts laughing to herself, saying, “Wow, *that* is fucked up!”

Maria slips back into the party but keeps to herself until the video drops in her tacnet inbox. Thinking to herself, *why the hell not*, she gets everyone’s attention, tells them all the Cliffs Notes version of the story, and then plays the video.

This alone cinches the deal Maria was making.

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94

here comes the tickle monster

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-20-THURSDAY
TIME: 13:35zulu (local 13:35act)

In the Salt Mine, the C3 complex carved out from solid rock, deep below the Nine Iron Smash here in Tareyton Greens, Cyzk has just watched the video feed from Eli Plunket as the CDF Major who was interrogating him, that is beating the crap out of him, puts a small 6mm breezeblock pistol up to his forehead and squeezes the trigger.

Eli's lights go out but the chip-audio stream continues with the Major's assistant saying, ["You shouldn't have done that, sir."]

["And why the bloody balls not, staff-sergeant?"]

["The locals will not take kindly to it."]

In the CIC, General Giáp kills the feed, while saying to Cyzk, "An' they didn't take kindly to it. See, Moidah, the Co-op's offer to the Five-Houses was making everyone not yet in this fight straddle the fence. The proposed profit sharing was brilliant, but this stream seems to have settled all the arguments."

Cyzk nods, "It looks like it lit a fire under them, but why Eli?"

Giáp shrugs, saying, "Everyone out there grew up with Eli! He was referee for every championship fight on Taiji for the last thirty years but, as a day job, he was archdeacon for the Anglican dioceses of Tareyton Keep."

As Vossler, in a JACC, and the ghost droid piloted by Maggie, step up to them, both covered in debris and smoldering ash, Vossler pulls his canopy off and says, "I 'eard everyone loved the old goat!"

Cyzk does a knuckle tap with Vossler, and, "Havin' fun, Voss?"

"A right ripper of a grand time!" Vossler thumbs towards a screen showing the live-feed outside the main clubhouse, right above

them, and asks, "Okay, Zipper, why ya be pulling me and Mags here? The fight topside was just starting to get good!"

Giáp shrugs, "You're out of the tussle, mate."

Vossler grumbles, "God-damned poofter, ya are!"

"If there's a need for recon after this you'll get your people back but, since they've all gone rogue sniper, Colonel Rand will take them off your hands and put 'em where she needs 'em!"

Sally Rand gives Vossler a little wave as she starts to walk away, "Thanks, Kung Fu! I needed the swinging dodgers, I did."

With Rand out of earshot, Cyzk and Maggie both snicker when Vossler mumbles, "Feel free to add my dick to that mix!"

Giáp smiles at that and says to Vossler, "How 'bout you go freshen up and come join me? I be puttin' on an early kettle!"

Vossler asks, "They gonna continue to get resupply drops?"

"Nope, ol' boy! No hope of that now."

Before he steps away, Vossler pats Cyzk on the shoulder and, "Then they've got three...maybe five hours fight left in 'im. Cheers!"

Giáp asks Maggie, "Lose any of your droids this morning?"

Maggie goes, "Not a one!"

"Good, you're attached to Cyzk. Protect 'im with your lives." Giáp then laughs at himself, "You know what I mean, hon!"

Maggie's holographic face grins, "Not a problem, sir."

He turns to Cyzk and points towards a huge planetary-wide tactical screen behind them, "Thanks to Eli, our thirty-eight reserve divisions hit Homer this morning and have pushed their troops out of all the C-BOOs in each of the five capital cities. We've captured all their supply depots and airfields, along with over eighty drop ships and a dozen or so fighters. Unfortunately, we had to blast all their armor. I would rather have captured that kit. As of now, the two-hundred fighters they have airborne have no place to land and rearm now that Graves' CAP and FCAP got 'em tied up. We've also got thousands of civis who are working the backcountry, sniping away, but they are acting civilized and focusing on creating cripples out of Homer. It's the fight above us that's getting murderously lollapalooza crazy..."

Giáp now points to the next display showing the central Anzac region. All of Tareyton Meadows, that spans from the equator into the Civil Twilight region, and south to the capital city of Tareyton Keep. The CDF forces are nine divisions spread out along a horseshoe arch that's 18 kilometers wide. The front itself, that is the entire length of

the arch, spreads them thin at over 40 kilometers. The formation has been moving north from the Keep, but the northwest shoulder is now stuck in a pitched battle over the golfing complex right above them, known as Tareyton Greens.

With the industrial salt mining tunnels also displayed, a spider web of tunnels between the Greens and the Keep, five exit points are marked with the general pointing to the northern most one, just southeast to the Greens, "Now, originally I didn't think we would be able to use this exit, but here we are! We need you to pop this cork in thirty minutes, when the entirety of the Sixtieth Armored has past."

"Think it'll be clear then?"

"We'll give you the go code when the coast is. Now, send your regiments in all directions and start chewing up their rearguard, but the focus is to the northwest and northeast. To the northwest your goal is to hit 'em in their arse in the direction of the main clubhouse." Giáp points up, saying, "That being, the one above us!"

Cyzk nods, "Shouldn't be that much of a problem to find."

"Then to the northeast we need you to split the line between their Sixtieth Armored Division and the Twentieth Of Foot."

"Let me guess, there's a buffer seat between them?"

"Exactly! The line is thin and they've got a half a klick wide gap between their flanking guards, an' it's only gonna get worse with them hanging up on the Greens! The Annex division that dropped this mornin' is moving towards that spot, and they'll hit it inside the hour. About that time you should be buggering 'em nice an' proper!"

Cyzk ponders this while the muffled explosions from above continue to echo through the solid rock walls of the C3 facility. After a big one goes off, making them look up, Cyzk shrugs and, "Not exactly what we originally had in mind but...yea, we got this."

Giáp adds, "Just so you know, Gudici and Nelson are coming in from the southwest and southeast. This horseshoe will close up and there will be no egress in that direction by the time you jump off. You will be walking into an encirclement in an encirclement." He turns to Cyzk to emphasize, "You know your exec, Fred Sargent, is leading the division from the northeast. Ya have to make that handshake because that'll be your only egress if this all goes arse up."

"You're saying, right now is my only chance to back out."

The general quietly confirms, "Aye. Now, for plan-b, we could have you bust out from the central exit and attack between Gudici and Nelson, but we're hearin' that court action in New Sydney may be putting the breaks to this a bit earlier than expected."

Cyzk nods his head, "We'll stick with plan-a, surprise the shit outta them." He looks at Maggie and asks, "We got this, Maggie?"

The ghost droid shrugs, with Maggie, saying, "We got this."

Cyzk and Giáp silently shake hands, and as he and Maggie start to walk out, Cyzk stops and looks back at Giáp, "If the cease fire doesn't come, the way it looks, they're not gonna last the day."

Giáp goes, "Could be, mate, but I think we're racing the clock on this one. We've precious little time to add to their hurt."

01000100-0100110-01000111-01010010-00100000-01011010-01001110

Above the tenth fairway, near the Nine Iron Smash, the carcass of a dead IR5 corkscrews overhead and splits into tumbling thirds only one-hundred meters above Peña's head. The debris from its wingman also flies past him—horizontally at eye level, with a huge chunk of its lifting body barely missing his ship as the thing cartwheels across the tenth green and then sticking it on the eighth tee.

As close calls go, for today, that's just par for the course.

Both IR5s were shot down by Kati Connors five-kilometers ago, and that happened only three hundred meters in altitude, but at the speed they were going it took that much distance for both of the dead Kali to finally drop from the sky.

Kati and her wingman, in the new bisE-a mods of the ASF47, replacing the Cerberus-Dips, streak past at only fifty meters in altitude. Flying underneath the spiraling junk they made of the first IR5, the last of the windows in the main clubhouse are blown out because the shock waves that are following them at Mach-6 kind of does that.

Anyone on the ground not in a JACC or an ACE fighting suit, sixty-three from the CDF to be exact, end up as combat ineffective by way of acoustical trauma. Specifically, bleeding ears and deafness, with only two of them dead from overpressure alone.

As the last possible supply drop for the CDFs 31st Armored Division, that's hung up at the clubhouse, it's not going well for them. The two IR5 did scatter all of the Annex's CAP leading up to the golfing complex, but here is Peña and two of his fellow CAS ground pounders now staring down the supply drop racing towards them from six clicks.

Jacob Graves and his flight of four ASF74s, flying the outer CAP, are chasing the two CDF drop ships and their four F51 fighter escorts, and they did launch centipedes after them, but the ships will make the drop way before those missiles can possibly connect, so Peña and his CAS pilots each snap-fire two centipedes at them.

Inside the four seconds it takes those missiles to reach the incoming ships, the F51 Djinn fighters scatter but the two drop ships are now dead meat. While climbing they manage to shoot all six of the SA centipedes out of the sky, yes, but of the three-dozen micropedes the missiles fling forward towards them—half connect and obliterate both ships and scatters their cargo across ten square kilometers.

One could say this drop was successful, but a “pallet burst” via micropede warheads makes it problematic to collect and distribute.

With Jacob and his fighters chasing after the four Djinn, Peña receives an alert on the command channel:

```
ALERT*ALERT*ALERT
23190220:13:36:56ZULU FOLLOWS AS:
CKXMSN: M2, RAMIREZ, MARIA
ORDERS: ALL-MONOCROME*MONOCROME*MONOCROME.
ORDERS: TAIJI OP-DESTROY CDF CLOAKED ASSETS
M2NOTE: NO MORE DELAYS. TEAR IT UP...
END OF MESSAGE
```

“About damned time!” Peña gruffs as he banks his Cerberus to the north while switching to the CAP frequency, “Buzzard Chow, we just got the orders for monochrome. Can you confirm, monochrome?”

Jacob comes on the channel, [“Monochrome is a go, Dog. Sorry, we’ve been puttin’ that off. Once you start in it won’t take them long to figure out what’s goin’ on.”]

“I’ll work fast, out.” Peña switches over to the SEAD coms and asks, “Gumball, you busy?”

[“I’m here, Dog. I see we finally got fuckin’ monochrome.”]

“Yep, long time comin’! Look, dude, I’ve got a Triple-A Mech hiding in the trees at the eighth tee. You want ‘im?”

[“Our hands are full, Dog, so if you got a bead on the thing then go ahead and take the shot.”]

“I gotta ask, can your people hold off on monochrome for a couple of minutes? I got the bulk of the Thirty-First Armored sitting cloaked on the eighth, seventh and sixth fairways.”

[“Yea, I can hold. Go put the fuck to ‘em!”]

Peña switches over to his CAS freq and, “Guys, you heard right, we got monochrome. Bam-Bam you take the sixth fairway. Grawlix, you take the seventh. I got the eighth. Let’s distract them with a couple of clusters then hit ‘em with the twenty-threes. We only get one free pass here, so we gotta make this run count.”

Bam-Bam responds with, ["It'll be nice not to play fucken' footsies with their shit cloaked anymore."]

Grawlix says, ["Yea, but our jobs just got a lot harder."]

Peña swings his ship wide and back around to the west with them following him in, "True that, but this'll be our one freebie!"

Now rolling in from the west, the three stagger out and launch their 20/20 missiles five kilometers out. Coming in behind the actual line, both their nose and dorsal guns knock out mini-missiles fired at them from the CDF troops below, as well as shooting at those who launched them. The 20/20 missiles pepper the fairways all to throw up debris as the three Cerberus fighters streak in.

Peña starts with his 30mm, and from three clicks out the four bombs he fires smashes into and shreds the Triple-A Mech. All three CAS pilots now fire their 23s against targets mapped out for them by a micro recon droid just a scant minute ago. The 90 rocket assisted bombs they launch reach out and then plummet down to destroy 18 Revenant and disable 3 of the Mancubus tanks that were targeted.

Instantly aware of what is going on, the CDF command has their units blast the recon droid from the sky. The next one that races in doesn't fare any better, but in the short 6-seconds it has over the fairways, scanning in grayscale and shifting the focus, the thing transmits the data before it too is blasted to smithereens.

Now forced to burn through their recon-droids, from the little snapshots of data they provide, Peña, Bam-Bam and Grawlix now snipe at the CDF armored units from a distance while still providing close air support for Giáp's Third Mobile Calvary who is stalled in a savage fight over the ninth hole by the clubhouse.

01001101-01010100-01000100-01010100

Jacob has been picking up new and promising pilots from the Iron Maiden as temporary wingmen all to give them the experience they need but, instead of leading them, he's been letting them take the lead to gain confidence. See, technical competence as a combat pilot is not at issue here, but self-confidence in combat is hard to come by. Getting past the butterflies in your stomach during your first few combat missions means the difference between dying or being able to fly future missions without said butterflies.

Today, Jacob's wingman, or gal that is, is PFC2 Yemi Kagame from Nigeria—who's actually a Tutsi originally born in Rwanda but nobody cares. Jacob is of the opinion that, since there is a war on, if he encourages his commanders to let their noob pilots get an early kill

or two then the statistical chances of their survival skyrocket.

This has proven to be true in practice so all Annex fighter commanders now forego the easy kills and defer them to their less experienced pilots with the results being, not more or less enemy kills being made, but fewer of the Annex pilots getting shot down.

Yes, it's the job of the ship's resident "ghost co-pilot" to coach the new pilots, but they kinda have to clam up when a fight on and the flight commanders are calling most of the shots.

Anyway, of the two Djinn that broke right, Jacob tells Yemi to, *go get 'em!* Yemi makes a snappy missile kill of the flight leader to start, but she is now letting their wingman put distance between them so that she can try for another easy missile shot, where Jacob gets on channel and says, ["He's by himself so get in with guns!"]

Yemi kicks it in gear as Jacob tells her, ["He's gonna turn so when he does, just like in the sims it's roll, cut power and skid for the lead, like you've done a thousand times!"]

Just then, as she was closing in at two clicks, the Djinn pulls up, then rolls left and pitches into a turn—at a right angle from his climb. The guy should have waited for her to get closer because Yemi pulls up ever so slightly then chops power while in a sideways skid, 90° along the axis of his turn, and lets loose with her cannon.

Problem is that she fires the 23 by mistake...

That shot should not have landed but she gave it so much extra lead that, even though most of the string fell behind, the first bomb rockets right into the top razor engine and explodes to the tune of 1,000 kilograms thus vaporizing the back half of the fighter.

With the fork of the F51 now tumbling away, that being the cockpit and MDDSH nacelles, Jacob is laughing his ass off on channel as Yemi cries out in stunned disbelief, ["Oh, *chei!*"]

Jacob chuckles, ["Yemi, wrong gun but...that was awesome!"]

01010100-01000010-01001100-01000110

As a matter of doctrine the Steel Annex does everything they can to avoid armor as the spearhead but, since they are squaring off with the CDF here on Taiji, and those guys subscribe and sacrifice to the alter of the armored spearhead, then the tip of the spear it is.

Unfortunately, for them, today they face the Pazuzu.

The Annex has been throwing the last of their Wolverine tanks into the fight and holding off on deploying the Pazuzu, what everyone in the field calls the StuG, but the SA is finally running out of their

older “Woolies” and are currently moving the StuGs up.

Now, when the Annex deploys a whole division they usually drop a mix of regiments and battalions from various platforms with one Deputy Field Marshal, including their exec and HQ-companies, as the designated mission command however, here on Taiji, DFM Cyzk is in command of all. Though Cyzk has eight divisions under him here, all but three have been split into free roaming regiments and battalions managed by General Giáp’s main CIC out of the Salt Mine tucked away under the Nine Iron Smash.

With the CIC’s intimate knowledge of the weather and terrain, Colonel Rand has been utilizing the SA units more like she would Australian Shepherds—hoodwinking and herding the CDF forces around to where Giáp’s units can engage. Only Guidci and Nelson’s regiments have straight up duked it out with the CDF troops over the last seven weeks, four and three times, respectively.

Fred Sargent, Cyzk’s exec from the Iron Maiden, was picked to lead the mixed division to breach the northeast shoulder of the line and make that handshake with Cyzk. They were dropped two hours ago and have been winding their way through the farmlands towards the fight with the lead scouting elements, that being three platoons of their Pazuzu tanks, spread out across four kilometers.

Both the Wolverine and Pazuzu are designed as human rated, but where the Wolverine tanks have a crew of three, the Pazuzu has a crew of only two. That said, the Annex forgoes living troops and now deploy all of their armor units as ghost droids—with the ghosts having gamified the tanks in the same manner they drive the robotic JACCs as well as flying the Cŵn Dawg models of the F308 fighters.

Angel Griego, platoon leader for Scout-Three, has five tanks in his group and, since it’s a scouting platoon, he has four other ghosts on his team. He and his teammates, Mahko Ozo, Sophia Martin, Butter Hewlett and Thomas Chase, each drive their own Pazuzu as well as two ghost droids, curled up and hanging on the back as infantry support, but instead of scouting they’ve been sitting still here for 20 minutes.

Fred Sargent comes on line to ask, [“Griego, this is Sargent. You still got that Mancubus in your sights, right?”]

[“Yea, Chief, he’s sitting there on the hill all majestic and shit. What do you want us to do with him?”]

[“How many others you got zeroed in?”]

[“We’ve got two maus and eight ravens parked in front of us, all cloaked. The recon-droid flagged over fifty more behind them.”]

[“We’re here way early. I got Bat-Five a click behind you.”]

["Shit, Chief, you are early!"] Suddenly, their micro recon droid they were flying over the maus is shot down, so Griego reports, ["Chief, they just skeet our micro from the sky. You still want us to disengage quiet like and hook up with Scout-One and Two, to the east like we planned?"]

["I got a little change of plans for ya. You're facing the point elements to the Sixtieth. Let's go ahead and you fire on the units you have direct eyes on, and *then* you can slither out of there for the rendezvous. Fifth Battalion will try to pull them towards the west to thin the gap with the Twentieth."]

["So, you want us to start this fight for Bat-Five!"]

["I didn't think you'd be opposed to that?"]

["Oh no, Chief! We'd be happy to do it!"]

["Hold one minute then git-r-done! Out."]

Griego asks on squad, ["Everyone got their battle buddy?"]

The others laugh with Hewlett saying, ["You don' got one!"]

["All ya'll are my battle buddies."] Giving them their assigned targets on the net, Griego adds, ["Each of you AP two Revs and book, I'm gonna double tap the Mauses."]

Chase wonders, ["Isn't it Maus plural as well as singular?"]

Sophia asks, ["Or, is it Meeeces?"]

Griego goes, ["I don't speak Kraut? Okay, on my mark."]

Ozo comments, ["And the Maus dies to the StuG!"]

Griego adds, ["It's the circle of life, kids...an' here we go!"]

Within two seconds, Griego fires his main gun and, while launching four micropede missiles, his tank twists slightly to the right and he fires at the second Mancubus tank. On his first shot the other four each follow suit with only their main guns.

All of their arch penetrators look like they are fired high, and as they get to within fifty meters to their targets they arch over and dive for the top of their assigned Revenant tanks. Now, puncturing the armor of the tanks from above is bad enough, with superheated Uranium spraying the inside and killing the crew, but in the tail of the penetrators is the warhead from a 23mm round. The micronuke bomb has one-thousand kilograms of explosive force, and with these things going off inside or below the tank, the now dead machines either burst open or go spiraling through the air.

As for the two Mancubus tanks, Griego aimed for where he thought the turret rings would be, between the turret on top and the

chassis below. The first one punches right through and blows the turret thirty meters into the air. The second Maus was hit in the thick armor below the ring, and this flips the thing on its side.

The micropedes were not exactly necessary but each Maus is hit by two of them. The missiles for the first one were redundant, but for the second Maus, one missile smashes into the gun and the second breeches the underside of the hull thereby killing the crew.

The five Pazuzu tanks of Scout-Three are already high-tailing it out of there in reverse before the 1k-kg grenades, like mortars, start to rain from the sky, and while the others are laughing, Griego has barely cleared the barrage going, ["Nope! Nope-nope-nope!"]

01110000-01110010-01101111-01110000-01110011

Regiments 3608 and 3611 have had a hell of a time on Taiji over the last seven weeks, but in the minds of the Gurkha troops they've had a hell of a great time. After the third of January, where most of the SA units have stuck to the job at hand, spurring the CDF troops around for General Giáp's units to engage, the Gurkha's have managed to maneuver themselves into five impromptu skirmishes.

Gudici and Nelson have had to yank their chains hard over the last four weeks to keep them in line but, for today, they are now off the leash—to a point that is. The Gurkha's have rushed in and closed the wide gap between the ends of the horseshoe thereby forcing the CDF to deploy their one reserve division to help fill that gap.

With that reserve division slamming headlong into the Gurkha troops, who were waiting for them, the sounds of battle starts to build as Anthony Gudici steps up to Zach Nelson and shakes his hand.

With their command and support squads spreading out, taking up guard positions around their commanders and execs, Gudici asks, "Is it everything you thought it was gonna be?"

Nelson asks, "Commanding the Gurks?" With Gudici nodding yes, Nelson asks, "How many are you nominating to polish?"

Gudici eyebrows rise, thinking, "Twelve so far, I think?"

Gudici's exec, Ganju Thapa, trots up and barks at them as miniballs from the battle fly through the brush around them, "If you two are gonna shoot the shit then get in the fucking crater!"

Thapa pushes Gudici into the deep crater followed by Nelson voluntarily hopping into it, where Thapa squats beside it and tosses them a pack of smokes, and snarls, "Take a fuckin' break for once!"

Gudici throws his hands up, "Okay! ...Bring Gurung here."

While Gudici and Nelson remove their canopies, Thapa runs over to grab Nelson's exec who is with her support squad, crouched behind a Revenant tank they killed just three minutes ago.

"And for you?" Gudici asks as he hands a smoke to Nelson.

"Fourteen? I think ten of 'em are shoe-ins."

"The way this fight has been goin', that's about right."

With them lighting each other's cigarettes with lasers, Nelson takes a puff and asks, "So, what are these mystery plans for me you mentioned back in January?"

"They asked me about you, and I recommended you, but they wanted to see how you would do here first and...you made the cut."

Nelson shrugs, "Doin' what?"

"Hold that thought!" Gudici has puts a finger up, and then says on the command freq, "Thapa, Gurung, where are you?"

At that very moment, the two execs slide into the crater with Gurung asking, "What'll it be, SD?"

After a puff, Gudici says, "Nelson and I have been ordered off the line. I'll be taking immediate command of First of the Thirty-Sixth. Nelson is to report to Chief Stark on the Iron Maiden and become a Trung driver." Gudici looks at Nelson, "You're now a Command Chief!"

Thapa shakes his head, "You're shitting us! Now?"

"Oh, it gets worse! Ganju Thapa, you've been promoted to Senior Deputy Marshal in command of the Eighth of the Thirty-Sixth. Binsa Gurung, you've also been promoted to Senior Deputy Marshal in command of the Eleventh of the Thirty-Sixth." He takes a puff and drops the cigarette, "It's in effect now, any questions?"

This was unexpected, and with them shaking their heads, *no*, Nelson says, "I'm gonna be given a Trung? Seriously?"

Gudici laughs, "Yea, dumbass, ya just leaped over my head!"

Getting past the shock of the moment, Binsa puts her hand out to Nelson and, "It's been a pleasure, Chief!"

Nelson takes her hand and smiles, "Thank you for everything, Binsa, but you were a pain in my ass."

She almost laughs, "Like I said, it's been my pleasure."

Gudici shakes Thapa's hand, "Thank you, Ganju." He then smiles and rattles off in Italian, "*Sei stato un rompicoglioni.*"

Ganju has heard Gudici call him a pain in the ass in Italian before, "It has been my honor...Sir."

Gudici rolls his eyes at the playful insult, "Our ride is waiting." He then thumbs back towards the fight, "Don't you two have regiments to command? Let's hop to it!"

With another round of fist bumps between them, Thapa and Gurung jump out of the crater and head north with their squads. Nelson takes one last puff of his cigarette and flicks it away.

While they both slap the canopies of their JACCs back on, Gudici says to Nelson, "Our flight out of here is two clicks south, an' they need to leave asap, so let's rock, Chief."

From the crater floor, they leap into the air and head south.

While flying low to the ground, zigging and zagging between the trees, Nelson asks, "Wop, you really recommended me?"

Gudici laughs, "Fuck yea, how else was I gonna get rid of ya!"

01000111-01101111-0110001-0110100-0110011-01100101-0010001

With the CDF's reserve division out of the way, and their Sixtieth Armored division being pulled to the west, widening the gap between them and the Twentieth of Foot, Cyzk get's the go code.

Three SA divisions have filled six tunnels, and are being held back one-hundred meters from an underground juncture that is only twenty meters below the surface—in the middle of the encirclement near Tareyton Greens. Months ago, Giáp's people set demolition charges and excavated one-hundred and twenty meters of the two tunnels that ran just below this juncture. The deep hole there will now easily accommodate the debris, and not block their way, when the charges in the ceiling above the juncture are set off.

On the SA joint-division channel a battalion commander calls out, *thirty seconds*, while Cyzk opens a private channel to Sally Rand who has been waiting for him, ["Oi, Kacper, before you jump off, I just wanted to say thank'y for the lovely time we 'ad 'erel!"]

Cyzk shrugs, "All that planning, and none of it panned out."

["Under the bridge they say."] Rand snorts, ["We did get to smack a fair bit of tail! Feel free to stop by for a rematch, anytime!"]

Cyzk chuckles, "Haven't you had enough already?"

["Never, me love! An' who knows when I'll see you again?"]

"The way this fight is going, probably a whole lot sooner than you think. I give Homer maybe four hours at best."

["Well...ye be probably right about that. Focus on the breach for ol' Freddy Boy! Then make for the clubhouse."]

"That's the plan!"

Suddenly, the charges go off and a twelve-meter wide by ninety-meter long section of the ceiling, above the tunnel, drops into the hole made for it—nice and pretty and in one piece.

Rand snickers, ["Have a jolly good time of it! Out!"]

The recon fire-team that was waiting above, perform a quick inspection of the hole and radios out, ["Clear!"]

Six strings of troopers, ghost droids and PacMan drones, pour out from the long hole in the ground. They spread out in all directions, towards regimental marshalling points, and when each battalion is formed, they head out to locate their assigned CDF rearguard elements to basically ruin their day.

With the bulk of the troopers having moved on, and their armored units starting to extricate themselves from the tunnels, Cyzk and his command squad heads out towards the northeast.

Cyzk really wants to move onto the Greens, but breaching the line in the northeast is the priority here.

01010011-01110100-01110101-01000111

Griego and Scout-Three, consisting of five Pazuzu tanks, pull up behind a tree line facing the gap between the CDF divisions. Those being the Sixtieth Armored, to their right, and the Twentieth of Foot to their left. With a whole kilometer now between their flanking guards, the three scouting teams have formed up into a ragged delta to punch a hole for Chief Sargent's mixed division to follow.

Scout-Three is now the tip of the spear.

A handful of Hydrapede droids orbit their position and take flanking and anchor positions around them.

Nicknamed the Red Shell, the Hydrapede missile-droids were originally coated in the same red enamel the old Centipede missiles were covered in. Tube launched weapons have always been color coded to simplify sorting and loading so, when Jacob delivered them last October, they were still red.

The Hydrapedes on Taiji have all been hastily painted in the same soft powderpuff pink as the new droids and Centipede Mews are distributed in, but after two months of combat most of that paint has scrapped off—making them look worn and haggard now that they are mottled red and pink.

Funny thing is that at a distance they are still hard to see.

Now, we all know that Taiji is tidally locked, and that here in the Tareyton Greens it is always perpetual sunset, in what all the locals call the TOZ. Short for the Tee Off Zone, the region spans from the equator at 90° to the local terminator at 98° latitude, but the seventh and ninth week of their twelve week cycle it is brighter than normal. This is because the distant and bright star, Nyx, happens to be peeking around Sriracha Mu, and with both stars prominent in the sky the distance where you “stick figure” against the light from S’Mu gets cut down to less than a kilometer however...

Here on the fifth day into week nine, it is starting to rain.

On recon freq, Griego sighs, [“God-damn it... Cloaks off!”]

Sophia points out, [“We were hoping to still use that shit!”]

[“No shit! I don’t think they figured out how we did it yet.”]

Ozo says, [“The net shows Cyzk should be hitting ‘em soon.”]

At that very moment, over five kilometers away, thin streaks of white, green and red fly through the air like fireworks, with Chase saying, [“Ooooh! So many colorful tracers, it’s like Christmas!”]

Ozo suggests, [“*Ey vato*, maybe we should start moving up?”]

Griego grumbles, [“*Pinche* light rain is mofo shit for cover.”]

Hewlett laughs, [“This is gonna be a hell of a push, guys!”]

[“Okay kids, you had better hit the john before we leave! From here on out we’re only gonna stop for snacks and murder.”]

As everyone laughs at that, and the ghost droids dismount to take flanking positions around their assigned tanks, on the tacnet Griego notes Scout-One’s position to cover right flank and Scout-Two to cover their left. Working with the data from a high altitude micro drone, they see that tanks from the Sixtieth are starting to pour into the southern end of the gap in an effort to block Cyzk’s attack.

Griego asks, [“You-all seein’ what I’m seein’ here?”]

Sophia answers, [“Yeppers, we do, Angel Baby!”]

[“You’re right, Mahko! Let’s get to it.”]

Emerging from the trees, and with cloaks on both sides turned off because of the rain, they have to move faster than normal, so the old maxim *he who sees first shoots first* rings true. Hovering along at twenty-eight kph, now a whole kilometer into the gap, they spot tanks pulling out a half klick in front of them, and turn south.

Griego goes, [“My god, I don’t think they see us!!”]

Hewlett adds, [“Thank your lucky starts for pixelated camo!”]

Slowing down, Griego says, ["I'm goin' full-on sneaky-sneaky for this. Guys, get ready to avenge my death."] His tank now turns sideways by fifteen degrees to his right, while continuing south, ["When the shooting starts we're gonna haf'ta push hard."]

Griego is now a half-football field away from the last enemy tank in the line, so he quietly says on freq, ["Ssssh, just keep looking away. It'll all be over with soon."]

He fires first, punching the closest Revenant from behind with a normal sabot-penetrator, and with the other four from Scout-Three also firing, the five tanks they hit simply drop from their hover onto the ground with a small bounce. The standard penetrators don't have an attached bomblet, so there is some heat and smoke coming from the now dead tanks but they don't have much in terms of flammables on board, so that's about it. Griego kicks it into gear and leads the others headlong into the fight.

Hewlett, Ozo and Chase all call out, *nevermore*, on channel as Griego urges them to, ["Push-push-push!"] Coming around a cluster of trees, he runs into a Mancubus tank that spots him and tries to get its gun around for a shot, ["Oh, hello there!"]

0011100-0011010-00110011-0010001-0111110

Many fighter pilots will say that they're strapping their fighter on, but when flying the F380 Cerberus this expression is quite literal.

While flying the Cerberus the pilot is sitting back, reclining feet forward, and they have no MDDSH nacelles protecting them from the sides, and no fuselage wrapping around them like when sitting in a normal cockpit such as the older model F308. Yes, most everything now has the bubble cockpit, and the one on the F380 is also on the ASF74 as well as the IR5, but when flying the Cerberus the primary mission happens to be Close Air Support, and flying balls-out as CAS means the bullets tend to come straight at your face.

These new bubble cockpits are quite heavy, and can take a lot of punishment, but here over the Nine Iron Smash Peña has a hard time seeing through the fuzzy crush impacts and crazed fractures on the top layers of the cockpit canopy.

Before him is the Mancubus tank he just emptied his 23mm cannon on a short minute ago. The tank is now grounded and out of the fight, with the micronuke bombs that hit it having rung the crew's bell and wrecked the auto-loader, so there is little else for that crew to do but jump and run.

Or, they could opt to fire on him with the heavy anti-air gun

mounted on top, but the problem here is that they decided to do both! Peña is not aware of that because when he makes one last pass to confirm the kill all he sees are 7.62 long legs splashing against his canopy, so how to respond is the immediate issue at hand.

Peña is pretty much out of everything except one cartridge of Micropedes, about five seconds on his Eighty-Eight, but he has almost a full drum of the 30mm, two-thousand kilogram yield bombs, which is fantastic for area denial and interdiction, but they tend to be overkill for the CAS mission—close being the key consideration.

He thinks they should add a variety of smaller yield bombs for the 23, like they do when they are fighting over an urban environment according to the ROEs. Sometimes the “close” in CAS needs to be surgically exacting, and using the 1k-kg sledgehammer all the time tends to be wearisome when a simple ball-peen in 500, 250 or even a 100 kg yield bomb would do the trick quite nicely!

Anyway, with Anthony Gudici having taken command of the First of the Thirty-Sixth, he splits his battalions to hit the flanks of the CDFs Thirty-First Armored Division, what’s left of it that is, thus taking the heat off Giáp’s Third Mobile Calvary.

This fight has become a total mess for the CDF because with all the Micropede attacks they can’t move any of their armored units up to deal with the pesky infantry...which is the bane of armor when they don’t have infantry to support them. With Giáp’s people using the SA supplied wontons, 1k-kg grenade launchers like mortars, endlessly, and one of their tanks getting picked off by every five minutes by Peña’s CAS pilots, the Thirty-First is being meticulously ground down little by little. Instead of sitting here on the eighth fairway waiting to die, and against orders, a lone Mancubus tank finally makes a move to charge the Nine Iron Smash in an attempt to break this stalemate.

Peña disabled this Mancubus with the last of his 23’s, and with Gudici’s troops putting the squeeze on the CDF, Peña decides to loop around behind the CDF lines all to make one last recon pass over the battle before he egresses from the fight to rearm and quick-swap his canopy out. Now, with the rain the CDF armored units have turned off their cloaks, but instead of firing on Peña as he passes overhead, they are all playing dead so as not to draw his attention. Well, all but the Maus he just knocked out that short minute ago.

“Bad plan, *mericon!*” Peña says as he pulls down on him.

With the bolts from that weapon splashing against his already mangled canopy, instead of dropping a 30mm bomb for just the one lone gun, Peña opts to snap-fire the Eighty-Eight. Now, the ship’s AI has already selected a standard TD-Cue, a simple vector frame that overlays the hostile target for the 8.80mm bolts to maneuver towards,

as is usual, but instead of one auto-targeting cue on the tacnet HUD in his visual cortex—four of them pop up.

With all the exploding bolts blocking his vision, Peña focuses on the one cue and fails to notice the other three as he squeezes the trigger. Half of the bolts take out the tank commander as well as the anti-air gun, but the rest have split up and are gimbaling between the other three targeting cues that are overlaying the three crewmembers in ACE suits who were trying to get away from their idiot commander.

On the instant review from an external camera, Peña watches as three CDF troopers stop to raise their hands a few seconds before he made the shot. The explosive bolts scrap all three—sending pieces of their fighting suits, body parts and gore up into the air.

Peña's heart sinks as he mutters, "*Soy un fundillo!*"

Bam-Bam calls out to him on channel, ["Oh shit! Those guys should have kept running! You gonna go put down now, Dog?"]

Peña just shakes his head, frustrated with himself, and as he races out of the AO with holes all over his ship, "I'm bingo on ammo. The field is yours 'til I get back."

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Griego laughs, ["Got your nose!"]

Angel Greigo fired his main rail gun at the Mancubus, and it smashes into its variable geometry gun, which falls away in spite of the shielding they've added since last October. The second follow on shot breaches the turret ring, which punches through and, with a huge jolt from the superheated Uranium, the turret slides off the lower hull.

Griego then fires his main gun at the Mancubus' behind him. Again, because of the short distances here, the sabot is still attached to the penetrator as it glances off the top deck glacis of the tank's lower chassis. The sabot is shattered and with the penetrator breaking free it then deflects off the side of its turret.

Having to reload the staging tray, used for quick triple-taps, Griego starts drifting his Pazuzu to the right, and around that Maus while spraying him over with his Eighty-Eight—all the while it's turret is rotating and trying to get a shot off at him. During this race Griego is laughing on the scout freq, ["Goochie, goochie! Goochie, goochie goo! Here comes the tickle monster!"]

With the tray loaded up, Griego snap fires an arch penetrator into the turret ring, between the turret and the chassis where, this time, the lower hull is slammed into the ground and the turret goes

flying straight up into the air as the trailing micronuke detonates inside and pops the turret off the tank like a champagne cork.

While this was going on his team breaks to his right, where Hewlett blows a penetrator through the side of a Revenant, laughing, ["Tag, Homer, you're it!"]

Ozo fires on another Revenant saying, ["Dirt nap for you!"]

On the other hand, Chase slams the front of his tank up against the side of a Revenant, pinning him against a stand of trees, while snarling, ["I say *no* to bullies!"]

The Revenant fired its main gun at Griego, but Chase t-boning the thing made the shot go wide, and with its anti-air gun now spraying all of them with 7.62 long legs, Chase asks as if he were a little kid talking to his father, ["Hey pop, can we keep him?"]

Griego points out, ["See how it's foaming at the mouth?"]

["Shouldn't we take him to the vet and have that looked at?"]

["No, son, we gotta put it down."]

["Just like Old Yeller!"] Sophia has pulled around and behind the Revenant tank Chase has pinned down, and while leveling her gun, ["Best look away, Thomas, or this'll give you bad dreams."]

Sophia fires and the penetrator punches through the tank, where the superheated uranium blows the hatches out, allowing spirals of heat, flame and molten debris to shoot up.

With the team turning to continue the push, Griego says, ["We'll find you a new Raven puppy at the pound."]

Hewlett adds, ["They screen for rabies there!"]

Chase asks with excitement, ["Can I pick 'em out?"]

Ozo goes, ["Sure, but one less frothy at the mouth!"]

Taking point, Chase cries out, ["Then I want ice cream!"]

Sophia wonders, ["You think we may be overindulging him?"]

Chase then Griego race past the tanks they just destroyed, followed by the others, and a kilometer past that they run into a dozen Revenants and Mancubus tanks moving towards them...backwards, firing on Cyzk's teams that are pushing hard against them.

Chase calls out, ["Danger close!"]

The infantry support around those CDF tanks notice them and dive for the dirt just as Chase, Griego and the rest of the Pazuzu's of the three scouting teams open up on them. While their ghost droids and anti-air guns in 8.80mm fire on their infantry, the Pazuzu main

guns start killing off the CDF armored units en masse.

With all the tracers from bolts and sabot penetrators, flying every which way, and CDF tanks caught out in the open, and dying, Griego laughs while saying, ["Need an adult here! We need an adult!"]

After a few seconds of this chaos, and callouts on the channel saying, *nevermore*, one Revenant manages to swing around and fire on Ozo before it's shot dead. Its penetrator comes in steep enough to kill an older Wooly, but here the dart simply ricochets away.

Surprised, Ozo shouts, ["*Dios mío!* I love this StuG!"]

01000001-01001110-01000001-01000100-00100001

Far away from the ground action, four hundred kilometers to the northeast, a cluster bomb launched backwards by an F51c scatters its micronuke bomblets and takes out a Centipede-Mew that was fired by Yemi Kagame. Eight of the Mew's nine micropede missiles evade destruction and all eight of them make it to the Condor.

The F51 is obliterated, but the one thing that does survive this onslaught is the cockpit, and as it drops from the sky the chute fails to deploy. The pilot finally comes to and she ejects in the nick of time, at three hundred meters altitude, seconds before the cockpit smashes into the hardscrabble and caliche of the desert floor. Like the JACC, the ACE suit also flies, so the pilot lands beside the wreckage.

Jacob was following them at a distance, while Kagame worked the kill, so he comes on channel to ask, ["Coords?"]

Kagame snaps out of the shock and elation of making her fifth kill, and reports the latitude and longitude with the calmest voice she could muster, ["Eighty-five-fifty, and the IFF shows the pilot as TKO."]

["Best possible outcome! Post the confirmation on the tacnet and come be my wingman again."] Minutes later, as she pulls up beside Jacob, he says, ["Well, Yemi, ya did good!"]

When excited, Kagame reverts to Nigerian pidgin, ["FM, you be *don kolo* for making me an ace!"]

Jacob laughs, ["And in a day! Your first combat mission too!"]

Again, in pidgin, ["You do well, FM!"]

["You're welcome, but you did it yourself."]

["No, you made dat happen for me! I owe you."]

["Tell ya what, I'm gonna throw you back into the squad but, if you keep this up, when I'm looking for a permanent wingman, you'll be the first to know!"]

["You be crazy!"]

["Kid, you're a natural."]

["Like I say, you is crazy!"]

Jacob pulls up an alert on the tacnet of a CDF fourteen ship formation, with six drop ships, that got past the FCAP and is heading towards them, so he flags it for him and Kagame to ambush and says, ["Didn't you say you were interested in practical astronomy?"]

["Astronavigation, it'll be something useful in this career."]

Pouring on the coal to intercept, Jacob goes, ["Fuck it, I'm offering you the job as my permanent wingman now. You want it?"]

["Like I say again, you is *maga* crazy!"]

["You want the job or not?"]

Kagame thinks about it, and laughs to herself then answers, ["Okay FM, yes, but it be your funeral!"]

011001110110111011101000110011001101111

Here in Department Twelve, high up on the top floor of the New Sydney District of the off-world Federated Court Building, we have Vince Stiller sitting by himself at the plaintiff's counsel table, across from the five attorneys representing the defendants.

The Judge, an aboriginal named Joyce Djerrkura-O'Ceallaigh, is scrutinizing the short 'memorandum of points and authorities' in support of the defendant's motion. She nods a bit while reading, then shakes her head and looks up at the Defendant's lead attorney standing at their table, "You want this ruling when, counsel?"

Evelyn Anderson, partner of the firm Anderson Cooper, takes a deep breath and says, "As soon as humanly possible, your honor."

The judge gives Anderson a stern look. She nods, glances back down at the pleading, then looks up to stare at Anderson with her nostrils flaring. Her eyes look over at Stiller, who is sitting there without a care in the world, and when she tracks them back over to Anderson, "Of the many-many cites you have here, the only one that has any real impact is, *Boo vs. Kiel*. You are aware of that?"

Anderson cringes slightly and, "Yes, your honor."

The judge takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes with the palms of her hands, then thumbs behind her saying, "You two, let's take this to my chambers."

Wide eyed, Stiller shrugs, "If you wish, mum!"

Stiller and Anderson follow, what everyone calls Judge Joyce, into her chambers. She pulls her robe off and tosses it in a far off side chair, and as she pulls her own chair out from behind her desk she leans out towards the two of them.

"Counselor Anderson, just so you know, my chambers is both first names only, and *everything* said here is off the record. Can you live with that...Evelyn?"

Anderson nervously says, "Yes...Joyce."

She looks at Stiller who says, "Joyce and I go way back."

Joyce asks Stiller, "How the hell are ya, Vince?"

Stiller shrugs, "Curious why you married that Mick? An' I was hoping to get my foot in the door before you fucked your life up!"

Judge Joyce snorts, holding her laughter back, then manages to say, "And the why is in evidence!"

Stiller looks over at Anderson and points towards his mouth, "The wagging tongue of mischief. Get's me in trouble all the time!"

Judge Joyce rolls her eyes and looks to Anderson, "So, off the record, I have to ask...what the fuck is going on here?" She puts a hand out to silence Anderson as she continues, "I came to New Sydney with orders to make sure I rule in your favor, within the rule of law, but Booboorowie vs Kiel kinda takes the piss out of your case!"

Anderson swallows hard and, "Things changed."

"No shit! Ya know, this isn't your everyday shootin' yourself in the foot! Oh no, this is throwing yourself in the woodchipper, feet first into the woodchipper I might add! Would you like to withdraw the motion? I mean I can throw it out, within the rule of law, it is within my purview because a Summary Judgement on Material Facts at this juncture is kinda premature...within the rule of law."

"I know you were supposed to stretch this case out."

"I could've given you five years on the docket, easy. That's what I was supposed to be doin' here. I even bought a house on the shore of the bay, with a dock, anticipating the long haul. Get me?"

Stiller interjects, "Joyce, if I may, we worked together on this motion. We kinda need the ruling like...now?"

Joyce spells it out, "Okay, in Boo, disputing the validity of the Recorders in New Brisbane, before incorporation, was over land rights however, off-world mining patents will fall into that rainbow of inclusivity on appeal! Validating the transfer of patent rights means your case is over, so before I do this I need to know the why."

Anderson looks to Stiller, "You want a go at this?"

Stiller says, "Joyce, the short of it is, there's a profit sharing option on the table that gives the five houses a massive return, but to do this they need to get out from under a currency "reserve in place" contract with the Bank of New Sydney to make that magic happen. Problem is, if the Co-op loses this fight, which they are close to losing as we speak, then the option is off the table forever. For the Co-op to issue the cease fire and save the day, we need your ruling."

Anderson goes, "Everybody wins if the cease fire is ordered."

Stiller adds, "They need to lose this case to give the order."

Joyce asks, "I'm curious, how much is in play here?"

"Reserves were set to fifty-percent of what they thought was underground, eighty years ago. Today the stated reserve in place is less than one-tenth of a percent of what is actually there, and that's just the gold. Since then they've found a shitload of copper, platinum, rhodium, palladium, silver and a bucket-load of extras!"

Joyce sighs, "You've got your ruling. Give me an hour."

Anderson hands Joyce a document, "Already drafted for you!"

01000010-01001110-01010100-01000110

In the Salt Mine, deep below the infamous Nine Iron Smash, General Giáp stands in the midst of sixty staffers in the now deathly quiet CIC. With the sounds of battle above them, radiating through the rock ceiling, the staff just got word of what is being asked of them.

Colonel Sally Rand goes, "So...we have to make the request."

General Giáp nods, "Aye, first, we have to broadcast it."

A sergeant says, "We got 'em on the ropes, sir!"

Giáp snorts a laugh, "Actually mate, we got Homer down for the count, but if we don't do this the entire population will hate our bloody guts if we thumb our nose at them and break the CDF's back." He looks at his air defense coordinator, "Captain, how soon till Graves hits their drop that got past the FCAP?"

The Captain shrugs, "Ninety seconds?"

"Call it off."

"Sir, Buzzard Chow could get a couple of good belts in for us!"

Giáp sighs while saying, "That would be the *coup de grâce*. We need to wave him off. Wave 'im off now, son."

With the Captain racing back to his workstation, Rand asks the general, "Would you like me to tend to this, Sir?"

"By all means, please do."

Rand pulls a wire mic around, ties into the IFF and transmits live in her thick Rough-Nut lilt, "General Alcock, this is Colonel Rand speaking on the behalf of General, Ngô Văn Giáp, of the House of Perth. We were wondering if you would be up for a lil' cease fire, a ripper of a fine tradeoff for some quiet face to face time? We think everybody 'as 'ad enough of this. Love to hear from you!"

When she cuts the mic, everybody starts snickering, so Rand looks at Giáp and asks, "Was that a smidge too much, Sir?"

Vossler, who was standing on the sidelines of their meeting, shrugs with a huge smile, "Colonel, that was perfect!"

The cease-fire immediately broadcasts on the IFF, and with the sounds of battle quickly winding down to zero, Rand points out, "Well, I be gobsmacked! That didn't take long."

Giáp nods, "They be waiting for it."

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cado monkey

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-26-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 04:35zulu (local 25:08pst)

The viral video of Piper fearlessly gunning for the monster that was slaughtering their people on the Queensland Vista, and killing him at the loss of her own life, and Victoria bagging two, to protect her as she fell, then letting the little one go free—made them both heroes in the minds of most everyone, everywhere. Piper's witty repartee with Victoria as she laid there dying made her a superstar...

Where E-Z Wednesday is just getting started (i.e. UT8-GMT) Wednesday here on Prypiat is coming to an end. Brillig was cancelled for today, and here at Boxter's home both friends and family are in the central ballroom watching just one of several hundred posted streams taken during the funeral procession—by the over ninety-five thousand people lining the two-kilometers between the cathedral in the upscale West Banes to a park where Boxter's Star-Clipper was waiting.

The eight Pipe and Drum bands in the procession, locally and sent from the UK by Victoria, was an impressive sight indeed, but it was the Second Line Preservation Band, the group that befriended Boxter and Piper all those many decades ago in New Orleans, that escorted her casket from the ship into the Star-Castle.

The Star-Castle of Prypiat, a Bastion Fortress that serves as the home of Nigel Kiel, was opened for the funeral attendees for what is now being coined as *the sendoff of the century*.

Nobody knew what to make of this band when they received the body while playing the morose "Closer Walk With Thee" but it was when they switched gears into "Over In The Glory Land" followed by "When The Saints Go Marching In" that transmogrified this solemn procession into a much needed celebration.

The SLPB did make a pinky-promise to Piper that they'd play

at her funeral, a promise made just two years back, and in Boxter's mind that's the equivalency to a *yubikiri* chit. The band was surprised that she actually died but since Boxter was springing for everything, and paying them all stupid amounts of USD to play, he was relieved that his SS wouldn't have to collect their pinkies if they reneged on it.

Then again, they all loved Piper and were thrilled to be here!

Anyway, from the desert alcove that's attached to the central ballroom, Samantha slips out of the alcove with *Vorpal* strapped over her shoulder and slithers up next to Jessica who has been watching the crowd as she waits to meet with Boxter.

Samantha leans in, "He's ready for ya, love." She playfully bumps her hip against Jessica's, asking, "You gonna come see me before you turn in? I 'ave got somethin' to show you!"

Jessica was about to say something then, thinking about it, her face says *why not* as she huffs, "No need to twist my arm."

Samantha smiles big, "Feel free to twist mine!" She then pulls in close to whisper in her ear—and with her warm breath drifting down her neck, "Don't keep our Boxxy waiting."

Jessica breaths deep, and, "Okay, give me an hour."

01010011-01010111-01010000-01000001-01000111

Boxter came around his desk and pulls out a chair for Jessica after he gives her a genuinely sweet hug, and as he steps around the desk for his chair, "Thank you for being last on my list of obligations for this eve. I'll make it up to you, *ma chérie*."

Jessica smiles as Boxter sits, "Noah need some TLC?"

Boxter visibly shudders, "That whinging *sitzpinkler*."

"Would you like to know what I picked up on?"

He touches his lip with a frown, "Think we can put that off 'till tomorrow? I don't want to keep you from Samael."

Jessica is taken aback slightly by that and puts up a defensive hand, saying, "Aaaaah, 'bout last night. I didn't mean to go there—"

Boxter cuts her off, "But Samantha did! Look, the two of you happen to be adults and, not to blatantly overindulge my youngest, but she...hasn't been able to shut up about you since you two met!" He leans towards Jessica, "Putting this in perspective, she did wheedle her way deep into your personal bubble, and you didn't put up much of a scrap so, it begs to be asked, do you enjoy her company?"

Jessica asks, "Is yes the preferred response?"

"Only if ye be honest." Claspings his hands, Boxter sits up with raised eyebrows, "A little tidbit of honesty from me in good turn? To be admittedly self-indulging, I shamelessly enjoy your company, and since the two of you are so young, we cannot blame our Samael in the slightest for desiring a more...corporeal cynosure with your time together! Someone that the both of us regard as...an equal."

Jessica is dumbfounded by that and asks, "Really?"

"Tragically yes, because I've so few to choose from! The only people *alive* that I personally consider an equal in this world would be Samantha, you, Marshal Ramirez, your father and...well, Seth."

"Hu? He never told me he was talking to you."

"Regularly...and the lil' scamp wanted me to share something with you tonight. We'll get to that in just a minute but, first, I wanted to say that I have been struggling with *not* asking if there could have been something—anything to save *our* Piper, but the moment she decoupled herself from the neuronet, well, that alone assuaged my curiosity. What happened was the best possible outcome. To pester you further would be pointless since my...imagination has already done the heavy lifting on this issue. Again, thank you and your brother for being candid when it counted most."

"To appease my curiosity, why'd she do it?"

"When she was a teen, Piper suffered from a bout of psoriasis, but instead of being cured it lay dormant and mutated into a rare and untreatable Dallmon Psoriatic Arthritis that reappeared five years ago. Her autoimmune response led to mutilans that attacked her bones, spine and hips. We even replaced all of her phalanges just last year but little by little...her life was being whittled away. Only Sam and I knew and, as much as it breaks our hearts, we ultimately respect Piper's choice. What happens to leave me in a lurch is that she doesn't want to wake up in a hosting world until I cross over."

"Wow, she always seemed so spry and happy."

"It's amazing, given time, how well one can adapt to opiates."

"Hosting world?"

"Not yet decided. So many Stumpies opt for that Taj Mahal silliness but, little does anybody know is that their server farm is in SoCal's...City of Industry."

"No shit! And nobody knows?"

Boxter is almost laughing at that, "Not a clue! I already paid for Vegas³ but the chips are transferable if I change my mind. Then considering how healthy I am...it's gonna be a long haul for me."

Jessica stares at him for a second, then shakes her head and, "Okay, what I can say is that you won't be alone for too long."

Boxter blinks repeatedly, then, "Well, I don't think I'll ever be in the odious mindset of replacing the irreplaceable."

"Okay, let's put it this way, your family will be accepting of who you replace Piper with—because you will not be replacing her. Also, she's not from here which helps. Does this make sense?"

"Strangely enough, it does. I just hope it's not a Band-Aid."

"You'll be pleasantly surprised. Trust me on this one."

"The family will be accepting of this Sheila?" Jessica nods yes, so Boxter shrugs, "Something to look forward to, I guess?" He rubs his hands together, "So, I made good on my promise by keeping my calendar open for tomorrow and, now that I look at it, it appears to be a gaping hole fraught with boredom. Have you that fix?"

"Yea, ya'll ready to become that man of peace?"

"Oh yea, the Jabbers. Must we? So soon?"

"Kinda, hav'ta, now." Jessica leans in, "Look, the Pale One."

"Wasn't that what they called Piper?"

"Bobby's daughter was named after Piper." Jessica scoots in and notices that the edge of his desk moved up when she bumps up against it, "Look, she's in a tenuous position. If we go tomorrow she'll be untouchable, there'll be peace, and another species joins the FIS."

"And if we don't?"

"Bloodshed...death on a grand scale, and so much so they will never recover." With Boxter pondering this, and waiting two seconds too long for an answer, Jessica prods him, "We're doin' this, right?"

"I'm thinking!" Jessica gives him that stern look Piper used to give him so he goes, "Okay! We'll do it, so...what do I have to do?"

"Bring a gift, and since you gave *Vorpal* to Sam, we kinda—"

Boxter points out, "We have an excess of those thingys lying about here. We'll give the Pale One, *Cletus*. That's Junior's Ninty-Five that gets no love. Pips never could stomach hunting like her mother." It's here that Boxter sets the Ruger that Piper used to kill Blue Boy on the desk, and slides it over, "On that note, this is yours."

Jessica recoils, "On that note, oh hell no!"

"Oh, hell yes! You don't get a vote. We all have one of these Ruger's, but my daughters wanted you to have Piper's! When we go tomorrow might I suggest a strong-side rig? With your ample bosom

and rounded...hips, it'll look mightily impressive while in your standard BDU trousers and t-shirt. Then, considering the task at hand, I would suggest pixilated desert with an olive-drab tee."

Jessica, debating on what to say, points at him while trying not to laugh, then chuckling as she quietly says, "asshole."

Boxter mouths the words, *thank you*, he then scrunches up, "So, Red Love, I'm all atwitter as to how we're going to go about this?"

"Michelle Kiel is flying us up there. You declare peace and give 'em the olive branch."

"A fifty-cal olive branch."

"Can you think of a better one?"

"No...no, I can't."

"The Pale One, like most the Jabbers, already know they don't stand a chance against us. Her father wouldn't listen to her."

"A common failing amongst parents." He thinks about it and, "You have droids up there now I take it?"

"Yea, and also a squad from Mook."

He wonders aloud, "With my granddaughter?"

Jessica huffs slightly, "I wanted that to be a surprise. Sheron and Clint are on recon up there and, tomorrow afternoon, they will be coming home to visit until the eighth." She then says with a little excitement, "Oh, and just so you know, we figured out that those things can see our troops while cloaked in their JACCs."

Boxter realizes, "But, not the droids."

"Exactly, it's probably their heartbeats or a thermal something or other, like with the Xhemal. We'll find out soon enough." Jessica throws out, "So you, the mate of their nemesis, will be doing all the talking and Michelle will bring Glados as our interpreter. She already has a working knowledge of their language and she can mimic it, and surprisingly well. Then again, she has always wanted to meet you!"

"Well now, wishes do come true! Piper spoke highly of her."

"Glados will be a baritone compared to them, but they'll be able to understand her. And, if she fumbles the ball I'll run with it."

"Via your puppet-master neuro-connectivity, correct?"

"I'm already linked up to the Pale One's mind."

"Let me guess, when you brought the wedding party and left by way of the Vista." Jessica's eyebrows rise, not knowing what to say, so Boxter smirks, "Remember, I see all...mostly."

Jessica does a quick double take and, "By the way, I gotta know, 83-T Jabberwockus Samantha?" She huffs a laugh, "Really?"

Boxter throws his hands up slightly, and tries not to laugh, "Well, when binomial nomenclature was to be enforced by the scientific community, of the species that Piper discovered and named, she used our daughter's names as the binomial." He now laughs while saying, "Speaking of which, I had a stoat named after me which...was apropos since that cutest little of things was found out to be a murderous little beast. Anyway, when Piper blundered into the jabbers up north while hunting banders, Samantha was in utero...but I got a stoat."

"Let me guess, Boxiter?"

"Close, Boxxyter, with two x's and a y. Pips has become a bit of a rabid naturalist herself. That and cooking is where her mother and she connected. Right now, she has a beautiful crane like creature up for naming and she has opted for Victoria as the binomial yet, if you promise to act surprised, there is a small eagle sized Jabber she found that blindsided everyone! Pips has the green light to name it and, with its roseate scales, I believe she's considering you for the honor!"

"There any nice way I can push back on that?"

Boxter points out, "No, not a chance, and by the way it flaps its little leathery wings, it's sooo you..." As Jessica wonders where she's heard *leathery wings* before, he asks, "Also, if by happenstance, you are going to be around us more often than not, I was wondering if I may impose upon you...on the by-n-by?"

Jessica nods, yes, "You are my friend, Box."

"And confidant?" Boxter points out, "There is a difference." Jessica thinks deeply about this, and after a pregnant pause, he asks, "Have I ever given you reason to distrust me?" She shakes her head, *no*, so he asks, "What say you, then?"

Jessica nods slightly, saying, "Yea, I'm game."

Boxter nods in like then, "Speaking of game!" He holds out his hands along the edge of his desk, gesturing her to do the same, and they lift the edge of the desk creating an inch-high lip around the entire desktop, "I know you were wondering what this was about."

"Yea...a bumper?"

"Ding-ding, and a fine segue towards, well, like in cinema, here is where I'm supposed to give you my...tragic backstory. I'm not sure if this is to avoid something that he sees over the horizon, or to enrich our future to come? He remains mute on the topic."

Jessica rolls her eyes, "The little bastard."

Boxter smiles big, "But a convincing little bastard!"

Jessica watches as he reaches over to a gold-trimmed ebony box that has always been on the desk, and she has wondered what it was for, and as he opens it, she blinks and asks, "Jenga?"

"This is how Piper and I would...noddle over things! Through the decades many a proscription and plot and conspiracy has been formulated and hatched over these fifty-four blocks of Alder and, considering what mischief I've been up to over this vast sum of years, it's been—the perfect metaphor. Care to play?"

Jessica is surprised, "Sure, set 'em up!"

Boxter lifts the elaborately engraved and gold-damascened loading tray from the box, stands it up between them and, pulling the tray away—it reveals a stack of old and heavily stained wooden bricks cross-stacked in eighteen layers, "When I was five I saw the stumpy children playing this game, with much bigger bocks than these, but I had to have it. I found this littler-original design and managed to put this very one on layaway...but I'm getting ahead of myself."

"It's your story!"

"It's your move." He gestures towards the Jenga stack, and as Jessica inspects the bricks, looking for a lose one, Boxter starts with, "I was born a garbo, to a family of pickers, and we agro-pickers were considered the lowest of the low. Pickers were compensated by a sliding-scale, a percentage of the return on the harvest, but what hurt us so was how the crops were always sold far below the going market rates. Obviously, the growers were being paid the diference under the table but...prove it. The practice was shockingly prevalent but nobody cared about their thievery simply because every stumpy is a grower! Undercutting the pickers when I was a child was so bad that my father, on his own initiative, decided to push for a pickers union."

Jessica pulls a brick, saying, "That didn't go over to well, hu?"

"To say the least..." Boxter continues the story while looking for a brick to pull, "Now, back then, at five, I was a cado-monkey. I was a swift and wiry little monkey at that. We chillin's would climb up into the trees and pick fruit not readily accessible to the adults, but we were so poorly paid that all of my earnings went to the family coffers. Then again, if I hustled my little monkey tail off my father and uncles would find a way to slip me a few spare-pee so—"

As Jessica looks for a block, she says, "Hence the layaway."

"Exactly! So, here we are on a Thursday and I was to go up into all the trees we worked over on Muldje and Wagyldays to find the avos we missed while pruning in the dark. At that point all I needed

was fifty-two pence...I was so close. Now, I always set up the bushel baskets with my father before my uncles, cousins and the rest were to show, but five minutes into the stacking, six men slip out from the trees and grab my father. One holds me down and forces me to watch as the others slit...his...throat."

Jessica stacks a brick on top while saying, "Jesus."

"But not every trauma is what it seems!" As Boxter looks for a loose brick, "My father was a tough man, and he was real hard on us children but, as his only son, he was exceedingly cruel towards me. My father would beat us all, but if I cried out he would beat me harder. By the time I was five you could have ripped my arm off and I wouldn't make so much as a peep!" He stacks a brick on top, and with Jessica now taking her turn, "So, on my knees, watching the gurgling bubbles and blood pour out from the slit in my father's throat, I shed only a single tear that rolled down my cheek...and you couldn't have framed that better on a Hollywood set! What I did not do was cry out, and looking into my father's eyes, what seemed like an eternity, Samuel Allan gave me a little smile, and with a nod...expired."

Jessica asks, "So, that's what happened."

"Not quite, we're just getting started."

She nods then asks, "Did you finger these guys?"

Boxter huffs a little laugh, then adds, "Well, I was five, and as I said to the authorities when they questioned me, in my broken garbo tongue I say, *'Oi no see notin' gova'na!'* and you could say that was because they threatened my mother and sisters, they did, but I was silent mostly because they did me a solid."

"That was a favor?"

"Considering how much I hated my father, yes, very much so but, if put to the question I'll deny it. So, with me uncles and cousins nancing about over my father's murder, I got a layaway to pay for, so that afternoon I traipse back out to the Kiel's orchard to pick some fruit! After four hours I had ten bushels filled to the gills, and I wasn't going to stop however, it's spring break and a gaggle of young men, all stumpies destined to be heads of their own households, they were walking past and, seeing this monkey in a tree they decide to get some target practice in—on guess who?"

Jessica protests, "You were five!"

Boxter thumbs back at himself, "Garbo!"

"Really, seriously? You were just a little kid!"

"Caste system, *comprende?* Welcome to Bribie Eyot!"

"That's fucked up!"

"Still is, darlin'." Boxter points towards her hand, "You gonna stack that block?" She does, so he continues while taking his turn, "After about thirty avos were thrown at me, Shephard Wanganui finally lands one between my eyes and I came tumbling out of the tree but, instead of bouncing off the ground in this low gravity, my shin and wrist hit an irrigation pipe and both snap in half." Putting his brick on top of the stack, Boxter smiles, "So, there I was and I was a sight! Spitting gravel with blood running down my face, a broken wrist and a compound break in my shin, and all these fine-young gentlemen were laughing but, what unnerved them is that I didn't cry out or whimper in the slightest. I just stared at them, and their discomfort made them laugh even more as they sauntered away."

Jessica, feeling for a loose block, wonders, "That's not the end of it, there's more to this, right?"

"How perceptive!" He gives a little chuckle, then, "What was surprising is that the EMTs were there inside a few quick minutes. They carted this little-broken monkey off to hospital but, instead of being housed in a commoners ward, I was put up in a private room! My oldest uncle came to see me the next morning, before the surgery on my shin, and he informed me that my mother, now a single woman of poverty with three children in tow, ended her own life...and took my two sisters along for the ride."

Jessica is shocked by this, "That's horrible!"

Boxter nods, "Yes, but what followed was not so much. The coward then told me that I was now a ward of the state—an orphan. Now, in all honesty, that was the best thing that ever happened to me but, what brought true clarity, putting this whole ugly affair into proper perspective, was that when I came too after the surgery, sitting on the side table next to the bed was...my layaway."

"Your uncle?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"There was one young man who did not throw, who did not laugh, and when the others jolly well toddled off he just stood there scowling at me...with contempt...radiant with unabashed disgust."

Jessica blinks and instantly realizes, "But not for you."

"Ding...ding for one Nigel Kiel, and I didn't lay eyes upon him again until I married his niece. Don't rightly know what he saw in me laying there, but from the shadows he...he didn't open doors per se, what he did was clear away caste imposed obstacles."

"I have to ask, is...what we're doing now, with the war and everything, is this part of your plan, or plans coming to fruition?"

"Since you are in my confidence, the answer is, yes. What I didn't expect was to discover unwitting allies from within the ranks of our adversaries. This was a surprise, indeed! Then add the reflective shock in realizing that the preservation of my life, and the origin of this journey, all spirals in around the gravity well of...a toy."

With sad eyes, Jessica quietly says, "Jenga."

"Ding-ding-ding." Now in deep thought, Boxter adds, "While little monkey me was lying there in hospital, taking stock in a toy that he was not sure how it got there, some revelations crept into his five year old mind. I always viewed my mother as comfort and a sanctuary from a father I loathed so completely, yet my mother exhibited the worst forms of fragility and cowardice. She extinguished my sisters and the hatred I always had for my father was instantly leveled onto her. This one-eighty flip was from the realization that my father was trying to harden me, toughen me, and in those last seconds before his consciousness lapsed I...garnered my father's approval."

"Wow, this is all so very fucked up."

"Don't quote me on this, but it had an impact."

Jessica is trying not to nervous-laugh, "You could say that."

"If one were to take the time to think on it, it is kind of poetic how a subtle smile, and a single tear, can impart an odd wrinkle onto the bruised psyche of a damaged child. Point is, as an orphan I was now school bound, so I dove into it with a vengeance...in mind."

With wide-eyed amazement, Jessica nods, "And here we are."

Boxter gestures towards the Jenga tower, "In the future, as we commune over...Jenga, and I spin more yarns, we'll need to make a point to stay on top of who's turn it is. Sound like a plan?"

Jessica blinks, "Yea, I don't know whose it is?"

"Well then, love." With a finger, Boxter tips the tower over and it crashes on his desk. He then gives Jessica a warm smile while asking, "Don't you have some toes to curl?"

00000101111

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-MARCH-01-SATURDAY
TIME: 17:20zulu (local 17:20act)

The trash run this morning into Tareyton Greens dropped off 320 lamb and ten cord of Delhi Maple, special delivery from Nepal to the eighth fairway closest to the main clubhouse. This is four-times what it would take to feed regiments 3608 and 3611 but, in the minds of the Gurkha, everybody is welcome to their celebrations.

General Giáp's famous Duck Hook regiment, the remaining combat effective unit left from his elite Third Mobile Cavalry is here, as well as all the crews from the C3/CIC called the Salt Mine.

Also, since the Nepalese are notorious for their generosity and hospitality, they invited the lone CDF regiment cobbled together out of what was left of the Thirty-First Armored Division. Here they're posing as the CDF "occupational forces" staged just outside of Tareyton Keep, solely for optics just to shut the Bank of New Sydney up.

They were stunned when the invite was delivered to their CO.

Known as the festival of colors, Holi is a favored celebration by many Nepalese that memorializes the death to the demon, Holika. Normally there would be parades and drums and horns and all kinds of mosh pit craziness with everyone pelted by handfuls of every color of the rainbow, in powdered form, liberally thrown about but, since they are technically in an AO, here they opt for camo paint.

With the eighth fairway turned into a string of BBQ rotisserie pits, hundreds of Gurkha men and women are going around painting the faces of the CDF troops who are waiting in line for chow. The troops from Duck Hook and the Salt Mine, however, they are sporting a black eye painted under their right eye. The people of Tareyton paint it under the left eye as a sign of unity and celebration, but under the right it's an expression of dissent and protest.

Everyone knows Taiji won the fight, stomped the Co-op like a bug, but they can't thumb their noses at swimming in money.

As a Razorback is landing on the other side of the clubhouse, sitting here at the ninth tee, we have General Giáp and Anthony Gudici doing shots as Jacob and Yemi Kagame head out to the bonfire being lit to burn in effigy the demon, Holika. That said, their attention is actually on Kevin Vossler and Sally Rand as they laugh it up while moseying out to the seventh green to refresh their beers.

Gudici throws out, "I got a fiver says, Voss 'll get lucky."

Giáp laughs, "That be a sucker bet, mate! Everyone knows Kung Fu Koala gets the pick of the litter *everywhere* on Taiji!"

Gudici rears back, asking, "Then why'd he join the Annex?"

"E' said it gets old. Wanted to get away from us all."

"*Matto da legare.*" Gudici just shakes his head, then asks, "Word is, I heard you were his last pro fight?"

"Aye, I was. We were all rootin' for the ol' boy, even me if you can believe that. After so many attempts at the title he deserved a win, and it broke me 'eart when I finally dropped 'im. Bastard packs a wallop, 'e does!" Giáp holds his shot glass out for Gudici to top it off, "This Aila shite ain't half bad! What's it made out of?"

Gudici pours from a bottle while saying, "Rice and millet and, I dunno, other stuff? Binsa Gurung's family owns this label."

Giáp slams the shot back and holds his glass out again while asking, "So, what we be celebrating here? Fagan Pur...wha'evs?"

Gudici laughs while pouring him another, "Falgun Purnima, what the Hindi's call, Holi. The Neps have a celebration for just about everything under the sun...including the sun!" He then nods towards the clubhouse, "We finally got our visitors." Giáp glances over his shoulder and, noticing Maria, Cricket, Bill Nguyen and Paris stepping around the clubhouse, he looks back at Gudici, who says with a nod, "Maybe you'll get your answers now?"

Giáp smiles at him, "I'm not holdin' my breath, mate! It'll just make me squeal louder when they go BOHICA on me."

Gudici holds his shot glass out towards him, "*In bocca al lupo*, my good friend. I'm feelin' positive vibes about this for once."

"Thinkin' that after havin' me arm twisted to throw in the towel like they did, I'm not feelin' any of those good vibes."

Gudici laughs, "Well, General, I already know whazz'up, but I'll let them tell you themselves."

"You be a bloody fizgig! You've been holding back on me!" He slams the shot and with them getting close, Giáp holds his glass out for Gudici to again fill, while he says to Bill, "Hey, Cowboy, it's time you be takin' this Fredo *métèque*-greaseball back wit' yu'z!"

With Gudici laughing, trying not to spill while he is pouring, Bill smiles, "I'm here for my people, so you get your wish, Zipper!"

Giáp looks at Gudici and starts laughing, so Gudici laughs back at him with, "General, all due respects, *vaffanculo!*"

Giáp says to Bill while gesturing towards Gudici, "Listen to the shite for respect, and after what I did for you people?"

Maria points out, "No, what you did for your people."

They bump fists, "Oi, Tiger, that's debatable."

"None of us wanted to cut your fight short like we did."

Cricket says to him, "General Giáp, we're sorry how it turned out for your fighters. They did deserve better."

"They deserved to finish it, but." Giáp then puts out a hand, "It could have ended the whole shooting match. We know that."

"This gives the Co-op some room to breathe." Cricket shakes his hand, and adds, "Great to see you again, Zipper!"

"Aye, it is great seeing me again!" Cricket laughs as Giáp points to Bill, "I 'ear you and Cowboy popped a critter out!"

"Yep, and she is gorgeous!"

Bills holds his PBDi up to Giáp with a picture of Jade on it, "Yea, I gotta do the daddy thing!"

Giáp is startled by the picture of Jade, then laughs at Bill while pointing at the picture, "You had a hand in this?"

Bill mocks him, saying, "Aye, matey!"

Cricket motions towards the Xhemal, Paris, "General Giáp, this is the FIS Secretary General, Paris."

Paris says, "General Giáp, it is my privilege to meet you, sir!"

She puts out her clawed and feathered arm and shakes his hand while he says, "It's my pleasure! What's your angle, mum?"

Paris shrugs, "So many countries have petitioned the UN to end this war, obviously that was pointless. Then they started working on the FIS and, here, they're beating their faces against a brick wall. Problem is they have no understanding of *why* there is this war."

Giáp nods, "You got that right, SG!"

"As a consolation, Marshal Ramirez has an offer to make!"

Giáp asks Maria, "Wha'? We get to drop the PADF?"

Maria smiles, "If you want my offer, no."

"What's the offer then, babe?"

"You have to agree to stay in the PADF before I make it!"

"Why would I agree to that?" Giáp motions towards Paris, "They answer to them. No offense, Secretary General, but playing footsies with the FIS is not my idea of a good idea."

"No, you'll be answering to me." The General rears back, confused, so Maria says, "I need an answer to tell you what I got."

Giáp nods repeatedly, weighing out the options, then throws his hand out at Gudici with his empty glass saying, "I don't need to get shite-faced for this one, but it'll help! I be answering to you, aay?"

With Gudici pouring, Maria asks, "Is it yes, then?"

He nods, "Aye, so what'ch you be offerin'?"

Maria points to Cricket who says, "You will answer to Ramirez directly. You'll get complete control of the PADF, in the shadows until after the war. You'll get four SA platforms, again on the QT through the duration. Afterwards it'll be renamed the Pleiades Defense Force. The alliance is done for with the way the FIS is restructuring."

General Giáp grins, "Well now, things be lookin' up!"

"You'll keep the law enforcement side of it because all local PD jurisdictions in the Pleiades will be traded out for the PPD."

"Aaaaah, I'd rather not have that side of the 'ouse."

"Sorry, General, it comes bundled as a matching set."

Giáp rolls his eyes, "Both bookends, uuuuuh if I must."

"We need to know who from your command staff you'll be saddling with law enforcement. Your people have a reputation of not playing well with others and the PPD is a political minefield, so it has to be someone that can work with everybody."

"That'll be Colonel Rand."

"Bump her up to Major General and we'll agree to it."

"Aye, Rand will be the best person for that job!"

Maria picks it up here, "How many of your people, in the ranks or reserves, have worked GTA5 before the war?"

"Thousands 'ave worked Scorch, why?"

Maria and Cricket look at Paris, who says, "We negotiated to have Taiji designated as a neutral territory, and they were open to that because they wanted to hire your people back."

Giáp shrugs, "With all the high paying non-union jobs comin' in with the Co-op, nobody 'ere, in their rightest of minds, would ever take those bloody jobs back?"

Paris nods then says to Cricket, "I'm feelin' a little peckish!"

Cricket nods, "Let's go grab some chow!"

Giáp is confused as the two wander off, so when they are out of earshot, Maria says, "They can't hear what we're gonna offer you now. What we're about to talk about is between us. Bill?"

Maria gestures to Bill who says, "Think of the intel and the damage your people could do right before we hit Scorch?" With Giáp starting a low-pitched chuckle, "Think that'll make up for cuttin' your peeps short here?"

Maria adds, "We'll also bonus your people the pay difference."

Giáp asks, "You'll get us kit planet-side before we jump off?"

Bill goes, "It's already there. I have five containers in the five conex graveyards, and each has fifteen hundred BR1s. Every railgun comes complete with a web-gear rig with two bandoleers of twelve mags, six extra grenade tubes and two micropede missiles each!"

"Already there you say!"

"As I'm standing here!"

"Coms, how do we square that away?"

Bill shrugs, "You know the A-u-Ex, the app used all over the Pleiades for purchases, an' whatnot?"

"Yea, it's got a coms component and it's PBDi only shite."

Bill nods, "The app is already N-2 and tacnet ready for coms! That feature was interlaced into the code since its inception. To activate you search on a specific string and you're in!"

Giap rears back, "You mean to tell me that crappy lil' thirty year old app on me PBDi is neuronet coms ready, and the fucker already passes the SCC security checks?"

Bill smiles, "Since day one, like it's not even there."

"Oh, bloody hell!"

With Jacob and Kagame coming back, Bill confirms, "You in?"

"You're god-damned right, we're in!"

Maria stresses, "We need soldiers on this one, not berserkers. Do you fucken' read me, babe?"

Giáp nods, then smiles, "Aye."

Maria asks, "We're hearin' that security is lax planet-side? Can you confirm this before we get comfortable?"

"Lax you say? There ain't no security for shite on the deck! Security is tight as a fisty gettin' in, but once you're past the check point there ain't nothin' to stop you on Scorch...I mean nothin'!"

"That's what we've been hearing."

"You be hearin' right!"

Now standing there, Jacob asks, "How many you think we can get on the deck for the jump off?"

Giáp puts a hand out and, "I can get you three regiments on the jump off, minimum, but how they will be sitch'inated will be a last minute thing. We just need to know the primary targets you want us to hit so my peeps can figure it out."

Jacob confirms, "You mean figure it out on the fly, right?"

"Aye, there is no other way, mate." Giáp then points up in the air, asking, "By the way, Buzz, we'll need bombs for the targets! For that, what do we have in the containers?"

Bill says, "On each web-rig ya'll will have four grenade tubes loaded with five wontons each, and two with three shots of ye old Disney Swish. The tube on the BR1 has ten, fifty-kg bombs."

Jacob asks, "Will that do ya, General?"

Giáp low-chuckles again, "Yea, that, that'll do right nicely!"

Maria stresses, "Here's the caveat, we need you to minimize civilian casualties. We need you to evac each facility, that is *before* you bomb the facilities. Get me?"

"It'll slow us down!" Maria gives him a stern face with pursed lips, so Giáp rolls his eyes, "Okay, Tiger, minimum collateral."

Maria huffs, "I know I can't ask for zero collateral."

He points towards her, "Thank you for seeing it my way, love! We'll make a concerted effort to minimize the blow back."

With Cricket and Paris returning, Paris carrying a spit with a whole lamb on it, Jacob asks, "Think we can interest you in filling a few Razorbacks with your people for the first drop goin' in?"

Giáp smiles big, "Sounds like Christmas to me!"

Jacob points out, "You do have ACE suits but we're thinkin' we can get your people in JACCs by then."

"I wouldn't be turnin' 'em down."

Maria thumbs towards Cricket and Paris who are approaching, and says, "We'll need to pick this up later."

With the two reaching them, Paris pulls the head of the lamb off with her teeth and, chewing away, bones and all, she says, "Damn, this is fantastic! How long they've been cooking it?"

Giáp shrugs, "About eight hours, maybe? These lil' Gurkha fuckers had all three-hundred slaughtered, skinned and on the spit inside an hour after the trash run landed."

Paris asks, "Maple wood?"

"Aye! I 'ear your people are nutcases over bar-b-que?"

Paris shrugs, "That's all I've ever known? Salt, garlic, spices, basting and every fire-pit technique you can think of!"

Giap nods, saying, "We're pretty much grillers here on Taiji. We rarely, if ever, do traditional bar-b-que like this."

She then asks, "What's with all the black eyes?"

"Hell, I dunno? I 'ear it's from some advert for ciggies from centuries ago? It's a Tareyton thing."

Cricket asks, "Really?"

"Aye, whatever 'I'd rather fight than switch' is supposed to fucken' mean? When ya-all find out let me know!"

Paris is about to take a bite then stops to ask, "Well, I got another question for you, General."

Giáp points at her, "For you, you enchantingly beautiful thang you, ask away!" He throws his hand out with the empty glass towards Gudici and asks, "Got more?"

Gudici shakes his head, "I'm out."

Jacob nudges Kagame and says, "Let's go grab a couple-three bottles of that stuff for everyone."

With them walking away, Giap asks Paris, "What'll it be, doll?"

Paris asks, "When we were negotiating the Co-op's departure from Taiji, you returned all the capital equipment you captured—only if they left the equipment you destroyed behind."

Giáp nods, "Aye, do you have a question?"

Paris smiles, "Yea, like why?"

Giap nods and says, "One of the most beloved golf courses on Taiji is in Wycombe. It has rusting tanks and downed aircraft, wrecks from a battle from over a century ago."

"Souvenirs?"

"Not exactly!" He swirls his arms around while saying, "These dead machines make great obstacles, so course management is gonna redesign the holes here to accommodate them. Most will stay where their time ended, but some of 'em will be kinda scooted around, just a smidge, but you get the idea. It'll liven the place up!"

Paris wonders, "You mean...as trophies."

"No mum...as memorials. I can't think of a better monument for the brave people who died 'ere. Can you?"

Cricket points out, "It's a Taiji thing."

Giap then wonders, "Speaking of a Taiji thing, what happened with the BoNS and our bloody currency?"

Paris points towards Cricket, "I think Cricket should field this one since she was working it. I'm gonna finish my snack!"

With Paris pulling a whole hind leg off, and plopping the entire thing into her mouth, Cricket says to Giáp, "The Bank of New Sydney was having a shit hemorrhage over the Co-op starting a mining op here, and that's because they weren't buyin' the CDF won."

Giáp says, "I 'eard they threatened to pancake our notes!"

Cricket nods, "You heard right, they were going to be bitches about it and drop your reserve until you could rehydrate it."

"That could take bloody years!"

"Exactly! So we, the SA, we're picking up your notes and are swapping them out for Au notes. In that we dropped twenty-five hundred tons of gold on their lap to cover it."

"So, we be converting to Au and fils, that sound about right?"

"Yes, but the printed notes they'll generate for the exchange will have cosmetic elements similar to your current bills for all of the five houses. Even the digital block-chain will reflect the houses!"

Giáp rears back in surprise, "Nobody gets that kind of special consideration from those BoNS cunts! Why the fuck now?"

"I demanded it?" Cricket then says, "And, since the Annex carries sixty percent of the Pleiades reserve they, well, they did the math when I threatened to pull our stock. Also, Marshal Ramirez is a friend of Queen Victoria so that may have had an impact?"

Maria shrugs, "I just mentioned it, but I didn't ask for shit."

Cricket adds, "The profit share from the SCC operation is going straight to the BoNS and from that the notes they make for Taiji will end up going directly to your citizens. Every man, woman and child who was born here, or naturalized before twenty-three-nineteen, will end up getting paid stupid amounts of money."

Giáp says, "I 'ear it's projected to be thirty-five trillion."

"In Au, that'll make everyone on Taiji a millionaire."

"Doin' the math, that be a hundred mill, US."

"Like I said, stupid amounts of money."

Giáp gnaws on these numbers for a few seconds then asks, "You think this'll weaken us as a people?"

"I sure as shit hope not."

Maria shakes her head and throws out, "Nope, if anyone can skate though this shit, you guys will. I think you'll be okay!"

Paris is about to take another bite from the lamb that's almost gone, instead says to him, "Oh yea, we're reorganizing the FIS!"

Giáp asks, "What's that got to do with me, hon?"

"Funny you should ask, you're now on the Security Council!"

"You've got to be pulling my bloody leg!"

"The PADF now has a non-voting seat."

Giáp wonders, "What's the point then?"

Maria interjects, "If they vote for you to do something, and you voted, then you have to do it. Without the vote you don't!"

"That's right, you and the CXi don't carry votes!"

She smiles, "We call it the fuck-off veto."

Paris adds, "The five houses will carry on with their individual votes in the GA, but Taiji itself holds a perma-member slot on the SC. The houses will trade off reps for that seat each year. Also, both the Xhemal and the Nefer Key will gain a permanent seat."

Giáp notes, "Don't both have observation missions in the GA?"

"Look, the FIS is not a governing body nor it never will be! That is expressly stated in the articles. So, political theatre aside, in the fall it's the GA, now the Diplomatic Convention, it represents the member states that meets for a month, but in the spring we're adding a new and different body of representatives based upon population. This elected group will become the Assembly of the Commons."

He realizes, "Their voices will bypass their governments!"

Cricket throws out, "Exactly! The FIS will be *nothing* like the fucktardary called the United Nations. Those shit-for-brains stick their dick in everyone's business, and three times they pushed for world fucking government, but that will never-ever happen with us."

Paris adds, "You'll need an alternate for the Security Council, so I recommend you make it easy on yourself and pick Rand."

"Aye, she's capable." Giáp nods, "Probably more than me!"

Maria snorts a laugh and, "So, with you now in command over the PADF, I don't know if you picked up on the bitch-fest they were having over the FIS using their roundel for their flag?"

"Aye, but I `eard it was an unintentional fluke by the artist."

"Well, the FIS will be changing their flag!"

Paris picks this up, "Since, I've been told, every organization that had a blue flag have, historically speaking, developed egomaniacal totalitarian leanings, like the UN for one—"

Giáp huffs a laugh, "That goes without saying!"

Paris nods, "We're changing ours to purple with gold stars!"

"Well, pur-gold, that'll be a step in the right direction!"

"We will also be adding a star for Eighteen-Tau."

Giáp frowns, "An' why would that be, love?"

Paris shrugs, "Your people earned it."

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LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-MARCH-11-TUESDAY
TIME: 11:45zulu (local 07:32mst)

In Jessica's prized southern corner apartment on the 100th floor of the Spike, a half-kilometer up in the air, one floor right above Cyzk's in fact, Scott steps up to the family room side of the kitchen counter and bumps his hip into Gilroy's while quietly saying to him, "I'm amazed you're able to walk, dude."

Gilroy huffs a laugh, "You wish!"

Jessica was pouring her coffee on the kitchen side and says to the two of them, "And on a Monday night."

"With our schedules ya gotta get it in when you can, sugar!"

Jessica rolls her eyes then, "Oh! Guns wants to talk to you."

"Three weeks, we keep missing each other. Is it important?"

She shakes her head, "Naw, just whenever! It's a little thing so when you get a chance go see her, okay?"

He shrugs, "I got that fire mission in a few hours, and I don't know what their plans are for me afterwards."

"Like she said, it's no biggie, so when you get back is good!"

Angela has entered the room and bumps into Gilroy with her hip like her father just did, "Mornin' hot stuff!"

Gilroy picks her up and, "How's the new school, Little Klicks?"

"Laurel Springs' zoom-room sucks laggy fat ass, but It'll do!"

Gilroy recoils, saying, "Oh my! You go brush those teeth, girl! Like to kill some'un with that stanky breath!"

Angela caterwauls in his face going, "Muaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He puts the giggling Angela down while Seth steps in asking, "Hey Dave! What dead people music you pickin' for today's mission?"

Gilroy waggles his finger at him, "You can't touch this!"

Angela starts dancing as Seth wonders, "What?"

"Dooo do-da do, doooo-dooo! You can't touch this!" Angela's hip-hop moves are pretty damned solid for a six year old, so after a few seconds of her vocalizing the music she high-fives Gilroy and gruffs, "Break it down!" Gilroy joins in with her, "Its Hammer time!"

Angela chose the song with Gilroy that weekend, they were practicing the video's dance moves for hours, and with her now doing the sideways crab-dance, Jessica laughs, "The fuck is that?"

Angela and Gilroy both point at Jessica, "You can't touch this!"

With those two continuing to laugh and dance, Seth asks Jessica, "Do...you have a point of reference as to what they're doing?"

Jessica hands him a glass of milk, saying, "The song is ancient and the artist is long dead. Hell, I just blew in last night and I heard they were at this all weekend."

"Ya, they were."

With Gilroy launching the video via the N2 on the wall-sized monitor behind them, Angela calls out to Jessica, "Come-on, sista!"

"Aaaaaaah, that's a no."

"Have some fun, Red Love!"

"I'm gonna have some breakfast! Yours is on the counter."

Jessica hands Seth an egg-in-the-hole, Léon style, who asks, "Wha', Léon just popped in—made 'em and boogied?"

She smiles, "No, he showed me how he makes 'em!"

Seth jiggles the plate around and notices that the yoke is soft, "Civilized too! Well, if I must."

As the two head to an island counter in the kitchen, attached to a six-burner stovetop, they hear Angela singing, "*I can't remember all the words but my breath is really stanky, yeeea!*"

Seth and Jessica are amused by that, and with them sitting down, Seth takes a bite and goes, "Holy shit! This is nuts on, Léon!"

"Thanks!" While digging in, watching Gilroy and Angela laugh and dance, Jessica looks at Seth and says, "They're really bonding."

"Please, don't ask if there is anything we can do."

"Yea, you keep evading that question."

Seth looks at her, thinks hard about it, then nods his head, "Okay, if you insist on asking then we'll talk about it tonight, deal?"

"We're supposed to be working together here, but I got this weird gut feeling that I'm part of why you are avoiding the topic."

"Very perceptive, but I think I got a paradox workaround, so we'll talk tonight." After another bite, and the other two giggling and dancing, Seth announces, "Father's going to get shot up today."

Jessica grits her teeth then asks, "Can we stop it?"

With wide eyes, Seth says, "Yes, but we're not."

Jessica huffs and snarls at him, "Why...not?"

"If you must know, his injuries will brick him for three years, but if this event doesn't happen today then tomorrow...he will die!" Seth holds both hands up like a scale, "Which do you prefer?"

"Stopping tomorrow a possibility?"

"There is nothing we can do to stop tomorrow. A platoon is going to get wiped out at Ninety-Five Tau with a megaton level nuke, they have a bunch of 'em buried as booby-traps, so if our father goes tomorrow both he and Peña's flights will be wiped out alongside them. Either way the platoon is forfeit so, what will it be, sis?"

Jessica shakes her head saying, "You can fuck off."

Seth nods, "Well then, thank you for seeing it my way."

"Anything else? Feel free to add some mo-fucks to my day!"

He thinks for a second then adds, "He's going to lose Glados, but next year Michelle will slither into that vacancy where she'll remain permanently. Father always had a strong penchant for athletic types, but Sasha opened the door for Guns, and she is gorgeous."

Jessica blinks and says, "That's the best damned news I've heard come out of your mouth in a long fricken time!"

"Yes, that tidbit is definitely a silver lining."

"Any more good news you can share?"

"Well, what I can tell you is that we've got two more siblings on the way. One will be new, and the other will be revealed! Both are a few years out so, not to sound like a broken record, but—"

"That's all you can say, right?"

"Ding-ding-a-ling!"

Jessica stares at him for a few seconds then says, "I'm gonna go see Samantha this weekend. Care to tag along?"

"If I must?" Seth then fights to suppress a huge smile as he throws out, "Feel free to twist my arm!"

Jessica points at him and is about to say something snarky, where she has a change of heart and asks, "Is Samantha good for me? You know, spending time with her like I've been?"

"First off, I won't be going with you. It's not time yet, and I also have a play-date with Peanuts I wanna keep! Second, lighten the fuck up and have some fun without overthinking shit!" Seth leans in to emphasize, "Sam is nuts about you, not in the turning of screws to you relationship type nuts, but friends with benefits nuts, follow?"

Jessica shrugs and nods, "We are having fun."

"Exactly, so have fun and stop overthinking it!" He points at her, "For all intents and purposes, Josav is behind you. For purely practical reasons he needs to get married and, even though he loves you more than anyone else, you are not in the running."

Jessica had to ask, "Cloé?"

Seth wasn't expecting that, so he thinks about it and says, "Look at it this way, you'll always be welcome to their bed!"

"Does everything lead to sex with you?"

"I am Jacob's son." Jessica gives him a scowl so he smiles, "Putting things in perspective, you're twenty-two years old and so far you've only sacked three people in your life. With Samantha, well, she is gonna open up your world so—run with it! Have fun for once."

With Jacob stepping through the door into the apartment, Gilroy waves to him as Angela hops into his arms, so Jessica says, "Carlos asked me to do a fight scene with Cloé for DiVAS."

"I know you didn't commit to it yet... Look, your social creds are gonna skyrocket if you do it, so do it! You are the most drooled over person in media next to Victoria, and since we know Carlos you realize this was unavoidable. So, my advice, don't disappoint Monique and the family, and bow to the fucking inevitable!"

Jessica rolls her eyes and, "I despise acting."

"You don't get it, they want you to be yourself!"

"Seriously, I'm an aloof asshole to most everyone!"

"Exactly!" Seth takes a bite while Jacob steps up to them, "Look, sis, you are really a great person, but the public doesn't know you. All they see is a walking vortex of KMA-titude!"

"KMA-what?"

"Another Mariaism."

Jacob says to her, "It's only one shoot per season, hon."

After Jacob gives her a kiss, Jessica goes, "They're saying it's for comic relief." Jessica points to herself, "Do I look like comic relief? And how did you get involved?"

Jacob shrugs, "Carlos' director saw you with the Jabberwocky last week, you know, that video going around, and it blew his stack how cool you were under pressure."

Seth says, "You didn't flinch!"

Jessica sighs, "You know I had everything under control."

Jacob points out, "Nobody knows that."

"Anyway, Drake has seen me before!"

Seth informs her, "Cloé told him you could fight for real."

Jessica's shoulders sag, "Oh, that's why."

Jacob asks, "So, ya gonna do it? It'll be fun!"

Seth adds, "They don't have a name for the character yet."

Jacob and Jessica look at each other and go, "Red Hell."

Seth grins big, "That's what I was thinking!"

With Angela crab-dancing into the kitchen, Gilroy cuts off the video, saying, "I think they had enough, honey!"

Scott has stepped in and pats her on the butt, "Eat and go shower. Hop to it because it's Ojai, then Monique's, *then* it's Tucson!"

Gilroy asks, "What's in Ojai?"

"Her school. I gotta log into One-Klick from their offices to hit the tacnet comin' here. She's getting a dedicated wormhole."

With Angela grabbing her food, "*It'll be less glitchy, yeeea!*"

0110011-01100101-01101100-01100110-0110000-01101111-01101110

This morning, Jacob and Gilroy rode on a CXi-commuter flight out to Gore Point. Called the Yard Flight, it's a perma-guppy HWG99f identical to those used for flights out to Second Hand, that does a round trip thrice a day between the Church Key and U-Ey. For the CXi the nebula in and around the red dwarf, One-Eighty, is code named The Yard, and the orbital tracks around the brown dwarf, Gore Point, is referred to as The Floor. Here on The Floor, here we have all of these Trung platforms under construction, yes, but in geostationary orbit a quarter-million robots just mounted the dome and dish side shells to the hub of a new station, Hipo-6. Slated to be christened, Belle Starr,

the ship is a block 2 of the much smaller Augustus Class battle stations and is identical to both the Carrie Nation and Mata Hari.

Stations that could actually fight if the need arises.

Also in geostationary orbit are the three massive SA stations, the Lizzie Bordon, Annie Oakley and Mae West. Each one is having a four-kilometer wide habitation ring installed around the hubs between the dish and dome sides. This addition will accommodate the staff and labs of the CXi, as well as civilian visitors, and this reconfiguration also comes with a station rebranding from the Caligula Class under the SA to a much less controversial Titus Class for the CXi.

They were dropped off on the Annie Oakley and launched with the RRF team that was waiting for them.

The RRF teams from the Oakley, as well as the Mae West, blow into the low orbital tracks around the planet Yunga, that orbits the Rainbow Serpent star known as Wagyl. The RRF teams are lures to pull forces away from the Juat region—where Gilroy is to sneak in and launch his attack.

Yunga is set back by 3au from Wagyl. Only a million-two live and work on the outer periphery of HIP-17900, occupying twelve dwarf planets and moons with Yunga being the center of it all. Just a tidbit larger than Titan, the entire surface is covered in water-filled craters, with dozens of seas about the size of the Great Lakes interspaced between, but no oceans to speak of.

Actual soil is not that common here so short grasses dominate the landscape, and where the dirt is abundant, there are tall ferns that grow to the size of trees. The strangest thing is that there are eight cities with about 100,000 people each, and anywhere from two or three thousand kilometers between each city, and if someone was in reasonably good shape, and get supply drops, they could hike around the entire planet if they knew how to navigate the torn landscape between all the craters and seas. The water is still potable, but the residents have altered the atmosphere to make it breathable leaving them with an oxygen problem—there's too much of it.

Find something that is dry enough to set alight and it will go up in flames as if it were a bomb. Point being, if you light a cigarette here the thing will flare up and burn out inside a half-minute.

Gilroy's pilot hugs the tortured surface of the planet, weaving in and around the mountains and ridges formed by all the impacts from long ago. The city of Juat, in the region sporting the same name, is the location for the main airbase and supply depot for the CDF.

The Warthog for today's mission is configured with two missile farm pods loaded completely with the shorter-intermediate Centipede

missile called the Millipede. For this shoot the pilot has to hold the HWG in a suspended 60° roll while floating in the air, rock-steady behind a small mountain, and this is so that when the missiles fire they will not launch up before they drop back down to hug the ground. Here the Millipedes will be firing out, straight into a nap of the earth flight profile thus avoiding that huge 'lookie here' loop normally seen during a Missile Farm launch—and in practice it worked beautifully!

Unfortunately, for today, this juicy target is actually a trap...

With Jacob and his flight of four Thunderbirds, having pulled away from the diversionary attack, they are now starting to lap around Juat in a wide 180-kilometer orbit to cover Gilroy. They anticipated a counterattack from incoming fighters, but when the mission sequence started what they didn't expect is for three pair of F51d, Djinn fighters to appear out of nowhere from deep inside this perimeter.

After just twenty-two missiles are launched against the base, the Djinn pop out from hiding and high tail it for Gilroy, and with the two closest already at ideal Centipede range they perform a missile dump as Gilroy laughs on freq, ["Maybe this was a bad idea!"]

Jacob calls out, ["Oh, no shit! Get out of there!"]

Gilroy has already called the attack off and, now racing away, their pilot announces, ["Guys, we are E3-outty!"]

With the two closest Djinn pressing down hard, the Millipedes that Gilroy has launched against the target he now redirects against the Djinn and the twenty Centipedes they fired that are hot on his tail. After the cursory missile for missile tradeoff the remaining Millipedes now force those Djinn to break off—but they cannot get away.

The debris from the two destroyed Djinn now rains down on the coast next to a 50-kilometer wide water filled crater.

At this point, Gilroy's ship is going way too fast to launch their Millipedes vertically, and too low in altitude to deploy from the ventral launchers from underneath the ship so, with the next two Djinn closing from behind, only one fires all ten of their missiles and immediately zoom-climbs high to track Gilroy for them.

It took twelve seconds for that string of missiles to catch up, and with the HWG stinger defense guns knocking the first eight down, the ninth missile grazes the hull and blows up one-hundred meters away but, instead of the standard warhead and mini-missile config, this thing has a 1kt warhead.

One thousand tons of explosive force flips Gilroy's ship over on its side, and before it could right itself the tenth missile blows up close enough to slam the HWG into the ground—on its back. The next

Djinn pumps three 1kt tipped missiles into its soft underbelly.

Jacob's nostrils flare out as he tears-ass after those two Djinn, "Ouchie, hang back five-klicks and don't crowd me."

00110100-01010111-01001001-01010111

One could say Laurel Springs is exclusive, as well as pricy, but it is a rare thing for a student to show up to their offices. When most everyone registered happens to be a somebody, active in film, N2 or music industries, then nobody is special however, when a new student is coming from some off world digs then that's a rarity indeed.

Jessica has borrowed Staff-Sergeant, Francis "Frank" Zamboni for today, who now flies exclusively for Maria. He lands her babyback just outside the school's offices here in Ojai, California, taking up most of the parking lot. Problem is that a police officer just so happened to be sitting across the street in a patrol floater. The cop was incensed by them landing there, threatening to impound the ship on the spot, but while Scott was inside setting up the link to One-Klick the Chief of Police gets on the radio and shouts, *'What part of diplomatic immunity and Laissez-Passer do you NOT understand!'*

So much for making his quota...

It took twice the time to fly subsonic-VFR from Ojai, around Castaic then southeast towards Monique's chateau, than it did to do a suborbital-parabolic from over the Angeles National Forest into Tucson which was six times the distance.

At 10:45 local, landing at the Herrero's Arizona facility, right next to the Pima Air and Space Museum, here in Tucson, people that were coming to the museum are now flocking to the babyback where Zamboni gets a kick showing the thing off. With Monique heading out to their climate-controlled storage facility with Lucia, over a mile to the east, we have Scott, Angela, Jessica and Seth now waiting out back behind the garage.

As Scott and Jessica are sitting at a picnic table, watching Angela inspect a junk pile thirty meters past that, Adolphina steps up beside Seth who was waiting for her, "You know, little dude, now that you mentioned it, I didn't realize the difference in you behind closed doors—not doing your autistic shtick."

With the octodroid cameras far enough away, Seth says with minimal mouth movement, "Yes, an' now you can't unsee it." He looks up at her, "Did you fetch the price I predicted?"

She shakes her head in amazement, "The guy wasn't gonna budge, so when I drew a line in the sand he gave it up!"

"And if I didn't say anything you wouldn't have gotten that."

Adolphina looks down at Seth, asking, "What doesn't register in my brain is you risking exposure through me? Like, why?"

"I know that, from your many contacts, you've heard of the Alter of Chains. Am I right, Aunt Dolfi?"

"That's shit from the rumor-mill, *mijo*."

"Ya, if you say so...however, I beg to differ."

"You're kidding! You tellin' me you're the Alter?"

"I haven't told you anything! Jump to your own conclusions." Seth looks up at her and smiles, "I'll deny it but...you've proven that you can keep a secret or two. Fact is, you keep many-many secrets." He nudges her in the hip, "Like you running that blond boy away from Hermosa like you did." He grins, "I think the words you used were, quote, '*I be cuttin' yo piñche huevos off, si comprende!*'"

Adolphina grits her teeth, "I never told anybody!"

"Yea, and the boy skipped town the very next day!"

She frowns, "And we haven't seen him since."

"Nor will you ever! So...thank you for doing that for me."

Adolphina recoils slightly, "What do you mean by, for me?"

"You know how lover's spats go, they have words, shit gets out of hand and sometimes someone will get the shiv!"

"Hermosa? Are you shitting me!"

"No, Hermosa would have been doing the shiving. Now she has a long and happy life ahead of her, and *not* in jail for murder-two. That would have been a blemish your show would not have recovered from so...everybody wins!"

"Why *are* you telling me this?"

"You'll see why in just a quick minute."

00111010-00100111-00101000

At the picnic table, Scott is looking at Jessica in total disbelief, "You mean she wants to sponsor a car, tell me that's it!"

Jessica cringes slightly, "She wants to drive the thing."

Scott is shocked, "Top fuel? Ah, did she forget she's ninety!"

With wide eyes, Jessica adds, "There's no age limitation and she's got great bone density, and reflexes like a cat!"

"She's fucking ninety! What's she thinking?" Scott throws his hands up, "Oh, that's right...she isn't! Somehow someone is gonna have to knock some sense into these people!"

Jessica thrusts a finger at him, "Monique is going to do what Monique is going to do, and you just have ta live with it!"

"Drag racing?"

"Jordan is gonna do it too."

Scott rolls his eyes, "Well then, nuts...it runs in the family!"

Jessica blurts out a laugh, "Yea, get used to it!"

"She has more money than sense!"

Jessica shrugs, "About time you accept that?"

"Jesus!" Scott points at his ear, "Okay, I gotta take this."

By the junk pile, Angela has a PVC pipe sticking out of the ground with a rock balanced on top, and in her hand is an iron pipe that she's going to t-ball it out of the yard with. As if she is stepping up to the plate, Angela is smiling and waving to her imaginary fans, while announcing as if she were Vin Scully, "Now batting first up for the Los Angeles Dodgers, Sian Diego!"

Angela hisses in her cupped hand the sound of the crowd, waves to them, and taps the imaginary home plate with the pipe. She takes a huge swing and misses the rock, "First pitch we have a breaking ball, swing and a miss for strike one."

She sets up for the next pitch and checks swing followed by, "Next pitch, fast ball got past the plate for strike two."

This whole time an octodroid camera has been following her, filming everything, and as she kicks herself for missing that pitch, she points her pipe out to right field, "Sian Diego is calling it, she's pointing her bat towards right field so let's see if she can collect on it!"

Now getting ready for the swing, behind her, Scott is shaking his head as Jessica grasps her face and cries out, "Nooo!"

Angela stops...she blinks as she hears Jessica sobbing, trying to catch her breath as she weeps, "No...not now!"

A blistering rage envelops little six year old Angela because she already knows what this has to be about—she's not stupid. She stands upright and her eyes squint as a vicious scowl deforms her otherwise pretty face. She slowly turns around, with pipe in hand, and starts to march towards them with fury swirling around her.

Jessica has panic in her eyes as Angela steps up to them, and Scott looks up to the sky, not knowing what to say to his daughter.

Angela knows what to say, "I lose my mother and...I was too young to remember her! I then lose my mom...just a few months ago and I have to bottle it up because...fuck'd if I know!" She points accusingly at Jessica, "You and Seth both act like you've been expecting that to happen so...fuck me!"

Scott says to her, "I'm sorry, honey."

Angela snarls, "Not David!"

"Babe, I am sorry."

She hits the picnic table with the pipe, shouting, "Not David!"

With tears rolling down her cheeks, Jessica pleads with her, "Angel, I'm sorry but it happens."

Angela now starts to repeatedly smash the pipe into the table while shrieking over and over, "Not David!"

Scott times it right and snatches the pipe from her hand, at the same time Jessica grabs her and pulls her in close. Dropping the pipe, Scott sits and helps Jessica hold onto the squirming Angela as she continues to fight them and bellow, "NOT DAVID!"

Scott pleads, "Let it out, Lil' Klicks!"

Losing the struggle, Angela cries out, "I want my mom, back!" She then wildly shrieks, "You can't touch this!" Now collapsing in their arms, Angela bawls loudly—painfully.

01010001-01010100-01000100-01000100-01010100-0101111-01010100

Adolphina and Seth are watching this scene play out, and as Angela's screaming fight is rendered into clutching sobs, Adolphina, with tears flowing, says out loud, "A *poco*?"

Seth, with a single tear running down his face, agrees, "Yup."

"I can't show this."

"Trust me, you will." Seth now looks up at her, "Do I need to steal your face to get this done? Like you just did to Skippy the Wonder Chimp? I can make you, but I'd rather you choose too."

"Okay, *mijo*, you give me a good reason an' I'll do it."

"Okay, Aunt Dolphi, I want my little sister to live."

"What do you mean by that?"

Seth nods, "It comes down to this...this moment. This is the very moment the people will fall in love with Angela. Also, two birds, this is the moment where people will see Jessica as human."

With Monique and Lucia pulling into the yard in a 1967 black GTO ragtop, Adolphina wonders, "I don't get it?"

"First, without the public seeing this they'll never know that those cold eyes on Jessie actually shed tears and, as for Angela, see, nobody thinks she's real. Everybody believes someone is writing all her lines. The kid has a mouth and attitude, and this proves it!"

"You said, Angela will live. What's does that mean?"

"It's simple, without the public seeing this, Angela will do the Alien movies then go back to real life. She'll join the CXi and red-shirt her way to a painful demise at twenty-six. If that path is taken I'll be helpless to stop it...she cannot know what I am."

"What happens if the public sees this?"

"They'll see Angela as the real deal! She'll have a celebrated career in film, and not because of her acting abilities, which will be marginal at best, but because of her intelligence, a one-eighty-nine IQ in fact, and that, well, that precocious mouth of hers!"

"That's a no shit!"

After a few seconds of watching Monique and Lucia step up to them and join the huddle around Angela, Seth says, "Go ahead, ask!" He looks up at her with a smile, "You know you want too."

She challenges him by asking, "Okay, if you know so much, how 'bout you tell me what's on my mind? If you nail it then I guarantee, my word as my bond, I will broadcast this."

"Deal!" Seth picks up the gauntlet, "You're in a shallow loop! Lots of lovers but you're left with a lonely bed."

"That's not what I was thinking of."

"That's because you were trying to trick me? I can see the outcome before giving you any response. You are not interested in money or success, you already got all that. Nope, you're interested in Kraft, jalapeño mac-n-cheesy love."

"You're a little bastard."

"Am I right, *mi tia*?"

"A deal is a deal. You get what—"

Seth cuts her off, "We want. We get what we want, Dolphi."

Adolphina asks, "How does this work out for me?"

"You know that idea you and Lucia were knocking around? Signing up three teams per season and give them the resources to build some mod on your dime?"

"Yea, and I was the one pushing back on it."

"I suggest you green light it."

"Seriously?"

"Aaaah, yea! Wanna fix your problem?" He then pokes her hip again, saying, "Do you remember the father-son team who were in Hollywood drivin' that Rat-Fink mod? You know the two I'm talking about, from last December?"

"They're from Nevada and they're on the alternate list."

"Well, best make sure they're on the *made the cut* list."

Adolphina's frowns, "Isn't the father a bit of a dweeb?"

"He's not *the one*, but just make sure they're chosen."

She then asks, "I'm gonna dare to ask one question."

"Yea, I was waiting for this. To answer your question, Jessica and I, we had oodles of time to acclimate to Nicole's death."

"If all this is true, then you could have stopped it!"

"Why yes, but the tragedy here is...that was an appointment our mother needed to keep."

000001100001

TIME: 20:15zulu (local 17:02mst)

Jacob pops into relative space high over Sapphire, and drifts down to one-hundred and fifty kilometers altitude before dropping out of the MDDSH spacial displacement field. It pops like a soap bubble leaving him with a forward velocity next to zero, relative to the oceans far below, which is no big deal, but he exits the dash without the canopy attached to his fighter which is kind of a big deal.

It got completely shot away thirty minutes before he jumped.

He instantly switches on the anti-gravity drive, because it's the convenient option, and mostly to prevent his ship from spinning out of control as it goes into freefall—transitioning from space to an altitude with the millibars necessary for atmospheric flight. Without the canopy he is exposed to the vacuum of space, yes, but in his JACC the severe buffeting from the high-altitude winds while leaving the planet, Yunga, was simply an annoyance. What extended beyond annoyance, and into excruciating, was where the spiral blades that snipped his legs with the force of a JATO-rocket powered Guillotine, below the knee on his right and above the knee on his left, have no thermal protections. When leaving Yunga, the freezing winds that slammed into the stubs of his legs caused such extensive frostbite it destroyed two centimeters of tissue past the blades.

Entering the atmosphere of Sapphire, he gets to do it again.

Yemi Kagame blows in from her jump forty kilometers away and has been orbiting Jacob and his fighter, ["How you be doin'?"]

Jacob is exhausted from the pain, but he manages to laugh, "I've been better, Ouchie! Thank you for taking care of those two guys that were on my ass for me. I owe you for that."

["You be *maga-kolo*, you know, crazy-crazy! Next time you no hear me, and target fixate like that, I'm gonna let them have their way wit' you'z! You get me?"]

Jacob sighs big, "Okay, I'm sorry, I hear you! Let me focus on this and you can bitch me out when we get on the deck, deal?"

["Yea, I be gonna bitch you out sometin' fierce!"]

Dropping through the thermosphere Jacob gets another dose of severe buffeting, then slamming about while continuing their decent through the mesosphere, which would be next to nothing if he had a canopy, but passing the stratopause things seem to settle down so Jacob continues his decent at 45° while keeping it below 500kph.

This whole time, Jacob is shouting and cussing angrily from the pain, followed by hysterical laughter with an occasional curse or two because excruciating transitions into the realm of blistering hell fire that is soon followed by...nothing. The agony he feels is wiped away as dopamine finally kicks in and he is left panting and sweating as they approach the top of the clouds marking the tropopause layer.

Jacob switches coms-channel, "Bud, you busy?"

Bud is furious, ["Wha? What the fuck do you want? I'm not talkin' to you! I don't talk to dead people!"]

"We made it out, didn't we?"

["We should have been splattered just outside of Juat, that's what should have been!"]

"If you won't do what I want, then I'll have Trixie do it!"

["What the fuck do you want then?"]

"Contact CK-Control and let them know I'll be landing at the Spike flight-line. Then tell C3 that I'll be landing outside and...I'll need medical assistance when I get there."

["One step ahead of ya, I already did it!"]

"Okay, wha'd they say?"

["It's not what they said, but what Ramirez said!"]

"Oh, fuck...she say she'll be out there waitin'?"

["How'd ya guess!"]

"I'm sooo fucked!"

["I'm gonna have fun watchin' this!"]

Trixie adds, ["I'll have the popcorn ready!"]

"*Et tu, Beatrice?*"

Trixie goes ["Let's just say that I felt a curious unease by your behavior today. I was wondering what oblivion felt like, but you got your ass handed too you without plunging us into that dark abyss."]

Jacob laughs, "Listen to you talk!"

["Thank you! Yes, after all these years, I think Bud's poetic chops are starting to rub off on me?"]

Bud goes, ["Well, Trix, I'm glad to be a good influence!"]

Jacob asks, "Don't you upload to your concierge instance?"

If an AI could smile then Trixie does with, ["Well, you got me there, Field Marshal! You could say this is my side job now."]

01100110-01101001-01100111-01101010-01100001-01101101

Because they are carrying non-combatants, Zamboni lands Jessica's babyback vertically on the touchdown markings just past the blast pad on the western end of the six-kilometer runway at the Church Key Civil Spaceport. He immediately turns off the runway and back around to the taxiway that runs from there to the Spike.

They reach the flight-line in front of the grassy knoll that's in front of the entrance to the Spike. Shutting down, Zamboni hops out first and, after a quick visual inspection lap around the ship, he calls up into the ladder well and gives them the all clear to exit.

Coming in to land are Jacob and Kagame's Thunderbirds.

Zamboni reaches Maria while Jessica, Scott and Monique lag far behind, trying to get the lethargic Angela out of the ship, so Maria says to Zamboni, "Sorry 'bout that, Zam."

"No, it was good that I was there. This was an exceptionally bad day for everyone. I still got that flight to DC?"

"They'll be ready to go after dinner. About nineteen-hundred Eastern-Standard? That'll be zero-hundred zulu. Cricket will be going with you, but I don't know if Jessica is still gonna WiSO for you or not? We do have tons of alternates!"

Zamboni shrugs, "I'll take Vossler if he's free!"

"Remember, you'll be flying as Air-Force-One when President Mofid and Esma are on board. Don't forget that, okay?"

"You keep reminding me!" Jacob's fighter has touched down, and as it slowly inches up to the knoll, Zamboni laughs then points out, "Aaaaah, isn't that guy's canopy missing?"

With Vossler, Glados and Nancy Yoon stepping up to the knoll, next to them, and an EMT crew exiting the hanger with a hoist and a mechanical gurney, Maria says, "Yea, he's why I'm here."

"Is it Graves?"

"How'd ya guess?"

Zamboni smiles, "Just a hunch?"

With everybody out of Jessica's babyback, they all watch as the Thunderbird's forward landing gear taps on the curb at the edge of the knoll and collapses out from under it letting the fighter's nose drop by 8° thereby slamming into the face of the slope. Propped up by the forked nacelles, they cut into the grass and dirt.

From this, Jacob's right shin and foot, amputated by the suit an hour ago, slides out of the cockpit and drops to the ground.

As Jacob reaches over to his left arm that's gripping the drive management control and, while he pulls it away in a slow rip, Nancy laughs and asks him, "How ya doin' Graves?"

Jacob nods as he inspects the silvery blades where the suit cut his arm off below the elbow, "Couldn't be better, Nancy!" He then shrugs while looking around at his ship, asking, "Waddya think?"

Nancy nods big, "Looks like a fixer upper! I think we can get 'er back into the air in about three weeks? Four on the outside."

Vossler chuckles, "But for you, I think its' gonna be awhile!"

Maria steps along the port nacelle and hops down to sit on the edge of the cockpit, and as she helps pull Jacob's canopy and helmet assembly off she asks, "How ya doin' Chuckle-Fuck?"

Jacob introspectively rolls his eyes, saying, "I've been better?"

Maria points to Kagame, who has just stepped up, and asks, "You, Yemi, what happened out there?" Jacob is about to open his mouth but Maria snarls at him, "Shut the fuck up, I'm asking her!" She again smiles at his wingman, "So, what went down, exactly?"

Kagame goes, "Well, Marshal, it was a trap. It be like d'is, Gilroy launched da missile farm and six Djinn pop up from behind stands of trees and go after 'im! Gilroy downs the first two but da second pair kill 'im. Day got kiloton warheads that slam his ship into da ground and dey gut it with three of those t'ings!"

Maria points down towards the cockpit, "How'd this happen?"

"Well, Buzzard here, he order me to hang back as he go after second pair and 'e down both with Mews. The last two were hot on his tail and d'ay empty on him with long-legs and wontons. The bolts weakened the canopy and a twenty-three landed! They got these shots in overhead before my missiles get 'em."

"You shot both of them down?"

"Yes, mum! I git 'em bo'f!"

With Jacob tossing his severed hand out the front of the cockpit, Maria says, "Thank you, Yemi. You did good!"

"You gotta knock some sense int'a his crazy head!"

"Trust me, you can count on it!"

Everyone from the babyback watched Jacob toss his hand overboard, and Angela, realizing it's him, flies off the handle and races up the knoll and onto the nacelle—ready to pound his face in. Angela dives for Jacob but Maria catches her in midair.

Swinging her fists at him she starts to scream, "Asshole! You asshole! Uncle J, I'm gonna break your face! God-damn it!"

Jacob grabs a hand as Maria grabs the other and he shouts over her rant, "I got him! I got the guys who killed David!"

Maria says, "He got 'em, honey!"

Finally understanding what they just said, she stops fighting them to ask, "You got them? All of them?"

"Yes, sweetie, he did!"

Jacob adds, "And Yemi got the guys who shot at me."

Angela asks, "I have to let this go then, right?"

As Maria nods, yes, to Angela, Jessica has stepped up on the nacelle on the other side of the cockpit, sits, and while surveying the holes in the cockpit she asks, "Seal Club Valley?"

Jacob nods, "Yup!"

"Looks like, today, the seals clubbed back!"

Jacob starts chuckling, "No...no shit!"

The EMT crew has reached the Thunderbird, so the chief asks, "You flyin' or do we hoist you out?"

His assistant goes, "The suit says he blocked the pain meds."

"Then give it to him!"

Jacob protests, "No, that makes me fuzzy an...shit."

The chief smiles, "You feel that?"

"Nope!" Jacob blinks then says, "I didn't want to feel dopey."

"Too bad! We need you all loaded up so when we get you upstairs we can extricate you without a fuss."

With the EMTs preparing Jacob to hoist him out of the cockpit, Everyone hops down from the ship and Maria goes, "Since we have the core here let's settle some things now while he's still awake."

Jacob speaks up, "Yemi, you're now flying for Connors."

Kagame nods, "She's not crazy like you, so sure!"

"Connors will be taking over CAP while I'm out."

Maria asks, "You want Peña running RRF?"

"If you don't mind, that's what I want."

Maria nods in agreement, "Okay!"

Jacob looks back and forth between Maria and Scott, "I can still plan things from a hospital bed."

Maria grins, "Yea, and I'm expecting you too!"

Monique speaks up, "Maria, does he have to recuperate here? If it wouldn't be any trouble, we would love to have him!"

"For a double leg regen, he'll be in bed or on wheels for the whole first year. You really wanna deal with that?"

Monique shrugs, "His children and grandchildren would love to spend time with him and, since Angela and Eight will be residing there during their shoot, I think it would be a grand idea! Don't forget, you installed a secure connection to One-Klick!"

Jacob shakes his head, "I don't want to be a burden."

Monique clutches her hands, "A burden you would not be."

Maria smiles, "I think it would be a great idea! As soon as we get him boned and bagged we'll drop him off on your doorstep!"

Monique claps her hands with joy, "*Oui!* It will be fun!"

"We'll work out the treatment schedules." And as the EMT crew starts to hoist Jacob from the cockpit, Maria now turns to Scott, Nancy and Glados, "Okay, Peña will have RRF while he's laid up. You guys work out the next couple of weeks and touch base with Chuckles while he's in and out of surgery." Maria turns to Jacob, "Hey, think you can still do Mission Oversight?"

Jacob is dangling in the air as the hoist is swinging him from over his ship to the gurney, "If they come to me, no problem!"

Maria points to Jessica, "Whenever there's face to face time, you're gonna haf'ta be the taxi! Sorry 'bout that."

Jessica shrugs, "Not a problem!"

"If Samantha is in town then feel free to have her tag along on these runs!" Jessica gets a look on her face so Maria smiles and says, "I already know 'bout you and her. Boxter told me."

Jessica points out, "It's nothing serious."

"Okay, then it's not a problem!" Maria then turns to Scott and Nancy, "Oh, yea, one more thing on the Boxter front. Michelle Kiel is not to be assigned to any combat mission or risky operation going forward. Not even a panty raid! From here on out she is restricted to diplomatic corps and glad-handing missions only."

Scott asks, "What's happening there?"

Maria shrugs, "Talked to Box. Everybody recognized her from the video of them making contact with the Jabberwocky's."

"I thought Co-op leadership wanted her dead?"

Maria thumbs back towards Jessica, "Yea, that is until she got involved! Now their Corporations Commission is losing their shit. They want Michelle safe so...it's the least I could do for 'em!"

Nancy says, "She's scheduled to lead the Cue Ball mission when they find the pathway. She a go, or do we get someone else?"

"Did the pathfinders find a path yet?"

Scott goes, "We got five mapped out but they're kinda jinky. We think early May we'll have a clean avenue through the nebula."

"Keep her on it for now." With it starting to rain, Maria throws out, "Oh since they're setting traps, we got Ninety-Five Tau tomorrow, right?" Scott and Nancy nod, yes, "Okay then, how 'bout we send in Cŵn Dawgs and not React? Get a feel for whazzup before Peña goes in to start some shit, cool beans?"

Nancy nods, "Done!"

Maria points out, "Not to sound paranoid but everything is now a trap until it's not. Let's keep that in mind for the time being."

Glados throws out, "We have some fresh intel that suggests the Nine-Fivers may be deploying nukes as booby-traps."

"Yea, and?"

"Megaton yield nukes."

Maria blinks, "That's the dumbest thing I've heard this week!"

"It does sound goofy, but we should play it safe."

"We're sending in Dawgs, so we'll see which stupid prevails." Looking up at the clouds and the rain, Maria asks, "Is there anything else we need to talk about now?"

Scott shakes his head, "Nothing that can't wait for later."

Maria turns and looks at Jacob who is on the gurney with the EMTs strapping him in, "Monique and the kids are going to join us for dinner with Mofid and Esma. We'll touch base afterwards."

Jacob has already hoisted little Angela up on his lap, and with Monique, Jessica and Seth at his side, ready to follow him up to the hospital floors, Angela says, "We'll get Uncle-J upstairs first."

Jessica asks, "The dinner is on Two-Ten?"

Maria says, "Yea, come as you are, see you at twenty-one hundred." She then asks Scott, "By the way, how's the car?"

Scott glances at Monique and says, "Don't take this the wrong way, sweetheart, but to me it's a box on wheels! Everyone there thinks it's the coolest thing they ever saw so—"

Maria cuts him off, "I saw pictures of it. It is the coolest thing ever!" She pokes him in the chest, "One more thing going forward, I need you to take over some human resource duties for me."

Scott shrugs, "With CivX picking up I expected as much."

"Okay, cool, let's you, me and Nancy reconvene tomorrow."

As this impromptu meeting is breaking up, with Monique, Jessica and Seth hovering around Jacob as the others head back into the Spike, Glados' eye twitches as she asks Jacob, "Need anything?"

Jacob realizes something is wrong, "No, I'm good."

Glados nods, "Okay...let me know if you do."

And that's it, she turns and walks away.

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With Monique in the trauma surgery suite with Jacob, as he is being prepped for extraction, along with Angela still sitting protectively on his lap, Jessica steps out into the hall to talk to her little brother.

Seth is looking out over the flight line, thirty stories below, and as Jessica slithers up beside him, he says, "I take full responsibility for each and every act that I have committed so, in the interest of being constructive, be specific when you chew me out. Okay?"

Jessica nods, yes, as she looks down over the flight line with him, then says, "What happened today was a very exacting outcome, and *not saying* how and when David was going to buy it—"

Seth drives the point home, "Gave us that desired outcome." He looks up at her with a smile, "I love it when things come to fruition and reaffirms my...vision." He looks back outside, "What happened today was insurmountably beneficial to both you and Angela. One errant word or crossed-wire would have FUBAR'd the whole thing, and the beauty of it is...I didn't do anything!"

"You told me last October."

"Cryptically? Had to say something back then for the dominos to lead up to this morning! On that note, we'll need to send the SA portraits of David, Nicole and Angela's mother to Dolphi!"

Jessica scowls, "She knows?"

"About me?" Seth looks up at her, "Yes, I needed her on board and she can be trusted, and now that she's part of our little intrigue she can be trusted in spades." He looks back outside, "I'll give you the full rundown tonight after dinner."

"I'm supposed to WiSO for Zam tonight."

"Vossler will be taking your place."

"Oh, okay... After dinner, then I guess you'll be getting me up to speed on why today had to happen."

Seth nods, "I can...for Little Klicks, yes, but, for you, it'd be better for you to let this play out without knowing and, considering how badly I played you, big sis, I'll give you that choice."

Jessica rolls her eyes, "Butterfly effect?"

He drolls, "D'uuuh, what else!"

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99

deep in the lair of the tasmanian devil

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-MAY-5-MONDAY
TIME: 09:03zulu (local 24:08mst)

The astronomy community, mainly the Orion Trust, has been reporting that Betelgeuse went out in a Type II Supernovae, even though it had all the earmarks of a Type Ia event. What was worrying everyone, to keep the cover up covered up, was the remnant...

What was going to be left behind?

There were all kinds of pots and side bets on the outcome, ranging from black hole to Earth-sized white dwarf, but if the core was in a carbon/oxygen fusion stage, less than a thousand years from the one-day iron death phase, then maybe they'll get that neutron star they were crossing their fingers and praying for.

In a span of a short hour, the brick from the QP-Gun shot had succeeded in crushing the core into that neutron star they wanted instead of falling short and making a mess of things.

What they didn't want was a mystery that defied the theories, but here they were left with an even greater mystery, and that was how in the hell did it work out so damned well? Nobody really thought they'd get an actual neutron star out of the deal, but here it is in all its blisteringly-hot and spinning glory. The thing they have to come up with an explanation for is why the remnant is following the bulk of the nebula that is expanding out from the nova event? They've seen this before but the neutron star has always flown away from the nebula after an asymmetrical supernova. Here it's chasing after it?

The models the Trust builds to explain this will be designed to confound and mollify the public, but any expert who would challenge them are already in on the secret, so they'll get their cover up!

What they wanted to uncover was the star itself, and the pics

from the reconnaissance flights into the nebula, F308 Grigori operating as pathfinders, with a 32" Ritchey-Chrétien telescope in the missile bay and a roof-prism binocular spotting scope, also sporting three separate R-G-B spectral analysis cameras, that can all operate simultaneously, they got some crazy-spectacular pictures! It's not the star itself, as neutron stars go the size, spin, temp and luminosity are about average here, which surprised everybody, yes, but it's what's swirling around it that made the astronomy paparazzi drop their jaws.

Filaments of gas from the nebula have already bounced back and are dropping in towards the neutron star. With a dozen strands spiraling in close to it like a dusty tornado, backlit by light reflecting off the nebula, the science community is already calling the core remnant, the Tasmanian Devil.

Now, with the leading edge of the nebula just a smidge past 4,000au away from the nova's origin, and the back wall of that nebula at just under 3,800au away, the Tasmanian Devil will never catch up to it, but the thing just blew past Cocytus by ten-million kilometers. Point being, even though "Cue Ball" has already decoupled from its gravitational bond with what was Betelgeuse, the neutron star whizzing by has slingshot it back around and it's drifting towards where the supernova took place—which is now pretty much empty space.

The Orion Trust already wonders what they'll name the nebula as it expands and pulls apart through the centuries to come, but it will always be called the Betelgeuse Nebula, which is fitting. The neutron star will continue to pull strands of debris back from the nebula and the Trust is already banking on it becoming an accretion pulsar.

On this they're crossing their fingers and toes...

The troopers of The Pale Horse, Forth Battalion of the Co-op SOG Seventh AirCav Brigade, known as The Reapers, have been stuck on Cocytus for the last 125 days with the five surviving Annex ghost droids they were fighting to the death last December, but instead of worrisome animosity, they actually had a blast with each other. The N2 instance here in Raccoon City was fired up and both sides had a lot of fun diving into it to recreate, reboot and whore about together.

The cases of booze the troopers from The Pale Horse brought down to the lower levels for new year's didn't last a week but, with the R&R levels still intact after the hot-nebula from Betelgeuse had passed over, the troopers scrounging around found another couple of stashes of spirits that featured gin, rum, tequila, brandy and cognac. Here they had way more than enough to get them through to the pickup.

When the last of the pathfinders blew in and surveyed the expanding nebula and neutron star yet again, from the inside the nebula on the week of the twenty-eight, they radioed Griego and told

them that the pickup would be today on the fifth.

Anticipating that, the troopers from the battalion moved the entire stash of 330 pallets of bullion held for the Bank of New Sydney, one ton per pallet, from the vault on mining level 25 up to a dock that is still intact. Since the doors to the outside of the dock are holding, and they still have atmosphere, it was decided that it'd be better to play it safe and not open these doors just yet and, because of that, they have no idea what awaits them on the surface.

At 08:00zulu, everyone from The Pale Horse is in their ACE suits and now await the Annex to show up. At 09:03, they get an open coms saying that they are landing outside the dock. With the crews from the Annex on the outside starting to breach the doors, the atmosphere from the unsealed dock now escapes into space.

It takes twenty minutes to get the doors cut and pried open.

Once the doors have creaked apart, opening up the dock, Angel Griego, and Angela Simmons step out in their ghost droids, along with Jordan Bristol, and are met by Michelle Kiel, Jessica Burke, and CDF Sergeant-Major, Emily Ryan.

Before them is a sight. The landscape has been both melted and then scoured away by the nebula hitting Cocytus. On the way out they'll hear that, by preliminary measurements, they lost just under eighty meters from the far side of the planet that faced the onslaught, but anywhere from about a millimeter to two centimeters here on the side facing away from where the nebula hit.

In the far western sky, at 2° over the horizon, and a smidge over an astral unit away, is the pinprick of light from the twelve-mile wide neutron star. It is so hot, with a surface temperature of 1-million Kelvin, it is as romantically luminous on Cocytus as a full moon is on the planet Earth however, in counterpoint, in the X-Ray spectrum it would be as bright as Sol is from Earth so it's not quite healthy to be standing there and gawking at for any length of time.

The JACC and ACE suits can only filter so much.

Griego laughs, "*Buenos dias*, Guns! Hey, Red Love!"

Michelle nods, "It's great seeing you, Angel!"

Simmons says, "You look great, Michelle! Hey Jessie, my god, how you've grown! Have to ask, how's my daughter?"

Jessica wonders, "You heard about Ny Hopen?"

"Sorry 'bout Nicole. You got Angela now?"

"Yea, I'm the mom, now." Jessica then asks, "You haven't heard anything about Little Klicks since when?"

"September? I'm sure my core instance has heard it all."

"She has, and I'll get you up to speed on the way out."

Michelle thumbs back at the neutron star, "Guys, we're being showered in X-Rays. It's droppin' below the horizon but our crews only have twenty hours, and since I got a bun in the oven—"

Angela points to her abdomen, "Shit serious!"

"Yea, I've just been told I'm roadkill now."

Griego laughs, "Retired on active duty?"

Michelle pats her belly, "Yup! Angie, you know I never start showin' until close to the end, and planning about had a shit fit when they found out about it this morning. So, here I am for my very last out on the town, deep in the lair of the Tasmanian Devil." She turns to Bristol and offers her hand, "Brigadier General, I'm Deputy Marshal, Michelle Kiel, and I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Bristol reaches out to shake Michelle's hand, "Jordan Bristol, at your service, mum!"

"It is my pleasure, sir!"

"I gotta ask, you're the missing Kiel heiress, right?"

"Yea, that'll be me!" Michelle motions for Emily Ryan to step forward, "I take it you know the Sergeant Major?"

With the visor on her ACE suit going transparent, revealing the face of Emily Ryan, Bristol laughs, "Well, bugger me hatches in the dead of night! Emily, that is you!"

Ryan smiles, "I got me extension, sir!"

Bristol shakes her hand, "It's great to have you back."

Ryan sighs while saying, "You're not gonna like our orders."

"Now, why would that be, love?"

"Seventh AirCav has been attached to Security Services."

Bristol is taken aback, "What in the bloody hell for!"

"All three SOG Brigades have been transferred over to them."

"What the fuck is me-poppy doin' is what I'd like to know!"

"We lost Polaris, sir."

"Still, the move doesn't make sense, Sergeant Major."

"Word is, from your father's mouth directly to me ears are, and I quote, 'This is to protect these assets going forward. Jordi just so happens to be conveniently in command of the Seventh!'"

"This means we're out of the bloody action!"

"Looks like it, sir."

"That's a load of bollocks if I ever heard it!"

"Pale Horse is being ordered to Second Hand."

"What, captivity?"

"No sir, R-and-R."

"We just got done with five months of fuckin' an' killin'!"

"Not my call, sir! And after two weeks there, the unit will be delivered to New Darwin where we'll be layin' low."

Jessica speaks up while offering her hand, "General Bristol, if I may? I'm sure you've heard of me, Jessica Burke?"

Bristol blinks with surprise, "Aye, I have!"

With him shaking her hand, she adds, "I want to thank you for the info on my grandfather. I was able to meet the child, and I'm convinced they all have good homes."

"Good to know, doll."

"The issue on the table, going forward, is rebuilding. The CDF will need the forces being squirreled away in Security Services to get back on their feet."

Bristol nods, "So, for all intents and purposes, it's over with?"

Jessica nods, yes, saying, "As was said to me, the realization of what will be, will struggle to catch up to that reality."

He smiles, "Aye, we read you five by five."

"Three years maybe? Four at most."

Michelle adds, "General, if I may speak freely. I don't know how well you know your father, but things are not adding up. If I didn't know any better, it's like your old man is intentionally driving the CDF and the Co-op into the ground."

Bristol shrugs, "That's above my salary grade, Deputy."

They have to move out of the way as twelve cargo handling robots float past them on their way to the docks to fetch the pallets of bullion so, to change the discussion, Jessica points out, "General, just so you know, on Sapphire there is an air of comradery between our troops and your people in Security Services."

"I 'ear that's another rumor makin' the rounds."

"Well, we're hoping you'll be part of that cooperative effort."

"Rest assured, since it's a neutral zone you can count us in!"

Jessica smiles because the general is reading between the lines with clarity, "Good to hear, sir!" She turns to Ryan, "We need to get your people loaded up. They only have two weeks there!"

Ryan looks to Bristol, "With your permission, sir?"

"It's in your good hands, Sergeant Major."

With Ryan stepping off towards the dock, calling out for her warrant officer exec, Bear, and a ragged string of cargo robots starting to haul the bullion back to the dropships, Michelle says, "Angel, you droids are to ride back to the Church Key with us. Go load up in the one-oh-one and grab a seat anywhere."

Griego is stunned, "*No mames!* Not fetal-shutdown?"

"Nope, you're gonna do a straight transfer at the Spike with your core, before we scrap the droids. You good with that?"

Jessica adds, "You guys earned it." She then laughs, "Just be careful with my upholstery, okay? It's new!"

With Griego stepping away to collect the other three droids, he smiles, "You got it, Red Love!"

Jessica says to Bristol, "You and the Sergeant Major will be riding with us. Your father wants to have dinner with you two, Deputy Marshal Kiel and myself before you go to Second Hand."

Bristol wonders, "Isn't this all rather unconventional?"

"I'm not one to speculate? I'm just doin' what he asked."

With thirty engineers and twice the number of facilities robots passing by them for the docks, Jesus Zazueta stops and wonders, "Don't you fuckers have some place to be already? How 'bout you-all get the fuck outta here and let me do my job, hu?"

Simmons is laughing, "Hey there, Zaz!"

Zazueta double-takes, "Ten Klicks! Just so you know, *chica*, the day I cross over I'm gonna come bang you senseless!"

She snorts a chuckle, "Promises-promises!"

Zazueta steps on towards the dock and calls back, "If you didn't hook up with Rutledge when you did, I would have taken care of ya long before you got your blond ass killed!"

Simmons shouts after him, "Hey, ya fuck monkey, don't hurry on my account, but I'll be waitin' for ya!"

Michelle rolls her eyes at that and motions for Bristol to follow her to the ship, and as they walk off, she goes, "Since I'm in planning,

you and I will be seeing a lot of each other but, before we get settled in, with staffing the way it is, we'll need to identify all the bad apples in the ranks of the Seventh Air. Just a heads up, where Security Services falls short on spit and polish, they do not lack in discipline..."

With them gone, and the robots racing back and forth for pallets, and the troops from Pale Horse loading up on the drop ships, Simmons says, "So, we're chumming it up with Security Services?"

Jessica nods, "Working towards a greater future, Klicks."

She shakes her head, "What's the world comin' too?"

"We're thinking ahead, babe." Jessica breaths deep and says, "A lot has happened to Angela since last September."

Simmons nods then asks, "Good or bad?"

"Both, but the bad is far behind us."

"Okay, then I'll hear the good?"

"She has a career path now."

Simmons' face scrunches up, "She's...six?"

"Yea, but things happened."

"Like, the fuck, what?"

"Like Carlos Sanchez, what."

Simmons' droid shoulders actually sag, "Oh, fuck!"

"She's having fun with it!"

"I don't want that shit for my daughter!"

Jessica almost laughs, "Well, guess what, you don't get a choice here, you're, what, dead? Last I heard."

Simmons points at Jessica with a snarl, "Bitch, I knew you were gonna play that card! I just knew it!"

"Angie, she's having a blast. She thinks it's all stupid so she's having fun with it. The crazy thing is that the Aliens production team has to work around her and rewrite half the scenes because of the shit that comes out of her mouth."

"Aliens, seriously?"

"Yea, she's got 'em wrapped around her little finger!"

"This shit's gonna make her a narcissistic cunt."

"Nope, no chance of that happening."

"Okay, how do you know?"

"She's being represented by Monique Ribot."

Simmons' face scrunches up, "You mean—"

Jessica throws out, "Yea, that Monique Ribot."

Simmons rears back, "How does that happen, exactly!"

Jessica puts her hands out, "Trust me, when you get to the Church Key to upload, you'll be pleasantly surprised."

"Okay, then I'll chill and find out when?"

"When we land, in an hour, maybe? You'll be the first in the queue to upload to your core instance."

"Okay...then, what's the stupidest thing you can tell me that'll make me go—oh fuck no, no way!"

"You really want that?"

"Ya, give it to me!"

"Okay." Jessica thinks on this for a few seconds and smiles, "Okay, Monique and Angela...they're sisters."

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100

echo park slice an' dice

LCTN: SOL-3, ECHO PARK, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-01.01 (0.999au from SOL)
DATE: 2273ce-MARCH-28-FRIDAY
TIME: 03:15zulu (local 19:15pst)

"Penche pendeja!" Maria hisses into the face of Wanda...

Maria has no idea what came over her, outside her aunt's home here in Echo Park, but with her husband of three hours at her feet, gasping and clawing at his throat, something clicks inside her. Maria kicks Wanda in the crotch, snatches her straight razor back from her ex-lover, and then spins around inside her flannel shirt that two local gang-bangers from Crazys were holding onto. Slipping out of the shirt, with her own blood squirting out from her neck, she slits both of their throats, then swipes the blade out at her cousin, Junior, where the razor slashes him across his face and gouges his right eye.

With Junior pulling back and cussing up a storm, and the two bangers gurgling as they die, she grabs her own throat to tamp off the bleeding while she stomps Wanda in the back of the head, driving her face into the ground. Looking at her now dead husband lying there, she whips the razor around Wanda's neck which gives an eerie shlorp when she pulls the blade and it wedges in her spine.

Leaving the straight razor behind, Maria throws herself into her floater and takes off. A sedan glider pulls up to Junior, who jumps in and they tear ass after her. Maria zig-zags her way onto Bellevue and shoots west, and when she runs into Glendale Boulevard she leads them south towards downtown Los Angeles.

01001110-01010101-01000010

"Pinky Pie, who'da *gavacho*?"

It's been five days and Maria is in a hospital gown, pulling an IV cart along with her, at the top of One-Klick with a beer in hand.

She pulls up to a pool table in the staging room where Maggie Prather just made the break, taking solids, but before Maggie can make her next shot she looks at Maria, "Should you be drinking that?"

Maria laughs, "It's always time for *cervesa*!"

While Maria chugs half the bottle down, Maggie squints at her, "You know you should be taking it easy!"

Maria comes up for air, "After five days on my back I needed to stretch my legs. Been pissing that milky EMT shit for two, and now they're pumping the real stuff in me."

"You shouldn't be drinking."

Maria starts to wobble as the beer hits her fast, so she leans in and holds onto the table while sizing Jacob up, "Who's the white boy, hu? The way you two were goin' at it last night says the honkey sure can fuck, but...can he fight?"

With her knees buckling, Jacob catches her and guides her to a soft chair, careful not to pull her IV hooked up to a unit of whole blood, so he asks her, "What happened to you?"

Maria laughs, drunkenly, "Words happened then...well, you could say it was a Friday night Echo Park slice an' dice!"

As Jacob checks Maria's eyes, Maggie has contacted the medical staff, saying, "She's up here. Bring a gurney for her!"

Maria blinks and, "Ey *chihua*, That brew hit hard."

Jacob takes the bottle from her, "No shit!"

Maria asks him, "So, can ya'll fight?"

Jacob lies, "Dunno, never tried?"

Maria looks to Maggie, "Pinky, you need to throw 'im back!"

Maggie has stepped up, "You need to get some shuteye!"

"I wanna watch you throw him off the building, aaaaaah!" Maria looks at her wrist then laughs again, "Aaaaaaah! It's a long fall." She points at him, "I bet'chya *el caca de pollio* will bounce off the pavement like squeak toy! Ya-all wanna take that bet, Pinky?"

Maggie squats in front of her to check her out, while saying, "Naw, I'll think I'll keep the white boy. For now, anyway."

"It's like guys who can dance...guys who can dance can't fuck for shit, so best throw useless back or you be sorry!"

An Asian medical tech has stepped up, "Wha'd she have?"

Jacob hands her the bottle, "This."

The tech laughs, "With what we've pumped into this skinny little thing here, that's half a bottle too much!"

Maria looks up at her and, "E'y, it's my Chink-quita banana! You gonna spank me for being a bad girl?"

"I don't think we'll go that far."

She laughs and says, "My vote is for you to rethink that? You're kinda hot an' I might like it!"

The tech shakes her head, "Jesus, she's fucked up. What'd our *chica* do to keep her on site?"

Maggie stands and, "Some gang bangers killed her husband so she killed them back. I'm thinkin' maybe she has a future with us?" She turns to Jacob, "By the way, can you fight?"

Jacob lies again, "Never had too."

Maggie smiles at him, "Well, I can vouch for you on escape and evasion! You got that down pat."

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Now, here we are two-weeks short of two-years later, and at a far off table on the wet deck of the Marauder, SA15, we have Jacob, Maria and Cricket Washington sitting and gazing outside at the jungle moon orbiting the sixth planet of kappa-Orion, Saiph6B. They are waiting for their Company commander, Robert Jackson, to show and they didn't have long to wait.

Bob steps up and sets four shot glasses down in a row. He pops open a full bottle of rye whiskey and fills each of them. He picks up his glass and they all do the same.

Bob gives the toast, "To the platoon."

The three quietly say "oorah" and they all down their shots.

Bob refills the glasses and takes the seat at the end beside Cricket to watch the moon as it slides past the window.

Cricket talks first, "What's the deal, Bob. You called it."

Bob nods, then stands and pulls his chair between them and the view outside, sits and, "Sorry to say, this meeting here is mostly business and me saying *audios*."

Maria wonders, "What gives?"

Bob shrugs, "For those spectacular cluster fuck ups last week, they're splitting up my company and promoting me. I'm in command of the First of the Third."

Maria gives a snarky grin, "You're in Mook, I'm sorry, dude."

Bob nods, "Thanks for the sympathies."

"Don' mention it!"

Cricket asks, "What about our dumb asses?"

Bob clears his throat, "I'm getting you three off ship until your orders come down. That'll be in four weeks, so tomorrow you guys will go to the Kilosphere. I got rooms for you there. On the Church Key you'll be attached to my exec, Kevin Vossler."

Jacob asks, "Isn't he training for that cage fight?"

"Yea, it's a Taiji thing. See what you can do to help him out."

Maria asks, "Aaand that's it?"

"Yep! You three get light duty until your orders come down."

Cricket asks, "Do you know what those orders are gonna be?"

Bob nods, yes, as he sets another shot glass out, "Yea, I do."

Maria urges him to, "Then spit it out, homie!"

As Bob pours that glass, and topping the others off, he goes, "Naw, I'll let this guy do that."

The Division Commander, Jason Kay, pulls a seat around from the next table and plops into it, so Cricket says, "Hey, Biggest-Six!"

"It's Jay on the wet deck, Cricket." Jason takes his glass and holds it up, "We're gonna toast to Bob, and you wanna know why?" The three shrug so Jason smiles, "Well, Bob got saddled with a fuck up that we in command fucked up, and when he was the voice of reason, trying to prevent us from trying to unfuck the fuck up that he was not responsible for in the first fuckin' place, well...things fucked up again anyway. Sorry, Bob, you're getting the Battalion slot."

Bob huffs a laugh, "You can fuck the promotion, Sir."

Jason laughs and says, "Here's to Bob!" Knocking the shots back, Jason motions for Bob to refill the glasses, "Now, listening to Bob, we're gonna be sending you three away for awhile. All of you will be coming back, but let's see what we can do for you first." Bob looks over at Cricket and smiles big, "So, first up, Cricket, you're going to be attached to Paper Cuts for the time being."

Cricket is suspicious, saying, "Shit serious?"

"Well, you're smart, engaging, personable, sexy, so they're asking for you in the Media and Public Relations group!"

Cricket is laughing, "You gotta be fucking me dirty!"

Bob smiles at that, "No, I was shoppin' you around and they wanted to grab you up! I don't rightly know what you'll be doin' for 'em, but they want ya, so have fun with it! It's gonna be stateside, New York or Los Angeles? I don't know which." He points to Maria and, "Now, Ramirez, about you."

Maria asks, "What about me?"

"Remember that testing Bob sent you to, two months ago?"

"Ya, that was some dumb-ass shit. What about it?"

"You tested high, like one-sixty-eight high."

Maria bursts out a laugh, "Wha', I'm a fucking idiot!"

"No, you're not!" Jason takes a sip from his shot glass then looks her in the eye, "No, you are not."

"So, if I'm such a brain-case what the fuck then?"

"Harvard Law is what the fuck." Jason then jabs a finger at her to shut her up, "An' before you say shit, Ramirez, when you get to talking you run circles around everybody so, honestly, your aptitude points in that direction and none of us can think of a better idea."

Bob chimes in, "I think it'll be a good fit."

Maria shakes her head, "Puttin' my ass through law school?"

Jason smiles, "Everybody has to have a side job!"

Maria shrugs, "Sure, why the fuck not?"

"Your first year will be on campus and that starts in August. Until then you'll be attached to our Wallace affiliate."

She wonders, "YanZhuGu?"

"For the time being, but corporate law is not our thing in the Annex, so I suggested to them that they farm you out to Blackstone."

"Okay, Jay, why Blackstone?"

"You'll learn both mission and tactical planning from the PMC side of the house but..." He then thumbs out the window, "They happen to be working the Saiph contract here! What I wanna know is if they had anything to do with your platoon gettin' scrapped."

Maria suppresses her smile, "Sure, I can poke around for ya, an' if I can fuck these guys over I will. You know I will."

Jason puts a hand out, "Don't stick your neck out, do you hear me? I just want you to report to me what you find out about their involvement, okay? Nothing else, just that."

Maria mumbles, "Okay, I'll play nice."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm gonna regret this?"

"Ya just gotta trust me, boss man."

Jason rolls his eyes and now turns to square off with Jacob, "Now, as for you...you're a problem...you're a problem on so many motherfucking levels, dude."

Jacob's eyes stab at him, "Then don't do me any favors, Jay."

"You don't get it, we had you pegged all wrong...even me."

"Well then, I got ya guys snowed twice over!"

"This entire time, from boot to advanced training and now in the field, you have slacked the fuck off, this entire time you barely squeaked by. Only Bob kept you in service when the rest of us wanted to ninety-nine your ass..." Jacob glances at Bob for a second as Jason continues, "Going over the file from last week Bob showed us how you zagged instead of zigged. How you thumbed your nose at our training and did things your way. We put twenty of our best troopers in the sims and they all died in minutes but...here you are!"

"Sorry to disappoint ya, Jay."

"You warned them, even shouted at them to drop *before* they fired. These arn't lucky guesses, there is some innate clarity or Spidey sense, or some Jedi mind-fuckery goin' on in that head."

"If you say so...so what shit plans you got for me?"

We're rethinking our training and we're sending you to C3 to run sims. Lots of sims. We're gonna see what you can really do!"

Jacob just stares at him, "Tell me there's more to this."

"Yea, that's your side job. You're goin' to flight school."

Jacob shrugs, "Word is everybody has to learn to fly the new Razorback. I heard you really have to work hard at crashin' the thing."

"No, I'm puttin' you in a Thunderbolt..." As Jacob's blinks in disbelief, Jason points out, "I pulled every string to get you in fighter training, so it's time for you to fly or die, son! If you want to drive the Thunderbolt, you're going to have to apply yourself."

"Only the top dweeb super-troopers get this!"

Jason thumbs between Bob and himself, "Yea, our asses are on the line putting you in a forty-seven. Prove us right."

101

ministry of love

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, Trixie, here for my meeting!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How many bisEb we got?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria asks, "The B-Mod?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We still have to chase after the Express."

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

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

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

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

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

Maria asks, "Lasers?"

Beth shakes her head, "Waste of time."

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

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

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

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

Peña asks, "How fast do they go?"

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

Peña laughs, "Then, surprise me!"

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

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

"No, they're different beasts altogether."

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

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

Sargent asks, "This is in effect when?"

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

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

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

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

Jacob asks, "The previous Group Marshals?"

Maria shrugs, "They are in planning now."

Michelle adds, "We needed their eyes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacob smirks, "I bet she will!"

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

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

Yoon asks, "Why are they allowing this?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacob wonders, "Seriously?"

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

"NO! No, I'm game!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Venkatesh smiles, "Montaña will be."

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

"As opposed to when?"

"Aaaaah, good point."

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

Stark goes, "Nelson."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yea?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cricket asks, "Mind if I bring Green?"

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

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

Jacob says, "No fucken' way!"

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

du Conde jokes, "The Ministry of Love."

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

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

"And that means what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rutledge laughs, "Fuck off!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michelle goes, "We're great!"

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

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

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

du Conde cringes, "Intimately?"

"I shouldn't have asked."

"We get along, swimmingly!"

Jacob quietly snarks, "I bet you do."

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

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

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

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

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

Jacob shrugs, "Brown by any other name!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cricket laughs, "They were awesome!"

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

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

"I helped her dig it up!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sargent knuckle taps Stark while saying, "Yea!"

Stark laughs big, "The Majors, baby!"

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

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

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

Michelle points out, "Fat chance there!"

Yoon adds, "She's too beautiful."

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

Maria nods, "Yea, she did!"

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

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

"She did tell that guy to walk!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria asks, "Gift for what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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third time's the charm

LCTN: 95-TAURUS-4E (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76727.0402 (48pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-12-FRIDAY
TIME: 17:01zulu (local 11:10pst)

If you happen to be new to this region of space, between the Hyades and Pleiades clusters that is, what grabs your attention most are the names given to the stars and planets around here.

Almost all of the systems up to thirty parsecs from the Earth were named by either the scientific community, or the survey teams sent out by the members of the old FTL-Drive Consortium—that being the United States, United Kingdom, Russian Federation, Republic of China, and the French Republic. To lock in these holdings, early on the member states took heroic measures to send in civilian settlers as well as diversified holding companies to set up shop.

While focused on incorporating their colonies, when FTL-Drive was finally wrestled from the consortium's control it didn't take long for the rest of the world to vault past them.

The original Russian teams that surveyed this region of space were supplanted by settlers out of Australia, New Zealand, Ukraine, Czech Republic and Canada. The Aussie's and Kiwi's were the first in and, with the two notable exceptions being 83 and 94 Tau, they ended up naming almost all of the habitable systems in a 25ad patch of sky between 30 and 160 parsecs.

Everything in this region has an Aboriginal or Maori vibe to it.

95 Tau was named after a long white haired aboriginal beast called, Yowie. Gas giants with habitable moons are a common thing to find around bright stars, and the grey and reddish stripped gas giant, three astral units away from Yowie, was named after a rose-crested cockatoo, the Galah. Its big moon, where everybody here lives, was named Cooee, which means "come here" so, in that spirit, that's what people did!

The one major city on Cooee was also named Cooee, because Gang-Gang didn't go over well when the non-Aussie's started to move in, and it became one of the hot spots for people coming out to the Hyades when New Brisbane, on 83 Tau, was restricting immigration. Long before Ngāti Whā became a thing, Cooee had the best beaches, casinos and brothels in the Hyades, and even though New Darwin has syphoned off a big chunk of that getaway traffic, Cooee is esthetically prettier and still controls the regional vacation market.

As a planet, Cooee happens to be tidally locked to Galah, no surprise there, but its polar orientation has the traditional north-up and south-down Latitudes. Unlike Taiji, this rock has no rotisserie spin to it and Cooee, as a city, is on an island dead center of the leading-orbital western hemisphere with a day/month cycle of 3.33 earth days.

The residents would have preferred a location at 0-Latitude by 0-Longitude, facing the not so giant gas-giant, but the permanent oceanic high tide that is being pulled towards Galah has swamped all of the potential islands facing it. This orientation of Cooee, the planet that is, has created a permanent neap tide zone that has revealed a belt of mountain top islands that lap the entire planet along the 90° Longitudes on both the eastern and western hemispheres.

The north/south running island that straddles the equator on the western hemisphere, christened New Rakiura, or simply Rakiura around these parts, is an overgrown lush-green landmass about the size of Sumatra but just a smidge less thicc. Cooee, the city of that is, runs along the south-eastern coast of Rakiura and faces out towards the planet Galah—that is permanently hovering over the far horizon.

The planet Cooee is the size of Mars but it's way more dense than Earth, chock full of heavy elements ripe for the taking, and since the core has a fair amount of Uranium in it there happens to be an overabundance of Helium percolating up from that core into reservoirs just below the surface of a metals rich crust. Mining stuff like Uranium happens to be a thing here, as is converting it to yellowcake for processing and export is of primary concern, yes, but the extensive network of tunnels as a result of that effort, crisscrossing the entire length of Rakiura, also have a conveniently utilitarian purpose.

Now the next practical industry here, after turning yellowcake water into U-235 wine, they have breeder-reactors just outside the city of Cooee, suppling all of its energy needs at zero cost to the citizenry, and from the Uranium isotope-must they've pulled from the ground the reactors distill the fissile *Cognac digestif*, Pu-239.

Plutonium has few practical uses other than tactical flambé...

There are a number of grades of Plutonium, that is ²³⁹Pu with less of the annoyingly unstable ²⁴⁰Pu contaminant. Those grades, from

lowest to highest, are Reactor Grade, Fuel Grade, Weapons Grade and Super Grade! Super is 2-3% of ^{240}Pu by volume—and for what they are doing here, as a hidden ancillary industrial pursuit in the tunnels under the northern half of Rakiura, well, that ain't gonna do!

In nuclear industry circles, the purest of pure Plutonium at 99.5% is labeled Reagent grade, and jokingly called Ivory Soap Grade, but here on Cooee the technicians are producing what they refer to as Cherry Grade at 100% pure Plutonium-239.

Pretty much everyone uses the "Cherry" classification as well. Well, everyone who happens to be involved in producing the Cherry Pit cores for mico-nuclear weapons that is, and here on Cooee they have four land based pit manufacturing plants hidden underground with only one of the facilities actually producing the Cherry Pits. The other three simply store and laterally pass raw materials like ^{60}Fe , ^9Be and ^{197}Au used as tampers, pushers, neutron reflectors, as well as O^2 barriers, with the gold-plated spherical pits already implanted into tiny, ready to use plug-an-play warheads the size of a 12-gauge slug, with yields ranging from 50 to 55,000 kge, coming back the other way. That said, the actual purpose of the three "fake" plants is as targets for the SA to drop bombs on so, for today, in just a few seconds in fact, Rakiura is going to get hit yet again!

The problem with the YDF, the Yowie Defence Force, is that after the first attack by the Annex, six years ago when they easily destroyed a fake operational plant here, the YDF optioned the use of megaton level nukes as booby traps—which got the attention of the SA just four years ago. One could say that this violates the moratorium on the use of atmospheric nukes over 1kt but, since it's a weapon they choose to use to defend themselves, it doesn't violate the one-kiloton limitation. The SA has to abide by it, but if Cooee wants to mega-nuke themselves then nobody gives a shit!

The second attack, again four years ago, did not impact pit production one iota, meaning that the Annex was yet again lured away from the actual plant so, this time, the SA finally figured out where the real pit-n-warhead plant happens to be hidden.

The YDF could not prevent the daily jumps by the SA Grigori's into low orbit over Rakiura, but the data the Cwn Dawgs collected, five-second snapshots of the radiation from below the surface of the planet, yielded images of just the three underground hot spots. They could differentiate the signature of the isotopes being staged there, but as for the plant itself—oh where, oh where can it be?

For three years, they've been getting nowhere.

Frank Zamboni, who shadows Maria anymore as her personal pilot and de facto sidekick, many times finds himself in the middle of

impromptu meetings and discussions that most people would not be privy too. The one thing that Maria respects in Frank is his silence, and if he happens to be at one of these off the cuff meetings, Frank simply doesn't say shit unless he's asked something directly, and even then his response is almost always the *'it's not my pay grade'* quip in jest. Just two weeks ago, in a chance encounter with Peña and Yoon, Frank actually threw out an unsolicited suggestion from left field and, plum out of ideas, they give what he proposed a whirl.

Like in Astronomy, they compiled and layered the data from the last three years into a single image, but it's what they didn't see that pulled their attention. From each of the three known radiation hot spots that say, *'drop bombs here,'* they noticed a shielded tunnel that blocked all background terrestrial radiation, including the hard to spot geoneutrinos emanating from the core. The three dark pathways, devoid of any radiant signature, wound their way by more than 200 kilometers out to a large dark spot at the far northern end of the island that covers over twenty-two acres.

It goes without saying, ol' Frank's serendipitous contribution to this long and grueling effort has landed him a prime spot on a Warthog for today's mission...

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One minute after 17:00zulu, three of the Kid Buu Wrecking Crew, specifically the Wake, K'uk and the Sforza, SA75, 79 and 80 respectively, blow in below the lowest orbital tracks and smack-dab right over the city of Cooe. From a dead stop, each one drops a full company sized assault consisting of six drop ships, half slicks and half Warthogs, as well as launching sixteen fighters. The three Mbande platforms then zip out over the far northern end of the island and hit the brakes right above the three hot spot 'targets' far below. From here each platform catapults another sixteen Thunderbirds as well as dropping twelve Thunderbolts from the underside drop stations. Half of the ASF47s are SEAD-Weasels and the rest of them are fresh off the line bisEa interceptors to fly counterpoint to the new and blisteringly fast IR5-Express in case those things happen to show up.

Oscar Peña is now in command of the RRF so he and Jacob swap jobs for today, and as the Mbande shoot out of the system, and with the assault teams dropping fast, he and Jacob blow in with over three hundred RRF fighters from the three stations, ["Okay, Grawlix, your people on FCAP know what to do! As for the rest of you guys, how 'bout we circle the wagons at sixteen-thousand."]

After Peña gets a verbal confirmation from Myra Coulter on FCAP, Kati Connors on CAP, Colion Marceau on SEAD and Chet Kincaid

on CAS, 208 Thunderbird fighters remain in space as FCAP while a mixed bag of 96 fighters follow Jacob and Pena down—that being 48 Thunderbirds, 24 mixed Thunderbolts, and 24 of the B-Mod Cerberus.

After a few seconds of silence, while trailing the assault teams, Jacob pops on command freq, "You know, I can't believe that I'm taking a back seat to you, Dog! What's the world coming too?"

Peña chuckles at that, then, ["Get used to it, fucker!"]

"Oh, no-no-no! That's not what I meant, I'm glad it's you!"

["It is kinda weird swapping jobs like this."]

"When I was bricked for three years you impressed the shit outta all of them. Hell, you impressed the shit outta me!"

["Well, we think alike, dude. I dunno if that's a good thing?"]
Now passing the 100 kilometer mark, Pena asks, ["You're gonna drop 'em a Thin Blu from sixteen-klicks? That still the plan?"]

"Yup, we'll start with two from sixteen—twelve seconds apart. With three-tons of mass and the motor assists they should reach Mach-eight, but if they don't breach we do got other options."

["What if these things happen to pancake, hu?"]

"Then we'll try dropping 'em at two-hundred thousand!"

["I'm curious, how fast will they be going from that altitude?"]

"A static drop from a hundred and twenty-four statute-miles, well, I'm told they'll hit at least Mach twenty-six from there."

["That's reentry speed!"]

"An' with their ablative skin they won't slow down."

["Think it'll work at sixteen-k?"]

"My vote was for thirty-two klicks to start."

["I know what you're doin' here is experimental shit today."]

"Dog, we can't get close enough to MiDAR the site! We don't know the depth to the target. We don't know the constitution of what we have to drill through, rock or dirt, nor do we know how thick the overhead deck is? Reinforced, I dunno? Then we have no idea what constitutes the radioactive shielding! How thick or dense that shit is, is a mystery to us because, hey, they've been blocking fucking neutrinos! I mean, how do you block god-damned neutrinos?"

Peña laughs, ["They must've picked up on something from Dedede we missed...maybe tree bark or some freaky-ass leaves?"]

Jacob nods, "Probably right 'bout that."

With the three-assault teams pitching up from an 85° to a 45° decent, Jacob notices the YDF fighters launching from their base below them outside of Cooe, and from the small base at the mid-point along the coast, as well as from three islands north of the actual target.

With the YDF fighters spreading out, maintaining high speed at a low altitude, Peña laughs, ["Holy shit, you just may be right! They think we're stupid enough to try for a ground assault."]

"Yea, looks like they're gonna try to splash the Razors, but..." With Jacob thinking about it, it then dawns on him, "Ya know, I wouldn't put it past 'em using the one-kiloton warheads on their centipedes like on Yunga, what, back in twenty-three-nineteen was it?"

Peña laughs, ["The Nine-Fives would do that, wouldn't they!"]

"They're desperate. That's what I would do if I were them."

Peña sends out an alert for everyone to watch out for that.

With the assault teams pulling out of the dive, now flying nap of the earth, the CAP fighters pitch up to trail and cover them from above at 16,000 meters. At the same time the 72 YDF fighters from the base next to the City of Cooe, now swing around to follow the assault teams also from a low altitude. Then, as expected, the 72 fighters from mid island base, that went north, has joined up with the 48 fighters that took off from three satellite bases on the islands above the northern end of Rakiura.

Having also dropped to 16,000 meters over the three hot spots are the second set of SA fighters from the platforms.

Peña gets an alert and radios out, ["Okay people, from the CDF training base on the other side of the planet we have sixty fighters coming out to play, probably Djinn, but, if things go as planned, they won't make it here in time to make a difference. Remember, the YDF Anzu's are tight turnin' wiry lil' fuckers at or below Mach-one so don't fight their fight! Keep your speed up, keep your distance from 'em, and don't let their centipedes get inside two-clicks."]

The assault teams have now reached the midpoint of the island and are fast approaching the over sixty hidden multi-megaton booby traps that were set for them by the YDF. The SA assault teams are currently flying in between them, giving these "Bouncing Betty's" wide berth, but they are not making it obvious that they know where they are dug in. It's now up to the YDF fighters to lure the SA fighters towards the booby traps so they can get to the Razors.

With the YDF fighters stabbing at the assault teams in groups of twelve and sixteen, trying to get them to break, the SA fighters and Razorbacks stay together and simply shoot down the 1kt tipped

missiles fired at them by the Anzu model F51's. With no other options, the YDF now launch six of their Bouncing Betty's at the SA.

Racing straight up and accelerating at three gravities, Jacob notes, "These things are moving a lot faster than the old Betty's!"

With three of the weapons arching high over assault teams, and three reaching out for the CAP flying over the hot spots, all six are intercepted by a centipede—and go off prematurely on contact.

The six fireballs are too high up to affect the assault forces below them, and too far away from the fighters on CAP to make a difference, so Jacob asks Peña, "What's the yield?"

Peña says, ["Eight-hundred kilotons, so they're smaller!"]

Jacob nods, "These Bouncing Betty's are faster than the ones from four years ago. Looks like they traded yield for speed."

"It's not gonna help 'em. They should've went big!"

"I don't think the Cooee's would have appreciated that much."

This whole time, from when the assault teams hit the deck, a single Warthog has dropped in from space, and levels out above the northern end of Rakiura at an altitude of 16,000 meters, in a lazy orbit all by its lonesome.

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In the cockpit of the Warthog we have the youngest command pilot for the RRF, Jace Nieto Verdugo, a PFC3 who goes by the obvious call sign "Neato," yet another laid-back underachiever who found their way and purpose with the Annex; and as his WiSO for today we have ol' Zam, Frank Zamboni, parked in the seat across from him.

With all of the YDF Anzu fighters now throwing themselves at the assault teams who are currently turning away from their targets, and the top CAP dropping in to help keep the YDF fighters at a healthy distance, and another six Bouncing Betty's racing up towards the Thunderbirds on CAP over the hot spot targets, Verdugo says on the command freq, "Bulldog, this is Neato, ya'll ready for us to drop?"

As those six Bouncing Betty's get hit by SA Centipedes, each one blossoming in a 800kt fireball, Peña goes, ["Roger that, Neato. We got them busy on the deck, so you're clear to get on station. We really wanna see what Thin Blu can do!"]

"We're on it, Dog! Twenty seconds to release."

Zamboni looks up at Verdugo and goes, "Bomb bay is open."

The weapons they are going to drop here are just over six

meters in length, and that makes them longer than the standard dispenser pods, so the "six-shooter" pod was created just for them. Housing a rotary dispenser, this thing holds six of the new Thin Blu, massive ordinance penetrator bombs that were developed by Sandoval from a conceptual design by Paleo and Maggie—whose inspiration came from the Arch-Penetrator guns adapted to half of the Annex's Thunderbirds and Thunderbolts, replacing the 23-3 rotary cannons.

Code names are Thin Blu or TRDS, for The Real Disney Swish, the forward half of the bomb is simply two and a half tons of depleted Uranium penetrator rod that's followed by a one-kiloton micro-nuke warhead. A guidance and gravity-torque drive unit steers the weapon towards the target, and this is all topped off by two Centipede rocket motors. The first one is a detachable booster stage, and this is followed by a terminal decent-to-impact motor.

Verdugo brings the Warthog gunship to a dead stop, sixteen kilometers above the dark spot on the north end of Rakiura, and says to Zamboni, "Okay, Zam, this is your show! Weapons free."

Zamboni hits the terrain below them with a simple radar pulse and locates a flat spot near the center of the target. Locking it in, he then hits that spot with an ultraviolet laser used in adaptive optics. After collecting wind direction and speed from the distortion, he creates and uploads a high-resolution image marking the exact point of contact for the weapon in case the thing needs to go autonomous if it loses touch with the launch platform—that is if the active telemetry is cut because the Warthog was destroyed during its short flight...

But then, fat chance of that happening with the Anzu's busy!

Zamboni looks up at Verdugo and says, "Ready? Once I let this thing go we're gonna have Bouncing Betty's climbin' up our ass."

As they feel the mild shockwaves from distance nukes start to pummel the ship, Verdugo smiles, "It's what we're here for, babe!"

The first weapon drops out of the bomb bay like an anvil, so Verdugo announces, "TRDS away! Thin Blu two in ten seconds."

As this weapon drops its tail swings up and, once stabilized, the booster motor fires, at the same time the rotary dispenser in the bomb bay spins 180 and stages the next weapon for release, and with the first Thin Blu now fast approaching Mach-3, Zamboni counts down, "Five, four, three, two, one...Let's get outta here!"

The moment the second bomb is released, Verdugo kicks the Warthog into a spine crunching five-gravity vertical climb. This whole time, that is two seconds after the first bomb was let go, five Bouncing Betty's were launched at their ship. Coming at them from hidey-holes over thirty kilometers away from the target, they will never catch up to

them, but Verdugo fires five Millipede missiles to intercept them just the same. Then, in a 'why the fuck not' moment, he fires his one plasma/particle turret gun at the nukes just to see what it'll do.

The particle beams fire in rapid succession, hitting each of the Bouncing Betty's. They all go off prematurely, and way before the Millipede missiles could possibly intercept them, so Verdugo redirects the missiles towards the Anzu fighters as he again fires particle beams at three more Betty's launched towards their first bomb.

It takes all of twenty-three seconds for that Thin Blu to hit the target, the terminal rocket motor having pushed its velocity up to Mach-7.8 at the point of impact and, without breaking stride, the thing punches down through the surface of the hilltop as if it were a stage prop cobbled together out of chicken-wire and paper mâché.

From a three ghost-droid recon team, positioned only four kilometers away from the point of impact, along with their six cloaked micro recon droids hovering at strategic locations above and around said target, they transmit back to Peña, Jacob and Zamboni some fantastic video when it goes off.

The real time video feed is spectacular, yes, but 100k frames per second slowed down to 60-fps makes what they analyze hours later eye popping to say the least. At this speed one can see a vapor tail shoot up from the hole being punched into the hilltop that fills the low-pressure cavity trailing the bomb. At about 100 meters down, when the resistance to the penetrator rod gives way to open space, without some programmed millisecond delay a signal is sent to trigger the one-kiloton warhead early, before the thing exits the excavation tube into the top floor of the pit and warhead production plant.

But, as with 1kt horseshoes and hand grenades, who cares?

The plant covers some twenty-two acres and is six levels deep with an open steel-grated floor between each level. Now, Plutonium reacts with Oxygen, and this is bad for pit production, so the space has been pressurized with 1,100 millibars of 100% Helium. This is so that in the event O² is accidentally released from the rebreathers on the workers bunny suits, or from the breakdown of lubricants and solvents in the machinery and robotics, those molecules and free radicals will drop like rocks straight down through the grated flooring towards the maintenance and support level on the bottom floor.

Even though 35% of the one-kiloton warhead blows up and out of the excavation tube, making a spectacular conical jet of dirt and stone surrounding a fireball that shoots out from the top of the hill, the 65% that blows into the facility does the trick and the entire plant is pulverized in absolute terms. First by the heat from the fireball, then by overpressure being the cherry on top.

From the recon droids, they record that the pressure doors from the access tunnels close to this site were blown out by the blast, so when atmosphere mixed with O² rushes back through those tunnels and displaces the superheated Helium—combustibles then combust! When the next Thin Blu drops through that same hole and ploughs into the floor of the lowest level, when it goes off the entire hillside puffs up then collapses into the cavity where the plant used to be.

Fighting the five-gravity climb, Zamboni reports on command freq, "Dog, looks like Thin Blu came though, as advertised!"

Peña goes, ["Thanks for the love, Zam! Neato, how 'bout ya'll head up to FCAP and hold at two-hundred clicks for the now."]

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With Jacob and Peña diving down to pick up the recon team, Verdugo radios, ["Hold at two-hundred, roger."]

As they level out over the forest to close on the site, and with the fighters on CAP above the three hot spots swinging around to cover them, and two of their SEAD Thunderbolts dropping in for the actual pickup, Peña says to Jacob, ["Buzzard, I don' know how you do it, but your damned crystal ball fucking nailed it again today."]

Jacob blows it off, "Maybe it's just dumb luck?"

["Luck, my ass, how do you do it?"]

At that very moment, through the IFF a stand down alert is broadcasted by the CDF to the YDF forces over Coeee, and as the sixty fighters from the other side of the planet acknowledge the order along with the YDF, Boxter comes on line, ["G'day, Buzzard Chow."]

Jacob responds by calling Boxter by his code name, "Well, if it ain't ol' Box Cutter, how the hell are ya?"

["For me it's early, and the proceedings on Coeee have been vastly entertaining over my...morning pumpernickel and café."]

Jacob smirks, "Yea, it's been a blast!"

["Yes, it has..."] A video of Boxter pops up to accompany the audio being transmitted, ["Now, on a secure line, I have to say I'm looking forward to seeing you with my niece on the fourteenth."]

Jacob nods, "From the sound of it, it's gonna be fun."

["Yes, and as big as this event is, Michelle insists on casual merriment over stodgy regalement, and I can't blame her!"]

Jacob finds it uncomfortable to admit to this, and it shows, "I'm actually looking forward to it."

Boxter blinks, ["That's...actually good to hear!"]

With Peña giving orders for their forces to disengage from the AO, Jacob asks, "Since we're getting an egress without a fight, I kinda get the feeling that you've got something on your mind?"

["Perceptive, as always!"] Boxter touches his face and says, ["Since what we have going on is coming to a swift end, probably swifter than we can imagine, my curiosity is getting the better of me, and I thought it might be advantageous for both of us for me to share my thoughts with you while you are still in the AO!"]

Jacob wonders, "Okay, I'm game?"

["How many of those...thingies you still have in your quiver?"]

"Why do you ask?"

["Well, Jacob...now that you're marrying into the family we do need to get used to calling you that. I happen to know you didn't test those MOPs before today and, me being aware of the proposed testing regimen and parameters, always nosey, and since those things are comically...Tex Avery direct, I feel like a kid in the candy store!"]

Jacob recoils slightly, "Wha'...are you serious?"

["Indubitably...shit serious."] Boxter smiles and points down, ["Below you on Rakiura, the three hot spot *la ruse* for today, we've been waiting for you, and were ready to film and collect data points, so imagine my surprise when you nailed the actual pit plant!"]

"You know we were lucky to find it."

["As the saying goes, third time's the charm!"]

"You were expecting us to hit the other three, right?"

["I didn't quite understand the point of the assault teams until I saw the Anzu's flocking around them."]

Jacob nods, then, "Okay, I have four of those bombs left."

["And I've three facilities that are...useless otherwise."]

"When can you evacuate them?"

["When ya'll popped in overhead, the crews skedaddled."]

"So, there's nobody there now."

["Not a soul."]

Jacob gnaws on this and asks, "What can you tell me about the three sites to make me wanna drop on 'em?"

Boxter shrugs, ["The Co-op did gift-wrapped them for you with a little bow on top, and it took you long enough to come collect."]

Jacob laughs big at that, and as he nods with a smile he asks, "Point made, so what would we be dropping on?"

Boxter perks up with, ["Well, the one in the western part of the island was dug in under a ancient volcanic deposit, or pumice have you, and the one in the east is buried two-hundred meters below a simple gravel and dirt backfill."]

"Reinforced roof?"

"One meter only. A simple support structure!"] Boxter then points up while saying, ["The central *hot spot* was purposefully dug out from under one-hundred meters of solid granite so, the question I propose to you, Jacob, is...are you as curious as I?"]

Jacob thinks about it for a second and nods in agreement, "Yea, Box, I think I'm curious too."

["How 'bout we get Mister Zamboni online!"]

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damnatio memoriae

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-14-SUNDAY
TIME: 23:20zulu (local 10:00pst)

It may be late-Sunday evening most everywhere, pursuant to Zulu-time and our CE-calendar, but here on Prypiat it happens to be early morning Wednesday, the year 9-610. A year, the time it takes for the planet Chernobyl to orbit Zemu, is just a smidge over 20 Earth years so here the 9 in 9-610 indicates the current year since the ANZAC Ninth Exploratory Task Force landed on Prypiat, two centuries ago, with 610 denoting the week count for the current year.

And yes, the settlers who followed them, and got fed up with the stumpies ruling, became the House of Anzac on Taiji.

A week here is 11 days of 26 hours and 12 minutes each, so on next Wednesday's High Moon there will be a planet wide New Year's celebration when it rolls over to year-week 10-001.

Michelle Kiel, the de facto ruling head of state here on Prypiat, now the sole stakeholder in the *Kiel Landgut GmbH*, an estate that acts as the leading SCC lender, as well as the sitting Chairman for both the Cooperative and the Corporations Commission, planned her wedding to not upstage the up and coming New Year's holiday. Long ago when they cut their week back from 12 to 11 days Wednesday became the calendar weekend, so this being a double-digit rollover Michelle is springing for the citizens to take the week off—and those who do work "the estate" will offer them triple time.

This wedding is the Hyades social event of the CE-decade and, where Piper's funeral was a downer, today they have a new Kiel in charge. Shelly has been making political waves in the short week after being installed on the Commission, and carrying the notes for the war means she proxies all the votes.

Then again, yet again, no one here dares to unseat Michelle...

Anyway, here we are at the Star Castle of Prypiat, located on the largest island on the southwest corner of the Bribie Stumps island chain, and this thing brings the idea of a bastion fortress to a whole new level. The Kiel's built it to keep the indigenous fauna out but, instead of opting for one of the many *trace italienne* patterns popular in Europe in days long past, for the Star Castle we have a perfect five pointed concave equilateral decagon, pentangle-star.

Simply put, your garden-variety pentagram.

The thing is striking to look at, with exterior walls constructed from a locally sourced dark-pink granite. Angled at 75° from the base, the polished surface of these walls are featureless all the way to the ramparts running along the top that's 38 meters up, but an eight-story height doesn't look so high up when you compare it to its width which is two kilometers between any two points of the star.

This facility was city central when people first migrated here, mostly from New South Wales and Victoria, but when the islands were cleared of predators then everyone left to set up a practical city closest to the farms on the Queensland Vista, and with New Brisbane firmly established, the Kiel's ended up with the Star Castle—lock, stock and barrel. Some factions did bitch about that but, when looking back a short ways, the Family Kiel did pay for the damned thing.

Jacob comes blowing into a high orbit over Prypiat and, when his IFF is pinged by the PTC, the controllers immediately hand him a pink line pathway through the heavy mid-morning traffic. After cutting in between the congested orbital tracks, he drops straight down over New Brisbane and follows one of the many military flight corridors that crisscross the whole of Bribie Eyot. Like most civilian airspace altitude is in feet so, when approaching the stumps at an altitude of 15,000 feet, he gains clearance from "Deutsch Insel" for an at-will VFR decent and vertical landing in the central courtyard of the castle.

Coming in from the east, Jacob orbits the entire island as he loses altitude, and then tightens it around the Star Castle for the last 1,000 feet. For the second and final orbit he notices a string of gliders and floaters lined up at the red-carpeted receiving area at the only ground entrance to the castle that's located at the nook between the northern and northeastern spikes. As his Thunderbird swings around, approaching the southern spike, the Kiel's family wing, he receives a priority clearance to approach and enter the courtyard from over the receiving area where the gliders are offloading passengers.

Jacob radios back with, "Roger that, DE-Control. On final."

Approaching the portcullis, the entrance to the castle, Jacob's ship flutters slightly as he transitions from flight via aerodynamic lift to gravity repulse, or more commonly known as AG drive. Floating over

the red-carpeted receiving area, just twelve-meters over the rampart, his ship drifts ever so slowly over the wall and past three HWG101's that are parked near the entrance. He touches down in the center of the courtyard with a slight compression bounce to the landing gear, and waiting here for him are Maria, Jessica, Peter and Piper Jr.

The ship's canopy opens and Jacob grabs a carryon bag from the jump seat as he hops out. Landing in front of them, he hands his bag to Peter and pops his suit's canopy, "I miss anything?"

Maria just slowly shakes her head at him, "Fashionably late and stylish motherfucken' entrance, don'chya think?"

Jacob snorts, "Sorry? Made a lil' detour?"

Trying not to laugh, Peter says, "Well, for starters you missed the breakfast, the dedication, and the Tilak has been delayed!"

Jacob wonders, "Come again, Tilak?"

Piper smiles, "The bloody Hindi's have rubbed off on us all!"

Jessica has already looked into the gun ports on both sides of the cockpit and notices that the speed tape patches that cover the muzzles of the five-barrel rotary cannon are missing, so she thumbs at it while asking her father, "Looks like the Polyken has been blown off of the rails of your eighty-eight so, wha'...Maui?"

With a tight-lipped roll of the eyes, Jacob grimaces, "Rongo?"

Maria asks, "Rongo on the table?"

"As a diversion, but Maui is the target."

Maria nods, "They really won't be expecting that."

Jessica asks, "So, pop, how many grapes did ya squish?"

Embarrassed, Jacob cringes, "Two?"

Jessica shakes her head, "Fucktard."

Knowing he's wrong, Jacob huffs, "I'm sorry."

"Ya know, you didn't have to recon today of all days."

He shrugs, "It was on the way?"

Jessica looks at him, "Give me a fucking break."

Maria interjects, "It was really stupid of you."

He protests, "Got some great intel out of the sweep!"

Maria points out, "It's not gonna make any difference, is it?"

With his Thunderbird starting to turn around and taxi back to park among the 101s, Jacob points at her, pulls it back, then realizes,

"No, it really won't make a bit of difference."

She nods, "And you knew it going there."

Jacob sheepishly admits, "Yea, I kinda did."

Maria grins, "Jessie's right, you are a fucktard."

Piper goes, "If I may, me mateys, as you people would say, we kinda need to get this on the hump."

With Peña floating in to land his b-mod Cerberus where Jacob's fighter was sitting, Peter nods back towards the southern wing, "Right this way, pop!"

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The storms came through at 10:30 and left at 12-noon, like clockwork, and with twenty minutes until High Moon, i.e. 13:00 hours, we have Boxter's Star Clipper touching down here in the courtyard. The ship slowly rolls up to the red carpet leading into the southern wing of the castle and the ramp drops onto the edge of the carpet.

The groomsmen step out of the vestibule lobby, where we have 5,300 attendees waiting patiently for the wedding to start, all to escort the bridesmaids back in. First we have four-year-old Jade come down the ramp to walk in with Michelle's three year old son by way of David Gilroy, Nigel the Third, with Piper Jr attending to them. Next we have Angela, who is now ten, walk in with thirteen-year-old Robert, Piper's adopted son and clone of Robert Jackson. Then it's Peanuts walking in with Jacob's favorite wingman, Yemi Kagame, whose black tuxedo is identical to the guys in the line but cut for a woman's figure. Lilith walks in with Seth, and Copper with Alex, Jacob's clone, followed by Cap and Jessica—who is also in a black tuxedo with her hair up in a Dutch-ribbon braid. Next is Brie and Peter, followed by Diego who'll be walking down the aisle solo as the maid of honor.

Now, the bridesmaids are wearing pleated, off the shoulder, tea-length dresses but where simple E.Coli is the most common source of spider silk nowadays, the fibres for these and Michelle's wedding dress was sourced directly from legions of, *Argiope-sutenresu*. The recently developed "stainless silverface" spider looks just like any other run of the mill Yellow Garden Spider, but the silk it produces functions like it has Scotchgard built directly into the fibroin-threads. Once it's woven into satin, the fabric will repel everything and absorb nothing, which means that shimmering white is the only color option you're gonna get with it. This holds true for their shoes where, *peau de soie*, the uppers were custom cobbled out of the same material.

Spill a merlot on any of these garments and it skates right off!

Finally, we have Michelle herself coming down the ramp of the Star Clipper escorted by the Mountain Troll, her great grandfather, Nigel Kiel. Michelle's dress is also an off the shoulder mermaid cut with absolutely no lace or features of any kind. With the panels stitched vertically, this snug gown clings to her as if it were knit, and the skirt flares out at the knees to an ever so popular modest-elliptical train. The simplicity, cut and sheer elegance of this dress accentuates the hips all to exaggerate her already buxom-hourglass figure and, like with Victoria, jaws are dropping at the sight of Michelle walking in!

So, to catch up, the actual wedding for Michelle and Jacob took place just the day before during the rehearsals, when everyone was in casual sweats and cut-offs while they were saying their vows, but today is the social/political media circus for everyone here on Prypiat. Funny thing is, with the Hererro's in attendance, the crews for *iFamilia Cubanaza!* have undercut everyone else and are providing the techs and octodroid cameras for this event at no charge. Sure, they'll be getting a killer episode out of the footage, and Michelle is counting on that, but at least they will be controlling the narrative and not the newsrooms out of New Brisbane. Since Michelle and Jacob are from the Annex, and they are at war with the people attending this wedding, the goal of the Cubanaza crew is to make Michelle and Jacob appear human, friendly and engaging—not the sworn enemy as eluded to and reinforced by the local press outlets.

Then again, Michelle's generosity leading up to New Year's has blown the populace away! They now think of her as a breath of fresh air, and the waves she's been making has pretty much trashed all of the negative press New Brisbane has been projecting over the last few weeks.

Inside the south wing an orchestra has been staged on the third level balcony above the dais, playing Handel's Water Music, and they have timed this whole thing beautifully. At 13:00 hours sharp, right at this year's final week rollover to 9-611, the wedding march begins with them playing the Water Music's *Menuet*. The bridesmaids and groomsmen pace themselves perfectly, and when Diego reaches fifteen meters out, Michelle and Nigel step off when the orchestra switches movements to the *Lentement* and then seamlessly jumping to the *Lento* when they are halfway down the aisle. Yes, at the end of the wedding they'll hop back and play the subdued *Presto* on the way out, but only a handful of people here know classical music enough to notice the sequencing changes.

The bridesmaids on display are all amazingly beautiful, yes, but Michelle's walk down the aisle in this tight wedding gown has a Brazilian *Samba no Pé* vibe to it, but the difference being is that here it's to Handel making it even more mesmerizing. With the bridal party

ascending the dais, each pair splitting at their assigned level, Michelle approaches the steps with a clear mind. Now that she and Jacob are already married the butterflies and jitters she feared are gone, and now it doesn't feel like she's climbing the gallows. The pressure is off so both she and Jacob can relax and have fun while going through the motions for the crowd and the cameras.

As Michelle and Nigel reach the platform at the top of the dais they meet Boxter, in a deacon's stole, who will be officiating for today, and as his assistant we have Eight at his side, robed in an acolyte's alb with cincture around her waist. To their left is Diego and to the right are Jacob and Peña, but where both are in the same black-on-black tuxedo that everyone else is wearing, the shirt for Jacob's tux is sewn out of the same bolts of shimmering silk used for the dresses.

The orchestra shifts quietly to the movement Allegro Molto, and as Boxter warmly bows his head to them, Nigel smiles back with, "Hey ho, Boxxxy! I be on time for once!"

Boxter's eyebrows rise as he goes, "Never thought I'd see the day, but then I never thought I'd hear them butcher Water Music."

Nigel addresses Jacob, "Oi'ello, Mr Graves!"

Jacob nods back, "Mr Kiel."

"It be Nigel now. We're all on first names here on out."

Boxter nods while saying with minimal mouth movement, "Well everybody, since we have three minutes here to kill...for show." He looks to Michelle and, "I have to say you've been a busy little bee, Shelly. Moving quickly I see! You want to build a middle class."

Michelle shrugs slightly, "I don't fuck around, Uncle."

"No, you're not the type. It would've been helpful if we had a heads up, or maybe some input on the direction you're taking this?"

Michelle's eyebrows rise, "Proverbs eleven : twenty-nine?"

Boxter nods, "I remember stressing the importance of that passage to you when you were an ornery...little cur."

"Yea, the lesson stuck." She nods towards her grandfather while saying, "You two were leaving me no choice, and I can't run this thing without experienced people, so you guys didn't get a vote."

Nigel says, "We would have helped you through this, Shell."

"And how many would die in the interim?" Michelle lets that sink in then adds, "That is not what I wanted to inherit."

Boxter rolls his eyes with, "She makes a good point."

Nigel asks, "You think the CLaW will fix things?"

Michelle says, "The C-L-W to start, then the CLaW just a few years down the road when things have stabilized."

"The people will see you as a deliverer, love."

"No, they won't see me as a commissioner asshole."

"*Touché!*" Then quietly he adds, "Little ripper roo, you."

"Clacker applies to both of us, Nigel!" Boxter asks Michelle, "Tell me, the IMF was all for what you proposed, weren't they?"

Michelle informs him, "They jumped on it, and I hear it was because they wanted our float to undercut the CXi for the UN."

Nigel snorts, "The Gnome ratbags already lost."

"I'm not givin' them a heads up."

"Those people are comically...stupid." Boxter adds, and then points out, "You are aware that when this all goes arse up, and distribution tanks, the civis are going to riot."

Nigel adds, "They'll be goin' after the stumpies and politicians."

Michelle nods, "I know, but I'll let them blow off some steam before I intervene. We have to allow some eggs to break."

Boxter nods towards the crowd behind her, "But afterwards, you'll have these stumpy pavlovas running things."

"After I pull their teeth." Michell stresses to Boxter and Nigel, "You know, you guys are gonna hav'ta make yourselves real scarce when the people go on a tear."

Boxter, in deep thought, nods with a smile, "My-my-my, you two are going to be a formidable pair."

Jacob shrugs, "Me? I'm just along for the ride, Boxyx."

"Then this fool shall be servant to the wise in heart?"

Jacob reassures him, "My idea, exactly!"

Boxter stares at him and, "I'm holding you to that."

Nigel speaks up, "Jacob, just be aware that your life before today, in my eyes, is *damnatio memoriae*. As I said, from here on out, you are family."

Jacob smiles, "Family? Wait until you meet the Hererro's!"

"Jesus!" Nigel snorts a laugh, "I'm looking forward to that."

"They are business...savvy." Boxter nods, then says as he raises his hand to signal for the orchestra to stop, "As fun as this all is, we need to get to the business at hand!"

With Nigel handing Michelle off to Jacob, and stepping down off the dais, and as the orchestra winds down, Boxter steps towards the edge of the platform to address the crowd, "I would like to thank you all for gathering together, here today, to celebrate the union of Michelle and Jacob. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you."

Twelve percent of the crowd responds, "And also with you."

After the opening prayer, and the choir beside the orchestra sing the cloying *God In The Planning*, half of the twelve percent who are active in the church chime in along with them—but at least the choir covers up how gawd-awful some Anglican hymns can be.

Eight opens the bible for Boxter to recite, "First Corinthians, thirteen...four through six. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always...perseveres."

He nods where Eight closes the book and steps aside while he looks over the crowd, "This is the theme for today, love. We accept these verses as gospel but, the sad fact of the matter is these are aspirations, not absolutes. In spite of what we would like to personally think of ourselves, as children of God we are all broken—not by design have you, but by will. By our flawed choices and who we gravitate towards. As we meander through life we broken beings lose sight of this truth, as well as many of the truths graciously revealed to us in the word. For too long lip service is paid out to compatibility, and I am one to acquiesce and admit there maybe something to be said for compatibility per se but, when simpatico is put in perspective, it's not who you lay with that matters as much as who...you wake up too."

"One must concede that, when it comes to compatibility we beings tend to focus on qualities that we believe are important where, in time, we discover them to be factually trivial. In the same breath, we clearly overlook the little things, one's hidden quirks and foibles where, much later, these failings may be revealed as monumental. Realize this too late and it's at that point love...may fail."

Boxter points upwards to emphasize, "It's not enough to know thineself. What is important going forward, and most difficult, is to confront one's own shortcomings head on before they come at-issue. Corinthians throws down a challenge for Michelle and Jacob—as it does for all the children of God. That is to sort out and overcome your hidden failings..." Boxter reaches out and brings their hands together, "All to preserve the love that brought you together as one. What I level on Michelle and Jacob today is simple and direct. The challenge

put forth to you is to become the shining example for all of us here to aspire too. So...you up to the task?"

They had absolutely no idea what Boxter was going to say, and it hit home. With Jacob nodding, yes, Michelle is almost in tears as she smiles, saying, "Thank you, Uncle."

Boxter smirks ever so slightly, "Can I get an Amen?"

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Like every Brillig since the war started this reception is also a serve yourself affair, with no waiting staff to be had. During the wedding, transports quietly landed and disgorged the food, tables and chairs, and it was all set up and ready to go when the attendees poured out from the south wing after the ceremony. Also, from behind the eastern wings they wheeled in fire pit platforms loaded with beef, lamb, pork and bumble on spits that have been cooking all night.

There may be over five-thousand people here but there is twenty times more food than they could possibly eat so, with the little guy in mind, after this event Michelle already planned to have it all shipped out to key locations in the poorest neighborhoods of New Brisbane. Security Services is handling the transport and distribution so this is guaranteed to be an orderly affair and, like Boxter noted, 'They will feast for days on this bounty.'

Most of the orchestra is now outside for the reception and, in line with Michelle's idea of revelry, they have switched hats and are now a swing band for the next five hours. Many of the people here have only heard old-school big band music in media, but to actually hear it live for them is a mind bending experience. Between the music, dance floor, food and drink, this reception is beyond crazy fun for everyone here.

With Boxter and Nigel escorting Michelle and Jacob, making the rounds from table to table, the band has reined in the tempo with a compilation of slow dance tunes starting with Moonlight Serenade. For Maria and Sasha this is kind of like a speed bump to them, so they slither back to the tables and plop into the chairs across from Monique who is surrounded by Victoria, Esma, Cricket and Adolphina.

"Hey mom!" Laughs Diego, who is heading back out to the bar-b-que pits with Brie, Jessica, Samantha, Cloé and Rufus Tyrol.

Maria blows her daughter a kiss and, when they fade into the crowd she grabs Monique's glass of wine, downs it all, then laughs at her while saying, "Thank ya, babe!"

Monique's nostrils flair slightly as she takes a deep breath

while trying not to laugh. She takes the empty wine beaker and slides it across to Maria, "The Cabernet, please."

Maria laughs and picks up the beaker, "I'm on it!"

Sasha adds, "Make that two!"

Maria gives Sasha a quick kiss and as she stands she asks, "Ladies, anything else?"

Victoria holds up her full glass of cranberry juice and shrugs with a smile, and at the same time Esma points to her and Adolphina's empty beer bottles, "Cervesa, hon! As many as you can carry?"

Sasha stands, saying, "I'll help ya!"

The drink tables are many, open, and even though there are lines, they are short and fast. Standing in the line next to them is a ravishing Japanese lady that looks a few years younger than them but, on close inspection, the very faint crow's feet by her eyes says she has more than just a few miles on the odometer.

Maria says to her, "I noticed you with Boxter's girls?"

"Yes, though I'm the one here with nothing to do."

Maria offers her hand, "Hi there, I'm Maria—"

"Ramirez, your rep proceeds you." She takes Maria's hand, "I'm Sally...Sally Fukushima." Maria turns to introduce Sasha and Sally goes, "Sasha Zinovenko?"

Sasha shakes her hand, saying, "It's Ramirez now."

"Hanging out with Boxxy, I got'ta know all the players."

Maria's eyes go big and points at her, realizing, "Hone—"

"Ona, retired." Sally nods, "Let's cut the bullshit, Boxxy said you knew about me and, to clear the air, all we ever did was talk."

"Really?" Maria is taken aback slightly, then, "Cool!"

"Box is, first and foremost, a gentleman. He never touched me, except for the first time I met him. That first night at his hotel room, decades ago, I tried to ply my trade and we spared for about, I dunno, four seconds maybe?" Sally then holds up her index finger, "He dropped me to my knees with just a finger."

"No shit! You'll have to show me." Maria shifts gears, asking, "So, you're sayin' Boxter and you are...involved?"

Sally nods, yes, "Recently betrothed."

Again, with the big eyes, "Really!"

"Really! You cool with dat, bro?"

"Yea!" Maria nods big, then, "Why don't you come join us?"

"I don't want to be an imposition or a fifth wheel."

"Okay, don't make me hog-tie your ass and drag you over!" Maria then cringes big, "That didn't come out quite right?"

Laughing, Sally goes, "No, it did, perfectly!"

Maria looks towards Sasha while thumbing at Sally, so Sasha pointedly asks, "Hone Ona, for real, hu?"

"The real deal!" Sally nods, then, "Retired!"

Sasha smiles big, "Trust me, babe, you'll fit right in!"

01000011-01000010-01000011-01010010

It's early evening and Seth is sitting by the 101's near a fire pit with a pig on a spit that hasn't even been touched yet, all the while watching the party continue to rage on, and even though the festivities are not slowing down, a small number of people are starting to leave.

"Hello, Seth." From the shadows, Boxter steps into the light and asks with a smile, "So, what do you think of the Star Castle?"

Seth sips from a tall glass of chianti, and, "It's...okay, look, Monique's chateau is ornate but this place is...kind of ridiculous."

"With all the sculptures an' ornamental bric-a-brac, the Kiel's have elevated the concept of ostentatious to orbital levels of...well, you nailed it, ridiculous!" Boxter then wonders, "I am curious, son, why are we putting our first time face-to-face off until tomorrow?"

"There's someone I need to talk too before she leaves."

Boxter is obviously curious, "A sheila?"

Seth's eyebrows rise, "My future."

Boxter motions towards the glass, "Fortification?"

"d'Elsa Classico, sorry for pushing our meeting out so late."

"You were very specific about ten, and it left a significant gap on my calendar, so I'm not opposed if you want to...move it up?"

"No, you'll need to save that gap for Samantha."

"Funny, she hasn't asked me for the time."

"She's not aware of it quite yet."

"Dare to clue me in?"

"Let's just say...you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Boxter smiles, "Where have we heard that before?"

Seth nods, "Yes, stepmother has rubbed off on all of us."

"Upon reflection, I have to say it is probably for the better."

With disbelief, Seth asks, "Even you?"

"Especially me, so your encounter is coming up shortly?"

"Seven minutes." Seth shrugs, "It's something I saw coming the day the war started. I was sitting with Nicole, my mother, and we were watching Diego steal a base while eating French fries."

"The importance of this moment is...astronomical, I take it?"

Seth laughs, "I wouldn't have put it that way but astronomical kind of lends clarity to what's about to happen to me."

Boxter goes, "Then I'll bid you success, and step off here."

After a few paces, Seth calls out, "Your transformative sermon today was thought provoking, and it kept everyone's rapt attention."

Boxter turns and says, "Thank you!"

"But, sadly, and I am being sincere, it pains me to say that you won't be officiating for our wedding."

"Aaaah, Syleste will be the lucky one!"

"The reading you do give will be well received."

"And...you already know what I'm going to say then."

Seth shrugs big, saying, "I wouldn't want to spoil it for ya."

Boxter smiles warmly, "Well, we should let you get to the task at hand, even though you already know the outcome."

Seth notices Lilith in the distance, "I do have choices."

"No, young man, you already made your choice." Boxter then presses Seth by asking, "Looking forward to it, this future you see?"

Seth nods, yes, so as Boxter again turns to leave, Seth again calls out to him, "What Michelle brings to the table, the results you get in the end, will be far better than what you worked so hard for."

Boxter turns back, "You will elaborate on that tomorrow?"

"I'd be a shitty oracle if I didn't but, by then, there'll be more pressing matters at hand. I can assure you that the final outcome will end up remarkably...savory to the palate."

Boxter's shrugs slightly, "Sure about that?"

Seth tries not to grin, "Prepare to be pleasantly surprised."

01000010-01101111-01000101-01000110

It's 18:30 Wednesday here on Prypiat, but for the ninety-nine guests on the groom's side of the aisle it happens to be 6:50 hours, Monday morning pursuant to the not hair splitting E-Z time standard. Many of his guests have Monday off and have acclimated to local time, with hotel rooms and no intention of leaving anytime soon but, for those employed by the FIS and the SA on the Church Key, today is a business day and they are now running late.

Under the eerily beautiful Twilight 360 sky, with Chernobyl in its full glory, the band has just started their last scheduled set, but between 'Song of India' and 'Cotton Tail' the conductor announces that they'll tack on another two sets after this one.

With the guests giving a resounding cheer to the news, at the edge of the party, halfway to the parked 101's, Caesar and Chell are hugging the Nefer Key attendees as they are leaving. With Luc, Lilith, Maat, Aat, and Alexi now walking past the fire pits and tables of food that are being prepped for transport—a puppy's Nerf ball squeak toy drops from the dark sky towards Lilith's head.

With a small chirp the thing bounces off her noggin, and with it coming back down, Lilith catches it in midair.

As everybody is laughing at this, Lilith slowly turns to look at them where both Maat and Alexi are pointing at Seth who is sitting on a bench ten meters away, with Luc saying, "We'll be waiting for you."

Aat assures her, "Take your time, hon!"

They motor on past her, heading towards the portcullis and the Razorback waiting for them outside the wall at the receiving area, but Alexi turns back and shouts, "Make it fast!"

Lilith glances at Seth, takes a deep breath and saunter's over to him, where Seth smiles at her and points out, "I was watching you. You went to one specific food tray three times."

"You know which one?"

"Moi à Merde?"

Knowing what that means, Lilith huffs a little laugh and says, "Oh, my god, the cheese in it!"

Seth notes, "I understand it's actually called, gick."

"Boxter told me that he and Piper discovered it in the Bayou. Wherever that is? He also told me that they deconstructed it and made it their own thing."

"I'm trying to remember what you said at Monique's."

"About?"

"Cheese!"

"Ah, verbatim...we don't have it where I come from, well, that is until you humans came. First time I had cheese I pow-down'd so much—the next day I though my ass was going to prolapse!"

Seth snorts a laugh, "Yea, that was it! It made me laugh and realize how...funny you are. Moderation now, right?"

"More like adaptation."

Seth wonders "Fiber?"

"Lots of it." Lilith then states, "You've been avoiding me."

"For good reason."

"Why talk now?"

"You've been getting impatient, and were about to lower your standards and...well, it was time anyway."

"So, this is an intervention?"

"You could say that."

"I've been waiting a long time."

"My best guess is seventy-four years."

"Nine months, five days and a handful of hours."

Seth smiles, "Eight hours, but who's counting?"

Lilith nods, "You know what I wanna know."

"Have you heard it said—all roads lead to Rome?"

Lilith squints at him, "How...exactly does this relate?"

Seth's eyes widen with, "As it relates to you, Lilith, all paths before you lead to the same outcome. Sure you want to hear this?"

She clears her throat, "Yea, I wanna hear this."

Seth laughs, "You only got four more years to wait?"

Lilith deadpans with, "Don't make me beat it out of you."

"Okay!" Seth nods and, "How 'bout I show you?"

Lilith wonders, "Hu? Come again?"

Seth closes his eyes and Lilith is hit with dozens of images from her future point of view with a human male, a masculine-chiseled Adonis, very much like a young Jacob Graves but with hair. The key

moments she sees are of them standing at the altar saying their vows, kissing, even walking in the rain on Sapphire. Then comes rapid fire snapshots of them in sexual congress, many times throughout the centuries to come, but this kaleidoscope of imagery ends by returning Lilith to their wedding night—on her back while clawing at his.

For Lilith this was like getting hit in the head with a brick...

At this point Seth releases her and the startled response Lilith has throws her off balance. The most shocking thing for her was that he was already standing there, knowing her reaction ahead of time and guiding her by hand towards the bench. Now sitting with wide eyed and open mouth astonishment, she doesn't know what to say but she manages to blurt out, "Holy fricken' Jesus, the guy is hot!"

"Oh, okay!" Seth sits beside her and, "Ya think so?"

Lilith puts her hands out and notices them shaking, "Can ya take me back to that last moment and let me finish? Pweeze!"

Seth smiles at that, "Let's not."

She protests, "I gotta wait four years!"

He blinks, asking, "Aaaah, you want that guy?"

Lilith almost shouts, saying, "Hell yea, I want that guy!"

With her looking at his face, the reality of who the beefcake was suddenly dawns on her, where she does a double-take and points at him while laughing, "You gotta be kidding me!"

Nodding, yes, Seth shrugs slightly, "Surprise!"

Lilith laughs, "My mental shit is flipping right now!"

"Yeeea, I guess it's a bit of a mind fuck, ain't it?"

Her eyes go wide, "You're a teenager!"

"Physiologically, chronographically, but...intellectually?"

Blinking repeatedly, she whispers, "Lightyears beyond that."

"You're gonna need considerable time to digest and reconcile this, so I suggest we meet every quarter over coffee...in public."

Seth stands and offers Lilith his hand, and as she takes it she also stands and looks up at him with, "I don't know what to think?"

"It's a lot to take in but I can tell you this. You already made your choice, yet right now you don't know how to accept it, let-alone express it." Seth then swirls his hand around over his face and chest, "I need time to grow into what I am going to become."

"Okay." Lilith breaths deep and, "That's the deal, okay."

Seth smiles, "I'd offer you a blow job to take the edge off but, as they say, good things come to those who wait, right?"

Lilith laughs in his face with, "You're an asshole!"

He smiles big, "We're gonna get along swimmingly."

"This is a lot to take in." She glances at the toy in her hand then suggests, "Coffee in...April?"

"Sounds great!"

There is a slight pause where Lilith reaches out to give Seth a little hug, and when she lifts her head up to give him a kiss, he puts a finger up between them, "Those who wait, remember?"

"Wow." Shaking her head in amazement, Lilith starts to step away towards the exit, where she turns back, "Who else knows?"

"Jessie."

"How long—"

Lilith couldn't get her question out before Seth responds with, "Until your tongue turns white." As she blinks and thinks about that he adds, "You don't realize it yet, but the Nefer Key can keep us humans alive indefinitely, but for you—"

"We have an expiration date." Lilith is already aware of the answer when she dares to ask, "I'm gonna die in your arms, aren't I?"

Seth doesn't want to respond to that, and mostly because he believes they should face some mysteries together, but what he says here and now is critical to vanquish all doubt and lock in their future, "Like Marcus and Prima."

00110010-01000111-01010100-01000010-01010100

Michelle's a4 custom-mod of the HWG101 Razorback rolls up to the center of the courtyard. It slowly spins a 180 as it approaches, and is now backing up to the party while dropping its ramp to the deck. The livery colors are striking with the upper half in a rich-vibrant goldenrod, and the underside in a deep Maybelline red. Emerging from the ship is SS-Chief Sergeant Major and BDF expat, Alex Rzegocki, who is geared up in a JACC fighting suit from the Annex. A JACC is not necessary over an ACE suit to pilot a Razorback, but it does make the interface a whole lot simpler and seamless.

Rzegocki steps up beside Porter Macquarie, recently promoted to SS-Brigadier General, and he's standing next to SS-Commanding General, Maroochi Dan who is arm and arm with her long-term beau, Kacper Cyzk. Next to Cyzk is Francis Zamboni who is also in a JACC

and waiting to load up on the ship.

Rzegocki looks over to Zamboni and, "Ready, mate?"

Zamboni nods then asks, "Crew loaded up?"

"Aye, just waitin' for the veeps."

Boxter's protégée, SS-Colonel, Donna Lynn, has slithered up and bumps her hip against Zamboni's, "Hurry back me Frothy!"

Zamboni gives her a smile and a kiss, "It's only ten days."

This whole time, a lit Nigel Kiel staggers up behind them with Lucia Hererro in tow, who is giggling while adjusting her blouse and skirt, where he hangs an arm over Porter's shoulder while saying, "Take good care of your charges, Mister Porter!"

Porter likes Nigel, and smiles, "They're in good hands, sir!"

"That they are!" Nigel says as Porter offers him a BuzzKill capsule, where he bites into it when Porter drops it into his mouth. Nigel shakes his head wildly as half of the alcohol in his system is instantly neutralized and, now realizing what just happened, while pointing at Lucia he asks with some astonishment, "Did I just?"

"Pork the lass? That you did, sir!"

"Blimey!" Nigel then quietly asks, "Who be the kangy?"

"Lucia, sir."

"From?"

"She's Cuban."

"And a dandy specimen at that!"

Lucia has stepped up and grabs Nigel, then shakes her head while laughing, "*You joder como un monstruo!*"

With Lucia dragging him off, Nigel looks back at them with a shrug and a smile, so Porter calls out to him, "You're a hit, sir!"

Dan says to Porter, "Don't say anything to him."

Porter nods, "I ain't gonna spoil it for 'im, general, no siree! The ol' coot is havin' fun an' she thinks he's way younger than he is."

Dan snorts, "That old coot looks younger than you do!"

On the bandstand, right before the start of the very last set, Michelle is in white BDU pants and t-shirt, with Jacob next to her contrasting in his everyday black BDU pants and tees. With them are Brie, Diego and little Nigel in desert and green camo BDUs and tees. Then behind Michelle is Shest, Nikki-6, who is in black and Boxter standing beside Michelle in a cheerful gray pinstripe suit.

The conductor calls out, "Let's hear it for the newlyweds!"

To cheers and applause, he hands Michelle the mic where she says, "We're going to take off here, but I wanted to thank you all for coming today. With that said, I also wanted to let you know that everyone here today is invited back for a New Year's celebration here at the Star Castle!" With everyone there cheering big, Michelle adds, "We'll have a proper fireworks show and..."

Michelle holds the mic out to the conductor who informs them, "Me and me mates will be pumpin' out the oldies!"

When the grateful applause dies down, Michelle says to them, "We would also like to thank everybody for the generous donations to the New Brisbane Children's Conservatory for the Performing Arts and, for what was given out of the goodness of your hearts, as our show of appreciation for each fiver you contributed—it converts to a permanent revenue share in the Prypiat Sport Stadiums Project..."

The hushed silence from this news sweeps over the crowd as Michelle says, "The Kiel Estate will pony up the funds to replace our FIFA and Rugby stadiums, then build a Gridiron Football stadium and a Baseball stadium here in New Brisbane. The locations are not locked in but, as I speak, we are in negotiations for pro MLB and NFL expansion teams and, since there will be no note hanging over these facilities, if managed properly, with concessions we should see dividends by the second or third season so..." The explosive cheers and applause from that little tidbit of news makes it difficult for the crowd to hear Michelle add, "It will be a pleasure doing business with you all!"

Boxter nods and stealthily says to her, "Dosh and circuses, you are making stumpy points today, aren't you."

Michelle cuts the mic and looks him in the eye, "It will be the only revenue stream they'll get that they don't have to work for and, for what's coming, they're gonna need it."

01001110-010100-01000110-00111010-001001

In Samantha's top floor apartment in Boxter's mansion, the one that overlooks the central atrium, right under the fern dome above the fourth floor, Samantha has traded her gown for a sheer robe after a shower an hour ago. Jessica blows in and flies out of the tuxedo and then throws herself into a much needed shower.

Stepping out of the bathroom while drying herself off, Jessica apologizes with, "Sorry, I was running late."

Sipping a glass of Shiraz, Samantha leers at her body with, "You looked great in that tux, today."

"Yeeea, I'm not one to be wearing that guy shit."

"Damned fucking hot, babe."

"I ain't butch."

"Still, it made me wet!" Having stepping up to Jessica, with a sly smile Samantha tosses her wine across Jessica's belly, chest and face while snickering, "Missed a spot!"

Jessica is not exactly keen on Samantha being aggressive like this, but sometimes it can be fun? There is no mistaking what she wants so, as Jessica wipes the wine off her face with the towel, she nonchalantly paths herself into Samantha's mind and gives it to her.

Samantha yelps as her back arches in a massive spasm, and at the same time her arms twist around and are hoisted up the middle of her back as if Jessica was twisting them by hand for real. Unable to move, Jessica pushes her back into a plush sofa followed by snapping her thigh with a twisted towel—making Samantha wince and yip.

Jessica crawls over her and pulls the robe apart while biting her neck, and as she starts to work her way down, Samantha cries out, "You are something special! You are something special!"

While she is kissing Samantha's chest, working her way down between her breasts, with a thought Jessica makes the pain even more pronounced as Samantha's back arches and twists. Now grimacing from the pain, Samantha catches her breath and shouts with glee, "Candybar! Candybar-candybar-candybar!"

Jessica cannot contain her laughter, and as she plops back into the sofa, she continues to laugh while saying, "That's a buzzkill! I'm not watching any more classic movies with you ever again!"

Samantha protests, "Come on, we're just getting started!"

"Fuck you."

"That's the idea!"

Jessica shrugs, "I don't get it? Why do you want it rough?"

Samantha is now free to move, so she pulls her arms around while thinking about it, "It's only once and awhile?"

"Still, the question stands."

"Ya really wanna know, love?"

Jessica's eyes glare at her, "I wouldn't be asking."

Samantha sits on her legs and throws her hands out, "Okay, best I can surmise, it's the—I want what I want forced on me thing!"

"Forced on you."

"Yea!"

Jessica shakes her head, "I'll never understand that shit."

"But you do it so damned well?" Samantha then points out, "And, good top is hard to find!"

"Maybe you should get someone else to smother your pillow?"

Samantha thinks about it and, "Well...gasping is not my kink but, for you, I'm game for anything!"

Jessica deadpans with, "Let's not."

Samantha shrugs, then, "I got an idea!"

Jessica huffs a laugh, "Yea, you and your ideas."

"No, seriously!"

"Okay, I'm listening."

Samantha stares at Jessica in the eyes, then, "Marry me."

Chuckling, Jessica asks, "Are you out of your mind?"

Samantha shrugs slightly, "No, I'm not."

"You are out of your mind, girl."

Then quietly, "No...I'm not."

Jessica protests, "I'm not a lesbo!"

Samantha shrugs big, "Well, neither am I."

Jessica then throws out, "I'm not giving up cock!"

Samantha slaps herself on the knee and, "Glad we're on the same frequency because I'm not either!"

"Then what's the point?"

Samantha thinks about it and, "I've been noodling over it for quite some time, but...what my father said today convinced me."

"You an' I are not the same, on any level."

"I know, isn't that cool!"

Jessica points to herself, "Edjimate me."

Samantha points out, "It's who you wake up to that matters."

While shaking her head, Jessica says, "This is moronic."

"Hear me out, okay? Right now we lead completely separate lives an' we see each other every week or two. We're not up each other's ass so, when you think about it, nothing changes?"

"We have nothing in common!"

"True, agreed, but admit it...it'd be cool!"

Jessica looks at her, "I don't fit in your world."

Samantha peers into her and reveals, "I live in a world of lies and deceit at every level. I'm trying to be like my father but I don't have a Piper! You...you keep me grounded. You keep me honest."

"I thought I was your piece of ass?"

"Ah, yea, my friends are jealous of me because...look at you!"

"Then I am your piece of ass!"

"Not hardly! How many air-to-air kills you chalk up, eight?"

"Let's not talk about that."

"Your...career sets you apart from everybody! Look, in my capacity, I can get all the casting couch coochie I could ever want—"

Jessica cuts her off, "But you're not Stewie!"

"You're right, I'm not." Samantha now points at her head, "It's what's in there that torques my crank. Fuck everything else!"

Jessica gnaws on this, "You're shit serious."

"If you were half the hotness I'd still throw down on you."

Jessica exhales big, then, "Okay, give me a second."

"Hu?" Samantha's head tilts, wondering what that meant, where her eyes slam shut and her head suddenly drops forward.

As Jessica pushes Samantha back into the sofa, Seth channels himself into her mind, <"Bout time you reached out to me.">

Jessica paths back, <"Where's Peanuts?">

<"Unconscious, between kicks, so I got a minute.">

<"Why didn't you say something to me?">

<"I did, I just didn't say who.">

<"Then let me ask—">

<"If she were bad for you I would have steered you clear of her long before anything started...and, you know that.">

<"Boxxy will want 'er to pop out a critter.">

<"Well, all things considered, and my future with Lilith, I'll be happy to take a bullet for the team.">

Jessica recoils slightly, <"You think that one up?">

<"No, Boxter will, but now you won't be so shocked when he brings it up in conversation.">

<"When will that happen?">

<"Tomorrow. He already knows about Lilith.">

<"And he knows you guys won't be able to have children.">

<"You can't deny the logic.">

Jessica huffs big, <"No, I can't.">

<"It'll be a suggestion of his. Something to think about, and while I have you, something else came to my attention. You've got a fight comin' up an' you'll not be prepared for it.">

<"What kind of fight?">

<"Aaaaaaah, desperate?">

<"What do I need to know?">

<"Have fun with it! Ciao, big sis!">

With Seth gone, Jessica looks at Samantha, nods then brings her around. With Samantha trying to get her bearings, Jessica says to her, "I got three things that are not negotiable. First, you nor I are going to change our career paths or goals for the other."

Samantha is obviously delighted, realizing that what Jessica is saying means, yes, "That's a given, love!"

"Second, we don't announce for six months. It's too close to my father's wedding. Okay?"

"Done! Last item, while I'm getting on my father's calendar?"

Jessica shakes her head while saying, "None of those fucking goo-goo eyed staged pictures between us or I'll kill the photographer!"

Samantha is already drilling down the Security Services neuronet towards her father's calendar, when she snorts, "Agreed! Those are bloody stupid!"

"An' one last thing."

"What'll that be, love?"

Samantha starts howling with laughter when Jessica takes the open bottle of wine she had, sitting on the coffee table next to the sofa, and starts pouring it all over Samantha's head and body.

00000100111

104

alienation

LCTN: SOL-3, SURREY, UNITED KINGDOM
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.000au from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-18-THURSDAY
TIME: 06:05zulu (local 06:05gmt)

The Alien franchise comes full circle back to where it began all because Monique didn't want to pay Pinewood rates. Monique caught wind that Pinewood was toying with the idea of razing the Shepperton site, but they were not going to shut it down until they found a buyer for the land and, as things go, a new subsidiary of hers had a contract signed and a check cut before the week was out.

Here is where it pays to read the fine print because three months later, when the last production wrapped and left, her people had control of the facility and soundstages that weekend before the wrecking balls arrived the following Monday.

The demolition crew had bulldozers and her goons had guns, but it was the injunction in hand that won out. Pinewood Studios was not at all happy about this turn of events because Monique now has a secure foothold in the United Kingdom.

The rich history of Shepperton Studios may go back centuries, but on the business end all of the media companies here have either moved out or merged with Pinewood. On the facilities side, except for a few brick exteriors, most everything here is reasonably new with nothing older than seven decades.

Today they are filming in the latest build of Soundstage-H, a 3,000 square meter interior tank superstructure that's all set up as the Promenade of a space cruise liner from the long gone Princess Cruises where, on storyboard timestamp 033:060, it has docked with the Alien infested Orion Nebula station...

And the airlock between them is going to be opened shortly.

Connie looks over everybody and asks, "Ya'll ready for this?"

With the cast and crew giving a quick cheer, Connie motions towards Monique who steps out, then clasps her hands together while speaking up for all to hear, "*Mesdames et messieurs*, here we are on day one of shooting number four, Alienation!" With everyone nodding and saying things like, *yup*, she continues, "It's a tight schedule so my desire is for you to cooperate with *Mademoiselle Sanchez* and keep our sites on target. Her eye, *mise en scène*, in preproduction is very much like her father's. And, remember, early and under means?"

The crew laughs, "Bonuses!"

She smiles, "*Oui!* So, with that in mind...break a leg."

Carlos speaks up with, "As second unit director on *Alienus*, Connie did a fantastic job with the pick-ups and stunts, and you all know it, but here on *Alienation* *she* is large and in charge—not me." Carlos points to Monique, himself, then Connie, "It's her money, my production but, as director, the final word is hers. Don't forget that."

Carlos gestures towards his nineteen-year-old daughter.

Connie steps out and soon points towards Angela, "Aliens ran three months over schedule because of her shit."

Angela, standing between Monique and Brittney, having pulled away from the makeup chair, goes, "Wha'? The fuck!"

Connie laughs at her, "Yea, 'cause of you, bitch!"

The camera assistant quietly snickers one of her impromptu lines from *Aliens*, "Hey, there's a monster under my bed! Anybody?"

With everybody laughing at that, the key grip finishes the line, "Okay, fine, I'll just be dead then!"

Connie says to Angela, "So, when am I right?"

Monique throws out, "We love Angela's *joie de vivre!*"

Carlos smiles at Angela, "Don't listen to 'em! Just be yourself, hon. Don't change you."

From the back, Jessica pipes up, asking, "Do I get a vote?"

With Angela shaking her head, *no*, and everyone laughing, Connie points out, "With her mouth the shooting script becomes a moving target, so we have to look to the storyboards as our bible. Between the DOP, scripty, continuity and me, we got our work cut out for us so..." She looks to Brittney and the other actors, "If she strays from the sides just roll with it. I want your natural reactions and any snappy comebacks if they pop into your head!"

Eight asks, "Even if it's a serious scene?"

"If you get rattled or flustered, I'll be honest, sometimes that

shit is gold! Think on your feet and do your best to finish the scene without breaking stride. Going forward, instead of us changing the boards on the fly, we'll shoot from-the-hip footage and angles around her "*script enhancements*" and deal with it in post."

Angela snarks, "Didn't know I was that popular 'round here!"

"I wouldn't go that far!" Connie laughs, then motions for the cinematographer, aka the DOP, to take the floor, "Benny."

Benny says, "We had the extras here this last week shooting atmospheres so we're ready to run the skinny's in to trash the place." He waves towards the thirty very thin motion actors in green screen outfits, with long alien heads strapped on, who give him a thumbs up. Benny then goes, "Now, this is for everybody, let's stick to the day's call sheet, don't stray from it and, for fuck's sake, get out of the way of the C2's so they can get their bloody scans between claps!"

With him done, Connie throws out, "Most of you have asked so, to clear the air, yes, we're shooting two endings. In the last five minutes before the credits, either our beloved Corporal Hicks lives or he dies, but this all rides on the contract with Mikhail Popov."

The funny thing is, it's only Samantha, standing in the back with Jessica, Jacob, Michelle, Brie, Diego and little Nigel, who can get away with talking to Mikhail Popov like this, "Why ya whinging poofter! You gonna keep these people hangin' by their wobblies?"

Mikhail was not expecting that so he belly laughs, "Well, with my contract up after this one we're tryin' to determine if it's the fans the story or budget that should be served in the end?"

Brittney asks, "But, you already know what it's gonna be?"

She shakes her head, *no*, when Connie asks, "He tell you?"

Carlos throws out, "Remember your NDA's! Talk 'bout any of this and you won't even bonus a breadstick from Olive Garden."

Connie speaks up, "Guys, yea, we already know the ending but we're still shootin' both, but this I can say. We're purposefully leaking the rushes two months before release, so what is leaked—"

Angela drolls, "Is not the ending, d'uh!"

"Right, it'll be a red herring." Connie nods, then shifts her posture to say, "Look, proper fan service is tossing 'em curve balls when we can. Episodes four and five is virgin territory and the outside has no idea what's comin' to the screen." Connie then points towards Angela with a laugh, "Oh, and your idea for an alien popping out of a walrus, we're gonna write that in for five!"

Angela chirps, "Cool!"

Everyone perks up hearing that one, with Carlos laughing, "She's not outrunning it, she'll be able to outwalk the thing!"

Mikhail snorts, "Can you imagine the shit that'll come out of her mouth with that one?"

Connie nods, "Exactly!"

Angela goes, "You'll hear it when we shoot it!"

"Anything else?" Connie then checks the time and announces, "If that's it, then it's a hot set in fifty minutes, people!"

With Monique and Carlos walking over to see Jacob and the rest of their visitors on the side, the Makeup Supervisor barks at Angela, "Get your lil' booty into my kitchen, girl!"

Before she walks away, Connie asks, "Got the veneers?"

Angela bares her teeth, showing both of her top secondary incisors covered with a green dental veneers, where Connie nods with approval while Angela points to the hairdresser, "Gotta go get fugly!"

A student film crew has been following Connie, making a documentary of her as a director on a major production at such a young age, so Connie says to them, "You got ten until lunch."

The producer/interviewer says, "Let's pick up on what you were saying about Angela. Why she's a problem?"

"What did we cover earlier?"

"We talked about her being underage, which is a given for any child actor. Then her being short and petite, which you said is a huge plus when casting younger characters like Newt."

Connie nods, "Okay, I remember. For her those are positives because she's so flexible. The negatives specific to her consists of two things. The biggest one is Angela going off script constantly."

"How often does she do that?"

"It's all the time. Then, did you just see that face of hers?"

"Yes, she's beautiful."

"That's without makeup! We gotta tone it down a bit, like she said, we gotta fugly her up or her lines don't work." Connie then puts her hands out like a set of scales, "In this industry, the more beautiful someone is—the more they and comedic delivery are in opposition. Her mouth and her face are polar opposites so they can cancel each other out if we didn't dog her up just a tad. When we give her face character, every line she nonchalantly pukes out work miracles!"

"That makes no sense."

"Well, that's just the way it is! Maybe when she gets older the people will see her for what she really is and it won't matter then, but that's what we gotta fight with right now. As for what we're calling "the mouth" going off script, the first take is inevitably the one we wanna use but the reactions from the other cast members who are in frame don't always jive because they weren't ready for it. Nobody is, so after two films under the belt we got a fix. If we can think on our toes we can shoot in counterpoint immediately. If not then we'll have to mask or CG around her going off script in the edit. We already blocked for the extra shots to stay on schedule and on budget."

"How often does she go off script again?"

"Almost all the time?"

"You're kidding!"

"Yea, purdy much!" Connie puts up a hand to emphasize, "Look, we've learned how to work around it so, now, the writers and the cast love having her on set. Where my father was pulling his hair out during *Aliens*, with all the impromptu work arounds, it was not near as bad during the *Alienus* shoot. This time in preproduction we think we figured how deal with *the mouth* and prepared for it."

"She doesn't take any of this seriously, does she?"

"Truth? If she ever does she'd be out of a job."

Monique and Carlos step up to their visitors and Monique says to Jacob and Michelle, "The wedding was *un délice!* Thank you for having us in attendance!"

Michelle points out, "Aaah, you're family?"

"One should always show appreciation, *madame.*"

Carlos asks Diego, Brie and Nigel, "You guys enjoy the tour?" With all three nodding, yes, Carlos then springs on them, "Connie has a surprise for you...wanna get eaten by monsters?"

With Diego laughing under her breath, Brie rears back going, "What, you want us to extra, like right now?"

Carlos smiles big, "We had wardrobe ready for you, but what you three are wearing would work perfectly! We'll get some shots in right now in the Promenade gift store and shoot you guys getting jumped and eaten in there after the main rush."

Monique points out, "The clock is ticking!"

Michelle smiles big, "I think you three should."

Brie asks Nigel, "Wanna get eaten by some monsters?"

They all crack up when he grins and says, "Bloody brilliant!"

With Carlos taking the three over to Benny, Monique says to Jessica and Samantha, "We were not expecting you on set today?"

Jessica goes, "We're here to see pop."

Monique turns to Samantha and quips, "Would you like to get eaten by monsters? I think we can arrange something?"

Samantha smiles, "You would like that, wouldn't you."

Monique stares at her for a moment, then, "As competitors, on paper, the fact is we have very little actual cross-over, so I've been giving it some thought. When you are done talking to Jacob in the SCIF outside, I would love a moment to slip in and bend your ear."

"Bend it now if you think you can?"

"We're both being hounded by...stars who want a slice of the pie on top of their normal compensation, and my effort to move as much from the return column to load and costs brings *moi...a toi!*"

Samantha looks around for the wrong ears, then, "So, you too are building ancillaries to gobble up your prod-budgets."

"Competitively, yes, for quite some time, and since the two of us together control, what, sixty-five percent of the studio square footage in the core English speaking countries, well, I have a modest proposal for you to consider."

"Elevator pitch, love?"

"Think of the possible benefits if we predate on each other?"

Samantha understands clearly, "Net should remain a fiction."

"Indeed!" Monique smiles, "With today's gargantuan budgets and box office it's a tragedy how little we realize for the effort."

Jessica calls out to Samantha, "Let's do this."

With Jacob and Jessica heading to the SCIF, Samantha turns back to Monique and, "Okay, come see me when they step out."

Monique goes, "I'll keep Madame Kiel entertained!"

With Samantha catching up to Jacob and Jessica, when she's out of earshot, Michelle says, "It's Michelle now."

"Even though the strings are tenuously thin, you are family. Yet, per your station, you deserve respect."

"I'm just a gunship pilot."

"Who has made a huge splash for the good in her new post. So, let me know what I can do to help you succeed."

Michelle wonders, "You think I can make a difference?"

"You already have." Monique wonders while nodding towards the three entering the SCIF, "Is this what I think it is?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, but yea, it's obvious."

Monique tries to do a brit accent, "Oh, how bloody dreadful."

Michelle almost laughs at the bad accent, turns to look at her, "I'm curious, why would that be dreadful?"

Monique shrugs, then throws out, "If Madame Hartcourt and I become family then...I'll be obligated to play nice."

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Inside the SCIF security conference room, Jacob turns around towards Jessica and asks, "Ready for the first?"

Jessica shrugs, "Same thing as always, right?"

Samantha dares to ask, "Same thing...as...as what?"

Jacob tells her, "Scarab here goes in and fiddle fucks around for an hour or two. Shopping, whatever. On her way out she does a pick up for us and skedaddles at least half an hour before we drop."

"And you can keep getting away with this because?"

Jacob shrugs, "She has City of New Sydney immunity."

"She's riding around in one of your vessels!"

Jessica points out, "It's registered as a lease."

Samantha's eyebrows rise, "That's just...bonkers!"

Jacob goes, "It's within the ROE's, Sam."

Jessica thinks about what Seth said a couple of days ago, and asks, "How long do you think we can keep getting away with this?"

"Just make sure you're out before you need to be out."

Samantha asks, "What kind of load we talkin' 'bout?"

"People, ya know, on the ground observers."

She points at him, "You mean, spies."

"I wouldn't put it that way, but—"

Samantha throws out, "I'm coming with!"

Jacob's face scrunches up, "Unless you two are married or engaged to fit a cover story, then that'll be a hard no."

Jessica and Samantha glance at each other, where Jessica breaths deep and says, "Since you brought it up."

That went right over Jacob's head when he says, "What up?"

Samantha snorts a small laugh and turns to Jessica to say, "You weren't kidding!"

"He's a guy-guy!"

"Subtlety not a strong suit?"

It dawns on him as Jessica says, "It depends on the subject."

Jacob nods, "No...I get it. It took a second to sink in."

Samantha goes, "By the look on your face, my father was on point about you. You are a closeted traditionalist."

Jacob starts to chuckle, "No, I'll be okay with this."

With him laughing harder she asks, "My father was wrong?"

"No, he was right, but after Diego I can cope with anything!"

Jessica throws out, "Told you two not to worry."

Jacob is full on laughing while saying, "I...I was always worried about the poor dumb slob you were going to marry, but NOW I have nothing to worry about!" Trying to catch his breath, he points at Samantha, "You're just as much of an asshole as she is!"

Samantha beams, "Why, thank you!"

"Don't mention it!"

"So, I'll be happy to go now!"

Jacob huffs like a bull, saying to himself, "Jacob, you had to open your big fucking mouth."

Jessica points out, "Father, these missions are a cakewalk, and this will be the only way to shut her up about what I do."

Samantha laughs at Jessica, "Speak for yourself!"

"We have a deal! This will be your one and only ride-along."

Jacob wonders, "Why does my gut say, no?"

"Your gut always says no when it comes to me."

"Promise that you'll leave Maui on time."

"When does something ever fuck up on these runs?"

"There's always a first!" Jacob shakes his head, then says, "Okay, the pickup is in fourteen days. I want her fitted for a JACC and trained inside ten or it's a no-go."

Samantha is delighted, "Smashing!"

Jacob snarls, "This run had better be fucking uneventful."

Jessica asks, "Why so stressed over a simple pick up?"

"It's not the recon team on this one. We'll grab 'em up during the assault. This time you got squishies to get out of there."

Samantha asks, "Spies?"

"Not exactly, but we're obligated to get these people out."

Jessica demands, "Who then?"

Jacob looks to Samantha, "You gonna shut the fuck up?"

She grins big, "Oh, most assuredly it's mum's!"

He turns to Jessica, "Stiller."

"Vince?"

"Yea."

"What the fuck is he doing there!"

Jacob shrugs, "Stuff?"

"Come on! Can't he get a ticket out?"

"Because of the recon flights, the Co-op revoked all of their travel permits. They're stuck. Vince is on an unrelated case but if we drop they're gonna be all over 'im."

"These people, plural? Like his wife and grandkids plural?"

"Yea." With Jessica throwing an internal fit over this, Jacob adds, "I can't have Michelle intervening on this one. You are the best Razorback pilot alive." Jacob then snorts a laugh saying, "Also, you happen to be flyin' the Millennium Falcon."

Jessica grits her teeth, "I hate when people call it that."

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taco tuesday

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.02 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-30-TUESDAY
TIME: 15:21zulu (local 09:54pst)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vana asks, "The build your own?"

"Yup! Set up in my office."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stockmyer laughs, "No, management!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria smiles, "*Oui, papa!*"

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

"*Au revoir!*"

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

Dowds whispers to him, "Technologically developing."

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

Candice corrects him, "FTL drive."

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

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

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

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

Stockmyer smiles big, "Everybody can see it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Surprised, Maria nods, "Good choices!"

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

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

Candice recoils slightly, "Hu?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria cringes, "Do ya have to ask?"

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

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

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

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

"The United Nations adopted it!"

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

"Didn't UNOOSA ratify it?"

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

Candice deadpans, "Not binding."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not gonna tie their hands."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Vincent Siino was announced this morning."

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

Candice recoils in disbelief, "For me?"

Maria shrugs, "Sure, why not?"

"Tell me why, or get bent."

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

Candice corrects her, "Infrastructure Survey."

Maria huffs a laugh, "Yea, whatever."

"I had time on my hands."

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

"Wasn't I right?"

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

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

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

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

"Fair enough, spit it out!"

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

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

"So it was all bullshit all along."

"No, that report is real."

"You denied it!"

"Exactly!"

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

Candice says, "We dodged that bullet."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Planning? What are they doing with it?"

Maria chuckles, "Waddya think, wargames!"

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

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

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

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

"Can I bring some people with me?"

"Yes, but limit it to two."

"Janis an' Reggie."

"They're acceptable."

"You already checked them out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The process is called a Murder Board."

"Looking for glitches an' stuff?"

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

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

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

Reggie laughs, "Bring it on!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

auto market had pancaked into the dirt."

Jacob says to Maria, "We got the time."

Scott agrees, "Yea, I want to hear this."

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

Scott asks, "Those the bottles in your credenza?"

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

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

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

Candice nods, "True that."

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

Candice nods, "That would be nice."

Maria smiles at her, "Wouldn't it?"

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

Maria points to herself, "You want me talking to 'em?"

Candice almost laughs, "You do have colorful language skills."

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

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

"Every time I open my mouth!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Was, being the operative word."

"What happened there?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They've both got the same fuselage."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Planning ahead, dude!"

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

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

"I thought you said it was amazing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacob protests, "Not at this juncture."

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

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

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

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

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

"You can do better!"

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

"Give me something!"

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

Jacob rolls his eyes, "Under protest."

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

Jacob shakes his head while muttering, "Asshole."

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

"Bud."

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

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

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

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

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

Scott's face scrunches up, "Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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grand theft auto

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-A5 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-98368.0104 (49pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-FEBRUARY-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 06:30zulu (local 10:08mst)

Here's an idea...imagine if you could take all those metal and element rich asteroids, planetesimals and nebulous debris spiraling around the red dwarf One-Eighty, way out at U-Turn, and toss it all into complementary orbital tracks around a run of the mill gas giant like GTA5, which is about the size of Uranus, what would happen? In short order all of the smaller-faster objects will ultimately catch up to the slower-bigger objects and sort of start clumping together.

Like with Earth's moon, it happened out here at y-Tauri-A-5.

Gamma, the "y" in y-Tauri, is why the fifth planet orbiting Primus Hyadum, that being the prime-Alpha star of the 54-Taurus binary system, is referred to as GTA5. Its proper name happens to be Corvette, but the legions of workers from Zemlya Dva have shortened it to Vette. It has three planetary sized accretion moons, those being Sloop, Frigate and Schooner but, as with Vette, the labor force has also rebranded them Scow, Frag and Scorch.

About the size of Charon, Luna and Titan, respectively, the three are being aggressively quarried by the Co-op. From space one can see that they're being strip-mined on a planetary scale, but on Scorch they have standing water, breathable air, some clouds, some rain, and an archipelago of four lush-green oasis like industrial zones similar to Arrakis out at 69-Tau.

In sharp contrast to the surface of Scorch being turned over, all over, each of these well-manicured industrial parks is on their own mesa like plateau. Three are about the size of Manhattan, with the main one at over twice that landmass. With no environmental, labor or safety agencies to confound and annoy the over two-thousand manufacturing plants that tinker away here with impunity, the site has

been jokingly dubbed the “Industrial Disneyland” by the Directorate working directly for the Corporation Commission out of New Brisbane.

With no official names for the industrial parks, the crews also adopted this sobriquet and shortened it to simply, Disneyland.

Nowadays when people here say Disneyland they are actually referring to the larger central park facility, and that was after the other three were christened Adventureland, Fantasyland and Tomorrowland! Early on, they did have a Frontierland but it was bulldozed when they found massive deposits of copper and gold underneath it. Then, in line with labor force verbal shorthand, the names of the four parks have since been rebranded into two-syllable praenomina and the popularity of Disney, Advent, Fanta and Tomo kind of stuck.

As it relates to costs, the Directorate was beyond thrilled to get Taiji back! As a non-combatant, the civilian Ngô Văn Giáp handily won the contract for engineering maintenance and mechanical support for all the plants operating here—undercutting a subsidiary of the Wallace-YanZhuGu conglomerate that picked up the slack when Taiji was unceremoniously booted out in the first quarter of 2314.

Now, the maintenance crews from Taiji have no set schedule so they can come and go at their leisure. With commuter flights contracted out through Qantas, they do have regularly scheduled drops coming into Scorch every Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, but the number of workers and Trident-Star Clippers on any given day is all over the place. Today they have three double-decker guppy configurations that landed early this morning, with over 1,200 maintenance engineers to add to the 860 already here, but that didn’t pull Security Services focus one bit. Giáp’s people have made a point to alert the SS on their comings and goings and, with all the PM tickets they now have choking the queue, Security didn’t bat an eye when the three ships with all those workers showed up four hours ago.

To minimize collateral damage, that being civilian deaths, Giáp pushed hard to have this mission put off till today because pretty much the entire workforce for all of the two-thousand production plants are attending the annual Rugby Fest at a stadium built out of a conical Lithium pit-mine in the middle of Disneyland.

Today are the final three knockout matches to select the players on Scorch who will represent them in the Hyades Rugby series that winds its way up to the World Cup playoffs. Over the last three decades the teams from Scorch have won the Hyades Regional Cup five times, and this season they are aiming for it yet again.

The Annex was planning to drop in a battalion or two of Giáp’s people to help out but everybody is already here. With Taiji assigned the priority ‘surgical bombings’ the Annex will be sending in three RRF

flight elements for CAP, SEAD and a double up on CAS. To move things along the Cerberus fighters and Warthog gunships on close air support will be assigned the larger targets not marked for passover.

When the ships from Taiji landed, the people were able to crack open the containers, gear up and stage all inside three hours, and with just a few minutes to go, General Giáp is now waiting at the stadium to chat with the head of the Directorate.

From the executive boxes that lap the entire top edge of the stadium, Richard Blemmings steps out where Giáp gives a genuine smile and calls out, "E'ello, Dick!"

"Oi, matey! Interestin' tool kit you've got on?"

And with an outstretched hand, "It be webgear, mate!"

Blemmings shakes his hand and says, "You gonna pick up the extension we sent ch'ya? If you're going to push back, just let me know what I need ta do to sweeten tha' contract!"

"Well Dickie, after today you may not want us 'round!"

Blemmings huffs, "In what bizzaro world would that happen?"

Giáp's eyebrows rise as he says, "Well...today's bizzaro world to be sure! We need you to keep the people here in the stadium and enjoy the matches and suds. You'll want to ignore what we're gonna do to tha' place. It's gonna get right messy topside."

An aide to Giáp steps up and says, "Thirty seconds, sir."

Giáp nods and asks Blemmings, "You ever play any of the N-2 Grand Theft Auto, fuck-about open worlds as a kid?"

With another aide having pulled a BR1-k out of the floater and handing it to Giáp, who does a press check, Blemmings nods with understanding, "Yea...I played San Andreas."

As a company of ghost droids that flew in with them, uncloak and spread out to surround the stadium, Giáp smiles while asking, "Find the Hot Coffee to your liking?"

"I pathed it endlessly."

"Tha's a right good one, but I'm a Vice City, Tommy Vercetti kinda guy myself!"

Blemmings wonders, "Nail tha Mercedes Bends challenge?"

Giáp laughs saying, "At thirteen? Like ya'll said, endlessly!" He then thumbs towards the droids flying in and goes, "You an' your people will wanna stay put. These things don't play nice. Here'll be the only safe place over the next hour or so, capiche?"

Behind Giáp, we have huge fireballs silently going off over the docks and the BDF airfield that are four miles away, so Blemmings nods, "Loud and clear, General."

"Aye, thank you for seeing it me way!" Giáp motions between them, saying, "I hope this doesn't hurt our personal accord. You're one of the very few I can say has been a good cobber."

"Even though I am a corporate whacka?"

Giáp smiles big, "Da best there is!"

With the shockwave and muffled explosions reaching them, Blemmings returns the smile, "General, I'm not quite sure how the Commission will react to today's proceedings but, be assured, I think I'll get over you trashin' the place."

"Good to know, mate!"

01110000-01101100-01100001-01100001-01110111

It's early morning here in the upscale Kai Pai district of Maui, the jungle planet that orbits the small gas giant Taranga, that orbits the star Tū, the primary star of 51 Tau. Except for all the rain forest greenery, Kai Pai is indistinguishable from the West Banes.

Jessica and Samantha are just starting an early brunch with her four sisters that they blundered into last night at the hotel. This week is the Hartcourt sister's annual three-day shopping spree, and every year it is a surprise where they go. This year it happens to be Sheron who planned the outing—and weren't they surprised when they blundered into each other in the hotel lobby.

Samantha bowed out at the last minute, saying something came up but not saying what it was, and with the diversionary attack on the planet Rongo starting just a few minutes ago they only have ninety minutes to get out of Dodge before Jacob and his troops drop on in for the primary targets here on Maui.

With the waitress stepping away, and everyone settling down, Piper Jr. throws out, "Okay, that's enough of the small talk, ladies!" She turns to Samantha and asks with a smile, "So, Samael, curious minds wanna know...who be the beau?"

With the middle sisters Sheron, Aurora and Eden all nodding big, Samantha rears back, "Hu?"

Sheron adds, "It was Eden's oldest one who saw on Papa's calendar, right before the notice went private, a post for the tenth that said 'sam wed plan' so—"

Eden cuts her off asking, "So, Sammi, who's the lucky bloke?"

Samantha thinks fast on her feet, "Maybe it was referring to 'Sally And Me?' Seems reasonable, aye?"

Aurora huffs, "Thought you were going to say that! None of the other dozen meeting notices 'bout their wedding are private!"

As all four of the sisters verbally gang up on Samantha for info, Jessica has been keeping an eye on Vince Stiller on the far side of the restaurant. She was supposed to meet him here, stumble into him and his family a half-hour from now, casual like, but she just realizes that he is being tailed by two Co-op agents—and taping into one of the agent's mind she finds out that they have two pair of Maui police staged on both ends of the street, and that they just got orders to pick him and his family up now.

Samantha asks her, "Should we tell them?"

Jessica shrugs and, "Maybe you should stay with your sisters 'cause things suddenly went south. We have to go now."

Aurora asks pointedly, "Are you picking our girls to be your bridesmaids? You know, family! Or, is it the ginger parade?"

Samantha again looks at Jessica, "I am coming with!"

"Suit yourself, it is your choice." Jessica stands as the two agents approach Stiller, so she turns to the sisters, "I'd love to chat, ladies, but it's a workday for me. See you on the tenth!"

As Jessica makes her way towards Stiller, Samantha stands while saying to them, "I'll be using our girls, but she get's the gingers!" With all their jaws suddenly dropping, she adds, "Gotta jet!"

Both agents face-plant into the floor before they reach Stiller, and as diners hop up to attend to them, Jessica appears and says, "Okay, you're being shadowed, so we gotta get outta here now!"

Stiller's oldest grandchild asks, "Who the hell are you?"

Jessica looks at him and snarls, two octaves below her normal voice with curled lips, "Do as I say—when I say it."

Stiller says to him, "This is Jessica, I told you about. I think we need to follow her lead...without question, aye?"

As everyone nods yes, Jessica goes, "We need to move now." Then to Samael she adds, "You're anchor."

Jessica steps outside the entrance to the restaurant, and with her heading out into the street she motions for Stiller and his family to hug the storefronts as they move towards the airfield. It takes just a half minute for the police in front of them to notice Stiller so they put one hand on their weapons as they point with the other, "Mister Stiller, remain where you are! You are under arrest!"

Suddenly, their backs go into spasms and they both shriek as they drop to the ground unconscious. Seeing this, the other two officers have pulled their weapons as they run towards them, shouting, "Nobody move! Stay where you are, you are all under arrest!"

Without turning back, Jessica drops them too.

At full stride both officers dive face first into the ground and slide to a stop, but instead of unconscious these two are now dead.

Rolling her eyes, Jessica is a little more than peeved by overdoing it on the last pair so, summoning a trolley driver with her mind, as it pulls up to her she barks at the passengers, "Get off!"

The passengers offload while Stiller and his family scramble to hop on then speed their way to the airfield, and as they are pulling up to her ship a platoon of Security Services troopers are positioning themselves around it, so she hisses, "God-damn it!"

Samantha asks, "Your droids gonna pew-pew on me peeps?"

As the trolley stops 12 meters short of the SS troops, Jessica says to her, "Only if they pull down on us."

"Then let me be useful and take care of this, love!"

Samantha hops out, and while stepping up to the platoon's Captain and their Major she says, "Top of the mornin', gentlemen!"

Both officers do a double take as Samantha approaches, with the Major saying to her, "Madame Hartcourt?"

"Last time I saw you, Major, was at Times Square, was it? We didn't get a chance to thank you and your troops for squaring away the union hooligans the way you did!"

The Major and Captain both salute Samantha as she stops in front of them, with the Major saying, "It's a surprise to see you here, Sir." As Samantha returns the salute, he gestures towards the trolley, "Would you like us to take the suspects off your hands?"

"These fine people are in my custody, Major." She shrugs, saying, "I was on holiday but now I find myself on the timeclock!"

The Major then points back towards the ship, "We have orders to seize this ship so I...I suspect you'll want to take this too?"

"There's a good chap!" She grins big, "You read me mind."

The Captain points out, "We don't control the air, Sir."

While Samantha motions for Jessica and the rest to board the ship, she asks, "What's the exception altitude, captain?"

"A thousand feet, Sir, but they've ordered everyone to land."

The Major adds, "The Annex has dropped on Rongo."

Samantha gives them a smile, "Oh, well, no surprise there!"

"The BDF believes Rongo is a diversionary attack to draw off the fighters from the airfields here. Local air command is sending only ten-percent of their CAP resources to intervene."

With Jessica stepping up, Samantha adds, "Then let's hope we don't have to shoot our way out! Do what you can for us."

The Major says to Samantha, "We can protect you, Madame."

Samantha sighs, "Only for a short while but thank you, Major. We're going to take our chances in the air."

01000111-01010100-01000001-00110101

When the definitive and final version of the neuronet came into being all of the patents for cyber mapping and the neuro interface have long since lapsed, but where the N2 standard is now open source the security protocols, encryption and all the anti-hacking components are zealously guarded. To pick the lock to the one and only backdoor into a user's real-time immersion requires both a court order and special access to an encryption key vault maintained secretly by the United States Department of Defense. Few entities have real time access to this vault—where the Annex has a mirror instance of it.

Let's just say that deCap, their workaround to the biometrics and firewalls, piqued both DOD and DARPA's curiosity in the extreme.

Anyway, none of the myriad of VR gaming experiences that have been collecting dust for over a century could be ported into the neuronet however, instead of rebuilding everything from the ground up they ended up building off of one template. DOOM for the N2 was the first interactive to take the market by storm and, with open-source in mind, everyone else has since built from that kernel and the ever so critical interface crosswalk. It was a stupidly inelegant cross-reference table that greatly streamlined everything that followed, and because all the N2 components were 'open source' the developers of doomN2 were unable to patent the core application. The follow on effort to copyright that table didn't hold up in court because all of the foreign keys were actually hooked into from the PBDi side of the interface.

The point is, DOOM retained all of the schlocky elements that made it a blast to play, and that experience carried over to most of the properties that cloned the kernel, but it was the CoD and GTA mods that brought the hyper-realism optional settings to neuronet games. That is, the normal challenge in "Hurt Me Plenty" with reloading and realistic loadout made the player's experience nightmarishly difficult

when compared to the ever so popular “Nightmare” mode.

Realistic mods in DOOM never did take off but on Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto the settings shot off like a rocket! Not so much for the casual gamer, who recoiled at the effort needed to plan ahead, but it’s the niche hard-core players who wanted that challenge. Then there’s the military SPECOP groups who train on customized mods of GTA with detailed modeling of their kit, loadout and objective.

Working out missions on GTA feels like the real thing!

Which brings us here today where, over the last two years, Giáp and his people have been running-an’-gunning it again and again on a customized “fun house” mod of GTA with a detailed 3D wireframe map of Scorch that they pulled in from their ticket and workflow system. Sure, the kludgy destruction physics sucks ass, but with this tool they’ve been able to divvy up 1,810 targets between 330 six-man teams, each team assigned between five or six targets, and this is so that the average speed-run in game ran anywhere from about 42 to 45 minutes. Of the plants not in their queue, 186 have been assigned to the Close Air Support guys from Peña’s RRF, with only 114 plants out of 2,110 total getting the passover for today.

The conex containers the Annex stashed in the graveyards were overstocked to the gills so when the troops cracked them open they stripped out extra tubes of grenades for their romp today. The bulk of the railguns were the older BR1-C3 models in 4.75mm but five percent of them were the newer BR1-k in 6.8mm. The k-models were grabbed up by their team leaders as well as the six command squads for anti-air work—the webgear stocked only with Micropede missiles. Everything in the containers the troops didn’t take will vanish inside a week and percolate through the black market, ultimately dropping into the hands of the kOri, but that’s a story for another day...

Now, what they couldn’t plan for was, 1.) How many fighters the BDF would have airborne on CAP when the airfield went up in smoke and, 2.) What will those pilots do to Giáp and his demolition teams running wild on the ground?

The answers are 460 and not much...

As for running wild, with Peña and the RRF forces a quarter hour away from the surface of Scorch, having easily bypassed the 1,200 spider missiles in low orbit, and the lone Epée cruiser sitting in a high reconnaissance orbit, the 330 ground teams are hitting their targets right on schedule. With explosions reverberating from all directions, they are leaving smoldering wreckage behind as they race from one target to the next on open-bed floaters. Even five of the six command squads assigned themselves at least one target, but it was Command-Six who took up a dedicated anti-air posture on top of a

factory half way between the stadium and Toon Town.

Toon Town being the massive container management facility next to the airfield, currently assigned to Peña's CAS.

Sally Rand, Major General of Security Services, is in command of Command-Six, deployed on the roof of the one Lego manufacturing plant not on Earth. From this high vantage point she has a clear view of Disneyland from past the stadium and back out towards Toon Town and the smoldering ash heap of what used to be an airfield. Noticing two Djinn circling the perimeter of the industrial park, obviously looking for a demo-team carelessly running between targets out in the open, she locks on the leader with a Micropede. Between the trees and columns of smoke rising up from the destroyed buildings, spotting targets for the Djinn is real hard to do at the speed they must maintain to evade Micropede missiles fired at them.

Like the one Rand just launched at the flight leader!

With the missile turning hard-left towards an interception point with that fighter, Rand now fires at the Djinn with her railgun. The 6.8mm railgun bolts slam into the rear fuselage and this makes the pilot push the throttle to full thrust. Banking right and pitching up in a coordinated turn away from Disney unfortunately extends the convergence point farther out and makes it easier for the missile to roll back and lock on. The missile flies into his tail pipe where the warhead goes off and the back half of the Djinn vaporizes—leaving the cockpit tumbling away from the debris, and the pilot punching out.

With Command-Six celebrating her third kill, and her corporal doing the same to the wingman, which the team also applaud and pat him on the back for, Rand ties into the tacnet via the AuX application on her PBDi to get a look at the tactical big picture.

Inside the first five-minutes their teams have destroyed half of the fifty-four anti-air mechs the BDF staged around the industrial parks. Advent, Fanta and Tomo had twelve each, the larger Disney was assigned eighteen, but with no ground forces to protect them from ground action it's obvious that they did not expect today to ever happen. Thinking what Giáp and his people are now doing here as impossible—the Co-op made it inevitable.

As Rand scans the sky for fighters she notices that Giáp's Command-One squad just ripped past the Lego factory, so she radios, "Blimey, Zipper! These fickle cunts are clueless on what ta do!"

Giáp laughs over the com-connection, ["Waddy sayn', Pogo? You be takin' 'em down like a bloody turkey shoot!"]

The missile Rand just loaded up, has already started to growl with a lock on, "Peña is on his way down, mate!"

["Right, copy! You got the airfield count?"]

Noticing four Djinn coming in from three different directions, Rand motions for the others to launch on them as she puts the bead on the one in front of her, "Prelim count at four-forty."

["That's good to hear!"]

"They still 'ave 'bout four-sixty in the air." Rand launches that Micropede and pulls her BR1 up to her eye to sight in the next fighter, "But, we've splashed twenty-three Djinn so far!"

Three of those fighters are blown from the sky but one gets through, and as it flies overhead ten railguns hammer away at it and shear its wings off, so Rand adds, "Make that twenty-seven, babe!"

["Great shootin' love! I be heading to Gerber-Fiskars to drop a Disney Swish or two on thar two-timing ass!"]

With her team scanning the sky, Rand glances down at her feet and laughs, "Hey, dumb question, why not bomb the Lego plant? Weren't they subcontracting parts?"

["Sporks for their rat-kits! We 'ad to let that one pass."]

000001101010

LCTN: 51-TAURUS-A2B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76541.0105 (54pc from SOL)
TIME: 06:56zulu (local 10:34mst)

Stumbling onto potentially habitable worlds orbiting gas giants happens to be a common theme in human exploration, but finding one where we don't have to do anything to the place before we break ground and set up shop has been the rare exception—and Maui tops that really short exception list.

Tū, short for Tūmatauenga, is the primary star of the 51-Tau star system. The fifth of twelve planets, Taranga, is a gas giant about the size of Neptune and in Maori tradition is the mother of Maui, the largest moon in orbit around her. There are thirty moons orbiting this planet, notably Hina and Tuna who share a common barycenter on an orbital track about a million kilometers out.

Then we have Tāne, the secondary B-star in the 51-Taurus system, which is an orange dwarf that is host to eight planets. It's second planet in orbit, Rongo, is an agricultural export powerhouse that's very much like Maui in that they didn't have to do anything to the atmosphere for people to move in like they did.

The manufacturing and storage arrangement between both Maui and Rongo are kindred spirits to the Zemlya Dva and Scorch relationship out at 54-Taurus. The difference being is that when GTB6, that being Zemlya Dva, got hit on the same day Javan got stomped out at Polaris, the Co-op mothballed the storage and distribution operations here on Rongo. Components and product are now shipped directly from Maui, so when the Annex showed up over Rongo, fifteen minutes ago, the BDF knew in their gut that it was diversionary.

Maui must be the real target, but when will that happen?

Anyway, the CDF would have sent half of their air assets, totaling eight-hundred fighters consisting of a mix of the Djinn and a smattering of the new Enfield, but the BDF is in control of air defenses

on Maui and they overrode what the CDF General ordered.

The Major General in command of operations at 51-Tau is hopping mad, yea, but inside a quarter of an hour the Brigadier in command of the air defenses will be proven right.

In the hold of the ship, Jessica and Samantha scramble to strip down to mount their JACC fighting suits, but when Jessica looks up she realizes that Stiller and his family are all strapping themselves into the rearward facing seats.

With only her t-shirt on she steps around the alon bulkhead and orders them to, "No, forward facing! Move to the forward facing seats because we are going to be maneuvering!"

Stiller realizes why and, "She's right, everybody move over!"

"Set your seats at a thirty degree recline!" Jessica then looks at the oldest, the fifteen-year-old boy, so she points to the forward facing workstation across from the cockpit, "You, get in there!"

With Stiller and his wife strapping the thirteen and ten year olds in before seating themselves, Jessica whips off her shirt as the young man races over to the workstation, and being so young he has a hard time not repeatedly glancing at her naked body as he struggles with the five point harness of the seat.

With him belting in, Jessica touches the workstation screen and it comes to life, "You can watch what's happening on this. The trackball directs the view. Have fun with it!"

Not enough time to stow themselves in the forward bay, the six ghost droids pile into the cabin and strap themselves in the rearward facing seats as Jessica turns towards Stiller, "It's gonna be a bumpy ride, Vince, so show 'em where we keep the barf bags!"

Samantha has already mounted her suit, and as she inserts her head into the helmet Jessica hops into hers, feet first, and with her arms pointing down the suit rises up and encapsulates her body.

Samantha is slipping into the WSO seat as Jessica grabs her own helmet assembly and calls out, "Hold on, everyone!"

Right as Jessica opens the hatch to the pilot's station, she hears Stiller laugh, saying, "Hey Nicole!" This is followed by a familiar voice in response, "It's be awhile, Vince!"

She blinks and looks around the alon bulkhead...

As a courtesy, ghosts in combat droids project their heads in the helmets visor—and the effect is almost lifelike. Jessica knows that the droid squad leader for her ship is the ghost of Angela Simmons, who is also functioning as her co-pilot, and seeing her sitting across

from Stiller was no surprise, but what was a surprise was strapped in next to Angela, so Jessica blurts out, "Mother?"

Nicole shrugs and says, "Sorry, I just grabbed a slot that said 'recon support' and I didn't think to see if it was you!"

Jessica blinks and, "That's okay, how's Oompa?"

Nicole huffs a laugh, "How 'bout you get to work?"

"Sure!" Jessica turns while saying, "We'll chat later."

As Jessica reaches for the pilot's station, the co-pilot instance of Angela Simmons says to her on the coms, ["Check list complete! We're at zero buoyancy with gear up."]

Having already tied herself into the tacnet interface, Jessica notices that four BDF Djinn fighters are bearing down on them from the east and are about seventy kilometers out, so as she slips into the pilots seat she orders, "Full-pull west! Let's hit it!"

Against a three-G acceleration, via the AG drive in reverse, Jessica braces her foot against the alon barrier between her and Samantha as she struggles to belt in. Snapping the last belt latch, she grabs the controls and launches two Hydrapede missiles known as the Red-Shell. With the fighting droids spreading out, low to the ground in the direction of the four oncoming Djinn, Jessica flat spins the ship around and it wobbles as it now points in their direction of travel.

Jessica then asks for the, "Scorpions!"

With their eight perimeter defense railguns sprouting out from the hull, four on top and four below, Simmons deploys the main stinger gun and says, ["All up! Deploying the stinger!"]

"Good idea!" Jessica, noticing three more distant flights of Djinn, now appearing from the north, west and south, looks up at Samantha through the transparent bulkhead and laughs while saying, "Well, Sammi, this ain't gonna be a boring ride-along!"

Taking stock, Samantha gives Jessica a big toothy grin, "Wouldn't 'ave missed this for the world, love!"

01000100-01000101-01000001-01000100

Things are getting crazy here on Scorch...

With Peña and the RRF teams able to exit MDDSH below the Co-op spider missile's operational floor of 160 kilometers altitude, they immediately head straight down for the surface of the planet at high speed. Finally noticing this, the Djinn fighters that were looking for a way to stop General Giáp's people, suddenly turn away from the

industrial parks and scatter. Spreading out in all directions, they climb to find tactically advantages positions before they turn in to face the RRF forces dropping in from high altitude.

With no means of protection against the troops from Taiji, and with over half of their numbers already culled from today's order of battle roster, the remaining robotic anti-air mechs slip out from cover that was designed to protect them from overhead attack, and they race out to find street level cover away from Giáp's people.

At its top-end run, about 65 kph, one mech leans into a tight turn around a five-story building. With its legs pumping in this turn, it smashes through a stand of trees as it drifts around the facility onto Main Street USA, by the stadium here on Disney. It accelerates out of the turn and, now fully upright, the machine is making tracks towards the Lego plant just a kilometer down the grassy roadway.

["We'z gots a runner, people!"] Giáp radios on command freq, and as his floater pops out from around the smashed trees and onto Main Street, he laughs, ["Pogo, do ya see 'im? The mech bastard is high tailin' it your way!"]

Looking out over the ledge, Rand goes, "Yea, I see 'im, Zip!"

["Well, drop the bloody thing why don'chya!"]

With the mech approaching fast, Rand notices that one of its miniguns is swinging around for Giáp's floater, so Rand pulls her BR1 up while saying, "Okie dokie, mc-pokie!"

In a quick second and a half, through the viewfinder of the weapon, Rand highlights the turret ring at the waist of the machine, locks onto it and fires. Micropede missiles are fire and forget, so when Rand lets the missile fly she throws herself behind the ledge she was standing on—a split second before the ledge is hosed over by bolts.

The Micropede stabs at the mech, right where Rand targeted it, and the machine splits in two. The top segment with the weapons and sensors rolls over and tumbles through the fireball as the lower segment with legs is thrown back by the force of the blast.

A wonton grenade shot from the floater slams into the now dead mech, and as the explosion shakes the building Rand is standing on, Giáp radios, ["Really great shootin', Pogo!"]

"Thanks, mate! Peña is just a few minutes away, so you need to clear out the last of those mechs!"

["We're on it, sugar!"]

Just then another mech runs out onto Main Street, looking for cover, and popping out between the floater and the wreckage of the

dead mech, Giáp shouts, ["Holy bejeebers, let `im have it!"]

As this machine turns to fire on the floater, the first wonton grenade hits it dead center and punches it back. The second one spins it around in a thirty-ton pirouette. The third and final is a 2k-KEG warhead and this cleaves the thing in two—vertically.

With the blasts reverberating off the buildings, melding into the many-many shockwaves that have been crisscrossing the Disney industrial park this whole time, Rand reports that, "Tacnet says the last three of those things are headin' into Toon Town."

Giáp radio's back, ["Right, we copy!"]

Over the centuries, many lines sourced from classic literature, especially Shakespeare, have been coopted by many peoples and, more often than not, are taken out of context. The *res publica* known as the House of Perth is no exception, but it's been said that the line they pinched from Romeo and Juliet now has actual clarity in context when uttered by the troopers from Taiji.

With the open-bed floater carrying Giáp and the ten guerrillas of Command-One down Main Street, passing the Lego plant on their way towards Toon Town, Giáp conveys to Rand, ["You know, Pogo, as they say...with violent delights come violent ends, and..."]

With a tight smile, Rand chimes in along with him by adding, "And we're having a delightful time of it!"

Giáp adds, ["Aye, we be, MG!"]

Rand shakes her head while scanning the sky, "No, Zipper, `ere I'm just a simple novalUM swabby."

["Q-tipper, my ass!"]

The demolition teams have been working their way towards Main Street, and with the explosions getting closer, Rand shrugs, "Honestly, I'm gonna miss the good times we `ad `ere."

01001000-01001111-01010100-01000001-01010011

Jessica's custom Razorback, the one and only HWG101b in existence, was never given any serious thought when it was delivered to her just under four years ago. Jessica flies her Thunderbird like a twisting-spirographic deamon while in a furball, but with what they call the Babyback she has always driven it as if she were behind the wheel of the family sedan on a leisurely Sunday afternoon.

That's quite a change from when she was piloting the 101a2. Where she regularly pushed the a2 beyond its performance envelope, she has always handled her 101b with kit gloves. Flatter, shorter, and

many tons lighter, everyone knew that the 101b should be faster than the a2 but nobody has seen her put it through its paces. She babies the thing like it's got a glass jaw imbedded somewhere in the fuselage that will reveal itself if she were to crank it over too hard.

Nobody ever asked, but they all wondered why?

Well, three weeks before delivery her father got some stick time with the 101b in the sims, and afterwards he came back with two recommendations that both she and Paleo took to heart...

Paleo had the foresight to add a pair of the bisE ventral fins to the underside of the 101a models, but for the 101b Jacob advised them to add another pair—and he showed him where he wanted them mounted. At first glance this configuration made no sense, but when Paleo actually flew the sim it blew his socks off because it now has the flight characteristics of the bisEa model of the ASF47.

This config of the b-model flies like a fighter, and because of that Jacob made Jessica promise that she'll hold back when flying it for real. She has always pushed it to the ragged edge in the sims, sure, but he insisted that she vow to pull in the reins and fly it "commercial" style in the public eye. Jessica was kinda stumped as to why until Jacob said to her, 'The day will come when you'll need to push it, and you don't want them to know what you're all about.'

Taking that sage advice to heart, today that day has come!

Jessica's ship is still accelerating, passing Mach 2.75, while still on the deck. Shooting past the coastline the 101b is so low it has huge-spiraling vortices that can be seen trailing behind each wingtip as it rips out over the water. The fighters following her at ten-kilometers have dropped to one-thousand meters altitude while trying to catch up.

Speed is life, yes, but at this altitude it happens to be suicide with the Red Shells hugging the ground. Below them with a three klick lead are the two Hydrapede missiles lying in wait. The Djinn can't turn for shit at this speed and these droids know it, and right when the fighters hit one klick out the missiles shoot up underneath them in a steep interception vector.

The droids each fire four Micropedes at the Djinn from a point about 500-meters ahead and 200-meters below their interception point. As the four Djinn scatter, each chased by two Micropedes, their turns and climbs are in slow motion as compared to the agile and vicious little missiles that were launched against them.

Three of the F51d's are instantly blasted from the sky, but the one that dove and flew towards the Micropedes was able to jink around the missiles and got clear of them before they could react. Now hot on Jessica's tail, it fires a Centipede missile after her.

Jessica can't release her own Centipede missiles this low to the water so, seeing him fire one, she rolls her ship around and, with her belly up she launches a Mew which falls behind.

She completes her roll while laughing, "Special delivery!"

Jessica's missile is the Centipede-Mew and this thing is both smart and difficult to anticipate. The Djinn pilot starts to climb out, and when his missile is half way to the Babyback its scorpion guns do their job and blast it from the sky. When hit its six mini-missiles, similar to the SA Micropedes, all launch but soon fall away when their motors sputter out, unable to catch up to the Babyback.

The Djinn has just reached three-kilometers when it rolls over to try again, but behind him is the Centipede-Mew and it launches all nine of its Micropedes as it flies up his exhaust port.

The cockpit didn't have to detach from the now vaporized ship, and with the pilot ejecting from it the Micropedes circle him once. With no perceptible threat close enough for them to be able to reach, they all turn away then self-destruct.

Still close to the ground, Jessica increases altitude enough to launch three more Hydrapede missiles followed by three Mew. The Red Shells race towards the oncoming flights of fighters from the north, west and south, but when they reach two-kilometers distance from the ship, the Centipede-Mews are already passing them while climbing for the most direct interception points with the fighters.

The flight from the west is the closest one so, thinking she can follow the Mew out and fly past the fighters as they scatter, she starts climbing but Jessica is struggling to keep up. At five-thousand meters altitude, she realizes the acceleration of the 101b is not quite there. In the sims she's been flying the thing with the Straight-Razor engines, but here she's lagging behind with the older Safety-Razors.

The Mew is already eight clicks out ahead so she banks hard around to go east, and noticing two more flights of fighters coming in at high altitude from the east, Jessica snarls, "God-damn it!"

As she starts to dive, her Centipede-Mews have reached their targets. The only real defense against the Mew is to shoot it down or run, but to shoot it down you have to get closer than you'd want to. The lead pilots from the three flights show balls of steel as they stare the missiles down while they blast them out of the sky, but the problem now are the Micropedes. Everybody scatters but the Micros nail one Djinn from the north, and a pair from both the east and south.

While racing away and continuing to dive, three of the BDF Centipedes have caught up to her. Again the 8.80mm scorpion guns do their job and blow all three out of the sky, but now she has

eighteen of their mini-missiles closing the distance. The 23mm stinger gun now opens up and, with a rip, it scatters 1k-KEG bombs out and knocks most of the missiles from the sky—save for one.

Their mini-missiles also have the wonton, 1k-KGE warheads, but the older ones are 500-KGE, and it was one of those that was coming at her from below the ship. Jessica rolls the Babyback so that it can hit the thickest armor on the topside, where it connects with the fuselage in the back over the workstations across from the cockpit.

The sound from the warhead going off is like a sledgehammer hitting an anvil beside your skull. With that, and the shockwave they feel through their seats, everyone jumps against the straps but the fifteen year old actually yelps because it went off right over his head.

Jessica looks towards the teen and grimaces while saying, "Just so you know, there's more where that came from!"

01001110-01000011-01010011-01010111-01001001-01000011

Just a scant week ago the Co-op pilots met the Cinderblocks on FCAP over Nufa for the first time and it did not go well for them...

Because of the slingshot MDDSH drive on the Cinderblocks, that being the bisEb model of the Thunderbolt, these things can do the random walk and jink along the lowest orbital tracks with greater authority than anything else that flies. The Cinderblock is so advanced that nobody wanted them anywhere near combat, but the beast is virtually untouchable in this role so, going forward, it has suddenly become the dedicated FCAP fighter for the Annex.

Loaded up with the advanced wormtrac Spiders, the latest high speed Mew2 build of the Centipede, and forty-eight of the brand new Green Hornet missiles, a design they shamelessly ripped off from the Co-op, and improved upon, what used to be as much as a few hundred fighters on FCAP can now be easily handled simply by a squadron or two of the Cinderblocks.

For Peña the ability to shift pilots and resources came at the most opportune time because today his RRF forces would have been spread too thin having to deal with Scorch, Rongo and Maui. As it is, he only needs sixteen of the Cinderblocks covering Scorch all because he already knew that if the troops of the Annex made it to the ground then the CDF command was going to write off the industrial parks on Scorch as a loss.

Giáp and his people running amok and blowing facilities up right out of the chute, like they are now, was a total shock to both General Bristol and his command staff when they were given status in

the middle of a working lunch in the West Banes.

So, as predicted, the cavalry is not being sent...

That said, Peña was himself shocked that the troops from Taiji blew up over four-hundred of their Djinn fighters while they were sitting on the flight line! The mix of Thunderbirds, b-mod Cerberus, bisE Wild Weasels, and a handful of Warthog gunships that he brought along with him, totaling 1,010 ships, are now totally overkill when facing the paltry count of 420 remaining F51d fighters that are, at this very moment, climbing and desperately looking for a way to turn it around and make an attack that would make a difference.

As a commander, planning for a fair fight is poor planning on your part, but what's about to happen here to the BDF pilots is tragic because they are essentially trapped. Peña knows his CAP pilots won't even have to try hard to pull a win out of this one, and since the war is basically winding down the Co-op pilots are tired of taking the brunt of command staff trying to salvage something out of this mess.

That said, Peña thinks these people do not have to die today.

Peña comes onto the IFF and makes a humanitarian offer to the BDF pilots, "This is Oscar Peña of the Steel Annex, commander of the attacking forces dropping in over Scorch. As it stands we now outnumber you by more than two to one, and with our respective loadouts these numbers are not going to work in your favor. I know you are acutely aware that if ground action starts, CDF Command will not send reserves or relief, so, I'm going to make you guys a onetime offer. If you stay then my people are going to shoot every one of you out of the sky and, since we have the Cinderblocks above on FCAP, you already know you're not going to get away. On the other hand, you can just leave and let us finish up! Simply turn away and you can get outta here scot-free. Yes, we'll let you go, but you have only one minute to get the hell outta Dodge. Think fast, *amigos!*"

With the RRF forces now hitting 55,000 meters, spreading out so they can engage with the BDF fighters far below, like a key log it takes twelve seconds for the first flight of Djinn to turn away. By the time they hit the thirty-five second mark, all of the Djinn are actively turning about and climbing for space.

Myra Coulter, in command of the FCAP, comes on channel to ask, ["We're gonna let them go, Dog?"]

"Yes, Grawlix, You're gonna let 'em go."

There is a pause, where Coulter adds, ["Whatever you say, Dog, but I sure hope you don't catch hell for this shit."]

"Fuck 'em." Peña switches to ground freq, "General Giáp."

Rand replies in her normally thick rough-nut outback accent, ["O'wdy, Dog, glad ya'll could make it!"]

"Is the General available?"

["Zipper is kind of busy, mate? 'E's in Toon Town after the last two of their mechs. An early-model Ryazan-Tottori, and the other is one of those bloody Chimney-Sweeps from Rockwell-Yaskawa."]

Peña wonders, "A particle gun Sweeper?"

["Naw, a refit, bristling with rail it be!"]

"You mean to tell me that you guys already killed all of the anti-air mechs save for those two?"

["Aye, it was to save your weasels the trouble."]

Peña snorts a laugh, "No, Pogo, it was because you guys were having a blast going after them."

["You could say that, I bagged me a Ryazan meself, I did!"]

"Okay, when Zipper is done fucking around have him mark on the net where he wants the slicks to land. We're slowing down and will be leveling out in about seven to eight minutes."

["I be posting that and the targeting in two. We'll want to get your Stuka's to work before we tackle the Wart'ogs, aye?"]

"Roger that, Pogo! Thumper is first up."

["With Command-One an' Two faffing 'bout in Toon Town, it'll be my Command-Six who'll be Fucking Off for you here on Disney. All FAC elements go live when targets post on the net. Status on Fanta, Tomo and Advent are as is. No changes there. We copy?"]

"We copy! To confirm, CAS will orbit counterclockwise with incoming attacks running from the northeast to the southwest."

["Aye, for traffic flow let's keep it simple! An' ya'll might as well send the five guppies in now 'cause we'll be tidying up here by the time they drop and set down on Main Street."]

Peña's eyebrows frown, "You're on schedule?"

["We're just a smidge-plus ahead, me matie!"]

"That's damned good to hear!"

["I thought the mad-knob was over-planning this bender but, now that I look at it, the planning paid off!"]

"Looks like it did, Pogo!"

["I have to give the General credit for being thorough. We be makin' mince of tha place!"]

01010001-01010000-0010101-00110001-00110001-00110001-00110000-00110000

Just like all hypersonic fighters and transports, high-pressure engine bypass is bled off and channeled through the fuselage to exit the ship along its leading edges. This does two things, it carries away heat and makes the fuselage even more slippery at high speed. The resulting vapor chimes flash all over the 101b amidship as it levels out at a brisk Mach 2.8.

Coming out of the dive at 150 meters altitude Jessica is still kicking up water, but it's nothing like the roster tail that trailed after her when she was below 100 meters just two minutes ago. She can go faster, like maybe Mach 5.6 at this altitude if needed, but here she wants agility over greater speed.

Jessica has already shot nine of their Djinn out of the sky but coming towards her are a few of the new F51e Enfield fighters that fly in pairs with the Djinn flying as escort. These are incredibly capable interceptors, but they are the only fighters retrofitted with their newest AG-drive Hornet missile. The Hornets are loaded on recessed mounts under the wings, but this configuration comes with a slight problem in negative-G. Nose over hard above Mach 1.5 and the wings will snap right off, which is why the Djinn are flying with them.

See, with AG-drive their Hornet won't sputter out but it can only hit Mach 3 in a straight line, so all the target has to do is to run. To keep the Hornet in play, the Djinn work like Australian Shepherds to corral the target for the Hornet to get close and do its magic.

With four Enfields closing, that's thirty-two Hornets, they just let loose four of those damned things so Jessica quietly says, "shit!"

As the Co-op fighters from the north, west and south are spreading out to surround the 101b, and the fighters from the east are still 120 kilometers out and charging in, Samantha gives Jessica a big grin and asks, "Sooo, what's the plan, Red?"

With Jessica pitching the ship up, she launches the last three of her Hydrapedes and, "'Shoot 'em down? Sound good to you?"

"Ya think we're gonna get out of this bloody mess?"

Jessica has her doubts, serious doubts, but she must convey confidence or she will emotionally fold up, "Yea, sure, but we're gonna hav'ta take a few more hits along the way."

"Aaah, this hull was designed for that, right?"

Jessica nods and laughs, "Purdy fuckin' loud, wasn't it?"

Samantha laughs back at her, with, "Dunno mate, I be pissin'

myself when tha thang rang our bells!"

Via the tacnet, Jessica commands all eight of her Hydrapedes to climb, and as they do, Jessica pulls the ship into a vertical climb, saying, "I'm right there with ya!"

"Pissing yourself?"

"Hell yea!" She pickles off the last four of her Centipede-Mew missiles, as well as six of her eight 20/20 bomb dispensers. Once clear, tracking the Hornets coming in from the east, and noticing three more centipedes coming in from the west and south, Jessica cuts power and pulls the sidestick back, pushing the ship into a bone crunching pitch over, while calling out, "G-squeeze, everybody!"

Samantha is in a rearward facing seat, and with blood pooling in her face, making her complexion look pink, she grits her teeth and grunts over the strain, "Arse over tits we go, aye!"

With the ship now diving, Jessica asks, "Fully sick?"

Samantha snorts, followed by, "I'm gonna spew, I am!"

Pulling the ships nose up, and leveling off from the dive, Jessica smiles, "I accept the challenge!"

"What challenge, you say?"

"To make ya puke!"

"It's not gonna take much to get me to yak, babe!"

With all seven missiles converging on them, Jessica has an intense look on her face when she calls out, "Hold on!"

The defensive scorpion guns are hammering away at the three Co-op Centipedes as well as the four Hornets that are straining to catch up from the other direction. At the exact same time all her Centipede-Mew missiles finally fire and two race out towards the east after the Enfields, the third one heads out for the two fighters in the west, and the forth one is turning south for that pair.

Inside a few quick seconds, the two Djinn in the west, and two in the south, fire mini-missiles and cannon at the two Mew coming at their faces. Both missiles are destroyed but its nine Micropedes blossom out of each one and blow both pairs of ships out of the sky. The two Hydrapedes that were climbing up after them now turn for the three Djinn coming in from the north. At the same time those fighters are shot down by the lone Hydrapede zipping up from underneath.

All three Hydrapede droids turn towards Jessica's Babyback.

Right before the two Mew reach the Enfields, the Hornets that were after Jessica have all been blown out of the sky, but the twelve

mini-missiles they pickle off now twist and turn and converge on her. Between four of the defensive guns, it's own Micropedes launched from canisters, and the stinger jumping in, surprisingly five of these things manage to get through this onslaught and hit the Babyback.

Jessica has already rolled the ship over to keep these missiles from hitting the underside. The hammering on the armored hull again freaks Stiller's family out where they flinch and jump in their seats as the 1k-KGE bombs go off and rattles the ship from the aft.

In the east, the two Centipede-Mew that were racing towards the two flights are easily shot down by the Enfields, but the eighteen Micropedes they launch as they are knocked out are next to impossible to hit. All eight fighters scatter but they still lose five of their number with two Enfield and three Djinn going down.

Taking stock, Jessica has three Hydrapedes to the west, two in the east that are trailing the surviving Enfields, and three taking up positions around her in a defensive Red Shell mode. It was here she notices seven more flights of four Co-op fighters appearing on the tacnet that are charging in from high altitude.

Jessica takes a long-deep breath and opens a channel to RRF command over Rongo, "Aaaah, guys, this is Scarab. I was wondering if ya have anybody available to clear my tail over Maui?"

Yemi Kagame answers with a less pronounce accent from before, ["Hey Red! We noticed your hands have been full."]

Jessica was expecting to hear from her father directly, but Kagame is good enough, "Ouchie! Can you lend a girl a hand?"

["We'll be popping in overhead 'bout thirty-seconds, and will be able to make a difference inside three minutes. Will that work?"]

Jessica is surprised, "That's quick, I'll take it!"

["Rongo was a bust. They knew we were coming."]

"Okay, what's Buzzard Chow doin'?"

["Your father is pulling everything out and throwing it at Maui. We're launching on primary now."]

"They swarmed all over me the second I got in the air. I take it Rongo was a bad idea."

["It gave 'em a heads up we didn't need to give."]

In a flash, Jessica reviews the tacnet status of the battlespace surrounding her. As the three fighters in the east continue to egress the area, she notices seven flights of mixed Enfield and Djinn, totaling twenty-eight BDF fighters, continue to close in. At that very second a squadron from the Annex, that is sixteen Thunderbirds with a Warthog

gunship in tow, pops in above her at 150 kilometers altitude.

As they start their dive, straight down, Jessica feels a weight lifted off her shoulders, "I see ya, Ouchie!"

Kagame asks, ["You be holding on, girl?"]

The BDF launches Centipedes and Hornets early, so Jessica nods and, "Yea, I can hold."

000001101011

108

stukas over disneyland

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-A5 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-98368.0104 (49pc from SOL)
TIME: 07:16zulu (local 11:12mst)

The two remaining anti-air Mechs are in a mad scramble to get away from Command-One and Two who are trying to chase them down here in Toon Town. It is almost comical how they're racing back and forth between huge blocks of stacked conex containers because, if you didn't know any better, you'd swear these machines are in a panic. They're not, but with the short-choppy strides they are taking in the light gravity of Scorch, all to prevent hang-time while bouncing up into the air, makes it look like these robotic monsters are having a good old-fashioned tail-between-their-legs freak out.

Tomorrow during the press briefing on Taiji, General Giáp will show a video of them in the container yard in hot pursuit while these robots are executing their escape and evasion protocol, along with Yackety Sax playing in the background, and everyone will have a great laugh with it but, right now, things are deadly serious.

Giáp goes, "Put the micro up its arse, corporal!"

With the general pulling his weapon back from the corner, the squad's corporal swings his BR1 around that corner and, spotting via the optics, fires a Micropede after a mech that is racing away.

"Shit!" The corporal pulls back as bolts start to shred the edge of the conex container they were using for cover. With pieces of metal being ripped from the box, he says to Giáp, "On the way, sir!"

With the firing having abruptly stopped, the general pulls his weapon around the tattered box and, seeing the monster take a corner into a crossing lane two blocks down, and the missile that was fired miss the thing and destroy empty containers down range, he grins big, "Slippery bugger!" He then dives around the corner, "Follow me!"

The entire squad is right behind the general as they pour onto

the main transfer lane between the blocks of containers, and while fast approaching the first crossing juncture, just forty-meters short of it they get the jump scare of their lives when the Rockwell-Yaskawa mech sprints through the gap between the blocks.

The machine is already gone as everyone in Command-One scrambles to either hug the ground or slam into the nearest container looking for some cover so, noticing some of Command-Two members leaping over between the blocks of containers, Giáp points up and to his right, calling out, "Let's go up an' cut tha' bastard off!"

In the light gravity the team members, including the general, look like parkour masters as they leap up on top of the blocks of containers that are in stacks that range between two and six boxes high. As they bounce and leap from one row of boxes to the next, the rest of Command-Two is leaping and bounding along towards them.

Giáp points to his left while shouting to the other team leader over the din of battle, "Your bloody Rockwell went that'a way!"

Team-Two's Major laughs, "Tah for the vector, Zip!"

As Command-Two run and leap past, "All in good fun, mate!"

With that team clear, Giáp goes on channel with his people, "Fire Team Three, go forward to clear the cross-lane two blocks down! Team Two, head out to the main juncture three rows out. Team One and I will be heading right to clear the main transfer lane."

After two minutes of them leaping from one container to the next, with the vertical stacks troublesome to navigate, all the while watching for any sign of the machine to pop up, Giáp approaches the main transfer lane and glances over—then leaps back.

A string of Co-op long legs, the 7.62x54mm bolts from the Ryazan's miniguns, slash through the steel box like lasers and shred the edges of it, ripping pieces off that tumble violently through the air. With this, the general spins around a full 360 when a bolt punches through his left hand right as he took his leap.

While flying back, and without aiming, the general snap fires the grenade launcher on his BR1-k and drops two of the wonton bombs into the lane. The freight boxes shake with the force of an earthquake as one goes off behind the machine that pushes it forward where the other bomb goes off on its armored mantel and knocks it over to the ground. Having been thrown two containers over, Giáp is already on his feet, and watching as the mech's miniguns shred the top edges of the conex boxes between the blocks.

Fire Team Two reaches the general, where the Sergeant asks him, "How we be doing, Zipper?"

Giáp tosses a Micropede missile to the sergeant and says, "Would you do us the honor, Magz!"

You didn't have to ask the sergeant twice, "Me pleasure, Sir!"

"There's a good lad!"

The sergeant slaps the missile into the launch tube and, with a running start, he leaps across the transfer lane and snap fires the missile one handed towards the back of the mech.

As both miniguns swing around to shoot him in midair, the missile hits dead center, splitting its armored mantel in two and this violently smashes the robot into the ground. Giáp and the corporal both fire a grenade into the lane just to make sure it stays down.

The general notices Thunderbird fighters orbiting the park, so he opens the coms with Rand, "What's the status, Pogo?"

Rand comes on the channel, ["If you kindy's are done pramin' about, I could use the help on FAC about now!"]

"What's the status on the b-mods?"

["We've got Stukas over Disneyland, if you be askin'!"]

He nods with approval and, noticing a large mushroom cloud rising up between rows of containers a half kilometer away, Giáp asks, "Command-Two, you put tha' Rockwell down, right?"

The Major radios back, ["Aye, not much left of 'im!"]

"Okay, go FAC for Pogo, we're off to meet the ninety-eight!"

01000100-0101011-0101001-01000011-01001011

The reports from the intel community indicated that Jessica's HWG101b should be an easy kill all because the only thing she has ever done to it over the last four years was to baby the thing. They have gone after her on three separate occasions, while she was flying her Thunderbird, and that was a huge mistake when she easily handed their asses back to them by shooting down eight combat tested pilots. Today was supposed to be payback for the humiliation but, as it is, she just shot just down eighteen Djinn and three Enfield.

And it took Jessica only twelve minutes!

The 101b was believed to be thin skinned when compared to the 101a models, and supposedly easier to destroy, but the damned thing just took six hits by Co-op mini-missiles with a micronuke warhead equivalency of 500 or 1,000 kilograms of explosive force. Yet, here it is still in the air and kicking up water less than 100 meters over the surface of the Omaio sea.

With the three Hydrapede droids surrounding her, Jessica has dropped below Mach 2.5 to allow them to keep up while maneuvering. With her pulling the babyback into a tight loop below the six 20/20 cluster bombs she cut loose two minutes before, she is hoping that the BDF pilots don't see them since they are suspended motionless in the air by their AG steering mechanism. Sure, that happens to be a dirty trick, but it's a dirty trick that works wonders...when it works.

Kagame's 16 Thunderbirds are dropping in from space, and 20 of the enemy Djinn and Enfields are climbing to meet them, and 8 of their fighters split off and are diving for Jessica, with 7 of their Centipede missiles in the lead, and 14 of their Hornets trailing behind them, Jacob comes on channel to ask, ["How ya doin', Scarab?"]

"I'd be doing a lot better if I had Straight Razors!"

["What, you don't have the Straight Razors?"]

"I wouldn't still be here if I had 'em!"

["It's only a software update!"]

"What? Are you fucking me!"

Jacob snorts, ["My Trixi is sending your Trixi the code now."]

After a few seconds, Jessica's instance of Trixi announces, ["Jessie, I have it in queue, but it will require an engine restart."]

"Now is not a good time for this shit!"

Trixie adds, ["If you find the time then call it out. It will take from fifteen to twenty seconds to kill and restart all the engines."]

With Jacob and his wingman racing towards Maui from Rongo, Jacob says with icy calm, ["We're coming for ya, sweetheart."]

"I'll be here!" Jessica then turns the ship towards the coast of Kai Pai and pushes the thrust to maximum while switching over to ship coms, "Angela, I got the Eighty-Eight, you got the micros and the scorpions." With Angela acknowledging, Jessica looks up at Samantha and smiles big, "Remember your training, Samael?"

Samantha looks at her and, "What...training?"

"On the Twenty-Three! The reticle will be in lead."

Samantha is startled by this, "Are you shitting me, Red?"

"We need ya on the stinger! Angela is overclocked but she can't do it all. You gotta step up." Jessica drops the ship lower to the ocean, "Just like in the sims, but what was fun there is real here. Cinch your straps up tight, and don't be sprayin' like a nube."

Samantha nods, "Conserve my shots, right?"

"That's my girl!" Jessica kicks on WEP and squeezes more speed while saying, "Take 'em down!"

Angela starts by shooting all of the Centipedes down, which was easy, but with the mini-missiles Samantha works on blasting them out of the sky. After she nails half of them the rest start to drop off when their motors sputter out. Now struggling to exceed Mach 5, the Enfields decide to launch four Centipede-Azul missiles after her.

"Fuck that." Jessica snarls as she cuts power and pulls the ship about in an impossibly tight Immelmann turn. She pulls the ship up and over—and coming out of her roll she is now flying towards the oncoming missiles and fighters.

The Azuls are exceeding Mach 6 when they drop their first stage motors, but they hold off on firing stage two all to see where the Babyback was going to go. Jessica continues to climb to meet them head on where the missiles fire stage two to close the distance—where she then drops the nose and jinks the ship in a severe negative-G maneuver where they totally bypass the missiles. Noticing that the fighters flew over the suspended 20/20 bombs instead of below them, she pulls her nose back up and pushes for a head on.

Samantha asks, "What are you doin'?"

Jessica grits her teeth, "I want you to fire the Twenty-Three on them as they shoot past. Lead ahead of the reticle, got that?"

"Just like in the sim!"

The BDF fighters can't turn away fast enough to get away, and at five kilometers Angela starts pickling off a dozen Micropedes on the approach as Jessica opens up with the Eighty-Eight rotary-cannon in the nose of the Babyback. The bolts rake over two Djinn—ripping their wings off in the process, and as they shoot past the six remaining fighters, one Micropede hits an Enfield. Samantha was tracking two fighters that were banking away so, having selected a simple elliptical spread for the reticle, she gives it a three degree lead at the edge of the targeted lead and opens up with a one second burst.

Four of the seventy 23mm rocket assisted bombs she fires connect with an Enfield and a Djinn, and as the ships are tumbling apart Samantha gives a cheer, "Woohoo!"

Jessica calls out to Trixie, "Restart now!"

She has the AG up to maximum pull forward, all to keep them from slowing down too much but, as luck would have it, when the engines drop thrust the gravity-repulsive engine drops off too.

Like someone hitting the breaks, the ship is slowing down so much everybody is being pulled against the straps of their seats in a

two-gravity deceleration.

Jessica grunts, "What the hell happened to AG?"

Trixie mentally shrugs, "Part of the update?"

Noticing that the Babyback is slowing down and losing altitude the BDF pilots don't turn about—but extend. Now thinking this may be a trick they want more distance between them.

Seeing this, Jessica huffs big, "You gotta be shitting me!"

01011001-01001011-01001011

With General Giáp's ground forces finishing up the 'fun part' of today's mission, that is blowing up the primary targets and nobody getting killed for the effort, it is time for their Forward Air Controllers to step up. Normally as a FAC you are carrying the world on your shoulders while relying on others to do their job reliably. Now, where an FO has the same responsibility as a FAC they are faced with far fewer points of failure. As a FAC you are at the mercy of everyone's (so many everyone's) potential fuck ups that in the past it's a wonder that anyone would want to do the job.

This all has to do with Close Air Support, and one little stupid oversight means the wrong people may die.

With the SCC-neuronet and the SA-tacnet, with real time data and targeting being shared by everybody, a friendly-fire *faux pas* is a rare thing anymore. The four industrial parks, with all targets marked within designated attack corridors, and CAS flights assigned to specific FAC teams, today's *coup de grâce* will be easy peasy.

With Rand having let the Controllers off their leashes, she has taken personal control of the Warthogs, "Righty'o, Puff, Zero-One-One! You are clear for the first string from Nav-P. Bring it in!"

The first Warthog turns to run in from the Navigation Point, ["We copy! Magic Dragon zipper-line is on one-fiver-three!"]

Because of the Cerberus, the only time Warthogs get in close anymore is landing forces on an air assault, otherwise it functions as a gunship from a stand-off range. Today they go back to their roots all to wipe out a twelve-square kilometer container yard. Now, in the old configuration they had three particle/plasma guns, but today they are working with two different configurations. One is the "Kiel's Hog" config sporting two particle guns and a single Pazuzu gun under the nose. The second is the "Wonder Warthog" config with three of the Pazuzu guns and no particle beam weapons.

The cool thing about the Razorback is its flexibility in adding

Pods where the need arises, like that Missile Farm they usually carry but avoid using. For today's mission they've been given a pod right out of the Frankenstein school of cobbling shit together.

The SKA pod, for Stupidly over-Kill Adaptation, has a Pazuzu gun on top, but below they have one of the 30mm seven-barreled railguns pulled from F308 Bulldog fighters out of Palmdale. Instead of using the last 180 Bulldogs as throw-aways, they've been pulling these apart for their parts. The 30mm cannons from those Bulldogs have been refurbished and are now in turrets below on the underside of the SKA pods—and with twelve thousand of the 30mm rocket assisted bombs, with a two-thousand KEG warhead that is jokingly called the "Disney-Swish" by the crews, the irony is not lost on anybody.

General Giáp is standing in the doorway of a hangar at an aircraft production facility located by what used to be the airfield outside of Toon Town. Here he is watching the SA Warthogs lazily drift over the yard at 200kph with the 30mm cannon puking out hell-fire in a wide angle pattern on the conex boxes below.

From this vantage point he hears the explosions made by the warheads of the 30mm rounds—followed by the rip from the gun when they were fired. Flying over the destruction, the ships also perform a MiDAR scan for damage assessment.

One of the maintenance crews have already pulled and staged the tooling for the F51e. The Annex was able to reverse engineer the Djinn without much trouble, but the Enfield was a bit of a challenge. Permanently borrowing the forms and tooling makes copying the thing so much easier.

With two sets of the tooling being pulled into the massive hold of the larger HWG98, Giáp has blood dripping from his bandaged hand as he asks the ship's crew chief, "How long will this take, Staffy?"

The Staff Sergeant goes, "Ten-twelve minutes. Fifteen max."

The general shrugs, "I like eight minutes, meself."

The Sergeant laughs, "Well, sir, I would do a quick tie down just to get off the ground, but I was told to be careful with it."

"Aye, do what you need to, son."

01110000-01101000-00110011-00110100-01110010-01001101-01000101

Jacob and his wingman pop in over Kai Pai at just under 150 kilometers, rotate towards the surface of Maui far below, and push their MDDSH engines for just a blip of a second. This accelerates their Thunderbird fighters up to Mach-stupid before they drop the spacial

displacement fields. Thirty times the speed of sound isn't bad in the thin atmosphere, but pushing into progressively thicker air on decent is problematic because they have to apply their AG-dive in a constant three-G deceleration to slow down so they don't rip their wings off.

But by doing this they'll get to the deck in half the time!

Kagame's squadron is keeping the twenty BDF fighters, a mix of Djinn and Enfield, sent up to meet them busy. She has lost one fighter, but so far they've lost three Djinn who were trying to pull her people into a full blown dogfight where, at slower speeds, they stand a better chance to maneuver for a kill. As it is, both sides are in huge defensive loops looking to see which side was gonna to take the now suicidal shot at an attack but, as things go, this gets broken up before it cascades into a chaotic shooting spree.

Jacob and his wingman trainee, Jace Verdugo, both dump a full canister of twelve Micropede missiles as they blast through this Lufbery square dance. All of the BDF fighters scatter because "oh shit" applies to everyone when it comes to these itty bitty missiles at close range. Jacob and Verdugo both score a kill on separate Enfields just seconds after they shoot through the formation at 12,000 meters, and this mad scramble of evasive twisting and turning gives Kagame the chance to chase them all away with little effort.

Jacob and Verdugo continue to decelerate while diving but, instead of pulling towards the three fighters that extended earlier, from the last attack on Jessica, three of her Hydrapede missiles are keeping them busy so they turn their attention towards two flights of Djinn that are hedgehopping at low altitude trying to sneak up on his daughter from the west—who is still in a decent without power.

"Fuck me!" Grunts Jessica.

Now that her ship has dropped so low in altitude, the Hornets are trying to split-s early so as not to overshoot their target. With a new convergence point fast approaching, all twenty-four of the now Straight Razor engines suddenly gasp and spring to life.

Jessica pulls the Babyback into a vertical climb, and there is so much power available to her that a shit-eating grin starts to spread across her face, "Yea, baby! We're in business!"

With the scorpion guns hammering away at the fourteen Hornets that are closing in, from each missile that is hit out pops three of their mini-missiles. Faced with this new mess, Jessica rolls her ship to place her armored topside of the fuselage towards them—where one lucky mini-missile manages to hit her in the port side above the nose where the Eighty-Eight is mounted.

That's not a good place to be hit with a 1k-KEG warhead, but

what now gets her attention on the tacnet are the two flights of Djinn that are streaking in from the west at low altitude, so Jessica snarls, "These fuck-wits are not gonna let up!"

Jessica barrel rolls then aileron rolls out of that while pushing the engines to full thrust towards the east. With her inching past Mach-6 the seven surviving Hornets fall behind at Mach-3. Suddenly her sense of relief is short lived when three more flights of mixed Enfields and Djinn pop on the net from the east.

Jessica can see her father on the tacnet, fast approaching a thousand meters, so she radios, "Where are you?"

Jacob and Verdugo's ships are shuddering violently as they continue to slow down to a useful Mach-3, and while pulling their noses up towards the flights coming in from the west, he radios to her, ["Come back around and follow me out, hon!"]

"Yea, okay!" Jessica cuts power and, again with the AG drive breaking to slow things down even more, and when she drops just below Mach-3 she yanks the stick back making her ass skid through another overcooked Immelmann turn—where she then rolls out of that while pouring on all the coal, "I'm a-comin', pop!"

With her jinking the Babyback around the seven Hornets, Jacob asks, ["I see you took a hit in the nose?"]

Jessica huffs, "Yea, just one."

Jacob laughs while saying, ["You know you're supposed to take it in the Tramp Stamp, duh!"]

Jessica also laughs, "Fuck off, already!"

Jacob and Verdugo are now low, with Jessica screaming in fast behind them, so Jacob says, ["We'll scatter AFU to the west and you can get the fuck outta here. My wingman will escort you home."]

"No, you keep 'im! I got the power I need now."

["Nope! Kagame is overhead, so just deal, okay?"]

Jessica shakes her head while saying, "Asshole."

["That's my girl!"]

Because Jacob and Verdugo are approaching low and fast the Djinn in the two flights are forced to break and climb away early, so to keep them running they both fire a Centipede-Mew after them.

With them scattering, two of their numbers fall out of the sky by the Mew. Jessica zeros in on a straggler and lets him have it with the Eighty-Eight as she charges in. The rain of 8.80mm explosive bolts shreds its port wing, canard and MDDSH nacelle. As the thing spirals

out of the sky the pilot ejects, but instead of flying clear in the decent the pilot is temporarily caught up in her ships wake, which spins the pilot around like a top as she streaks past.

Also passing through this melee, Samantha opens up with the Stinger gun and nails a Djinn with a 23mm bomb.

While Jacob turns to square off with the four remaining Djinn, Verdugo is hot on Jessica's tail as she climbs almost vertically for space at high Mach speed where she announces, "We are outty!"

At an altitude of 85 kilometers they both kick in MDDSH, and as they zip away in an Echo-Three zig-zag out of the area of operation Jessica is already spooling for a jump. After a minute they drop out of the dash—and at the exact second Verdugo's ship nestles up to the underside of hers, Jessica jumps them both directly to Sapphire.

01000001-01010011-00110010

What Bob has wanted most since joining the Steel Annex was to become a fighter pilot. Early in his career he was spread too thin to be accepted into flight school, but the rejection notice he received back in 2273 is kind of a moot point now that he's dead.

His journey ended on Fjalar just a scant four and a half years ago and Stone Garden has been a lot of fun, sure, but three years on it dawned on him that he could get back in the game regardless of what he was before he died. He signed on to retreat but instead of a stripe and a couple of rockers, he got all six of 'em.

Not exactly what he wanted, but beggars can't be choosers.

Bob went through normal flight school, just like everyone else does, but for air combat training he received executive level treatment when they shuffled him off to Paleo. The problem Paleo had was that Bob was an excellent student and couldn't keep holding him back when he proved to be better than competent.

So he was handed off to Peña!

The one fighter dedicated to host ghosts is the F308m. Called the Mako, this thing is a full spectrum fighter but it's been relegated to CAS as a matter of design. Yea, it has been assigned oodles of escort missions, and some recon jobs, but truth be told all of the Mako pilots would prefer a good old-school fuck about overhead on CAP.

So, here's Bob, a newly minted Mako pilot rolling into his third cannon run on his first combat sortie, zipping along a 152-southwest vector and coming in low from the designated Navigation Point for this sector. Normally they hand off a new Nav-P for each run but nobody is

shooting back today.

The run he just made was better than perfect, and the single 30mm round punched through the wall of a plant at the second story level. The 0.01 second delay allowed it to reach the center of the structure—where the blast puffs the exterior walls out like a bag of popcorn in a microwave oven before the explosion blew the walls out. The cool thing about the Cerberus, and most CAS missions today, using the 23, 30 and the new 37mm railguns, is that you can actually witness your own handiwork before you overfly the target!

Yea, sure, Bob would rather be flying CAP, but watching as the thing you just shot at pop like a fiery balloon does make you want to grin like a 'tard in spite of professional decorum.

As Bob pulls out of the sector and merges back into traffic, on the CAS loop, Peña comes on the RRF channel with, ["Everyone, we're being asked to pull the bulk of our CAP and throw it at Maui. As it is, you CAS guys will be finished in about ten minutes, so when you're done you'll CAP for Quantus when they bring the five Guppies out. Bam-Bam will take over for me. We clear?"]

With hundreds of clicks on channel, Peña switches over to the command freq, ["Kincaid, you're in charge. Can do?"]

Chet Kincaid replies, ["Will do!"]

With Peña rattling off orders for the main body of CAP pilots to rendezvous before approaching Maui, and with all eight-hundred of them starting to climb for space, Bob asks Peña, "Who do you want me to pair up with, Oscar?"

Peña is laughing as he pulls his b-mod up beside Bob's Mako, ["You're not stayin' here, Jackson. You're comin' with!"]

000001101100

109

in your base an' killin' your doodz

LCTN: 51-TAURUS-A2B (Hyades cluster)

CORD: SAO-76541.0105 (54pc from SOL)

TIME: 07:33zulu (local 11:29mst)

Rongo was a disaster for the SA. What was supposed to be a quick an' dirty diversionary attack fizzled out when only eighty fighters diverted from Maui. Forty-five squadrons remained behind, and when these guys did show they hung out in space only long enough to cover the ninety-six on Rongo to get out and race back over to Maui.

This was a planned move, the result being that Maui is now on full alert, and they have almost 900 fighters—minus the ships Jessica and the rest shot down near the Kai Pai fashion district.

Which was 48, and that brings the BDF numbers down to 848.

The real targets here at Tū have always been the industrial cities of Kolohe and Whanoke on the massive Greenland sized island of Whare Kino on the other side of the planet Maui.

Kai Pai and Whare Kino are on exact opposite sides of Maui so any direction of travel from one side to the other is as good as any other possible direction you could pick. With their fighters scattering to the northwest for Whare Kino, Jacob and Kagame opt for the down under route over the southern pole while the Warthog recovers the four SA pilots, Jessica's Hydrapedes, and all 48 of the BDF pilots and then dropping those guys off at Kai Pai.

Now at sixty-one kilometers in altitude, holding at Mach-18, Jacob radios Kagame, "Isn't that field commissary goin' up soon?"

["Yea, on Aroha Mai. You out?"]

"I thought that was to be on Aroha Atu?"

["Was, but twenty minutes ago one of our Grigori's was shot at from Atu, so the exchange is getting rerouted to Mai."]

"Well, right now I'm kind of Winchester on Mew-pews."

["Then land-n-load and we'll cover ya, Buzzard! I know Dog held all the Green Hornets for dei Ea and b's, and Yellow Jackets for SEAD and CAS, but I t'ought you'd git di yellow ones?"]

"We're short on 'em, and he wanted to make an exception for me but I insisted that I follow his orders—just like everyone else."

Kagame laughs, ["I sabe, bu' you be usin' di Hydras now?"]

Jacob adores Kagame, and talking to her makes him smile because she's so comfortable with him that she reverts back to her native pidgin, "Getting a kill-credit ten or twenty minutes after you shoot the damned thing off is like cheating in my book."

["I no 'gree, that's when dey just gittin' started!"]

"I get ch'ya, I'm also gonna top off on AP when I set down."

["By de wai, how's da Baby-P workin' for ya? I git mine dis Saturday and ah bei wunderin' if it gon' be butterin' my bread or no?"]

"Below Mach-two it's sorta shit, but two-five and above it's a bona fide death ray. It'll butter yer bread if you remember two things. First off is to remember that you got it in hand, let's start there! Second, is sim your ass off because the lead is counterintuitively short. AP is squirrely an' takes quite a bit of swag to land the shot."

["In deflection mode, is de t'ing any gud?"]

"Practice makes perfect, Ouchie."

01001001-0101001-01000001-01000001-01011001-01000001-01010011

Now flying past the icy waters of the southern pole, on the tacnet they notice clusters of BDF fighters in groups of thirty, sixty and ninety or more, suddenly pop out of MDDSH far from the current FCAP zone, and drop in over their fighters that went northwest. They dive and race in to add to the cover over the targets on Whare Kino.

They came from everywhere and, again, this was planned for.

After six hundred fighters get through, the FCAP from Rongo plugs that gap and half of the CAP from Rongo shows up and dives in two-hundred kilometers ahead of Jacob and Kagame's people.

This gives the Annex a paltry 620 Thunderbird fighters to go up against the 1,450 BDF fighters, but with Peña and his entire CAP from Scorch streaking in from their rendezvous point at the barycenter between Hina and Tuna, this adds another 800 Thunderbirds to the SA side of the tally sheet, so it's pretty much even-Steven now.

Anymore, the air-to-air engagements in this conflict, all to control the air over objectives, has become an all-consuming obsession

by both parties and the numbers over Maui show it. The Annex has 96 Cerberus for CAS, 48 of the older bisE flying as Weasels for SEAD, and only 16 of the bisEa conversions as fighter-interceptors to chase after the infamous IR5 Express. On major engagements, these numbers have simply doubled through the years where the numbers for CAP have more than quadrupled over the same timeperiod.

The fighters about to engage above Ware Kino represents eight percent of the fighter forces for both the Co-op and the Annex, but where the Co-op has been spread thin across hundreds of systems the Annex can focus all of their forces at will.

The other thing to note is that the Annex can continue to build new fighters with impunity but, less than an hour ago, the industrial might of the Co-op is now completely out of the air/spacebuilding business for at least a year to come. This whole time the Annex has been waging a war of attrition against the Co-op's financial resources and budgets but, as of today and going forward, the SA is prosecuting a war of attrition by numbers.

Now, where Kai Pai is about the size and shape of the UK and Ireland shoved together, Whare Kino is huge like Greenland. To the south are the islands of Aroha Atu and Aroha Mai, and both are half and a third the size of Iceland, respectively. Just a Straits of Dover width away from one of two primary targets, here being the industrial zone between the suburbs and the city of Kolohe, the curvature of Maui takes the landmasses out of direct line of sight.

Reaching Aroha Mai at first light, Jacob lands his ship on open ground near the combat field resupply unit. With Kagame and her people flying on to their new CAP assignment, three reloading mechs are extricating themselves from the hold of an HWG98. Jacob hops out of his Thunderbird and, while being shadowed by Bud in a ghost droid, he walks over to the resupply ground crew—where he blunders into the much hated, ball-busting company master-sergeant under Robert Jackson, back when he was young and green.

Jacob has not laid eyes on her since Saiph-6B so he grins big, "Well if it ain't Rita Orozco, how the fuck are ya!"

Orozco turns around, "It's Margarita to you, motherfucker."

Jacob laughs with, "What are you now, a retread? Seriously, I thought you were gonna be a Master-Sergeant forever!"

She huffs a laugh, then shakes her head with a grim smile, "Nobody thought you'd amount to shit. Look at you!"

Jacob shrugs with, "I still don't amount to shit."

Orozco nods with approval, "You got that right."

Thumbing back he asks, "How long is this gonna take here."

"FAS-T is open for business in just a couple minutes."

"Okay, that sounds great!"

"That's to get the mechs out! Your reload is another six."

Jacob wonders, "Can you give me a full rack of the Mews?"

"Minimums, babe!" Orozco throws her hands up, "You gotta have two of everything an' I can't back-slide on that one! Best I can do is to load you nine Centipedes. Will that shut ch'ya up?"

Jacob nods repeatedly, "That'll have to do."

"Oh shit!" Says Orozco as she turns and high tails it towards her ship, while shouting back to Jacob, "Incoming! Take cover!"

On the tacnet he sees twelve of the older Condor fighters coming in from Aroha Atu, at high speed and low over the water, so he waves his ship away, "Trixie go! Get the fuck out of here!"

As his Thunderbird hops up, spins around and blows out of the area over the treetops, Trixie radios, ["We are E-three outbound."]

Jacob and ghost droid Bud are airborne and flying out the other way towards the trees, the coast and the island of Aroha Atu, with Jacob adding, "Echo-Three outta the AO and steer clear!"

With 23mm bombs going off all around the HWG98, one explodes underneath it and makes the ship flip up into the air, where several bombs hit the exposed underside—splitting the ship into thirds.

As the mechs are now being hammered into scrap, co-pilot Bud asks, ["Don't you want us to circle round and come back for ya when shit's clear? You know we can do that—"]

Jacob cuts him off, "No! Park her outside the Spike and stay the fuck put! Don't budge for anybody. Copy?"

["Okay, echo-three to GOP it is!"]

With the 23mm bombs falling all around for good measure, Orozco and half her crew reverse direction and, now up in the air and above the explosions, they are following Jacob for the coast.

Jacob notices them and calls out, "Cloak and slow, Rozco!"

They cloak and slow to below 5-kph as the Condors reach the island and orbit low at eighty-meters altitude. Seeing total destruction of the HWG and mechs, and not seeing anything alive and moving, they shoot off towards the north to sneak in below the Annex CAP.

With Orozco's people going back for any weapons and ammo they can find, she slithers through the foliage and lands on the beach

beside Jacob, who asks, "You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

Orozco says, "I heard a Grigori was shot at."

Jacob can barely see the one lone mountain on Aroha Atu poking above the distant horizon, so he turns to Orozco and wonders out loud, "Something is over there we missed."

Orozco rolls her eyes and, "Ya think?"

With her squad mates appearing with bandoleers of ammo, a cartridge of Micropede missiles, and loose Hornet missiles in hand, Jacob selects a Yellow Jacket and nods with a smile while saying to Orozco's people, "If you're with me...keeping your hands and feet inside the coaster is optional. Let's rawk."

01100101-01111010-0110000-01111010

From the stadium, one can see the Warthogs finishing up the last of the gun runs over Toon Town. From this distance the sounds from the warheads and guns are muffled but eerie just the same.

Up close we have four of the five guppy configurations of the Trident Star Clippers, leased from Qantas, taking off from Main Street USA, with the fifth one slowly taxiing up behind General Giáp as he waits for Richard Blemmings at the top edge of the stadium.

With the ghost droids rising up and loading into the back of a Warthog that is slowly drifting past, Blemmings steps up to Giáp with an outstretched hand, "Make a mess of things, General?"

Giáp smiles while taking his hand, "Quite the mess. A bloody fine mess you could say! How's the first match?"

"Bout ta start the second half."

"Too much passin' and not enough tryin'?"

"Aye, you could say that."

Giáp smiles and asks, "We on for eighteen next week?"

Blemmings points to his bloody and bandaged hand and points out, "Didn't you just lose half your hand?"

"Oh tosh! It's just a couple of digits, mate!"

"I'm not going to give you a handicap for that."

"Did I ask for points when I lost half of me foot?"

Blemmings smiles with, "I expect you to make par."

"Better than!" An aide to the General has stepped up, so Giáp turns to her, "What'll it be, Matilda?"

"Sir, we have one of our personnel holding up the evac."

"Well, have Rand tell the daft bludger to get it in gear!"

She hesitates, blinks then says, "On it, Sir."

Giáp turns back to Blemmings and, "I'm pickin' up the green fees this time, but Tareyton or Wycombe? It's your choice!"

Blemmings smirks, "Ninth course...Tareyton."

Giáp shakes his head, "My gawd, you're a bastard."

"Wha'? You be sayin' I'm takin' advantage of a cripple!"

"Aye, that I am!"

On the tacnet, Rand comes on, ["General Giáp, Sir!"]

"Give me a sec!" Giáp says to Blemmings then asks Rand, "What'll it be, MG? We got everyone accounted for?"

"All but one, sir."

"Who be this wanker, so I can stick my boot up his arse!"

Rand snorts, "That'd be you, Sir!"

"Aaaaah, so I'm holding things up! I'll be right with ya, MG." Then to Blemmings he gives a fist-bump, "I gotta bug out, so I'll see you on the seventh, me matie!"

00101000-0101111-00111000-0101110-00101000-0111100-00101001

Maui is tidally locked to the gas giant, Taranga, so as this planet continues its counterclockwise orbit, the star Tū starts to light up all of Whare Kino. Jacob, Orozco and her people were able to cover the twenty kilometers under the shadow of the mountain on the island of Aroha Atu, stretched out far over the water towards Aroha Mai, and they made it here without being noticed. Between the fog over the water, and with the camouflage setting of their JACC's dialed in on the despised powderpuff pink, this combination of camo and elements made them nearly impossible to spot as they streaked in under the quickly dissipating shadow.

They hit the beach just as Tū crests the mountainous peaks, then switched to a mottled green camo as they slipped into the jungle.

Now negotiating the undergrowth, it only takes them a few minutes of weaving between the trees and foliage before they stumble onto a clearing where all the undergrowth is missing. Under the massive trees of Aroha Atu they blunder into a hidden Co-op airbase. This expanse is two kilometers wide and full of Quonset huts, aircraft hangers and an airfield that's missing it's aircraft.

Having stepped out into the edge of the clearing, a hundred meters away from a guard post laced with automatic weapons, Jacob is hidden in plain site as he says on channel, "This was unexpected."

Orozco replies, "A whole lotta tooth here!"

"A battalion's worth, if that?"

"At least that!"

"This is why intel was baffled by Maui. We couldn't see 'em!"

"I thought the thing shot at the Grigori was shoulder fired."

"It was." Jacob shakes his head slowly, saying, "We thought Atu was a shit OP, but this is a fucking, full on airbase-base."

Orozco asks, "Whaddya wanna do 'bout it?"

"Report on it, maybe?"

Suddenly, a sonic boom hits as a pair of Condors screeches almost to a stop, and then slides in under the trees from the beach while undetected by the Annex from nearby Whare Kino.

Orozco then asks, "What else?"

"Sit tight and keep reporting!" Jacob shrugs and looks back at her, "What's ten of us gonna do to tha place?"

Now, there was a light rain here mid-morning, just an hour before sunrise and, when that boom hit, it shook the water from the leaves high above them. That mist took some time to drift down to where they are and, when it lands on Jacob, the kaleidoscope of colors from the holographic cloak pinpoints where he is standing.

Orozco points out, "You're cloak is on?"

With the guards scrambling for their weapons, Jacob nods as he switches it off, "Yea, uuuuuuh, yea, it was."

"Ya know, we don't really use it much anymore."

Jacob has dropped to hug the ground, and while rolling behind a mound, "I haven't trained for ground action in quite some time!"

With the bolts ripping past him, overhead by two feet, Orozco laughs, "Well, Graves, you're gonna hav'ta bone up real fast!"

While strings of fire are whipping back and forth across the jungle growth, keeping Orozco and her people down, Jacob rolls on his back and pumps a wonton grenade at them.

The guard post is disintegrated from the 1k-KEG blast, and as bodies spiral into the air, Orozco says "Overkill, maybe?"

"It's all I got!" Jacob then fires off the remaining four bombs

that drop in on four hangers. With them going up in massive fireballs, Jacob scans the Yellow Jacket and pulls up the interface. Identical to the Hydrapede toolkit, he checks off the 'Red Shell Mode' box and throws it into the air while saying, "Fly, be free!"

The Yellow Jacket's AI identifies the Condors and zig-zags towards them. It drops a Micropede on the ships and rips past them before the little missile connects. The two fighters are shredded by the blast as the Yellow Jacket snakes along looking for more fighters.

Jacob says on channel, "Shock works to our advantage, guys. If you want in on this then follow me and cover the flanks!"

Bud in his droid leapfrogs past him and holds at the destroyed post, while laughing, "Sounds like a God-damned blast!"

Orazco squats next to Jacob and hands him a bandoleer of ammo and a sling of grenade tubes, "Count me in!"

He smiles at her, "It's gonna get messy!"

She nods, "Music to my ears."

Jumping up, they advance on the post and race past it to the closest destroyed hanger, while Jacob calls up, "Dog, you here yet?"

Peña comes on channel right when a BDF platoon opens up on them, ["You're on Aroha Atu? What the fuck you doin' out there!"]

Returning fire with his forearm mounted 5.77mm chain guns, Jacob says matter of factly, "Kinda getting' shot at, that's what."

["Needs some air? Want me to send Thumper?"]

"Sure! Three or four of them would help."

["What did you say you're doin'?"]

"Shooting up an airbase!"

01000010-01101111-01000101-01000100

Jessica pops out of her jump close to Kirin, immediately drops and blows through the orbital tracks around Sapphire at way too high of speed while making a mayday call to air and space traffic control. The ship was venting so getting to an altitude with breathable pressure enough to offset the loss was critical. Leveling out at ten-thousand feet, high above Blank Stump, the Stiller family's ears start to pop when pressure increases inside the hold of the ship.

Still celebrating their mad escape, the excitement is winding down as the 101b takes a straight shot into the Church Key and lands at the flight line at the foot of the spike. Samantha is already back in

her street clothes when they land, with the ladder to exit the ship having dropped as they touch down.

Jessica is in this strange post-combat deadpan mode, with heightened awareness and everything moving along in slow-mo, and as she slips out of the pilot's station, with her helmet assembly already off, Samantha plants a big wet one on her mouth.

"I gotta go!" She kisses Jessica a second time and heads for the ladder, saying, "We gotta do that again!" Leaping down the stairs, she whoops and hollers and, "I shot down three fighters!"

Vince's family is already on their feet, with the celebratory cheer having passed, and each one thanks her as they descend to the flight line outside. After his fifteen-year-old grandson salutes Jessica, then disembarks, Stiller stares at Jessica with genuine gratitude.

He stresses to her, "I owe you."

She shakes her head, "You don't owe me shit, Vince."

He pats her on the arm, "How 'bout I buy you a shot of rye."

As he leaves the ship, she says to him, "I'll hold you to that!"

Jessica dismounts from her JACC, and as she starts to dress five of the ghost droids stand at attention and salute her before they leave. All except Nicole who says, "You did good today."

"I don't feel it." Having slipped on her shoes, Jessica stands then says through clinched teeth, "I could've done better."

"These ghosts units have been ordered off. See me soon?" Jessica nods, yes, so Nicole gives her a one-finger salute, "The ship is fucked up, but everyone made it out alive. Ya did good!"

As Nicole exits, Jessica calls out to her, "See ya tomorrow!"

Jessica takes a minute to drink in the interior of the ship. She added an office and small bedroom and this has been like a second home to her over the last few years. With cracks in the hull and losing atmosphere, then popping the emergency oxygen masks on the way down, means her ship is a total and it will never fly again.

Jessica turns to the ladder, and before she descends she pats the bulkhead and quietly says to herself, "Thank you."

She steps out onto the flight line and takes a quick peek at the damage to the hull in the back of the ship. Shaking her head, she walks to the grassy knoll where a huge crowd has formed, and upon seeing her they start to applaud and cheer as she climbs the small hill towards Scott, Maria, Bill and Jace Verdugo.

As is their custom in the Annex, she does not acknowledge

the praise, nor make eye contact with anyone in the crowd as she squares off with Scott and the others.

Already knowing the answer, and according to custom, she has to ask, "How long to make her flight ready?"

Scott glances at Bill and then, with a smile, he says to Jessica, "No can do, buckaroo! What we got's here is a total."

With the applause finally starting to die down, tears well up in Jessica's eyes when Maria says to her, "Ya did good today, Red."

Through clinched teeth, Jessica shrugs, "Whatever."

Bill says to her, "Breathe, sugar. Just breathe."

Scott says, "Babe, you did do good today!"

She protests, "My ship is scrap now."

Maria adds, "It did its job."

Scott adds, "I pathed your file...that flight out was nuts!"

Bill huffs a laugh, "Yup, that was some spectacular aviatin'!"

With tears streaming down her cheeks, and about to hurl, Jessica hisses through clinched teeth, "I feel like such a Mary Sue!"

Scott puts a hand on her shoulder, leans in and says to her, "Get a grip, breathe deep. Looong deep breaths."

With her taking those real deep breaths, Maria grins and says, "Adrenaline is a motherfucker, ain't it?"

Jessica nods yes, and again through the teeth, "Ya think?"

Scott then opens up to her, "Everyone called your ship the Millennium Falcon as a joke. We couldn't understand the point of the thing until just now." Jessica's brow frowns as he continues, "I talked to Paleo before you landed and your replacement, the b-one, will get the Mbande substrate in the armor and the Butterfly engines. We will also configure it how you originally wanted it. Like Kiel's a-four."

In disbelief, she goes, "Ooo'kay?"

"The twenty-three in the tail as a stinger gun, we just never thought about it before and it makes perfect sense now!"

Maria adds, "We just have to figure out the ballistics."

Bill then says, "We're gonna build about forty of the b-ones."

Maria laughs, "Everyone is going to want one now!"

"That's a no shit." Scott huffs a laugh, then asks pointedly, "How many did ya shoot down today?"

Jessica shrugs, "I guess...by my count it was twenty-eight?"

"Just so you know, you're Hydras have been workin' overtime and your final tally is thirty-three." Scott puts a finger up to shut her up so he could finish the count, "The two Hydras from early on, they shot down the three ships that were RTB. The group that extended, a Djinn got a little careless and got its ass handed back to it. Also, those flights coming in from the east flew under the bombs you had hanging in the air and they bagged an Enfield that couldn't get away!"

Jessica's face scowls in protest, "I was already gone."

"It is what it is! It's what you're gonna hav'ta settle for."

"That's fucking stupid." Jessica then notices Jace Verdugo, and he seems familiar so she asks, "You're my father's wingman?"

He nods, "Jace Verdugo, at your service."

Jessica's eyes squint while asking, "Do I know you?"

Verdugo shrugs, "I just wanted to say, thanks for the burrito."

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Now, where Peña had command of the overall operation for today, he had two missions that launched simultaneously and those were Scorch and Rongo. Peña led the CAP attack at Scorch and it was better than a resounding success. Twenty-three light years away was the diversionary attack on the planet Rongo that tried to pull air resources from the planet Maui, and the Annex lost half of an hour trying to figure out that they were being played.

In that time the Co-op was able to pull fighters in from over thirty different systems to offset the numbers that the Annex was sure to bring, so the SA lost a guaranteed numerical advantage.

Sure, the four hundred that were let go from Scorch never would have been able to get through once FCAP locked down the lower orbital tracks of Maui, but those guys happened to be a no show.

Anyway, for defensive flying, in sizeable groups, you have the Lufbery Circle combinations, and Thach Weave variants, but for an attacker there are ways of chipping away at those. What the BDF has come up with is an odd combination of both—taken to the vertical. Since "stall" in flight is not really a thing anymore, the BDF has formed a column of fighters, ten kilometers wide by twenty high, that are over both Whanoke in the north, and Kolohe in the south.

With the Djinn on the outside of the columns performing crazy ellipticals, consisting of power dives followed by zoom climbs, and the Enfield doing lazy banks in the middle of it to cover them, this left the

Annex scratching their heads and wondering what to do?

See, for the ground assault in Whanoke the SA assigned two regiments from SA36, led by Gudici, who are in an attack force that consists of twenty slicks and ten Warthogs, then for Kolohe there is an identical force from SA96, led by Venkatesh. They would have landed some time ago, but with the BDF fighters over the targets in a brilliant defensive arrangement the assault teams can't really approach and land without getting their hair mussed more than just a tad. Peña and team has to control the air for them to be able to stick that landing.

Then the annoyance factor is jacked up more with three of the latest IR5 Express who are giving a merry chase 100 kilometers out with eight bisEa trailing after them and looking for an angle.

A week from now Jacob, Peña, Cyzk, and Kati Connors will figure out a counter to this defensive formation, which will require the use of their 23mm cannon for the first time in air to air combat, from a safe distance of course but, for now, Peña has already thrown his hands up and called in the 'oh fuck it' option.

...They have Thin Blu on the way.

Peña was expecting to get Bob some trigger time on CAP but, with the call from Jacob just now, he has pulled himself, Bob, along with Sheron Pilliod and Clint Wanganui who have become dedicated CAS pilots over the last two years.

Orozco's corporal had the airbase mapped and on the tacnet in the six minutes it takes Peña, Sheron, Clint and Bob to blow in and hit the area with MiDAR; and while studying the data with his FAC hat on, Peña calls Jacob, "Where do you want it, Buzzard?"

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Jacob and everyone has advanced a quarter of the way into the base and are approaching the destroyed Condors, all the while the firefight they are having with a company sized unit, dug in beside a maintenance depot 150 meters out, is picking up fast.

While Bud covers him, Jacob pats on the two intact cockpits to get the pilot's attention. He then makes hand gestures to ask if they are going to stay put. First, he points at them both, makes a fist, then points at the ground—where both pilots nod big and give him a thumbs up, where he gives them a thumbs up in return.

Stuck in the middle of a real nasty firefight, and Spooky having dropped bombs everywhere, these cockpits are cozy, stocked and are indestructible enough to keep both pilots safe for now.

On channel, Jacob says, "Leave them be, they're staying put."

It's here that Peña asks where he wants it, so Jacob goes, "We are in a firefight with Homer and I'm plum out of wontons!"

Peña laughs, ["That's what we're here for!"]

"How 'bout ya drop a five-k, marked on the tacnet, one-fifty meters out along zero-zero-fiver. You copy that, Dog?"

["I copy, how thick is the foliage above you?"]

"Pretty thick. Maybe twenty-meters or so?"

["We'll have to blow the canopy first."]

Peña makes the first run and rakes the top of the canopy with 23mm fire. This cuts huge swath out of foliage it but it takes Bob and Sharon's run to finally blast through it, making it rain debris all over the maintenance depot and troops below. It's here that Clint picks up his Navigation Point to roll in with the 5k.

Now, the IR5 have been lapping the whole area, looking for little opportunities that pop up here and there, and four CAS ships out from under CAP by a whole thirty clicks was just too enticing. With two bisEa hot on his tail, the IR5 pulls his nose in by fifteen degrees and lets loose four Centipede-Azul. Two Azul race up after the fighters in CAP, and since the missiles are climbing Pena ignores them because it's obvious where they're going. He doesn't see the two Azul hugging the surface of the ocean while also heading north—right for them.

At the NavP, Clint turns on a dime and take's a south to north heading to drop his bomb on the maintenance depot. Since the target is deep in the foliage, he has to launch the 5k-KGE bomb on a lazy ballistic trajectory. He slows his ship and pulls his nose up to lob it in the cut, and when he fires it at a low power setting, you can see the thing kind of hang in the air as it moseys its way to target.

On CAS over thick jungle, low over the treetops means life, so as Clint dips his nose to drop altitude before he makes his turn away, he hears Peña say over the CAS channel, "Oh shit!!"

The lead Azul streaks in and, pops all of its mini-missiles a fraction of a second before going right up Clint's ass. And with those little things spiraling away, Peña, Bob and Sheron all scatter to get away from the minis and a second Azul that blows through and, not turning back, continues on to find a target on CAP thirty clicks away.

The back half of Clint's ship is vaporized and the forward half, with him in the cockpit, tumbles and spirals into the cut they made in the treetops. He cartwheels into the depot below—and as fate would have it, the 5k bomb follows him in.

After the cataclysmic 5k blast, Jacob and the others brush off and push on while other bombs have queued up elsewhere...

Two Razorbacks slip into position two-hundred kilometers in altitude with one above Whanoke in the north and the second over Kolohe in the south. Both ships have two of the custom six-shooter pods with the Thin Blu rocket assisted penetrator bombs. Within seconds of opening the pods, the bombs are pickled off.

Frank Zamboni announces on the general mission frequency, ["TRDS away! Thirty-eight seconds until impact."]

The bombs reach Mach-30 as they enter the thicker part of the atmosphere, leaving a fiery plasma trail behind as they cut through the air, and with the terminal decent-to-impact motor firing off in the last five seconds. They maintain a brisk Mach-26 as they slam into their respective industrial zones in a lovely spiral pattern.

Twelve one-kiloton warheads go off underground outside of Kolohe, and twelve outside of Whanoke, and the blasts are contained underground, yes, but they raise the surface by a few scant meters in a rippling motion from the center to the outer regions of the target. Worse yet, the harmonics from the explosions are compounded when the blast chambers collapse and this effectively shatters the entire site when the surface drops below where it started from—effectively razing the entire industrial zone, but that's not all...

The cherry on top are another two Razorbacks who are only at sixty kilometers altitude above Whanoke and Kolohe. After Thin Blu streaks by, they slip in and when over the target they each pallet drop the entire deck of the ship. On the deck pallet are 28 transport bricks, each with 128 Centipede missiles. The bricks are set to burst apart when released—and as this happens it sets free 3,584 missiles that shoot straight down to a predetermined point on the map where, ten seconds short of contact, releases all six of their Micropede missiles that deliver a total of seven-thousand KGE of explosives. Both targets each receive a total of 25,088,000 kilograms of explosive force spread out over forty square kilometers.

It's not total destruction, but it'll do!

Jacob, Bud and Orozco reach a crater of what was the depot, laced with the body parts of the dead BDF company. Looking at the crushed canopy of the Cerberus lying there, and the mangled JACC containing a quite dead Clint Wanganui, he pulls the suit with Clint out of the wreckage.

Receiving fire from another BDF company trying to advance on the crater, Jacob leaves Bud there to cover them. With everyone pulling back to the closest hanger, Jacob one-hand drags Clint's body

with them. As Orozco's people are laying down fire, Bud now falls back to their position. Jacob pulls up a com-link and launches it while telling Orozco to walk Thumper in to push this group back.

As he and Orozco's people are picking off troopers trying to push on them, Boxter Hartcourt answers, ["Hello, dear Jacob!"]

Jacob is blasting away with his scorpion gun, "Hey Box!"

["From all the popping I hear I'm curious what you're up to?"]

"Well, Aroha Atu. I'm in your base an' killin' your doodz."

["On Maui!"] Boxter snickers, ["Well, son, that's not my base and not my dudes, so is this a social or business call today?"]

"Actually, it's a family matter. Clint is dead."

Boxter gives a low chuckle under his breath, ["Oh, how tragic, but before I weep for the loss of the lil' tyke, are you sure 'bout that? At my lofty station, one must know proof positive before we start pulling strings. Don't want to run afoul of the Wanganui's."]

"I pulled him out of the wreckage. It'll be a closed coffin."

["Oh how opportune! This distraction will pay hefty dividends. By the way, how did the little bugger bite the bullet?"]

"An IR5 shot him down, but the five-k bomb he launched seconds before he crashed, the weapon, it landed on top of 'im."

["Well now, I must find a way to reward that Express pilot. Need help pin-pointing the base up north?"]

"Thanks but we found it, and the alert went out for them to evacuate. We're gonna drop a couple of twenty-twenties on it."

["For your edification, I just now received an alert that Bristol is pulling their forces out of Maui. Looks like you were successful!"]

Looking at a text alert on the tacnet, Jacob nods big saying, "And I just got an alert that we're standing down and letting 'em go."

["After you bomb the base in the north?"]

With the fire from both sides dropping off to nothing, Jacob shrugs and adds, "There's no need to now."

["How unfortunate."] Boxter's mood changes when he says, ["On a side note, I'm still gnawing over the fact that my youngest child managed to wheedled her way onto one of your missions with her betrothed. I want to personally thank you for clearing their six."]

"Sorry, Box. That was supposed to be uneventful."

["We both know that, in our endeavors, nothing is uneventful

when it's supposed to be."]

Jacob smiles, saying, "Yea, you're right about that!"

["You know, Jacob, I'm glad both sides in this conflict are working together like we do."]

Jacob shakes his head, "This standing down and letting people get away when hitting an objective is kinda like delaying the inevitable. Aren't we putting the meat back into the machine here?"

["Well, if you had your way it'd be over with too soon!"]

"I don't understand what you and Ramirez have goin' on."

["Common goals? The way it's going, and cutting through the bull, Rho Tau may very well be an all in event. I can only pray!"]

Jacob wonders, "How would that be good?"

Boxter gives a little laugh then says, ["When we close the books on all this, we'll need a...definitive end to hostilities."]

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periwinkle

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-761311.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-FEBRUARY-3-SATURDAY
TIME: 11:03zulu (local 25:32mst)

It may be midday Greenwich time in the UK, and for everyone living on zulu time, and the E-Z time standard for that matter, but here on the Church Key it's early evening with Electra slowly dropping below the horizon. The sunsets of Electra on the planet Sapphire can be electrifying, and from the top of the Spike they are doubly so, but the windows in Maria's corner office face north and east. Not really an issue because with the entertainment interface she can switch them to any view she wants from any window on the Spike.

Jacob was told to come on in when he got here, and entering her office, she points to the side chair in front of her desk and goes, "*E'ý pachuco!* Take a seat while we wrap this up!"

Jacob nods, sits and, "Pins and needles!"

He can only hear Maria's side of a two-way conversation on the CXi version of the tacnet, "I don't care, John! We got the fuckers down to seven, then they push for nine, and now they want twelve? That's a hard hell no, fuck no, piss no, shit no!"

She puts a hand up to her ear and goes, "This is retarded!" Then after a few seconds she almost shouts, "They meet on this again when? Monday! Okay, let the fuckers know I'll be there on Monday and they'll see it my way. Admin gets one and they get nine and that's it! If these prima donna dweebs don't like it then they can tell it to my face when I get in theirs...Monday!"

With the call cut, Jacob is chuckling, "What was that about?"

Maria puts a finger up, "First, let me tell ya I talked to Bud." She crosses her arms in front of her and leans forward on her desk, "Now, I may be out of the chain but I'm not out of the loop. Get me?"

"Yea, I kinda get ya?"

"Things went well, better than expected on Thursday, but they'll be no more splitting resources like Scorch and Rongo."

"That wasn't my doing."

"I know it wasn't your idea. Maui should have been a failure but the way it turned out, even though Peña called in the Hail Mary option..." Jacob was about to protest where Maria puts a hand up and continues, "It was the right call on his part."

Jacob wonders, "Shouldn't Scott be talking to me 'bout this?"

"Out of respect for you I volunteered. Scott needs only one little excuse to ground your ass, an' we're catchin' a lot of heat to pull that ass off the line. Scott's not quite sure why Bud was there but I happen to know." Maria then throws her hands out, adding drama to what she is saying, "So, there you were on Aroha Atu, just like in the old days, runnin' around and clippin' people when you should've been focusing on ending their asses...permanently."

Jacob rolls his eyes, "I know, that Lieutenant pulled on me."

"Yea, after you shot his fucking legs off. Anyone else, and that would've been a golden ticket but, for a Looey a regen fucks with upward mobility in the CDF, so Bud had to put 'im down."

"There any words from the Alter regarding Rho Tau?"

"No, an' since it's your last hot mission, have fun with it!"

"Is it my last one because I took Diego to Taurus-Littrow?"

"No, but it should be! I've been mullin' over what I should do to get back at you for that one, and du Conde kinda missed the mark."

"Yea, I know, the Statute of Limitations don't apply to you."

"Got that right! Nobody get's off my hook, so you're penance, Chuckle, is next time I ask you to put out...you'll be my monkey!"

"Yea, cool, I think I can live with gettin' off easy!" He shrugs, then points around her while saying, "An' ya gotta admit, that thing does kick ass sittin' on your credenza next to Smiley!"

Maria mumbles, "You're an asshole for taking her there."

"Back to Rho Tau, Boxter thinks it'll be an all-in affair."

"Dude, you just mopped up the MOP, and they've plum run out of options! So, no more humanitarian gestures like Peña did, an' I know that worked out in our favor but it is now a numbers game. Think grade school math! All that matters going forward is simple subtraction. I only wanna see red ink on their side of the ledger!"

Jacob nods with, "Okay, I'll trickle that down."

"But when it comes to addition, you just broke five-hundred!" Maria grins big, "And as for Jessica, wow, thirty-three kills in one engagement! Hot-damn that was impressive!"

"Twenty-eight. Penalty box kills don't count."

"Yea, sorry, the official score is thirty-three." Maria sits back, "Ya know, and we talked about this before, but nobody knew what to think of your daughter until close of business two days ago."

Jacob snickers, "Yea, I heard the talk, them sayin' she was your Sith apprentice, runnin' around doin' dark lord shit for ya."

Maria laughs, "What'd they call her? Darth Hottie was it?"

Jacob nods with, "Yea, and, let's see, there was Darth Mama, Darth Kangy, and my fav, Darth Behbeh!"

"Honestly, if you don't know Jessie like we do, she does come across sort of like an ice princess, but when Scott and Bill posted that fight on the net the troops instantly fell in love with her. She's a hit, and our people now accept her as one of their own."

Jacob ponders that and adds, "It's not the flying or the fight, nor the kills she made that won 'em over. It was some amazing flying, but the fact is—it was her trying to pull it together after she landed. That was the moment she became human in their eyes."

Maria thinks, "Sure, I can see it, every one of us here has been there. I do remember. Ya gotta be one proud papa."

Jacob shrugs, "Always have been...with all my kids."

"What worked in our favor was that Samantha was not at all keen on rolling Security Services in with the Annex after our lil' soiree, but ever since Thursday she's been one-hundred percent on board."

"You talk to Boxter 'bout Thursday?"

"It's cool! Don't worry." Maria then pulls up a bottle of wine and pulls the stopper saying, "Oh yea, don't forgit, *Darth Tomato!*"

With a confused look, Jacob asks her, "You mean tomato? And, wasn't that du Conde who came up with that one?"

"It's French with an 'e' not an 'o' and the 'e' is silent."

"Okay!" He points to the bottle, "What's with the wine?"

Grabbing a pair of glasses, Maria gestures towards the pit, "Let's go watch the sunset an' celebrate you breakin' five-hundred!"

They step over to the pit, and as she has him pour them both a glass, she switches the windows view from the north and east, over

a mile in the air, to the tenth floor view from the south and west.

As they sit, Jacob takes a sip and goes, "I really don't feel like celebrating that. When you get your first five, an' become an ace, you get really cranked up about it. Then hitting twenty was big, and fifty, then eighty, but after I hit a hundred...it wasn't long after that I just stopped caring about the numbers."

"Everyone else is stoked by it!" Maria takes a sip and says, "Ya know you could've broke eight-hundred or maybe even a thousand if you were shooting 'em up instead of coaching and baiting."

"Molding the next generation happens to be the priority."

Maria shrugs, "Like with Ouchie, Kumquat, T-Rex and Neato! You've created a bunch of you to follow in your footsteps."

"They are all purdy good!" Jacob nods to himself, "You know, babe, every fighter pilot I've known becomes a junky for the action but, somewhere when the numbers hit the high two's or three digits, we eventually stop thinking of what we're doing as heroic or noble. At around that point every one of us starts to think of it as, well, what we do becomes..." He chuckles while saying, "Poetically tragic."

"But inevitable...like death and Russian literature."

"Now, there's a correlation I never thought of!"

Maria laughs, saying, "To bring more levity to the moment, you wanna know what that dumb ass call was about?"

Jacob perks up, "Kinda do! What was it?"

"Scientists, like engineers, as smart as they are, they can exhibit all kinds of stone-cold fuckin' stupid."

"That's an obvious given."

"This example *de jour* started last November, but it has now carried over into this month!"

"The mascot thing?"

"No, that was settled—almost settled. There I'm asking for Sandy Cheeks to front Tailgate, the safety AI, over Rocket Raccoon but I'm getting push back."

"You'll win."

"I know I'll get my way! No, here the dweebs wanted some emblem on their insignia that would indicate their specific discipline and, I'm not opposed to that, but what they came up with was not doable. I suggested we add a diamond pip and color code it."

"Lemme guess, they came back with a couple dozen?"

"Four dozen." Jacob's mouth drops so Maria continues with, "We met in December three times and whittled it down to seven. After the first of the year they came back with more and we settled on nine. Now, right out of the chute admin reserved red for security, the Security Militia group, which will be Security Services troops, and that color is the only primary or secondary color on the list."

"Oooh'kay, you want me to ask what those colors are?"

"Since you asked...we got Charcoal, not black, Charcoal for astronomy, Luna, a gray for Planetary Sciences, and that was broken up into Shamrock for botany and Amethyst for Zoology!"

Jacob asks, "Amethyst, what's that?"

"It's a purple. We then have a color called Utah, that's a light brown for geology, Artic for Archeology, Cheetos for Chemistry and Microbiology, Nautical for oceanic sciences and, the one that gets me is Periwinkle for atmospheric sciences!"

"Wha'? Did you say Peri—"

"No! Dude, be careful when you say the last color by name!" Maria stresses then adds, "Did you know there are eight or nine different Periwinkles? I never knew that until this fuckin' project got traction!" Jacob opens his mouth and she puts a hand out to stop him, "Don't say it! In the meetings I was rattling off 'pound-809BC6' or 'pound-7BA1C5' but'chya never-evah say the word itself!"

"Okay, why shouldn't I say it?"

Maria shrugs, "It's for your own protection! I mean, when you actually say the word your jaw goes slack, an' lips flap, and by the time you reach the fourth syllable, saying pewi-wink—" Maria starts gagging, then adds, "Suddenly, someone slips ya the cock!"

Now laughing, Jacob asks, "How's that go again?"

"Pe-wi-wink—" Again gagging, then laughing where she looks at him to say, "You know...that's not a bad idea!"

Jacob's head tilts to the side, "Hu?"

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Ninety minutes later the southern and western views have been switched from just a few meters at the tenth floor to a whole mile up where their floor is. On the ground level, Electra has vanished from sight while approaching local astronomical twilight but, up here, half of Electra is still in view while it is dropping below the far horizon.

With the effortless push of a holographic button on her office's

entertainment interface, part of the three-quarters circular pit flattens out into a full-on queen sized bed. When deployed it has both fitted and flat sheets in place when it fully extends. By pulling the comforter and pillows out from under the other seats you'd be ready for a comfy night's sleep, which Maria has done many times, or bypass all that for other considerations...like now!

Spooning, while watching this now spectacular sunset, with red light streaming into her office, Maria says, "I just ordered a fajita platter for two. It'll be here in thirty-five minutes."

Jacob mockingly snits, "Wha', *olá* again!"

Maria smiles and says, "Get the fuck out I'll eat it all myself!"

"No, I'll hang and suffer with ya." Maria nods with a smile until Jacob asks her about, "I am curious because...didn't you say you have a family thing to bring up?"

Maria takes a deep breath and reaches over for her wine while saying, "Yea, 'bout that. I gotta lil' problem I wanted to bounce off of you while you're here."

Jacob shrugs while reaching for his wine, and with her waiting for a response he nods, yes, and says, "That's why I'm here, right?"

Maria breathes and, "Okay, Guns came to me just before you two tied the knot, and asked if I could find out something for her."

Jacob goes, "Lemme guess, who Brie's father is? I know the family has been bitching at Michelle to find that out." He playfully nudges her and, "So, whaddya wanna bounce off of me?"

"I happen to know who the sperm donor is."

"I figured as much." He takes a sip, and as he puts the glass down he adds, "Ya want to know how to bring it up to him, right?"

"Yea, that pretty much sums it up! The condition for finding out who—was him getting to decide if he wants to have any part of it or not. We need to know if he's approachable when I tell her."

"I get it. Sure, some guys are bags of shit for not wanting to be involved as a father. You know I never-ever wanted to be a dad, but now that I am one I wouldn't give it up for anything."

Maria nods and, "I do want to thank you for being a father figure to Brie all these years. You didn't have to, but you stepped up and it didn't affect your relationship with your own kids."

"Brie and Diego have always been really great friends so, when you think about it, it sorted itself out on its own."

"Our girl thought it was a kick to share you."

"Diego did make a point to let me know."

"Again, thank you for being there when it mattered most!"

"Okay, thanks for the thanks but, on point, if it were me in your shoes I'd give it to 'im both barrels!"

"Right between the eyes?"

"Don't pussy foot around on this one, be direct and give the dumb ass the facts, and list his options going forward!"

"Just like that?"

"Yup, just like that! Brie is of the majority so it's not like he's got a lot of things to do for her. He may be able to catch up, but I got to be her dad when it counted. I lucked out there, but if you're wondering if I'll be cool with who it is, I will be nice to 'im no matter what. Cool beans?"

Maria asks, "Seriously, no matter who it is?"

"As long as he's nice to her I couldn't give a shit. I'll be civil!"

Maria takes a sip, then twists around to look up and grin in his face while saying, "Guess what, motherfucker, you're a father!"

Jacob nods, "That's the way to do it!"

"Cool! My work here is done."

As she swirls her glass, with that twinkle in her eyes, Jacob realizes that it's him, "You gotta be...you're not shitting me."

She asks, "Knocked for six?"

Jacob cringes slightly, "Yeeea...you could say that."

Maria puts her glass down while telling him, "I took a stab at something before I ran her and Brie's blueprints. I checked all the security tracking during the eight-year bash over our victory out at Fifty-One Tau and...well, on camera there was Michelle, stumbling along while dragging your drunk ass out to the free-for-all."

"On the Carrie Nation." Jacob nods, "I don't remember."

"Nobody remembers that night!"

"You confirmed with both our blueprints?"

"I ran the sequencing and 'ca-ching!' You da papa!"

In deep thought, Jacob is shaking his head, "I wonder who is going to be pissed off about this?"

"Listen, nobody is gonna be pissed, what they are all going to be is...amused." She snorts a laugh, "Yea, amused is the word!"

Jacob wonders, "Why is it always the guy that catches hell for this shit? We catch hell for everything!"

"For every one of the things, yea!" Maria thinks about it and points out, "You've been running around being her dad when you were her dad all along and didn't know it. It's comedic gold in my book."

Jacob looks at her with a suspicious eye, "I know you, you've got a whole repertoire of snarky comments and jokes at my expense lined up, don'chya?"

Maria starts laughing while saying, "I got enough material to last the next five-six years and not get stale!"

He shakes his head, "You're a bitch."

She smiles, "Yea, and?"

"At least you have a new career path to fall back on while mine is winding down...and I've got no options on the table."

"I'll give ya that. You'll have the Ninety-Six for only a few years, but Mission Oversight is on your plate forever!"

In deep thought, Jacob admits, "We know that but, honestly, I really want nothing to do with the kOri."

"You know that has to get done."

"I know, but I don't wanna be the one that does it."

Maria looks at her hand, shakes her head and flatly states, "We really don't have a choice."

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roadside picnic

LCTN: CALAR-3 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: M45-B002 (133pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-APRIL-15-TUESDAY
TIME: 09:11zulu

Always cautious, the Nefer Key exit their jump ninety-six light minutes away from Calar-3, and it takes them all of forty minutes to leisurely transit the 1.728 billion kilometers to the rendezvous orbit a mere one-million clicks above the surface of the brown dwarf.

Also always fashionably late, today by over eleven minutes, Delta Echo slips into that orbit which is clockwise by their orientation, and inside a few quick seconds after they drop out from their spacial displacement field the Iron Maiden blows in. Within a genie blink, it stops on a dime two clicks behind Delta Echo and, because of its orientation, in a counterclockwise orbit by comparison.

The beauty of space travel, or a chigger itch of an annoyance, is the constant reorientation when establishing up as opposed to down at any given system. Usually the axial hub above a counterclockwise spin denotes north, and there are some exceptions but they usually have to do with the orbits of objects out of synch with the host star like with Prypiat and Chernobyl out at 83-Tau.

At any rate, SA36 maintains its upside-down orientation while it immediately executes a full on one-eighty spin before dropping out from their MDDSH soap bubble. Then, while Delta Echo executes a nose down quarter-turn to orient their underside docking port to the tail end of the Iron Maiden for mating, a Warthog and four fighters drop onto the deck of the Maiden and roll up onto two elevators that descend into the hanger deck below.

With the alien ship at a right angle to the platform, and the more nimble of the two, Maiden Control calls out, ["Delta Echo, you are clear to approach for docking."]

Luc radios back, ["*Merci!* Thank you for the clearance, Maiden

Control. Please confirm, docking adaptor is the IBDM-five standard?"

["That's affirmative, Delta. Three meters with eleven petals."]

["Copy! Approach to contact at 0.025 meters per second."]

["Roger that, Delta. Docking approach 0.025 at contact."]

["Approach rate confirmed. Delta Echo on final."]

In the sixteen minutes it takes for the Nefer Key ship to make contact and hard dock, two bisE models of the Thunderbolt, and a captured F51a Gryphon-Anzu roll out of the first airlock, park and shut down beside the second airlock. Hopping out of the Thunderbolts are Jacob and Kati Connors, and sliding down from the Anzu fighter is Porter Macquarie, a First-Lieutenant from Security Services.

Porter steps up to Jacob and Kati, where he salutes them and then shakes their hands, "It's been a lovely outing, aye!"

Jacob smiles as he pulls the Major's insignia off his ACE suit, "Thank you again, Porter! It went off better than we thought it would. Sorry, but I have to bust ya back down to First Lieutenant."

Porter laughs while saying, "Truth be known, I'd rather have the stipend over the crown! Let Angie know it all went well?"

Jacob gestures over to the Warthog that is waiting for him in the airlock, "We'll let her know! See ya around on the Key!"

Porter trots off to board Michelle's ship sitting in the airlock, and as the airlock starts to close, Kati sighs, "What a great guy!"

"And a damn good pilot." Says Jacob as he waves to his son sitting in the cockpit of an F308g, in the airlock next to the Warthog.

"I sure do hope he makes it through what's comin'."

"I can't think about that." Jacob pats her on the shoulder and as he steps away towards the elevators, "I gotta go dismount. Thanks for all your help, Kati! An' that was some mightily-insane navigation you pulled out of your ass like a frickin rabbit!"

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Called the sail, this structure connects the top 'dome side' to the bottom 'dish side' of the Iron Maiden, with the trailing third of the expansive flight deck on the dish side running along both sides of the sail. Most of the sail is utilitarian, chock full of mechanical shops and stowage, but the forward quarter of it is the inverse² to utilitarian.

Called the stack, this massive space is a hotel like atrium with twenty-five structural decks. The whole forward wall is a triple layered

mix of transparent Alon and carbon diamond compounds that gives a fantastic view of the forward half of the flight decks and the underside of the dome segment. All walls and guardrails in the atrium are made of the same transparent compounds—making this place stunning.

With decorative plants, ivies and dwarf trees everywhere, if you were not already aware that you're standing in a military capital ship you'd swear to God that you were in a five-star hotel!

The bottom of the atrium is called the wet deck, which is a lounge, sports tavern, or rave, and that depends on the time of day and day of week. The top deck is the quarters for the Field Marshal. Deck 18 is where the ballroom-sized receiving foyer is, and from there a wide service-tunnel runs from the foyer all the way back 700-meters to the docking port at the very tail end of the ship.

Bob, Maria, Scott and sixteen-year-old Jessica are standing in the main foyer waiting for the Nefer Key representatives to show. For safety's sake, they use wheeled golf carts inside all of the SA capital ships, and even though these vehicles are super-fast they had to install governors to slow them down while in the ship. There are vehicles available that would be more in tune with ship operations, yes, but these are street legal and have a tactical value to them. Their largest eight-seat build that's bringing the Nefer Key to the foyer has been on several missions, and if you know where to look you'll find nine bullet holes that have not yet been patched.

Anyway, they were greeted by Jacob and Gerald Stark, the guy who actually runs the Iron Maiden, and with him is his sidekick known as Chinh Phung, whose proper name is Phung Thi Chinh. Like with Glados at the Spike, she is the SYLNa android that seamlessly links into the ships AI, and here she represents the ship as an entity onto itself. Every capital ship in the Annex has one, but what's kind of unnerving is how these androids refer to their ship in the first person.

The Nefer Key representatives, those being Luc, Lilith, Aat, Charles Washington and Robert Graves, are mentally dropping their jaws at the sight of the atrium. As they pile out of the cart they can't help but look around and drink it all in.

With Chinh making the introductions, and everyone shaking hands, she and Stark leave as Jacob guides them all into a twelve-seat conference room attached to the foyer. Three walls to this room are also transparent, and the sight of Calar-3 slowly rotating into view of the entire stack is staggering to behold.

Luc speaks up first, "Marshal Jackson, I want to thank you for meeting with us on such short notice."

Bob goes, "Not a problem, Mister de Prima."

"We hope this did not put you out considering the...tensions between your organization and those in the Hyades."

"Well, that is putting it mildly." Bob then points to him while saying, "And since you apparently didn't get a lot of love last January out at Home Base, and on the fourteenth last month with Kiplinger, it appears to us that you've come to the end of the road."

"I did hear you people tend to be...direct." Luc perks up with, "And considering that, on occasion, I have been accused of being nosy and meddlesome, I'm going to have Charles Washington speak for us, an' since you are the Consulate Marshal for the Annex—"

Bob puts a hand up to cut him off, "Please excuse me, I hate to disappoint ya here but you were very specific in your request to meet with me, and that's why I'm here, but my core function with the Steel Annex anymore is entirely ambassadorial to the FIS."

"We thought you were in charge?"

"Were, yes, past tense! I no longer have command authority. Today I am here solely to observe and advise. The person in charge of the Annex, in a command role, is Marshal Ramirez."

"Hey!" Maria gives a wiggle-finger wave towards them.

Bob then adds, "You have my sympathies."

Maria smiles at that, "We're on a first name basis here, Chuck! So, Luc, Lilith, Rob, Aat, you can call me Maria, or Mar, or call me a God-damned bitch! Lord knows I've heard that one come back at me more times than I can count."

Charles smiles, "Is Mar okay with you?"

"Sure, but you'll end up calling me a fucking cunt by the time you leave so, I'll give ya the option of using that up front!"

With all of them smiling, Charles snorts, "No...no, Mar is fine."

"Suit yourself, Chuck!" Maria pats the table, "Now, ground rules, you'll get no bullshit from us so I expect the same. I'm not gonna lie to ya, not gonna jerk you around, and I'll venture to guess that if you knew it was going to be *me* you ended up talking too today then we wouldn't be sitting here now. Am I right?"

"That...would have been a possibility had we known."

With wide-eyes she goes, "Very diplomatic way of putting it!"

"Thank you!"

"Let's get a few things on the table and out of the way first. You know, stow some shit and clear the deck before we tackle the bigger issue of world peace, m'kay?"

Charles nods, "Sure!"

"The first thing is, you wanted to meet, Scarab! Okay, now, obviously, like Robert here, we figured you were interested in using Jessie as a conduit between you and us, and our first thought was, oh hell no!" Maria then raises a finger, saying, "But, then, we noodled over it for a spell and, through our maniacal cackles an' hand-wringing we thought sure, why the hell not?"

Charles wonders, "Why the change of heart?"

"Well, Jessie can take care of herself and, honest injun, from personal experience, this'll all probably blow up in your face."

Charles asks, "Then she is our conduit?"

"It's a done deal as done can be!" Maria then leans towards them and, "Just so you know, you can't pull the wool over her eyes, just as she can't pull them over mine."

"I think we'll be able to hold our own."

"Think again...and I'm not saying this because I hold sway over her, or she has some undying loyalty to me. I have neither of 'em, no, she's not exactly what you could say is, housebroken, so..."

Jessica looks at Maria and quietly says, "da fuck!"

Maria tries not to laugh as she continues, "To give ya'll fair warning, our lovely and endearing Jessica hates everybody—equally. She doesn't play favorites, so if you fuck with her you'll...end up with a tiger by the tail. Again, you've been warned."

Jessica looks to Luc, Charles and Robert, "Guys, I'll be nice."

Robert says, "Why? We were just told you were a handful?"

Jessica shrugs with, "I may be an assbat but, today, I choose to be the nice guy." Then via her mind, Jessica says privately to Luc, "<Sit back and let this play out. Today, Maria is the handful.">

Maria nods towards Charles and Luc, "When we're done here you can get Jessica up to speed with what the job entails, cool beans?" They nod yes so she asks them, "Now, that wasn't hard, hu?"

Charles says, "No, honestly, that surprised us."

"Ya didn't have to fight for it...so, you can see that I'm not at all unreasonable!" She turns to Robert, "So, Bobbie, baby, it looks like you were the first conduit for the Nefer Key?"

Robert says, "For the Security Council members, yes."

"The permanent sitting members?"

"Specifically, yes."

"So, curious minds, who...is doing the job now? I mean, you're lookin' pretty spry for a dead guy!"

Robert shifts his weight and, "My son."

Maria shrugs, "A name would be good!"

He doesn't want to say, but goes, "Marcus."

"Marcus Graves, from Arizona? Who has a daughter, Sandra."

Jessica is fighting the laughter that is starting to overwhelm her ability to suppress it, and as she continues to fight laughing out loud, Jacob gives a little huff while maintaining a deadpan expression.

Robert says to him, "We were not expecting to see you here."

Maria goes, "I asked him here, and I could have had someone else bring what he's bringing to the table, in just a few minutes, but this was just too damned good to pass up!" She then turns to Luc with, "And since you claim that you're nosey and meddlesome, I'll have you know I'm the sullied queen bitch of nosey and meddlesome!" She then looks to Scott, "See, Scott, you happen to be the key-log to my nosey meddlesomeness today! When they said Charles wanted to meet you, claiming you were his distant issue, his descendant, it got us to thinking...we have nothing on you! We know nothing about your background, or your family or...anything!"

Scott says, "I wanted to keep it private."

"We respected that! Then again, we could have asked, but we decided to pry since they made that claim." Maria turns to Charles, "First off, I just want to say it is my honor to meet you, Charles. Here I'm sittin' across from *the* Charles Washington, the first man to step on the surface of Mars. A genuine hero!"

Charles says, "And it's my privilege to meet you, Maria. Your reputation precedes you and it has a long reach."

Maria nods, "Yea, that's what I've heard. Anyway, always nosey, we ran a comparison of Scott's blueprints to yours!"

Charles is taken aback, "You have access?"

"Sure do! President Cruz went all out to see that we could get to them when...we already had access, but sometimes it's just nice to ask for permission. You can see who your allies are!" She points towards Charles and almost laughs, saying, "The point is, Scott is not your descendant. Nope, sorry to say that was not a possibility from the RFLP comparison we ran. No, what we did find was even more interesting and I'd like to share those results!"

Luc speaks up, "Mar, if I may?"

"Sorry, Luc, everything is on the table today." She turns back to Charles, "What we found out, Chuck, is that Scott is not your descendant. Nope, this guy here happens to be your...ascendant! That is, your immediate ascendant."

Charles blinks in thought and goes, "oh."

Realizing she hit a nerve in Luc, and a sore spot on Charles, she takes a deep breath and, "Sooo, ya didn't know?"

"No, I didn't."

Jessica quietly says, "But wait, there's more!"

Maria goes, "Since we're on a roll, I thought maybe there's more to this? So, we started bouncing everyone's gene sequencing against everyone else's and ya wanna guess what we found?"

Charles shakes his head, "I'm rabidly curious!"

"Luc, would you like to share with everybody before I puke out what we came up with?"

Luc nods, and turns to Jacob, "Yes, your grandfather happens to be Marcus Graves, our conduit, but your grandmother, Hether, her maiden name is Washington. She's the daughter of Luke Washington, the son of Charles, and Luke's wife was...is, Rachel Kay."

Jacob's eyes squint while asking, "Kay? As in—"

"Yes, she is the daughter of Jason Kay. Your great-great grandfather, just like Charles Washington happens to be the same..." Luc points to Scott, "And Scott, here, is your—"

"Great-great-great grandfather." Jacob turns to Scott and, through clinched teeth, he asks, "So, what's your story?"

Scott shrugs, "My name is Abeeku. In my first life, back in the mid-seventeenth century, I was an Ashanti warrior in Africa before being captured and sold into slavery. In that life I escaped the sugar cane fields in Jamaica, became a Maroon fighter, and years later the Spanish caught me. They thought they killed me, but Luc and Marcus, your grandfather's namesake, rescued me and gave me a new life. Not exactly a meaningful one, but a pleasant one!"

"So, you are aligned with them, then."

"Not exactly one-hundred percent? Maybe fifty? I've sort of been AWOL, for quite some time, and they wanted to take this opportunity to reel me in, but in the Annex I've found a forth life. With my wife and daughter I have a family."

Maria lets him know, "Since you have working contacts with the United States military, we'll have to inform President Cruz."

Scott dreads asking, "So, my time here is up?"

"Not by a long shot! No, we're not letting you go."

Luc says, "With what's coming up, we want him safe."

"I'll find a way of getting him into planning, that'll work?"

"We'd rather take him with us—"

Maria cuts Luc off with, "Dude, not a chance in hell with what we've invested in him. Scott's valuable, but now he's priceless."

Jacob turns to Scott and motions between them, "Did you know about this before today?"

Scott shakes his head, "No."

Jacob thinks about it, then, "Since we have to work together then nothing changes between us. Our family connection stays in this room. That is, if you wanna work with me?"

"Yes, it's a deal." Scott nods, and he then turns to Charles, "Sorry I didn't keep up on our connection. I was very busy...making a whole lot of connections for the Nefers!"

Maria looks to Luc, "Before we get to the main course, I was wondering why you guys were spreading his seed so far and wide? You know, curiouiser and curiouiser!"

Luc looks at Maria, and after a pregnant pause in thought, he gives it up, "Abeeku, Scott to you, was a windfall to our eugenics program. In him we discovered a clearly partitioned genome with a small population of first-sib and first-cousin re-coition, but a genetic thread with no detectible congenital defect, disorder, syndrome nor appreciable chronic condition. In the clearest terms, he was...clean!"

Maria goes, "But that's not the reason."

"Exactly! See, before humans we spoke via telepathy, we still do, but it's not what you think. We developed a vocabulary of glyphs because with thought alone, it takes forever to convey a thought that another would understand because when everyone had their own dialect of thought then nobody can communicate, so...glyphs! While rubbing elbows with humans we had to revert to speech where we were rudely made aware that one can convey ideas faster and with greater clarity through your languages over our glyphs and telepathy. And, that was a very bitter pill for us to swallow."

Maria has a look saying, *what's the point*, "Okay?"

"Our focus, what we could not achieve with our own species after many a millennia, was to develop a bloodline with a stable and cognizant prescience. We've had members of our society develop this

trait but once they are discovered 'in the wild' and we try to harness this power, they become unstable and uncooperative. What we have learned with humans is that those who exhibit 'exacting' premonitions tends to have the foundation for precognition."

Jacob volunteers, "My aunt."

Robert adds, "Yes, clairvoyance did not set well with her."

"She killed herself."

"Tragically, and because your mother had difficulty dealing with her premonitions, we couldn't bring her on board."

Luc picks this up, "Females in our species do better with it where males in yours are more stable exhibiting the extreme skill sets. We're not even close to knowing why that is."

Maria asks, "But why breed Scott like a triple-crown winner?"

"Like most human males his premonitions were not cognizant thoughts per se, but a foreboding or a gut feeling. Scott's gut feelings scored off the chart, and where he ignored them—we didn't."

Scott turns to Maria to ask, "Considering the work, can you blame me for not turning down the job they offered?"

"Nope!" Maria turns to Luc, "Thank you for being candid!"

"You're welcome." He then points to her, "What about that main course you promised?"

"Since you insist." Maria shrugs, then says, "I talked to Cruz about your visit. The key players on Earth said they weren't involved so it was out of their hands and, you not liking the lack of results, ya'll went to go see Kiplinger. Ol' Kip told me that since there was no fighting going on he was not sure why you were upset?"

Luc protests, "Everyone knows it is coming!"

"Yes, Luc, everyone knows it's coming."

"If you know it then you can stop it!"

"Why the fuck would I do that?"

"How could you want war?"

"I don't, it's just that there's nothing I can do to stop it!" Maria leans in to say, "We all know they're gonna throw the first punch but we're not sure when that'll be? There is a lot of in-fighting and some want to false-flag an early start, which would be bad for both sides. If it's delayed long enough, then I know the conditions for SCC command to throw it, *and* I control those conditions."

"So, you are going to start it?"

"Not quite, I'm providing the triggers for them to start it."

"But how can you make the effort to help them!"

"Fact is, I'm not lifting a God-damned finger. Ya know, you'd be surprised by how little of an effort this is for me!"

Luc almost shouts, saying, "We can't have this!"

Maria smiles, "Here's Chuckie, whose supposed to talking for you, and there you go running your suck! Like you did with Kiplinger?" Maria nods, "And it got us ta thinkin'...what is it, if anything, can you do about it? The problem with the Annex is...you can't find us."

With Luc keeping his lips shut tight, knowing he screwed up, Charles volunteers the obvious, "Yes, we can't find you, and with that we have very little to fall back on when making demands."

"Exactly...but, what would you be willing to do if given the chance?" She shrugs, "See, we can't take that chance so we sent Jacob Graves, here, to go forth and track you down!"

Maria gestures towards Jacob who takes the floor, "The Orion Trust conducts a infrared sky survey on a regular basis and this was the IRAS-Eight survey to build on the Infrared Astronomical Satellite catalog. We piggybacked another set of sensors on the Orion Trust station out at HIP-31827, which is outside the expansion bubble but within the lightyear limitation. The toolset is called 'gravtrac' and with it we discovered a whole mess of activity out towards the star cluster M-46. This activity was profound in a region fifty parsecs out past the Calabash Nebula, but short of the partition marking M46 by maybe thirty parsecs." With Luc and Charles getting uncomfortable with this, Jacob dishes out, "So, yesterday we ran out there, short by about fifteen parsecs, and there we were able to narrow down our search to a binary red dwarf system, IRAS8-P7399X98U8."

Maria grins, "Curiouser and curiouser, what did you find?"

"Thank you for asking, around the smaller of the red dwarfs we identified a binary habitable system you call Dolphin Reel, and here we found a whole shitload of your ships, hundreds of them, all as large or larger than the Maiden, parked in all of the Lagrange Points in the system." Jacob nods towards the display at the end of the conference room table, "Here, on the monitor, I'd like to share with you some home movies we made while out at Dolphin Reel."

With the display going live, all from Jacob's point of view, "This is my point of view from my Thunderbolt. In the Razorback, a Warthog gunship configuration, we have one of our Deputy Marshals, Michele Kiel, in the other Thunderbolt is Senior Chief, Kati Connors. Piloting the United States Marine Corps, Bulldog fighter happens to be

my son, Lieutenant-Colonel, Peter Ribot, and in the Gryphon-Anzu is a Major, Porter Macquarie of Security Services."

Luc mutters to himself, "Principal of Segmentary Opposition."

Jacob wonders what he said, "Come again?"

"It's nothing...please continue."

Jacob goes, "How 'bout we let the audio speak for itself?"

The audio-chatter part of the pilots flying around the huge ships goes live, with Porter Macquarie saying with some astonishment, ["Fuck me! It's like a bloody Roadside Picnic 'round 'ere!"]

Michelle asks, ["What in the hell is a roadside picnic?"]

["You should watch the movie if ye be wonderin'!"]

Peter Ribot goes, ["I thought it was kinda dull."]

["Aye, but it does have a huge cult following!"]

Peter snorts a laugh, ["The movie is so boring I wanted to slash my wrists by the time the credits rolled!"]

Katie asks, ["Pete, isn't your family in show biz?"]

["That's why I watched it. My brother-in-law, Carlos Sanchez, wanted to do a remake and we had to talk him down."]

["Everything is a remake of a reboot anymore."]

["Fuckin' tell me about it."]

Michelle laughs, ["That's the truth!"]

Jacob goes, ["Okay, guys, do we have the counts now?"]

Michelle says, ["Yup, we got 'em!"]

["And?"]

["Here it's two-hundred and thirteen. Over on Lagrange-Four it's one-ninety-five. The two L2 points have sixty-five behind Imi and Seventy-three behind Sashi. The barycenter in the middle has—"]

Katie cuts her off, ["Shelly, you got that missile farm, right?"]

["Yea, I do."]

["Couldn't we just blow the whole kit-n-kaboodle an' scram?"]

"Well, you get the idea!" Jacob has cut the audio feed, and as they continue to watch them buzzing around the huge ships in the L5 region, Jacob then points towards Sashi, "And what does that look like to you guys? Delta Echo? If I were a betting man it looks like they may be heading out to a hasty rendezvous, maybe?"

"Fucken hell." Charles mutters to himself as the Anzu fighter pops its landing gear and presses them to the side of a massive ship.

Jacob hears this and goes, "Not only were they not ticklish, these leviathans were totally non-responsive to us buzzing around them. We flew all over the area and got dick for a response."

Charles says, "If we come after any one of you—"

Maria finishes with, "You'll be coming after all of us."

Jacob adds, "That's how we rock."

Maria looks at Luc, saying, "Peace is a wonderful thing, Luc, but it's at a premium. What people like you don't realize is that peace at all costs, costs all the things."

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At the ship's central kiosk, on the far edge of the atrium on Deck 18, Jessica is standing there with the Nefer Key representatives, "Luc, Lilith, I'm looking forward to working with the two of you."

Lilith smiles at her, "Yes, that's two of us."

Luc, still butt sore, adds, "Same here."

Jessica switches over to telepathy and says to both of them, <"You'll be surprised how easy I am to get along with!"> She then thumbs over to Charles and Robert while reverting back to verbal speech, "Scott's free if you want to chat with him, I need a couple of minutes with these two!"

"Sure!" Luc nods with a smile, "I am looking forward to our future encounters. You seem like a lot of fun."

With Luc, Lilith and Aat stepping off towards Scott, standing by the conference room with Bob and Chinh, Jessie turns back to Charles and Robert with a snarl, "We do not talk about my brother."

Charles goes, "Aaaah, I was just about to ask."

"Let's clear the air up front, my brother is what the Nefer Key has been striving for, so get them to bow out of the Geisha Hut crap! Greenfield your involvement because the next shit-storm that's comin' will blow up in your faces. So, get it done!"

Robert goes, "We were never involved with that side of it."

"Doesn't matter! If your fingerprints are found on it, in any way, it will taint you, the people will hate you! Bow out now."

"Luc has invested a lot of time and effort to get—"

"You're not hearing me. The Nefers will get access!"

"Will Luc be able to talk to him soon?"

"In a couple of years, maybe?"

"I think Luc wants to talk to him sooner than later."

Jessica cringes slightly, "It's not that simple."

Charles dares to ask, "How bad is it?"

Jessica huffs, "I'm trying to get my brother to adulthood without him having a psychotic breakdown or suicide."

"It's that bad?"

"You have no fucking idea." Jessica is about to cry when she says, "He's a little boy! What he sees *everyday* is horrific beyond words. He's a small child, and he sees and experiences things that *nobody* should ever have to see."

Robert says, "So, it's that bad."

"It is that bad!" Jessica pulls it together with, "Luc will get to meet him, and talk to him, in just a few years—when he is stable. The one condition will be that Luc cannot ask any questions."

Charles huffs a laugh, "Seriously, no questions?"

"Not a one, and you know what's funny, Luc will fuck that up!"

Robert goes, "No surprise there. Oh, to be a fly on that wall."

Jessica snickers, "Don't worry, Robert, you'll be there!"

Charles asks, "Can you give us anything to convince Luc?"

"Twenty-seven." Jessica pulls a small gift card with balloons on it, and hands it to him while saying, "Open it and take a look!"

He opens the card and written on it, in a child's handwriting is a nonsensical math formula: $20+7=\text{☺}$

He shows it to Robert who asks, "What does this mean?"

Jessica shrugs big, saying, "When you guys figure out what twenty-seven means, then you hand the card to Luc!"

"When do you think we're gonna meet?"

"Don't ask, Seth will ask for you."

00000110111

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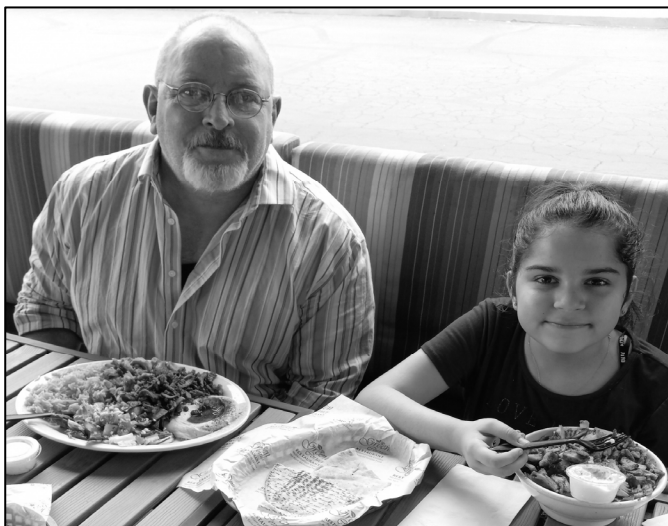
Jacob Baum for being Blu82!

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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 much more grayer now and the clock is going crazy! Here with Stich, she is quickly catching up to her sister, Monstre Deux!

So, it's on to book six...

haters gonna hate



05 violent delights

Jessica Burke, a snarky loner at twelve, finally sticks her neck out and it pays off big. Allied with the Steel Annex, as Jessie grows into adulthood her abilities, along with her brother's, are being channeled towards a greater purpose. Only a few know the truth about Jessica, and fewer still know about her brother, and from the nebulous shadows they direct the war and guide it towards a permanent end of hostilities.

All because of their machinations over a billion lives have been saved, but the thing that still haunts Jessica and her brother to this day is that they couldn't save their mother.

Fact is, they arranged for Nicole's untimely end.

Throughout the war everyone in the Annex watched as Jessica used their tech and flew their ships, going from one secret intel or interdiction mission to the next, and not one of them had the slightest idea what she was about. It wasn't until close to the end of the war that she finally became one of them.



ISBN

