

25

donkey boy

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 16:03zulu (local 12:20mst)

In the receiving area at the top of the Spike Nikki-8 dutifully waits for Maria to come out of her office. Being called for by Maria is never to be taken lightly, but the last two times were really no big deal. Nikki was simply asked to tap into a diplomat or two that Maria couldn't read; but from the purposeful activity behind the glass wall in the C3, and their thoughts echoing in her head, she realizes that all is according to plan.

Jessica steps out of the elevator and notices Nikki across the way looking out the window over the air field and pyramids far below. Bracing herself, Jessica makes a bee line towards her and stops just two meters short.

Jessica lazily applauds, "The fifteen year old, I'm amazed."

Nikki bodily turns, "If I may ask, which one?"

For Jessica it's like looking into a mirror—from four years ago, that is. Where Nikki's sister cherubs stopped growing five years before, and the budding pre-pubes' development was arrested just last year, this Nikki, at twelve, has starting to fill out with her hips and breasts rounding off quite nicely.

Jessica grins, "Donkey Boy. You know, Demitri."

So, this is what I have to look forward too, thinks Nikki as she ponders the beauty Jessica has become, "Oh, him!"

"A remarkable feat of accommodation. My hat's off to you!"

"One for the team."

Jessica flips, "Well, he isn't exactly a sport-fuck!"

Nikki flips back, "I took it *all* with grace and aplomb."

Jessica wags a stern finger at her, "No-no-no-no, it was more like open-mouth astonishment and moaning like a whore. Your normal M.O. You know, like a pro!"

Nikki snaps back, "At least I'm not fucking my nephew."

Jessica smiles, "You would if you could if you had one. Josav and I are exclusive, and I'm not out there spreading my legs for everyone and their second cousin just to win a popularity contest."

Nikki makes one statement of fact, "I am popular."

"That may be..." Jessica grins big and leans forward, "But I won't have beef-curtains by the time I'm eighteen."

Nikki didn't know what those were, but in a tenth of a second her brain pings the neuronet and it feeds her the data and an image. Unprepared for that tidbit of information, damage not seen in two centuries, inside she laughs at Jessica's slam.

Outwardly, Nikki scowls with disgust, "Yeeew, that was sick."

Jessica ponders the insult, "Ya, that was, but your reaction was priceless."

It was just then that Maria pops her head out with a worried look, "You two getting along?"

Nikki says flatly, "Yes."

Jessica doesn't look back, "We're fine!"

Maria watches them for a few long seconds, then, "Okay."

As Maria slips back into her office Jessica and Nikki stare at each other for the longest time, but it's Nikki that backs down, "After four years you still hate me."

"I don't hate you." Jessica shakes her head slightly, "I think you're fuckin' dangerous." Jessica's face then brightens up, "And, I so love poking you with a stick as one would a rattlesnake."

"Me? Dangerous!" Nikki nods towards Jessica, "No, you're the scary one. If they only knew how deep of a dive you've made they'd string you up by your—"

Jessica cuts her off with a growl, "You don't know shit!"

Nikki shrugs, "I'm not saying anything but, honestly, you should be caged right along side me."

Jessica leans in, "I have no ambitions in this life except to fuck with you."

"No?" Nikki smiles, "Could have fooled me." Her smile fades, "Look, we have to work together. How about we get along?"

"How about you keep the Beta-Set away from my mom?"

"They're adults, they can make their own choices."

"Bitch, you fuckin' seduced her!"

"You don't say." Nikki feigns contemplation, "You sure about that? I don't remember Nicole trying to fight them off?"

Jessica pleads, "My mom is vulnerable."

Nikki nods, "She needs a lot of affirmation."

Jessica snarls, "You need to reel those two cunts in!"

Nikki stands firm, "Nicole can choose for herself."

"It's a ragged edge you are walking along, Nikki. I so fucking know when the rest of you come of age...well, the collective you are gonna throw yourselves at her like bees on sugar water. Just like you plan to do with Donkey Boy. A sea of Nikki flesh to dive into!"

Nikki flips, "My trysts with Alex are an investment, pleasant even, but with your mom, well, consider it bonding."

Jessica snarls, "Consider yourself warned."

"Okay, but Nicole did find it strange yet rewarding. All in the same breath!" Nikki then smirks, "And she sure does love her salad tossed, amongst other things."

Jessica bares her teeth at that last remark.

All she wants to do now is to kill this Nikki. Yes, Jessie can accomplish this task with a simple thought, it'd be a breeze, but in her mind this warrants something more feral and savage as payback. Instead of cutting her down with words Jessica transmits into Nikki's mind the image of her stomping the crap out of the little trollop, followed by slow dismemberment with a dull k-bar.

With that Nikki now realizes she went too far, pushed a button she should not have, and sheepishly admits, "That *was* uncalled for."

With quiet wide-eyed rage Jessica whispers, "Ya don't say!"

"Look, Nicole now belongs to something that has given her a sense of stability. You allowed for this. Least we forget..." Nikki points to Jessica, "It was you, yourself, that arranged for this."

"Just stay the fuck away from the Omegas."

Before Nikki could respond Maria pops out again, "Okay, ladies, I can sure use your help about now."

After a pregnant pause, eyes locked wide with hostility, the two peel away and step into Maria's office.

As they stop at her cluttered desk, Maria states more than asks, "I take it you both know what's going on?"

In unison they say, "Yes."

Maria looks at Nikki, "Oh, really?"

Nikki throws it back at her, "*You* are off limits, remember? Not your people. Also, I believe you didn't expect Security Services to bite and show up at *upsilon-Taurus* just yet." Nikki puts her hands out, "Just a guess! Not a mind-read."

Jessica adds, "I'd say *du Conde* pulled it off too good."

"We have Nikki to thank for that, but let's pick this up later..." Maria thumbs back at the screen behind her, "I got this goin' on."

On the monitor behind Maria is the stern face of the Co-op's Chancellor. As with all sub-space communications, after ten or twelve seconds, the image cyclically snows just a tad—then twitches back into focus as the signal switches from one wormhole channel to the next.

Jessica gestures to the monitor, "Who we working on?"

Nikki volunteers, "Ranch Kiplinger."

Maria adds, "Same drill as before. Feed me text. Step out of camera shot and let's find out what the fuck he wants."

Maria already knows what Kiplinger wants, but before she opens the channel, Nikki asks, "Do you want to know beforehand? I've met him, remember?"

Maria looks at Jessica and Jessica shakes her head, "I won't be able to do anything until you open the channel. I don't know why that is, but open that line up and I'll be wired into him."

Then to Nikki, Maria asks, "Go ahead."

"Fear."

Maria and Jessica go, "Hu?"

"Security Services found out about the negotiated settlement he was working on with Pitney and Jackson." Nikki then grins, "By the surprised look on your faces I take it that you didn't know about what they were doing."

Clearly frustrated by the news, Maria says, "If Jackson doesn't share then it's not my job to know."

Jessica quietly admits, "I knew."

Maria gives Jessica a scowl so Jessica throws her hands out to her sides in protest, "It's not your job to know!"

Maria huffs, "Point made, it's not for me to know...yet." She looks to Nikki, "Tell me more!"

"Everything?" Nikki asks. Maria nods yes, so Nikki gives it to them, "To stop the settlement the hawks, specifically Hartcourt, put Kiplinger under arrest and in a knee jerk reaction tried to start the war today. And yes, du Conde did come through for us on this one, but now that Chief Stark spanked them as bad as he did they want to put it off to give themselves time to regroup. Replace the losses and plan better. As it is, Kiplinger stays in power for the time being, but that power is now totally superficial and any settlement offers at this point forward are, as you would say, Marshal, without foundation."

Maria is genuinely concerned, "His life is at risk?"

Nikki confirms, "Very much so. His family too."

Maria motions for the two of them to get in place, "We'll see If you're right, Nikki. If you are, this won't take long."

The feed goes live and Kiplinger manages to keep it light, ["Oi, Ramirez, you kept me waiting long enough. I was beginning to think I needed a tee-up."]

"Hey, Kip, I hear you've been having a bad day."

["Short-game is in the loo. Bugger-all I can do about it."]

Jessica nods to Maria confirming what Nikki said, so Maria runs with it, "So, if you wanna kiss and make up then I'm good for it. Otherwise, we're just gonna hunker down and wait to see what the dumb-shits in your Security Services do next. Like, my God, what were they thinking?"

["Honestly, it was an unfortunate misunderstanding."]

Maria leans back, "Ya know, Kip, you're so convincing you make me want to believe you; but, our hackles are up."

["Marshal, I promise, it ends here."]

Maria reassures him that she knows the truth, "For the now."

Kiplinger knows that there is no point in arguing that, so he apologizes, ["Sorry about the Dashi."]

"Shit happens. That blows but it goes with the territory."

They look at each other for a few long seconds. Maria offers no apology for the three cruisers, and Kiplinger didn't expect it.

Kiplinger simply says, ["That it does."]

"Keep in touch, Chancellor."

["We should. Hooroo!"] And Kiplinger cuts the transmission.

Maria leans back in her chair with a pencil in hand, and while staring into Nikki's eyes she starts tapping the pencil on the edge of her desk, "So, you were right all along. You being honest and shit makes me wonder where your loyalties lie."

Instead of playing *stare down* with Maria, Nikki is curious about the yellow writing object in her hand, "What is that?"

Maria lifts the pencil up, "This?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"A pencil?"

"Whoa, I've never seen one!"

Maria shrugs and tosses Nikki the pencil, "Ticonderoga Number 2. You can still get 'em."

Astonished, Nikki says, "No way!"

Maria reaches under her desk and pulls out a whole box of pencils, and a sharpener, and tosses them on the desk top, "Here ya go, Nikki. Enjoy!"

"Seriously, thank you!"

"Look, Nikki..." Maria thinks hard about what she now says, "Thank you for your help. Ya, we got Jessica and she's capable, but we do appreciate your help whenever you can give it to us."

Nikki nods her head, "It's my pleasure."

Maria points to Jessica, "Look, I hate to cut this short but I have to get out to the Carrie Nation and I need to talk to Jessie before I go. Again, I want to thank you for your help."

Nikki turns to leave, and before she steps out the doorway she looks back at Maria, "Maria, my loyalties lie with those who will win. That will be you."

Maria challenges her, "You sure about that?"

"I have a good idea what you plan to do." Nikki then assures her, "It didn't come from you, but your people are not as discreet with their thoughts as you are."

Maria asks curiously, "And?"

"Like I said, I'll stick with the winning team."

Maria ponders, "You know, I keep looking for a reason to end your ass, and I can't find one..." Then with a laugh, "Yet!"

Nikki adds, "And, I won't give you one."

It was then that Jessica pipes up, "Me? I don't need one!"

Nikki totally blows her cool and shouts while pointing towards the lobby, "Can we talk!"

With a smirk, Jessica looks at Maria while pointing at Nikki, "Give me a minute. Okay?"

Maria says with some urgency, "Make it fast."

As Jessica steps past Nikki, and into the lobby, she whispers to Nikki, "My, we have a temper."

Before Nikki follows her she says to Maria, "It'll be Polaris."

"What about Polaris?"

"That's where they are going to build up their forces. That'll be their jumping off point. Jessica will confirm."

Stepping out into the lobby Nikki faces Jessica down, "Off me now or shut the fuck up! I'm done."

With a shiver, Jessica smiles, "Ooooh, choices."

Nikki is pissed, "I mean it, bitch. I am sick of your shit!"

Jessica protests, "What do you want me to do? Be nice?"

Nikki didn't have an alternative, "You might consider it? I'm not getting off this planet, even if the Co-op takes it I'm stuck."

"What do you know?"

"Pretty much everything and, no, it did not come from Marshal Ramirez if that's what you're wondering."

Jessica shrugs, "I believe ya. Few people have the discipline of thought my Aunt Maria has."

"Most everybody else is transparent to us." Nikki adds, and as Jessica nods in agreement Nikki asks, "Doesn't it get old?"

Jessica wonders, "What?"

"The constant hurricane of thought that surrounds us. If I couldn't filter out what I choose to hear, or if I could not blot it out completely, like we can, I'd...I'd go insane."

"Ain't that the truth." And after a short introspective silence, Jessica gives in, "Being nice, to anybody, is not my style. And the idea of being even cordial to you goes so against my grain it's breathtaking, but...let's say I don't have to be an asshole all the time."

Nikki starts to say, "Maybe even we can—"

Jessica cuts her off, "No! I'll never like you."

"That's not what I was going to ask, but it would be nice."

Jessica gestures to her to ask her question, so Nikki tries again, "Maybe we could do lunch? Start fresh."

"Don't push it." And while inching back towards Maria's office Jessica says, "And, while we're at it, stay away from Seth."

"Such an unremarkable child..." Nikki then quickly adds with some panic, "No insult intended! I mean that I was anticipating *more* considering his pedigree."

Jessica stops and shakes her head with disbelief, "What were you expecting? Muad'Dib?"

"Hu?" Nikki asks, confused.

Jessica rolls her eyes, so Nikki taps the neuronet again as she summons the elevator, "Dune?"

Jessica shrugs, "It's dumb as fuck, but you'll enjoy it. I did."

"I'll download and rip it."

Which is to say Nikki is going to queue it up at night—where by morning having 'read' the book will have been implanted in her memory. She could do it on the go but the results are not clean and more like having scanned the Cliffs Notes. An all too common practice anymore that purists, those one-percenters who still use tablets or buy hard-copy, insists that it short-changes the experience.

"How about reading it! Doesn't anybody actually read books anymore? It's not like you don't have the time."

Nikki nods her head, "Okay! Why not?"

Jessica can feel Maria getting frustrated, so to cut this short she draws a line in the sand, "Look, my mother will have to fend for herself..." *But only so far* is implied yet not said—and understood by both. "Just steer clear of the Omegas and we'll get along."

"Fair enough."

The elevator opens and Nikki gets in, and before the doors close Jessica calls out, "Oh, and Nikki!"

Nikki's head pops out, "What?" She steps out while holding the door. "Normally you close our discussions with a dig, so what is it this time?" Then in a severe country drawl she adds, "I'm just all a twitter wonderin' what ya'll has'ta say."

"Actually..." Jessica smiles big as she slips into Maria's office, "We should do lunch!"

As Jessica approaches Maria's desk, Maria asks, "Polaris?"

Jessica knows Maria knew that long before, "Yup."

"That's the last place we'd ever look."

"Ya, who'd 'uv guessed." Jessica plops down in a side chair, "So, think you can pull this off?"

"If they take the bait. Today was too soon."

"To spread them thin, like you want, you'll probably have to give up way more than you want too. You realize that?"

"I know, but we'll make them pay for every inch of ground they take. I just don't know about Sapphire though. Playing the neutrality card here will be difficult at best."

Jessica looks around while spinning her finger in the air, "This is an embassy, technically speaking." She then leans in, "And what a thorn in their side it will be. Especially with me here."

Maria nods in agreement, "You'd be a thorn in their side and they would not even know it."

Jessica confirms, "So, you plan to use me."

Maria blinks her eyes in disbelief, "Did you have any doubts?"

"Think of the intel I could gather."

Maria is annoyed by Jessica's smug tone of voice. She looks in Jessica's eyes for a second, and then points to her, "Tell me, love, how much have you contributed to what we're planning to do? And, don't bullshit me."

Jessica sits back with a snort, and stares back at Maria for the longest time, "Very little, actually."

Maria gestures to herself, "I'm all ears."

Jessica tries not to answer with, "Let's just say I've been greasing the skids for you."

Maria snaps, "Knock it off!"

"I'm already done."

"I'll bet." And as Maria stands to leave, "We're gonna haf'ta have a talk when I get back."

"Okay."

"I should be chewing your ass out, but that's not going to accomplish anything. So, my dear, if you're gonna continue sticking your nose in our business—"

"Keep you in the loop?" Jessica shrugs, "They were such minor things, Aunt Maria."

"What were you doing?"

"Just tugging on some strings. Ones you wanted tugged."

"du Conde?"

"Obviously."

"Lebedev or Saavedra?"

Jessica sheepishly admits, "Yes."

"Both?" Maria asks, and Jessica nods yes.

"Tugging on some strings..." Maria then shouts, "I want an itemized list!" She then thumps her desk with her fist, "Need I remind you that the *minor* things you do can have major repercussions? From here on out your hand *does not* go into the fuckin' cookie jar without my permission!"

"I understand."

"I'm glad you do."

"Speaking about that hand in the cookie jar thing—"

Maria leans forward and gives a quiet snarl, "what?"

"Kiplinger." Jessica points to Maria, "I can see the wheels turnin' in your head and I can guarantee it ain't gonna be easy..."

Maria plops down in her chair and deflates. She knows she has to listen to Jessie and it kills her to do so. Whatever she and Nikki picked up when they connected to Kiplinger is critical, and it's obvious in that short exchange that Jessica has both intimate details of his situation and a possible solution.

"They got 'im buttoned up pretty tight, but not tight enough."

Maria sighs, "Okay, you got an idea?"

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Maria has been trying to get out of here for the last couple of hours. Jessica has been long gone but the C3 staffers and others have been like an endless parade through her office. It's now 18:50 zulu and Jacob calling in the middle of his dinner party was her chance to boot everyone out, but to hear him say he's planning to turn down Alex's stepmother, when she's obviously coming onto him, blows her away. Then to hear from him that she looks every bit like the late Claudia Willoughby, every student of history's wet-dream, confuses her even more.

Maria laughs big, "She looks just like Madam Fap-Damage? Are you shitting me?"

Jacob confirms, ["No shit. It's like she was cloned or somethin'. A somewhat younger version, but it's uncanny."]

Maria shakes her head, "Dude, what's the big deal? Tell ya what, if you don't perform this little service I will hop on the next *beer run* and come take 'er off your hands!"

Jacob complains, ["I feel like a door prize."]

Maria agrees, "As well you should, and considering what Sasha Demitri has done *for the cause* you really need to put out if this is what she wants."

["You're shit serious! You want me to tear it up."]

"Yes, but don't punish her."

Jacob has abruptly come to an amazing realization about his relationship with Maria, ["So, I'm the monkey with the tin cup and you're the organ grinder."]

"About time you figured that out, chuckle-fuck."

["I guess I got my marchin' orders."]

"Be the monkey!" Maria then changes her mind, "Better yet, for this think of yourself as a Circus Seal! That's more your style. Think you can handle it, slick?"

["Let's see, how's this?"] Over the link Maria hears Jacob slapping his hands and barking like a seal, ["Orrrk! Orrrk!"]

"Now, that's getting into character!"

["You know I don't like 'em so...meaty."]

"You mean pudge..." While they were talking Maria pulled images of Sasha from the ceremony that afternoon, "But that's some mighty nice pudge! Look, if Sasha's anything like Willoughby in the sack then you'll be thanking the heavens you did this. Who knows? She just might end up as a regular on your dance card?"

The irritation in Jacob's voice is more for show, ["I can't believe that I'm about to do a fatty."]

Maria is truly astonished by Jacob's comment. Sasha is not a 'fatty' per se. Historically she wouldn't even be considered full-figured except by today's standards. The perfectly marbled Porterhouse Sasha offers, as compared to the über lean round-steak walking the streets nowadays, is a throwback to a day when plump was in vogue—and Sasha would be considered skinny by comparison.

Maria pleads, "Just do it!"

Jacob caves in, ["Okay! Okay! I'm on it!"]

"Make me proud." And Maria cuts the transmission.

With nobody bothering her Maria makes good her escape, and on the elevator heading down to the lobby of the Spike she feels her jowls tighten and realizes she has a slight ringing in her ears. She wonders if it's stress or anger but after a few seconds she comes upon a disturbing realization—she's jealous.

What a miserable feeling, Maria thinks as she struggles in coming to grips with these alien emotions. She's not at all jealous of Jacob getting a shot at Sasha, that's so not her style. She's jealous of Sasha and that's what's bugging Maria. She can have Jacob on a whim, and he is accommodating, it's just been too long. Years in fact. And it's not like she's not getting laid. The staff in C3 could be her personal harem if she so choose but Maria has avoided tapping that for obvious reasons. To get hers Maria has been sneekin' down to the casino at the Khafre pyramid which has yet to disappoint.

Two or three times a week Maria gets dressed-to-kill and starts her evening at the blackjack, roulette, or craps tables. At the casino she is nobody, just like everybody else, but she's such a laugh riot that hooking up with the hot single lady or couple is effortless for her. Humor is such a powerful tool and, armed with a big personality and a sardonic wit, Maria has no problem getting a little action. When Maria want's intimacy she'll opt to pay Nicole or Jacob a visit, in that order, but Nicole has been occupied as of late and she's been avoiding Jacob for quite some time. The why is something she cannot fathom or put to words until now. And while stepping out onto the airfield, under the roar of a Razorback drop ship performing a rolling take off, the thought dawns on Maria as if it were a punch in the face, *I still have feelings for the stupid sonofabitch!*

"Fuck that!" The Razorback drowns her out as she stamps her foot while screaming, "Uh-uh! No, no fuckin' way! I thought I totally got past his shit!" Maria then throws her head back and shouts out, "God, you asshole, strike me down! Show some mercy, motherfucker! Come on and..." She then bellows as if she were challenging God to stomp her like a bug, "DO IT, YOU FUUUUUUUUU!"

Just then a com-alert flashes in Maria's head from Corporal Vossler in the C3, and Maria amazes herself as she switches from a primal-rage to sing-song pleasantness, "Yes, Corporal. Wazzup?"

["Waddya mean, wazzup? Where are you?"]

"Leaving?"

Even though Vossler is a corporal he's a retread, and what Maria can't shake is that long ago he was a Chief and she was a corporal three levels under him—so privately he can speak his peace,

["The hell you are! Your meetings with Sandoval can wait."]

Maria pleads, "You're having a Murder Board! It's unorthodox for me to be sitting in on a review of my own plan don'cha think?"

Maria can almost hear the growl from Vossler, ["We're fast tracking this one, Ramirez. S.O.P. goes right out the window."]

"Voss, Sandoval has Frankensteined us a few game changers that will impact the plan in a good way."

["You can tell us on the hot-seat."]

Maria shakes her head, "Wait a minute? I'm the boss!"

["Maria Lynn!"] The fatherly-authoritarian tone hits its mark.

Maria stops, grits her teeth, turns about-face and stomps back towards the Spike all the while grumbling intelligible obscenities. Decades before Vossler's voice got results, and it pisses Maria off that it still works on her today.

["So, what's it gonna be?"] Vossler asks, knowing the answer.

"I'm comin', I'm a comin'!"

["Fucken-A, doodlebug! That's what I want to hear!"]

Maria knows he's right but flips the bird towards the top of the Spike out of frustration, "You owe me, Kevin!"

Vossler chuckles, ["I saw that."]

Maria breaks on a dime and leans forward with hands on hips, "Who's fucken' this monkey, hu?"

Put in his place, Vossler fumbles, ["Ah...you are?"]

"That's good to know, Voss." Maria starts again for the Spike. "We're on the same page."

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