

79

short curls

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-31-TUESDAY
TIME: 18:01zulu (local 03:09mst)

"Holy shit!"

"Holy shit, what?"

"This shit!" Says Griego, handing the letter to Angela.

Angela reads it and does a double take, "No shit!"

"What?" Asks Mahko Ozo.

"Check this out!" Angela says while handing it to Ozo.

Ozo reads it and, "Holy shit is right!"

He hands it over to Butter Hewlett and Thomas Chase who read it together, with Hewlett saying, "Oh my Lawd!"

Chase laughs, "This is the nuckin' futtiest thing I ever read!"

Here on Cocytus the last of the ghost droids are meeting up on a Level-30 drift tunnel, four kilometers under the Arklay Mountain base called Raccoon City. Fifteen days ago there were eighteen droids who entered this fight but now there are only five left. In command is Griego and he is the only one still in their original mech. The others have significant combat damage with Angela, having booted up the last of the spare droids a week ago, losing her left arm yesterday.

An encrypted tar-file came in from the Spike at 18:00 right as Griego was opening the envelope given to him by Hershey, and this has been the only thing that has come to them from the outside since the BDF landed in October. Even though Angela outranks Griego he's been running this show, so his droid also serves as their share drive. After unlocking and bursting the tarball he posts their files.

Griego goes, "Ya'll got WADs, come an' get 'em!"

For a ghost droid a WAD file coming in for you is like the ultimate a mail call. There can be a bunch of different things in it, like texts, images and updates, things that they can't receive in real time because communication and bandwidth tends to be restricted, but the most important thing they upload from the WAD is a compilation of memories from all the other instances of themselves out on missions.

As a courtesy to the troops you are currently with, since you tend to work with the same people all the time, and on simultaneous missions, usually limited to five or six, everyone with you will stage their WAD to append—then hot reset their droids at the same time.

Waiting to reset with the others, Angela looks to Griego and, "Angel, want me to go topside with you, babe?"

Griego asks, "You know LC, Bristol, right?"

"Through Porter. Bristol was a captain back then."

"Yea, I figure you can grease the skids, but now that I think about it how 'bout you twist their arms 'cause these *mericon's* don't have the time to hem and haw over making a decision."

"No prob...and I figure you can use the emotional support."

"Yea Angie, I could use a huggy." Griego smiles big, and with everyone holding their hand up, he says, "Okay, let's reset!"

Their holographic heads in the droids dissolve then flash back.

Having just uploaded two and a half months of memories, some of them ongoing missions, they need a few seconds to absorb all the activity for that time, with Ozo saying to Hewlett, "Butter, baby! You got the highest body count on Ngāti Whā! Congrats, girl!"

Hewlett laughs, "Yea, ain't that a kick in the junk!"

Griego does his own double take saying, "*A toda madre!* We were GMI BERs an' fightin' on Te Aka Kāi! That was a blast!"

Angela realizes, "I shot MacKenzie's legs off!"

Griego points to her, "No shit, you did! *Tu vata* badass!"

Angela, with a long face, "I wonder if she'll ever forgive me?"

Chase laughs big, "Hey, we're killin' it on Nufa! I clipped me a hundred and sixty Homer there! By my li'l lonesome too!"

Ozo nods, thinking, "Taiji has been a tough nut, like here."

Angela, absorbing all the action they've been in over the last ten weeks, says, "I'll say, we peeps 'ave been fucken' busy."

Griego thinks about it and points out, "They've redacted what we've been doin' on GTB6. I wonder why that is?"

Angela nods, "I know why, but I can't say."

Griego wonders, "Why, is it bad?"

She shakes her head, "Naw, but I'll tell ya after the third."

"Fair enough." Griego pulls up an IFF text box and keys in
<THIS IS SA MSGT GREIGO. WE ARE CALLING A TEMPORARY TRUCE.
IT IS IMPORTANT WE COME TALK TO YOU INSIDE THIRTY MINUTES>

Angela worries, "I can't believe they did that to Alpha-O!"

He asks, "Think it has to do with the grays?"

"Oh yea! Most definitely it's because of 'em."

Griego turns to Ozo and says, "Ready for me to copy over?"

Ozo nods, "Ready-set!"

Griego grabs their files, including the WADs covering their last ten weeks here, drags them over Ozo's partition while saying, "Mahko, if they club us then send these to the Spike, booby trap the barriers they put up, seal the bulkheads to the tunnels and kill everybody in the tunnels and anybody who try to get in. We're now in murder mode."

Ozo goes, "Shoot to kill, 'bout damned time!"

Just then a text comes to them via the IFF saying <THIS IS
BDF LC BRISTOL. OUR TROOPS ARE STANDING DOWN SO COME ON
UP AND WE WILL HEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY>

Angela sighs, "All good things must come to an end."

Hewlett says, "Making this offer is kinda dumb if ya ask me."

Griego points out, "It's orders, and it is the right thing to do."

Hewlett laughs, "Right thing or not, I don't rightly care."

Ozo urges them on, "*Homie*, the clock is ticking."

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Jordan Bristol, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the BDF, finds himself suddenly in command of the SOG Seventh AirCav Brigade known as The Reapers. Many of the Special Operations Groups of the BDF, just like the rank and file of the Annex, wear *all the hats* and this includes reconnaissance, interdiction, counter insurgency, and when it suits their fancy they have that air assault thing down to a pat. As recently as an hour ago Bristol was in command of its Forth Battalion, known as The Pale Horse, which is their dedicated shoot-'em-up "Delta Force" style conflict resolution element.

This is a job Bristol has loved—and his people love him back.

Bristol and his team were brought in a week ago to take care of the drone-n-droid infestation here on Cocytus after the other three Horses incurred an excess of casualties. After just five days of really intense and nasty fighting it was believed that The Pale Horse pushed the PacMan drones and their ghost droid handlers out of the swanky R&R segment of the underground facility. Impressed by the results, their Brigadier General, known to be a hands off sorta guy, thought it would be a kick to drop in, touch base and grab hands with the troops, then inspect the tunnels for himself—in spite of Jordi's protests.

That was yesterday-noon, and come about zulu-tea, on their way back from looky-looky at all the barricades to the many tunnel entrances of the mining operation, they get caught in a harrowing little ambush staged as a pop-up greeting card for the General.

Yea, nobody saw that coming.

It takes Griego and Angela almost twenty minutes to reach the surface, negotiating the labyrinth of lift and ventilation shafts that zigzag between levels, and even though all the BDF troops they stroll past seem pleasant enough—there is this weird, even macabre sense of relief in the air. The troopers of The Pale Horse have known that these ghosts, personality constructs that pilot the SA droids, are not out to kill them. Unfortunately, they do not know that their mission protocol has just now changed from mayhem to murder spree, and the fact is that killing has a whole lot less exposure to it.

On the way up the one thing that surprised them both, the thing that Hershey told them was going to happen, is that not one item was removed from the underground facility. The BDF troops surveyed, scanned and inventoried everything in detail where it sat. What was even more surprising is that not one of the pallets of bank reserve bullion the Annex was holding in trust on mining level 25 was messed with. Of the 288 tons of gold, 10 tons of platinum, 9 tons of rhodium and 23 tons pallidum, not one was disturbed. Not the wrapping, not the banding nor the documents affixed to the pallets were touched.

Now one would think that this would have been a huge score for the Co-op but the fact of the matter is—their hands are tied and they couldn't make off with any of it. The Bank of New Sydney, who is in control the Sapphire Au notes in circulation, is doing business in the City of New Sydney, which is surrounded on all sides by the much larger incorporated greater-metropolitan New Sydney.

And here is where it gets a little messy...

The City of New Sydney actually has familial political ties to the City of London and not with metropolitan New Sydney or Sapphire even. Back when Waterworld became Sapphire they were forced to abide by a treaty with the City of London that recognizes the political

autonomy of the City of New Sydney separate and apart from Sapphire or any municipality under the jurisdiction of Sapphire—which is why the City of New Sydney has a seat in the FIS.

What's more confusing is that the City of New Sydney is an indentured subsidiary to the *temps immémorial* City of London who is surrounded by the greater-metropolitan London—separate from that London yet under the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom.

Point is, the Bank of New Sydney has muscled in on old-fogies like De La Rue and now controls off-world currency note production, as well as circulation, digital block-chain, and also manages the reserve holdings for most of these governmental entities. Included in this odd mish-mash of treasury notes is the Sapphire Au and the SCC Dollar. The interesting thing of note is that gold is the single thing under treaty that has absolutely no fluctuating value whatsoever. Everything teeter-totters around gold and that value is high—and the Sapphire Au, the money of the Pleiades, is considered the "gold standard" of today becoming the primo reserve currency for pretty much everybody.

Yea, Special Drawing Rights is still a thing, but while on a war footing the valuation formulas for the Co-op tend to weigh differently and those have redefined what 'stretching the rubber band' means.

Anyway, with them stepping onto the airfield at 18:23zulu, Griego realizes that the last time he was topside here was shortly after sunset all the way back in early October. From the looks of things, the BDF took apart the wreckage of what used to be the pinwheel training facility, and the debris they sifted through is all over the airfield. Knowing how thorough Hershey said these people were, Griego is self-assured that the BDF found nothing of actual value. Miss-information is on the menu today, and pretty much every day.

There are twelve interconnected trailers by the entrance to Raccoon City, and with Griego and Angela walking towards the obvious command trailer, the one with windows all over it, two figures step out of the airlock and head towards them with a cheerful gait.

Jordan Bristol, in an ACE suit calls out over a universal radio frequency, "You're just in time for high tea, me cobbbers! I'm always up to throwin' on a kettle!"

With them approaching each other, Griego and Angela stop and give a snappy and proper salute, more of an American style, and this is returned in kind by Bristol and his exec.

Griego goes, "LC, I am very pleased to meet you, sir."

Bristol shakes his head, "No, sergeant, the pleasure is mine."

Angela smiles, "Hey, Jordan!"

"Angela? Angela Simmons!"

"Yea it's been awhile, how the hell are ya?"

With a startled expression, Bristol grins, "We've been having a grand time here, and a stonking great tussle this has been!"

"How is the General?"

Bristol points to her arm, "That was you! Sorry 'bout the fin."

"Neeea, no biggie. I just can't seem to keep it, ya know."

"The general, he'll live, but he's out of the game for awhile. Ya hit his spine below the navel an' that did a number on 'im."

"Tell the general I'm sorry 'bout that."

"The sad ending to this dreary day is that Com-n-Con just gave me the Brigade, and that I did not want."

"That means you'll become a Brigadier!"

"Brig-General and, like I said I did not want."

Angela shrugs, "If I would have known—"

Bristol cuts her off, "No, love, you were doing your job."

Griego points out, "So, you're catching up to *su padre*."

"*Si mi amigo!*" Bristol shakes his head with some amusement, "Me ol' man, as a father he's topper than notch, but as a general he can be a bit of a spastic poofter. I really wanted to steer clear of the sword-boards, ya know." He smiles at Angela, "Honestly, I'd rather you 'ave put me on the mend."

Griego hands him the letter, "Sorry 'bout that, mate."

Angela cringes, "I just heard about what I did to MacKenzie."

With him starting to read over the letter, Bristol gives a little huff of a laugh, "Oh, that. Truth be told she wanted time off to pop out a rug-rat so this was very opportune for her!" Visibly stunned by what he is reading he adds, "She did say to me she was delighted you didn't punch her time clock, so there should be no hard feelings."

Angela is relieved, "That's good to hear."

Bristol hands the letter to his exec, "Well, isn't this a pickle!"

Griego laughs slightly, "Yea, surprised the shit outta us too!"

Bristol holds a finger up and radios, "Sergeant-Major, please come on up to the airfield." After she acknowledges, Bristol says to Griego, "I want the Sergeant-Major in on this discussion. It should only take a minute."

"Time is important, sir."

He nods in agreement, "A precious commodity, indeed."

Griego then says, "I'm surprised your people didn't open the reserve vault on level twenty-five."

"Oh no, we did open it! The Bank of New Sydney contacted our government right as we landed. We were under orders to make sure it was all there, and send a snapshot of it to the Bank then close it right back up nice and proper!"

Angela asks, "Why didn't you just go for it?"

Bristol smiles, "I think you know the reason, love. Tempting, yes, but we are at war with you—an abstract entity. Touch that bullion and we'd be at odds with everybody. Not to mention we'd forfeit our reserves held by the BNS. No gettin' around that one."

Griego points out, "I heard your father was very vocal about wanting to raid the banks in the Pleiades."

Angela adds, "Everybody was expecting that."

Bristol laughs, "Very much so! Our Corporations Commission had to shout 'im down. For now our dollar is being propped up, and the IMF would surely snap that rubber band if we stooped towards the path to larceny. Snap it in our arse they would 'ave too!"

Angela then says, "I'm surprised your people left the rest of the place go mostly intact."

Griego nods, "Very disciplined people you have, Sir."

"Thank you!" Bristol shrugs, "You'd be surprised what you can get out of the dust bunnies when you put your mind to it. I have to say our intel services are a tad too thorough because what they collect is mostly useless." He points up in the air, "Case in point, your previous commander, Jackson, we found his flat here before they shut the place down, back when he was a freshly minted Deputy Marshal. We zeroed in on it from the dust on a ballpoint pen of all things. With that we confirmed many stories about him. He did have that cocker spaniel, the one that everybody here hated on, a Maine-coon cat that everybody here thought the world of, and that he had a bloody full measure of gentlemen callers."

Angela adds, "Nicole said he was a bit of a social butterfly."

"Yes, a jolly huge collection I might add. You'd be amazed by what you can gleam from all those buttocks ground into a mattress!"

Griego laughs with a nod, "Yea, like you we don't get a lot of 'guys only' guys in the Annex."

"Point being, we had a lot of respect for Marshal Jackson, which brings me to asking a little favor of ya."

"Depends on the favor?"

"It's a personal one and it has to be handled rather delicately so it does not come back to bite me. If I tell you what it is here, when you load up at the Stone Garden you will know there, correct?"

Angela says, "I can guarantee we will keep it confidential."

"With my father I was privy to a lot of things that I should not have been and...this one has troubled me. With our cloning program they were looking for the best soldier they could find that was both proven stock, and into blokes only! The reason I bring this up is that securing Marshal Jackson's blueprints was stupidly easy for us."

"They did shut that program down, right?"

"Yes, but they have several thousand of the little guys out there. It appears that his proclivities were spawned from the abuse he endured from the foster care system, and that the non-abused stock were into Sheila's, so chalk one up to the nurture column! Point being is that Command wanted to scrap them all when they found out."

Angela does a double take, "Why the fuck was that?"

"They wanted soldiers with no ties. If the ankle biters grew up to desire wives and families then it would have made a mess of things. Command was after cannon fodder—not family men."

Griego worries, "They didn't scrap them, did they?"

"Oh, no-no-no. Mr. Hartcourt, bless his heart, stepped in and took them all. He found every one of them good homes, and kept one for himself. His oldest daughter adopted that child."

Angela asks, "What do you want us to do?"

Bristol shrugs big, "It's tragic that Jackson's daughter died with him at Ny Hopen, so his granddaughter may want to know. Now, Scarab can't do anything about it but she may want to know, however, her knowing is not for me to decide."

"Marshal Ramirez."

"Exactly! It'd be her call."

Angela nods repeatedly and says, "Wow."

Bristol nods, "Oi! Here comes the Sergeant Major."

From the underground base emerges the Sergeant Major, with her warrant officer shadow in tow. They step up but both do not salute Bristol as is the standard practice in a combat zone.

Standing between them, she glances at Griego and Angela, gives them a nod and asks, "What'll be your pleasure, Sir?"

Bristol gestures with his head for his exec to give the letter to the Sergeant-Major, and as she takes it he says, "I think they may have us by the short curlies here, Sergeant-Major."

She reads the letter, blinks and then calmly says with a nod, "Well, if this is right-true this makes us toasty prawns on a stick."

Griego has pulled a tactical rolled screen, and while pulling it open it tears because of the holes incurred in combat, "We have a video from the Orion OP at twenty au...damn it!"

Angela snickers while hands him her tac-screen, "Here!"

Griego successfully snaps this one open and says, "This was the view from the Orion OP at nine-forty-two zulu."

On the screen they watch as the star, filtered for the glare, slowly expands then blows out from the other side. The filter darkens even more to adjust for light bouncing back from the nebula. They watch for a whole ninety seconds as the star starts to shred from along the edges then bursts apart on the side they are viewing from. Seconds later the camera snows out as the OP is incinerated from the light energy hitting it in full force.

The exec asks, "When does it reach us?"

"Photon pulse will hit at Nineteen-fifty zulu."

The Sergeant Major says, "That's in an hour and twenty minutes. That's not a lot of time."

Bristol asks, "Will there be terms?"

Griego laughs, "Oh, hell no! No terms of any kind! This is a doin' the right thing, workin' together truce, *Homie*. Just grab your kit and get your asses in the base before the shit hits!"

The Sergeant Major says, "We'll be facing away from it, sir."

Angela points out, "Yea, but this here will still get scorched to all hell. If you get your supplies and gear in the dock area those doors will hold for the time it takes us to break it down and move it into the mining levels before the debris field hits."

She looks to her WO shadow and points to the trailers, "Bear, have our people break the trailers down and wheel the automat, the recycler, the atmo-skids and the three supply trailers into the dock! If there's time we'll then grab the med trailer. Chop-chop!"

With her warrant officer running off and shouting orders over her radio, the Sergeant Major asks, "An' the big shit is gonna hit?"

Griego shrugs, "We're lookin' at tomorrow between thirty-two and thirty-three hundred hours, local time. That's in sixty-four hours."

With a sense of relief, she says, "So it'll hit the other side."

"They timed it so that we'll be on the night side, facing out."

Angela adds, "Cue Ball is believed to be the core of a long dead gas giant that got stripped down and captured. It's cold, mostly, but the core is made of iron and uranium so we're always fighting Helium leaching out of the walls. The problem here is air-handling. If we vent out from the R&R and living sections we lose the bulk of our atmosphere unless we seal every tunnel, bulkhead and shaft."

Griego adds, "We're still gonna be fighting Helium so we have to keep the O2 circulating constantly."

Angela goes, "What you're not gonna be short of is oxygen and food. We installed recyclers on level thirty and have sixty pallets of CWR-RATs in case that unit goes down."

The Sergeant Major asks, "Your recycler is rated for?"

"A battalion sized unit."

Bristol breaths easier, "That's good to hear."

Griego points out, "But, sir, to be safe and smart, we should get all your 'quip to level thirty as soon as possible."

It's the exec who asks the obvious question, "Sergeant, how long till we can get out of here, you think?"

Griego blinks and shrugs, "It's an asymmetrical blast from the *other* side of Betelgeuse so, we're looking at a possible path through it being found as early as...what'd they say?"

Looking at Angela, she picks it up with, "February at the earliest. It may take longer but no more than nine months. Twelve on the far outside chance, so I think we should start a pool! When it gets here we're guesstimating that the mass from Betelgeuse should pass inside ten hours. During this scouring-barrage they believe we may experience some acceleration like sensation. It could range anywhere from the feeling you get on an express elevator to maybe point-five G. That said, they expect Cocytus to remain intact."

Griego adds, "In seventy-five or so hours we should know for sure. With that, there are quite a few cases of scotch, bourbon and vodka in the R&R center. You should consider bringing it all down so your people can celebrate New Year's after the shit passes."

"That's a splendid idea!" Bristol nods, thinking, then turns to his Sergeant Major, "Sergeant Major, how many wounded have we incurred since the transport left?"

She says, "Three, Sir!"

"Have them loaded onto the Ute." Bristol then turns to his exec and gestures to the small transport ship they have on the airfield, "Major, you will fly them back to base and give our status. Tell my father I'll get back when I get back."

The exec says, "No, sir, you should fly it out."

"Ah, no. You have your orders." He then looks to Angela, "When do you think we will be picked up, again?"

Angela goes, "They say February or March, but if I were to put my money down I'd throw it at some time in July."

Bristol asks, "Sergeant Major, when are you splits?"

She knows where this is going, "I rotate in five weeks, Sir."

"Then rotate out now. You're goin' with!"

She snarls, "The fuck I am...Sir!"

"Paper, scissors, rank! You have your orders."

"Under protest, Sir!"

"Duly noted. Emily, we will throw you that duster and get everyone cronked when we get back." Bristol stands to attention and salutes her, "Thank you for everything, Sergeant Major."

Forced retirement is not a thing anyone wants when it comes down to it, and after forty-two years and two wars, the Sergeant Major here is suddenly thrown into an emotional tailspin, which breaches her granite like exterior, "I am gonna file for an extension, Sir."

"Then we expect you to hurry back, love!" She returns the salute and Bristol tells her to, "Now, shove off ya Pollard."

While watching his exec and Sergeant Major walk off, Bristol admits, "That woman has been a pain in my arse."

Angela nods, "As all good Sergeant Majors should be."

"Amen." He agrees, then looks to Angela saying, "I'm gonna miss her. She kept me honest and my people alive."

"In spite of what we were trying to do to them."

"Thank you for not killin' me peeps!"

Angela thinks about it, "Sorry 'bout The Black Horse."

Bristol almost laughs, saying, "No, they walked into that one."

Angela shrugs, "Kinda, I don't think we were that obvious?"

"No, they half-stepped their way in like a troop of idjits."

Griego says, "Aren't you being a little hard on 'em, *home*?"

"All those motion sensor red flags? No, call it clarity." Bristol then gives them the counts because they will not ask, "In case you lost count, between Black and Red Horses you put three-hundred and twenty-one of them in hospital. Only twenty-nine of mine."

Griego nods, "Sir, Pale Horse was kickin' our asses."

Bristol points out, "You were taking stupid-crazy risks."

Angela asks, "I got a favor to ask you. If we make it past the big shit-hit, our handlers wanted us to bring the bullion up to the dock so they can haul it out of here. If the dock is still there, that is."

"Say no more! Stand back 'cause I'll put my people on it."

"Just askin' for a little help."

Bristol huffs and shakes his head, "Angie, doll, consider it my people schlepping out of eternal gratitude."

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