

LCTN: U-TURN/GORE POINT (Orion cluster)
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For a lowly east side gang-banger, Maria has come far indeed!

The leaders and entourage of delegates for the most powerful countries on Earth, namely the United States, Russia, China, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Japan and Australia are here. It was reported this was to be an Orion Nebula sightseeing junket on Air Force One and, for all intents and purposes, it was.

The demo was a resounding success but you couldn't tell that by all the long faces of the people wondering around the floor of the stadium—at the very bottom of the dish side of the Carrie Nation. Everyone here is still in a palpable state of shock by what they just saw a half an hour ago, as well as by what they are standing inside, so chalk one up on the big win column for lil' Maria!

Everyone is milling around trying to digest everything as well as trying to swallow what Maria has just dished out to them, and has generously offered to them equally through the CXi, which she says has changed its status from an *initiative* to an *institute*.

Through the transparent floor below their feet they can see six brand new Trung class platforms, as well as a carousel like space station holding twelve more of these ships near completion—seven of those slated for the CXi at no out of pocket cost—and all this at the tail end of an off the beaten path compound dual-binary star system.

A system outside the thousand light year limitation zone.

The main star, what the Annex calls U-Turn, is the largest and scorchingly bright star of a binary pair that is over 1,800au away. Surrounded by a veiled nebula is the local dim binary pair that consists of a red dwarf called One-Eighty and a brown dwarf named Gore Point,

so if someone from the SA happens to be talking about U-Turn then it's actually Gore Point they are talking about. Now, normally one would think that the Annex would be in violation of the UN treaty but, splitting hairs, the Annex did not set up any permanent planet-side colony, base or settlement which would violate that treaty so, basically they would be in the clear if it were to be put to the question.

Everyone's done it, it's just that the Annex went all next level.

There is nothing around U-Turn worth a tinker's damn but here behind the dark nebula, and out of sight from the partitioned zone, are the red and brown dwarfs, and hundreds of rocks, asteroids and planetesimals spinning around them in crazy-ass orbits. There is enough complex raw materials in these objects to build thousands of the Trung platforms, and to do so all they have to cart in is stuff like solvents, urea, acids, petroleum and water which is easy to fetch.

Today, where the UN was expressly not invited to this shindig, Cricket and Paris are here representing the FIS with Ranch Kiplinger along for the ride, but what threw President Mofid and members of the US delegation for a loop was Chancellor pro tem, Hartcourt and his wife in attendance. They know the full story behind Boxter since he and Mofid worked together at the UN, and now with the Honey Badgers on the sly, yet him being here makes them feel all kinds of uneasy because Maria and Boxter are at war—yet here those two are shaking hands and bro-hugging as if they were old school chums! Go fig?

The amazing thing to note is that during the demo, when everyone else was in a state of jaw-dropping shock, Boxter and Piper were applauding—even giggling at the sight of Betelgeuse exploding. Anyone else in Hartcourt's position would have wiggled out over such a sudden and massive change in power dynamics, but President Mofid realizes that Boxter correctly senses how this does not change much of anything between the SCC and the SA.

The war will continue unabated...

With Charles Washington and Aat remaining behind, to join in the discussion on the CXi, the bulk of the Nefer Key delegation, which consists of Luc, Lilith, Robert and Jacqui Graves, move to the stadiums mid-point egress ramp with Boxter, Piper and Scott following Maria.

Jessica steps out of the portal to the ramp wearing an armed JACC with canopy occluded, and weapons consisting of a penta gun in 4.16mm on her left forearm, a BR1-M2 in a tactical sling on the right shoulder, and as Scott holds the group at the foot of the ramp, Maria steps up to Jessica who asks, "How are ya feelin'?"

Maria looks to make sure the others are out of earshot, then back up at Jessica while nodding, "Pleasantly surprised."

Jessica nods in return, "Guess you won this round."

"You were right." Maria shrugs, crosses her arms and touches her lips in wonderment, "This is all so surreal. Who'duv thought?"

"You've sure come an impossibly long way for a little clover."

Maria starts laughing, "Yea, ya got me there!"

Jessica nods at her, "Single-handedly you...*you* have changed *everything* and I have to say, I am proud of you."

"Not changed yet, I still have to cinch this deal."

"Don't hard sell it. They all want what you offered."

"Okay, and thanks for taking Box and Piper back for me." Maria nods towards Eight, Copper, Peanuts and Cap on the other side of the stadium, "The girls can yank their chains if I need it."

Jessica pats her shoulder, "Go win 'em over easy, babe."

Maria turns and at the foot of the ramp she shakes hands with the four Nefer Key delegates and the Hartcourt's, and as she walks away, towards where Carrie, Mooch and Snoopy are being introduced to President Mofid by Nancy Yoon, Scott motions for the six of them to follow him up the ramp. Stepping past Jessica, with her canopy still occluded they have no idea who is inside the fighting suit.

Walking past her, she turns and starts to follow them.

In silence, Scott leads them all through the concourse towards an elevator bank where there is already a lift waiting for them. They pile in and Scott presses the button to the first level flight deck, and even though the lift is fast, it still took almost a minute to reach it.

Stepping out into the elevator lobby, they turn and walk out to the flight deck that is under the central hub of the Carrie Nation. Walking past the massive Air Force One, the Super Guppy model of Boeing's Trident Star Clipper series, it has three times the capacity of the old 747 Jumbo Jet. Sitting beside Air Force One are four white USAF, F308 Bulldog fighter-escorts, and sitting by them is an HWG83, Javalina drop ship tagging along in case of an emergency.

Heading towards Jessica's HWG101, she flies ahead and lands by the ladder. Walking up, both Luc and Robert are almost tripping over themselves as they bodily turn around to look at everything.

Scott stops at the ladder and motions them to, "Grab a seat!"

As they climb up, Jessica gestures for Boxter to hang back with her. In the ship, Lilith and Jacqui take the left rearward facing seats across from Piper, while Luc and Robert take the right rearward facing seats across from Scott.

As they buckle up, Scott says to Luc, "I am still Abeeku."

Luc does not look up while adjusting the belts, "Jason, you and now Zach. Every one of you who joined the Annex, turned on us."

Scott shrugs, "Not exactly, but we'll talk after the Alter."

Luc looks up and, "We have a lot to talk about."

Scott shakes his head, "Not really, but what's going to flip your lid is realizing that our loyalty...never wavered."

Luc just shakes his head, "If you say so."

Scott's eyes stab at Luc like lasers, "We told you not to have us give 'em some nebulous ultimatum but would you listen? Then you came around sticking your nose in *their* fucking business and got your ass handed back to ya! Then, all butt hurt, you took that God damned Fly Swatter out and did, what, twenty-seven test shots and you didn't think it was going to get back to them? Seriously?"

Luc points out, "We wanted it to get back to them."

Scott points at Luc, "Today was your doing! This is on you."

Luc's nostrils flair out with a little huff, so Robert says to Scott, "I've been tryin' to tell 'im that all along." He looks towards Luc and smiles big, "You gonna listen now?"

Luc asks him, "Do I gotta choice?"

Scott reaches deep to pull out his old mixed African/Jamaican accent, "Luc, why change your style now, *mon?*"

Across the isle, Boxter steps up to Piper and thumbs towards the cockpit stations behind him, going, "Hon, Scarab just invited me to ride along with her as the WiSO!"

"Oh, dear, go...go have fun!" Boxter leans in and gives her a sweet little kiss, after which she waves him off, "Toddle off, now!"

With the ship starting to roll forward into the elevator-airlock station, and as they buckle up, Piper looks over at Lilith and Jacqui with a smile, "Alpha Orion goes boom!" She then gives a wicked little snicker, "Wasn't that smashing, ladies?"

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It's still Tuesday 8:35pm here in New York when they land on top of Boxter's hotel. It took Jessica only a half hour to touch down on the landing pad after jumping from Gore Point, and because they are way ahead of schedule, Jessica takes a quick twenty minutes to go down with Boxter and Piper to say hi to the families. When Jessica

steps out, still in her JACC, she is followed by Scott who stands guard with her BR1 in hand, and he is joined by six ghost droids who deploy from their stowage compartment under the nose. The droids surround the ship with one stepping up the ladder into the passenger area.

In the ship Luc, Lilith, Robert and Jacqui are watching various live video feeds from Times Square including one news report showing their ship landing on the Hotel, and on the feed they can see the droids and Scott outside. On the screen next to it is Mihkail Popov, Adolphina Herrero and their BBC cohorts. Shortly after celebrating the London countdown the story broke on Betelgeuse going supernova right when the BBC was about to close out so, instead of signing off, they put on their news anchor hats and remained on the air to cover it together.

The ninety-second time-lapse video from the Orion Astronomy Outpost will have to suffice until they can process the real time video from the science station that got destroyed, and that will take at least a day for them to clean it up for public consumption.

With Jessica showing up at the penthouse with Boxter and Piper, the Hartcourt's didn't even bat an eye at her in her JACC when they exchanged hugs and kisses. At the other end of the reaction spectrum is her family. The world of the Steel Annex always seemed like a fiction to them, they have never even seen Maria or Jacob in one of these things, and Jessica has always come across as a free spirit with no apparent goals in life, but here she is in one of their super high-tech fighting suits like it was old hat.

After running the Hartcourt gauntlet, Jessica finally reaches Ophilia and Agatha, who is shocked by what she is wearing, so Ophilia asks, "*Mi pequeña roja*, what is up with this?"

Jessica deflects the question, "You guys having a great time?"

"*Si!* The Hartcourt's are a welcoming, very traditional family!"

Agatha whispers, "You know that Boxter is Chancellor of—"

Jessica nods and cuts her off, "Yes, I know."

Ophilia asks, "We don't understand what's going on?"

"*Mi abuela y mi tía*, the Hartcourt's are our friends and I know they adore the shit outta you two!" She laughs, "And, you can say that Adolphina now works for Samantha."

Agatha laughs, "*Conejito rápido es ella!*"

Jessica nods, "The thing is, Boxter is my friend, and Maria and he have a...a working relationship!" Ophilia and Agatha roll their eyes and laugh at that, so Jessica asks, "Where's Mac and Léon?"

Ophelia shrugs, "Léon cooks—Mac eats!"

Agatha adds, "In the kitchen with the oldest daughter creating a dish for their pasta *restaurante*."

"Give 'em hugs for me. I really gotta run!" Jessica kisses them both and, "I love you guys!"

Charging back through the Hartcourt gauntlet, Jessica reaches the door and stumbles into Samantha last who goes, "Oh my!"

"Hey, Samael, happy New Year!"

Samantha bumps her hip against Jessica's and snickers like Piper, "Ooooooh, murder tech! It's definitely you!"

"It's in season."

Samantha snorts a laugh as she runs her finger over Jessica's armored shoulder, saying, "Well, *mi roja*, in this here thing you can frog march me anytime!"

Both laughing, they give each other a little cheek-kiss, and as Jessica walks away Samantha calls out, "We must do lunch...soon!"

Now at the top of the hotel, stepping out on the landing pad, Jessica suddenly picks up on Samantha's thoughts and realizes that she wasn't kidding about being frog-marched—and then some, and she is aboveboard ravishing, and they are the exact same age, so Jessica shakes her head and quietly mutters to herself with a self-mocking, "Flap your wings...expand your horizons he says."

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It's 5:56pm when they land on top of One-Klick. Jessica slips out of the cockpit and backs up to a bulkhead on the other side of the ladder. While everyone starts to unbuckle from the 5-point harnesses Jessica pops her helmet and points her arms down at a steep angle to her sides. The suit blossoms open and peals down below her waist.

Luc and Robert are eye-struck by the sight of this gorgeous redhead reaching up and pulling her naked body out of the JACC.

No longer the soft buxom teenager they last saw a handful of years ago, Jessica is now lean with muscles rippling under her skin and this exaggerates her hips, full chest and the hourglass taper around her waist. She is so different now they don't recognize her.

From the neck down she looks more like her mother, Nicole.

Jessica can feel their eyes drinking her in so she sighs big while setting the helmet on top of the open cavity of the JACC, saying, "Get your tongues back in your mouths, grandpas!"

Scott steps around the bulkhead and goes, "Hey, Jessie!"

Respectfully not gawking at her naked body, Scott gives her a sideways palm-slap as he steps down the ladder to the landing pad.

Luc and Robert look harder with Luc asking, "Jessica?"

Jessica shrugs, "Yea, I kinda grew up, didn't I!"

Both are visibly startled, and embarrassed, so looking down while they finish unbuckling, Jacqui and Lilith step around the bulkhead as Jessica slips into a thong and her t-shirt with incredible speed.

Jacqui ventures to guess, "You are Jessica?"

"Purdy much!" Jessica says as her head pops up through the t-shirt, then, "So, I take it you're Jacqui?"

"Last time I looked, yea."

Jessica pulls her BDU pants and shoes from her bag hanging on the bulkhead, "They say you're my great-great grandmother but, if you asked me, you don't look a day over thirty."

Jacqui smiles, "Good genes."

With an approving nod, Jessica leans in to give her a hug, then turning to Lilith, "How ya doin' hot stuff?"

Lilith shrugs, "Doin' okay! Today has been an eye-opener."

"Sorry 'bout that."

"Nope! This was inevitable." Lilith then laughs, "I just didn't expect it to be this much of a smack-down!"

"That smackerooni wasn't just for you."

"From the look on all those faces I kinda picked up on that."

With her pants buckled Jessica leans against the bulkhead to slip on her shoes, "With you in the FIS we'll be seeing a lot of each other, Lilith. If you need anything you just say the word! 'kay?"

"How many staff members will I need, you think?"

"Three, maybe three or four of your people? We'll provide security for all of 'em. I'll also assign you one of the clones we call Fifty-Two. Her name is, Fey, and she'll stick to you like glue."

Lilith huffs, "What, is she gonna spy on us?"

Pulling the straps over her shoes, Jessica stands and looks long and hard at her, then nods, "Ya, to be honest, yea. Until you learn how to do things here she'll hold your hands and guide your steps. Everyone is gonna try to get in close and everyone is going to try to use you so we'll be runnin' interference."

"Until the novelty wears off."

"For people it'll wear thin, but never off." She points down as Luc and Robert step up beside them, "So you know, this is Earth and here it's dangerous as fuck for you and the Xhemal so, tonight, if you and Luc approach a place you can't go you'll bump into a ghost droid. We got 'em all over! We also got Secret Service on point in front and walking perimeter, and a bunch of Delta snipers in the hills."

Luc asks, "All that security just for us?"

"Nope, we have the First Lady, Esma Mofid, Victoria from the UK, Caesar and Shiela. It's the same security you'll be getting when coming to Earth after the big reveal...next month maybe?"

Luc asks, "I'll be talking to the UN, right?"

"Yes, but you'll have no mission there. No need to play that political game with you." She points at Luc, "On that note, we'll have to get our lies in order to make sure we're all on the same page!" Jessica looks over at Robert and cracks a little smile, then twirls her hand at him, "Hey Robert...come on, get in here already."

After they hug, Jessica goes, "Let's get up the hill, guys!"

Outside the ship, on top of One-Klick, they can see the entire basin, far into the Pacific Ocean, and where the sky is extremely dark to the east, the sun in the west has blazing red streaks radiating out as it starts to plummet below the far horizon. Lilith and Luc are stopped in their tracks by this sight—their own double red dwarf stars when setting doesn't hold a candle to the intensity they see here.

Jessica prods them to get in the limousine, saying, "Hop on in, you two! Just wait until you see the sunsets on Sapphire."

Outside of One-Klick, when on the street level uphill would be referentially correct but on top of the building it's actually a shallow descending glide path to Monique's. Instead of setting down at the front of the chateau they land on the pad above the main hall.

Piling out of the limo, they walk around the dome over the entrance towards the gas fire pit where they run into Monique standing there with Diego, Connie, Angela, Brie and Mini-Mon. They're looking south-east towards the Orion constellation that is low on the horizon.

Monique tells the girls, "Ladies, the star, Betelgeuse, will be overhead in about three hours, but it will be another five-hundred years for us to see the supernova from this vantage point."

Upon seeing Monique, Jessica calls out to her, "Hey, Monique, sorry we're early. I did contact McElroy."

Monique turns and hides her surprise, "Yes, but we had no details on your arrival time."

"My bad." Jessica notices Mini-Mon and Connie do a slight double-take when they see Luc and Lilith but follow Monique's lead. Angela, on the other hand, runs and hops into Scott's arms. Jessica looks to Diego who glances at the aliens then almost scowls back at her, so Jessica asks Scott, "Can you make the introductions?"

Scott nods, "Sure, go talk to her."

With Diego following Jessica back around the dome to the pad, Angela kisses her father then, as bold as bold can be, she leans out towards Lilith and, "Hey! What's your name, toots?"

Both Lilith and Luc laugh and delight in her fearlessness.

At the pad, Jessica tries to find the words, and with tears welling up in her eyes, because she feels that she's been lying to her sister all this time, Diego puts her hand up and says, "Don't say shit."

Pained, Jessica whispers, "I'm sorry."

Diego goes, "Look, it's stupidly obvious you work for mother. You flyin' all their shit and sneakin' around to talk about shit got old but it wasn't for me to know so I didn't ask. We'll talk later but if you tell me anything—you tell me everything or don't say shit!"

Just then, Seth speaks up beside Diego, "I think it's time."

Startled, Diego jumps, "God damn it! Why do you do that!"

Jessica huffs a laugh as she asks him, "Everything?"

Seth looks up at Diego and, "Yes, spill your guts about you."

Diego looks at Seth and asks, "What about you?"

Jessica points out to Diego, "What I can say about our brother is that I don't talk about him. Maria does not talk about him."

Seth says, "Nobody talks about him because...there is nothing to talk about?" He kisses Diego, "Sorry to disappoint you, Sian."

Diego nods, fully aware that she is not to press further, sees Monique, Angela, Connie, Brie and Mini-Mon heading for the stairs, so she steps off to follow them saying, "Okay then, hurry down!"

With them gone, Jessica turns to Seth, "Ready for this?"

Seth points up in the air saying, "Give me a sec."

Thinking, Seth looks out at nothing in particular, blinks and nods so Jessica finally throws out, "Whaddya doin'?"

"I find it tragic that we can queue up a file set, an entire body of work, a life's work and simply wake up remembering it all."

"What's so bad about that?"

"Okay, for text, reading, fine, but last year I pathed a man's work, a radio personality named Harvey, and what gives me a frowny face is realizing that I did not get to enjoy the media in the medium."

Jessica asks, "The point is?"

"Well, he came to mind just now because, finally I am in close proximity to Luc and...now I know the rest of the story."

"Come again?"

"The missing piece of the puzzle. Let's go chat them up!"

Jessica says, "You're sounding more like Boxter every day."

As they start for the fire pit, Seth asks, "Is that bad?"

"From him it's cool, but from you it's kinda creepy."

"Sorry 'bout that, big sis."

They walk around the dome and Jessica steps up to the fire pit and looks at Luc, "You know the conditions. Ask *no* questions."

Jessica steps aside so that Seth can enter into the glow of the fire pit. He slips in and sits in a non-threatening sideways position to Luc and Lilith. He may be a ten-year-old boy but his beauty makes him seem rather underwhelming, that is until he opens his mouth.

Seth first looks to Robert and Jacqui sitting across from him, "Hello grandmother and grandfather. I'm very pleased to finally meet you. I had a thousand questions but now that you are here...I already have my answers so there is no need to even ask now! You've had very colorful-fascinating lives but we are here for Luc and his people. So, we'll get to the huggies and talkies when we take you down to meet the family." Seth turns to the two aliens, "Hello, Lilith...Luc."

Luc quietly says, "Hello, Seth."

"Ever hear of a...sunk cost fallacy, no? This conversation may illuminate that, conceptually. The Nefer Key have, for one million and eight-hundred thousand years, worked incrementally yet diligently to create...well, me! You couldn't achieve it with your own species so you dabbled with it in ours. Problem is, Jessica and I were unforeseen accidents. See, your genome had all the right elements of telepathy and acute premonition, but your eugenic practices preceding this effort had so homogenized your bloodlines to the point where you eradicated actual uniqueness and a key element. That being aggression."

Luc points out, "Our males have aggressive traits."

"Very much so, but when that trait flips back into the female population they are prohibited from breeding. Isn't that right, Lilith?"

Lilith nods and gives a bitter, "Yes."

"Truth be told, with aggression comes things like curiosity and progress which is something your species has failed to embrace. You'd create and sit on something where we humans think of it as a spring board towards the next big thing. Case in point, quantum particle generators. You are still on what we call gen-one where we humans are on gen-four and are bypassing gen-five for gen-six! What is the size of a three-story building for you is now the size of a beach ball for us. From the demo tonight you were forced to come to grips with the fact that...our progress can be shocking." Seth sneers ever so slightly, "Do you know the one thing that hurt your people most when you became a technological society, what, two million years ago?"

Luc shrugs, making sure his response is not in the form of a question, "At this point I couldn't begin to venture a guess."

"Oh no, *you do know.*" Seth leans in and, "Here is a spoonful of sugar before I give you the bitter pill. Your species is at the precipice. You are at the threshold of a golden age, but to grasp and hold onto that future you have to do so blindly...in the dark."

"That is not what we worked for."

"It is what you get."

"I am curious as to what the thing was that hurt us."

"C-Section." Everybody there recoils slightly, not expecting that, so Seth elaborates, "Motherhood was a death sentence before learning of the Caesarean procedure. Before technology males and females worked together equally, harmoniously and, like us humans, sexual contact is a form of entertainment however, females controlled pregnancy by manipulating caloric intake. If they ate at normal levels, fertilized eggs would not mount the uterine wall. On the other hand, if they were to more than double nutrient intake, and fucked their brains out, and continued to eat big to term, when the day of emergence came the little ones would claw their way out through the abdominal walls. As this event approached the other females of the tribe would begin to lactate, and it was up to them to nurse the litter of anywhere from five to nine as the mother herself...slowly dies from the trauma and blood loss. Lingered days or maybe a week even?"

Jessica wonders aloud, "The six to one ratio."

"Yes, my sister, and the direct result of saving the life of the mother is the formation of a matriarchal caste that rules the Nefer Key tyrannically through the guise of kindness and conformity. Why our Lilith here will never bear children in their society is because she is an outlier. She is independent and a free thinker so...she becomes a dead end in their eyes. You see, because of your exceedingly long lives to start with, increased fivefold with the technology you possess,

the Nefer Key now has an expressed fifty-eight to one female to male ratio, but that number is solely based upon dedicated breeding stock." Seth glances at Lilith, "This does not include the uncounted and marginalized three-hundred and twenty-one outlier females to each male who, just like Lilith, lose all access to males—not to mention the exclusion from high social standing awarded for child bearing."

Luc quietly says, "We were sitting on a powder keg."

"Yes, female intimacy as a stopgap is common for all castes but for the outliers it fell far short. For Prima to bring in human males to pacify them faced little opposition. You see, Prima was the missing puzzle piece." Seth nods towards Luc, "She took the most aggressive male of her progeny, twelve generations down, and coached *you* into becoming a non-threatening emo soy-boy par excellence. With her life coming to an end, when she chose you to inherit her office nobody from the tippy-top risk-aversion caste batted an eye. None of them wanted the job and to them you were utterly controllable...oopsie!" Seth sits back and, "You are here at the helm by her design. See, she had the sight, not with the clarity I possess, but she had it so it begs to be asked, why-oh-why didn't she share?"

"I believe you'll be telling me that right now."

Seth nods, yes, "I call it the *prescience falsification paradox*. It doesn't roll off the tongue like the...*oh fuck, don't ask shit paradox*, but it'll have to do!" With them chuckling, Seth shrugs, "I hate some lexicon, like in business, *strategic* is back in vogue, and in the sciences the word *singularity* has been folded and spindled and cocked-up out of proper context, and far enough to lose all substantive meaning but, here, the only elucidation available to me that works is *paradox*."

Lilith smiles, "You are a funny little guy!"

Luc counters with, "I'd say he's a funny little asshole."

Seth shrugs, "Considering what I'm about to say, I'd have to side with Luc here." Seth leans in again with a small card in his hand, "By your nature your species has developed an almost pathological risk avoidance. What you are faced with is a paradox of such an insidious nature that if one were to inform you of a perceived outcome—it would immediately falsify said outcome, and it only gets worse for each iteration! Follow-on alternate outcomes never improve on themselves, and you cannot dig yourself out of this hole once it starts. It's so bad that to even ask a specific enough question—that act in itself will negate the currently known outcome before it is revealed."

Without even thinking, Luc blurts out, "Why!"

Where everyone catches their breath, Seth raises the card and turns it over for them to see—in hand written text, *Why?*

"The answer to your *question* is that back then, Prima could see us sitting here now." Seth hands Luc the card, "The choices made today were forced on you, but how are you going to fare on your own? How about a story!" He looks towards the fire, "My sister and I waited years to see our mother die. We knew the exact moment and we saw it so many times looking for a way around it but...there wasn't one." He turns to look at Luc, "We could have stopped it, easy, but how does one reconcile the fact that, as a child, I manipulated events to make damned sure that our mother was delivered to that end. She was the one thing in this universe my sister and I loved more than anything else so, it beggars the mind as to...what brought us to that choice?"

Where Luc keeps his mouth shut, Lilith has a sadness in her voice when she says, "That must have been difficult."

"No, Lilith, the choice was elementary. When faced with the prospect that the end of a single life was pivotal to changing the course of the war and saving billions of lives, well, it was all too easy! Excruciatingly easy." Seth peers into Luc, "See, it's all about choices. The ugly truth is that the Nefer Key is encumbered, handicapped you might say, by a mentally-crippling all consuming...fear."

Luc blinks, looks away in thought, then back to Seth he says, "The feeling I get is that *you want us* to reach that golden age."

Seth hangs on this word, "Desperately."

Luc nods, "We got a lot to work on."

"Lilith." Seth looks over at her and smiles, "You've now come to the end of your quest."

Lilith says with a sad quiver, "I want to see my husband."

Seth nods and says, "While we go down and meet the family, dine and enjoy New Year's, Jessica will take you where you need to go. I already know it will be short and sweet so hurry back! Everyone here will be dying to meet you."

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In the Blue Room, the ornate bedroom at the top of the stairs by the main hall, Jessica is reclining on the bed with pillows bunched up around her. She motions for Lilith to curl up to her side.

As Jessica wraps her arms around Lilith, "Where we're going I'm an admin, so just clear your mind and let me pull you in. You'll automatically synch up to the model we made of you."

"We're going to your Stone Garden, right?"

"Yep, from here! That's the idea."

Lilith looks up at Jessica, "What am I going to say to him?"

Jessica gives her that look, "I'm not the one to ask, but I'm sure the right words will come to you. Now relax." As Jessica settles in she sniffs the air, "You smell like...cinnamon and cookie dough!"

Lilith gives a stressed little snort, "Sorry, I need to bathe."

"No, you're fine, honey! You smell good...you do."

She gives a sad smile, "Jay said that a lot."

After a long minute Jessica says, "You can open your eyes."

Lilith opens them and, instead of the cobalt blue draperies of the bedroom, she is on the moonlit beach near Bob and Michal's glass chalet. Jessica puts up a finger and the sound of the breaking waters start to build up with her asking, "Can you hear me?"

Lilith nods, "Yes. Are we close?"

Jessica points to the chalet, "That's my grandfather's home. On the other side is Field Marshal Kay's home."

"Where that noise is coming from?"

"It's New Year's!" Jessica shrugs, "I can't seem to get into the swing of things, but that's me. Here they have parties that count down with New Sydney, London and New York, and Field Marshal Kay celebrates them all." She puts a hand out to Lilith, "Ready?"

"I've been waiting too long...for this." With a deep breath, Lilith takes Jessica's hand, "Thank you for being here for me."

Walking past Bob and Michal's chalet they approach the party. With a bon fire, BBQ pit, horseshoes, volleyball, open bar, and the sand peppered with ice chests and Tiki torches everywhere, this is a perfect beach party setting for the two hundred attending. Outside the house they have monitors receiving the broadcasts from Times Square, with the largest one showing the Cover Girls performing live.

Everyone here has a data-tag that anyone can pull up on a whim, and everyone knows Jessica here as an admin, but when they see the beautiful gray-skinned Lilith, her huge-black eyes twinkling by the light of the Tiki torches, the people talking, partying and playing are stopped in their tracks—in awe by the sight of her.

They didn't have to go far. In the light of the distant bon fire Lilith sees the familiar silhouette of her husband, Jason. She looks at Jessica and lets go of her hand so she can close the distance on her own, and Jason is clueless that Lilith is approaching him from behind.

Now just yards away, seven decades of pent up emotions and loss percolate to the surface, compelling Lilith to simply say, "asshole!"

Bob and Michal were talking to Jason, and when they hear Lilith they stop and stare at her, but Jason is still oblivious so she starts shaking and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, Lilith shouts over the din of the party, "Asshole!"

Jason turns and is shocked by the sight of her, "Lilith?"

Unable to breathe, her face now contorts wildly as she finds in her the spare breath to shriek, "ASSHOLE!"

Jason hurries to her where she pounds on his chest while wailing and screeching through the tortured cries, "Why...why...WHY!"

Lilith crumples into his arms, and with seventy-years of loss, emptiness, abandonment and agony pouring out with each tormented sob, this hits everyone who is witness to it like a sack of bricks.

Standing beside Jessica, Seth taps his chest while saying, "You know, for closure, this kinda gets ya right there doesn't it?"

Startled, Jessica looks at him and, "What are you doing here!"

"Multitasking? Angela has got everybody there laughing their butts off, so I thought I'd come sneak a peek with you!"

Jessica, wiping away her own tears with her hands, asks him pointedly, "How did you get in here?"

Seth looks up at her, "I'm me, or did you forget?"

"Asshole!"

"That appears to the theme here this eve." And now that Lilith has been relegated to simply crying her guts out, Seth observes, "You know, there's a certain elegance, a raw beauty we can distill from the sentient expression caused by tragedy and despair."

Jessica rolls her eyes, "You *are* an asshole."

"Well, Jess, by default I've become a connoisseur to tragedy. An appreciation not by choice so...I wouldn't hold it against me."

"Okay, I'm being the asshole." Jessica nods, and after a few seconds she looks at Seth who is looking at her, up and down, so she asks, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Can't decide if it'll be dusty rose or charcoal pinstripe, but that depends on if you want to be the maid of honor or the best man?" He points at her, "That is, *the best guy* if you opt for that job!"

"For who?" Seth gestures to Lilith, so she asks, "Too who?"

Seth closes his eyes and projects into Jessica's mind an image of Lilith at the alter in a wedding dress—with Syleste officiating and an Adonis as the groom, so Jessica goes, "Oh, my God...gorgeous!"

Seth nods saying, "And a stunning bride she'll be."

Snapping out of it Jessica goes, "Yes, but I meant the groom!"

"Thank you! That's after my up-n-comin' Quasimodo stage."

"Eeeeeww!" Jessica turns to Seth, with a look of surprised horror, so she comically starts to brush her hands off on her t-shirt while going, "No-no-no-no, bad thoughts! That's not right!"

Seth cracks up, laughing, "I guess impure thoughts of your little brother doesn't set well with you!" He then sighs big and points out, "But did you not think Diego made for a fantastic maid of honor?"

"That was her!" Thinking about it she says, "Yes, she did."

"That's good, because she'll be your maid of honor too!"

"No, don't tell me who! I do NOT want to know."

"It's just as well 'cause *the who* would fuck with your head, but what you do want to know is...is it gonna be worth it or not."

Jessica wonders and asks, "Will it be the right thing for me?"

"This I can answer and the answer is yes. Obviously, we both will be building alliances by getting married but, just so you know, we both will marry who we marry out of love. Surprised?"

Jessica nods, yes, "That's good to know."

"You know what just came to mind?" Seth huffs a little laugh, "Whatever would I do with myself if I were actually...happy?"

She nudges him, "You'll figure it out."

"Of course." Then with a little spark of excitement, Seth says, "I see you gave Lilith, Fey to work with? How unexpected!"

Concerned, Jessica looks at him, "What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just that she's packing, and in the Nefer Key spirit of collectivist sharing her stuff...will be passing her around."

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