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you gotta be shitting me

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-3-FRIDAY
TIME: 04:01zulu (local 14:18mst)

In Maria's new north-east corner office, near the top of the Spike, Jacob and Vossler have joined the meeting Maria was wrapping up with Scott, Bill and Glados, "Good, you guys are here!"

Vossler asks, "What's up?"

Maria shrugs, "I have to give Luc über-props for being a real quick study. Since the DPKO op for Fifty-Two has terminated—"

Jacob snorts, "Yea, I hear the under-secretary was livid!"

"Ya think?" Maria chuckles, "Well, he suggested we bypass talking to the UN altogether! Cut them out and invite who we want from Earth to his FIS speech here—then do a diplomatic tour of those countries there, and I have to say he's making a great point."

Bill huffs, "That'll get a rise outta 'em."

Scott nods, "Exactly!"

Jacob asks, "Media tour?"

Glados says, "I don't know about that yet."

Maria adds, "Glad and I were talking about it. We may want to put that off until shit settles down. The Xhemal were primitive but the Nefer Key are not, so people will need time to acclimate."

Vossler nods big, "That sounds like a good idea."

Maria throws out, "We got Jessica and du Conde working with Luc on sweeping the last two centuries under the carpet, and figurin' out how to spin the *probatus* gospel truth to the public."

Bill says, "Yup, best git our lies in order!"

"Also, in case you all haven't heard, du Conde has tendered his resignation, well, more of a fuck you to the UN and walked. I hear the French president is rippin' pissed, but who gives a shit what he thinks? Anyway, Tristin is comin' to the FIS to work as the hand-holdy liaison between the FIS and the Nefer Key—whose job is to actually smooth the hackles of the Nefer Key back home for Luc."

With all of them looking at each other, wondering what to say, Maria asks with wide eyes, "Can any of you think of a better nob for the job?" With them shaking their heads, *no*, Maria nods and smiles, "Good, 'cause we're runnin' with it! Okay, before you go, Vince Stiller has gone full retreat and Green is now heading Paper Cuts and, before you freak, it's all delegation so he keeps the little league team."

With sighs of relief all around, Bill says, "That's good to hear!"

Maria adds, "Stiller is on permanent leave for us in the civilian market and is representing the five houses. He'll file the action this morning and the first hurdles will be an attempt to quash followed by motions for change of venue. You know, all the standard bullshit."

Vossler asks, "What's up his sleeve?"

"He'll settle for New Sydney as the neutral venue but approve of their judge *only* if it's all under the standardized uniform rules of civil procedure—which, except for a few tweaks, are the same as their rules! Discovery will start in February, and our document production is already packaged for them with a nice little bow on top. That in itself will be like a curb-stomp to the teeth so...who knows what will happen after they get that? Okay, *vámonos!*" She points to Scott and Bill, "You two, I'll see you at U-Turn! Glados, you got the Key!"

With those three stepping out, Maria says, "You two, park it!" They sit and she asks Vossler, "Training, what are our options?"

Vossler shrugs, "Our options are shit until the war is over. There is a nice little cryo-nightmare of an ice cube out past Second Hand, but it slips out of the neutral partition in twenty-four months so there's no point in setting up shop there yet. We won't be able to hide it and they'll just bomb it out of spite. Post war it would be fantastic to bounce them between there and Led Myach."

"What ideas you got until then?"

"How 'bout New Darwin?" In confusion, Maria and Jacob look at each other, so Vossler elaborates, "Look we train our peeps just like theirs for the first six months so I say set up shop by New Darwin for the now! We'll drill and run patrols around there and go blow up shit on Black Stump when it's our days."

Maria looks at Jacob, puts a finger up, then turns her chair a

quarter way around to look out over the sunny mid-day sky to the north. After a few quick seconds of thought she asks the sabre-tooth tiger skull sitting on the credenza, "Whaddya think, Smiley?"

Jacob laughs, "Whaaa?"

Maria looks at Jacob and shrugs big, "My sounding board!" She nods towards Vossler, "Okay, you run with that, and work with Hershey on the config since it's his gig, but you lose the office."

"Hu?" He waves it off, "You can have it!"

"No, dude, I like this one way better, but the whole point of you being here as a chief done fizzled and went out the window when they didn't take the Church Key! We'll find new digs for you when we get back 'cause today you'll be going with us to U-Turn for a little consult. We need ya to help figure out how to unfuck their sitch since losing DM Jones who was in command of their recon company."

Obviously pissed, Vossler asks, "Why me?"

"You know Taiji better than anybody! We'll figure everything else out when we get back. Who knows, maybe you'll move in next door? An' as neighbors we can swap cat pics and recipes!"

Vossler laughs, "Oh, I sure as fuck hope not!"

Laughing, Maria points to the door, "Bill and Scott already know you'll be riding with 'em. See you at U-Turn, babe!"

Vossler stands and, "Maybe I just wanna go back to being an everyday retread like before? What about that?"

"Anything is possible, but you're keepin' Ground Round for the time being." Maria waves bye to him, "Toodles!"

With Vossler stepping out, Jacob asks, "Does he suspect?"

Maria shrugs, "You'd think it would be obvious?"

"Not with you, and you know that."

"Good, it'll surprise the fuck outta 'im." Squirming in her chair she puts a hand out, "So, Pete wanted me to tell you he resigned his commission. He walks as a full-bird with twenty-five years."

"He was talking about that."

"Well, it's a done deal now and he agreed to come work for me in the CXi. He'll be taking a leadership role on the ground floor."

"And you were gonna tell me when?"

"First opportunity like...now?"

"Oh, okay!"

"Shit, I just found out yesterday! We've been busy, dude." Maria squirms a little more as she asks, "Is there anything you can think of we missed before we head out to U-Turn?"

Jacob shrugs, "I dunno? We just gotta wait and see how it all unfolds—and, thanks for giving SEAD back to me at the last minute!"

"Your people have the most experience at it."

"The SEAD cherry on top of CAP and CAS!"

"The air over that AO is your baby, and it was the original plan! Did they say it when you threw SEAD back in their laps?"

Jacob laughs and, "Yup...you gotta be shitting me!"

Maria looks up and shakes her head in praise, "Ya just haf'ta love the people who do that job! The balls they swing." She looks down at Jacob and nods, "I'll be praying for 'em."

"Thanks for the positive vibes, babe!" And then with a serious face he adds, "I put the platform SEAD assets back on standby reserve and thank you for finally seeing it my way. This is a better config but, remember, *all* of my people's asses are on the line here."

"Had to crunch the METT-AI again, Mission Ops in command of that AO always gave best results with the fewest casualties."

"You put too much stock in that fucking, Delphi system."

Maria stares at him and, "It's been nuts-on at every step."

Jacob nods, "I say fuck that Alter of Chains shit! I believe in good old fashioned spreading the love around *then* rolling the dice."

"Hum, normally I would agree, but..." Maria slaps her hands on the desk and stands, "I got another pressing issue here to resolve."

Jacob just stares at Maria as she stands with nothing on from the waist down, and as she flips her t-shirt up over her head he quietly mutters to himself in a poker-faced, "You gotta be shitting me."

Eighty is the new thirty they say, and as the now sixty-six year old Maria, sultry and shockingly hard-bodied, steps from around the desk she is brushing her fingers back through her hair. Jacob full well knows he should make a run for the door, but then...why?

Maria, realizing Jacob is mentally stuck trying to weigh his options, huffs a laugh while saying, "You know, for shit I don't have to pay for I hate playing the budgetary bullshit for the CXi."

Jacob asks, "The CivX interceptor?"

"Yea, I gotta make a fuckin' decision..." Maria then raises her foot up to Jacob's chest and shoves him back hard!

Judo is an interesting skill set—once you learn something like, how to fall, it does not ever leave you! With his chair pitching back he tucks his chin in and rolls out of the chair when the back hits the floor, and he is instantly up on his feet as if he were a springbok.

Jacob may be sixty-eight, but it's the white of his beard and non-metro straight-guy chest hair that gives away his age when his own t-shirt goes flying off like hers, "Ain't you feisty!"

Maria slowly steps up to him while he unbuckles his BDU pants, "I can't give 'em the forty-seven or the seventy-four, and the three-eighty is a CAS platform and not mission suitable." She reaches in the BDUs and seizes him by hand. Pressing her body up against his, and brushing her lips against his chest, "God-damned technicalities."

Jacob maintains his stoic façade as he points out to her that, "The A-model three-eighty doesn't have the chin-gun an' the PADF use it as an interceptor and, honestly, it does the job like a champ!"

Maria looks up and, with her lips just out of reach of his, she hovers there saying, "That cock...pit makes the three-eighty twice the price of the three-oh-eight and the endowments...won't cover it."

He takes her free arm, wrenches it behind her back and lifts her up slightly—allowing their lips to almost touch while he toys with her, "The three-eighty fuselage is half the cost of the three-oh-eight. So, how 'bout you use the old three-oh-eight cockpit?"

Wide-eyed, Maria laughs in his face, "Yea, way ahead of ya!"

Jacob spins her around and shoves her against the desk and, bending her over, he maneuvers his way in, "Paleo again?"

"You bet! He's got the time to think of this...shit!"

Driving himself ever so agonizingly slow into her, Jacob is holding most of himself back as he throws out a little laugh, "I have to admire the little fucker! He comes up with some great ideas!"

Having difficulty keeping a clear head, Maria says, "We're calling it the X-model. Since the fuselage...of the Cerberus is...half the cost of the Bulldog's, with this...cockpit...oh, fuck!" Frustrated, she then barks back at him, "Stop playing with your kill!"

Jacob drives it fully home and Maria goes into convulsions while trying to say, "It's now...point...six the cost of...the G-model!" Catching her breath she bucks him off, spins around on the desk and, face to face, she pulls him in saying, "Yea, this mod is very doable!"

Now working it torturously slow and shallow, driving her nuts, he looks deep into her eyes and says, "You just say the word, and—"

"Nooo!" Maria protests, and hisses, "Don't ruin the moment."

He snarls back at her, "I thought you wanted—"

"Don't think!" Then smiles, "Consider this a sympathy fuck!"

Jacob snorts a little laugh, "Full dance card, remember?"

"FOR ME!" Maria shouts, and now panting she says, "All I get is coochie anymore and, yea, it's mostly blue blood but I needed this! When talkin' shop, like now, you just may hav'ta put out?"

Pinning her down, Jacob starts to pull back slowly, "Oookay!"

Maria moans and, with her feet peddling in the air, she wraps her arms around his neck and begs, "Hey, fucktard, have a heart!"

With their foreheads touching, Jacob gives her a wicked little smile, then lets her have it after saying, "You asked for it."

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At U-Turn, in orbit around Gore Point, the Carrie Nation is oriented so that from the transparent stadium floor one can see the eighteen new Mbande class Battle Platforms they've built and have been sitting on—waiting for this day. With only two flight decks the Mbande class platform is forty percent smaller than the Trung class, which are massive with four full flight decks like the Iron Maiden.

Maria emerges from the mid-point egress portal and steps onto the ramp leading to the stadium floor. On the floor are the Field Marshals and Deputy Field Marshals for all twenty-one battle platforms. Also here is Jacob and Peña, Nancy Yoon, the station SYLNb, Carrie, along with Bill, Scott, Cricket, Green, Jessica and Kevin Vossler.

She looks up and she sees the massive tacnet holo-display filling the air above the stadium floor. In this you can see the new Mbande ships with all the old surviving platforms as well as the station they are standing in, the Carrie Nation. Not shown above them is the Iron Maiden, in orbit around Sapphire, and the Phoenix-Marauder and Pandemonium who are both out near Second Hand.

Maria stops at the end of the ramp. Since she last walked it the lip of the ramp was removed and this new termination has side steps and handrails installed. Maria turns and goes down the three steps and, with her thighs cramping, she rubs the top of one with a few strokes from the ball of her hand. She looks up at Jessica who is shaking her head with a little smirk on her face, but standing next to her is her father. Jacob is innocently looking up at the display while giving a quiet little whistle—whereby Jessica subtly elbows him in the arm. Maria just rolls her eyes away from them and steps out onto the floor then looks up to study the holograph.

Maria raises her arms wide and, connecting to the invisible virtual controls, pulls her arms together, which shrinks what is in view, and this pulls in a slice of the brown dwarf, Gore Point, the carousel assembly station and the six new Trung platforms they already built for themselves into the display. She rotates the image up and over, then around, and then resets it back where it was.

Five meters in front of her, and still sitting undisturbed in the middle of the transparent stadium floor, Maria notices a masonry brick, the fired red clay brick she threw out there a couple of days ago. Nobody has touched it, then again—nobody dares touch it.

Maria steps over to the brick and picks it up. She tosses it in the air, catches it, then lobbs it back and forth between her hands a few times. Staring at it, she huffs big and looks up at her people who are standing around, watching and waiting for her to say something...

"We've already beaten the plans for today to death, so I can't think of anything we missed, anybody?" Maria looks around and all she gets are them shaking their heads, *no*. "Okay then, twelve-noon, fifteen-thirty and twenty-forty-six are still good to go, right people?" With everyone now nodding, yes, she does too with some satisfaction and, "We know Taiji is expecting us so let's not disappoint them! We know Polaris is not expecting us so let us make the most of it."

Maria looks up at the display saying, "There is nothing else to say at this point except that there is a lot of wiggle room in the plan, so when the bullets start to fly—work the problem!" She looks down at them and almost shouts, "Adapt the best you can and, if in doubt, motherfucken ask for motherfucken help, okay? That's what reserves are for!" She then points to Bill and Scott, "That's why these two are where they're at, and that is to fix yur shit for ya!"

Sandoval couldn't resist, "Yaaays, mum!"

With everyone chuckling at that, Maria smiles and tosses the brick to Sandoval who then tosses it back to her. Maria catches it and holds it up, "Ya'll watch this yet?"

With everybody nodding yes, cheering and applauding, one Field Marshal says, "It changes everything."

Maria nods towards him and, "That it does, Robbins, and now we have to make good on it. Today...is baby step number two." She looks up at the display one more time then back to them, "We had an hour set aside for this but, since we really don't have anything to go over, we should break it up early how 'bout?"

There is a table on the other side of the ramp, so Maria walks over to it and takes one of the shot glasses of whiskey that Nancy and Scott poured for all of them. She picks up the closest one and, with

her stepping away, everybody else comes over to each take a glass.

With them all maneuvering into a crescent around Maria, she takes a moment to look at the faces of each one, where she then turns back to Vossler to ask, "We have one thing in the queue for after this so, Voss, what would you have done differently on Taiji?"

"The way I see it?" Vossler asks, and with Maria nodding, yes, Vossler says, "I'd 'ave worked the terrain differently? Jones ran recon by the book but that's what got 'im dead. Nobody knows how to work the land and weather there unless you are from there."

"Okay! How 'bout you go show us how's it's done."

Vossler rears back, "Hu?"

"Angel's share." Scott says as he takes the shot glass from Vossler and pours it onto the deck, then, "There is a new waldo sitting up in the C-deck armory for you. You and a squad of droids will HALO into the AO from about thirty or so klicks up. They need you to bring twelve M2's and as many bandoliers of eighty-eights that you guys can carry without goin' splat! Gudici will see your ass to the company." He pats him on the shoulder saying, "Have fun...lucky bastard!"

As Scott steps away with the empty shot glass, Vossler's jaw goes up and down not knowing what to say, so Maria goes, "Chief, it's your company until you're dead or the fight is over with. You good with that? We hope you're good with that!"

"Yea..." Vossler nods big, "Yea, I'm good!"

Bill adds from the sidelines, "They be waitin' for ya!"

Maria points to the ramp, "Will you get outta here, already!"

Now, Vossler may be in his late-eighties but he vaults over the rail and high-tails it up the ramp as if he were a kid, so Maria shouts, "And stay alive, ya stupid fuck!"

Everyone starts laughing as Vossler spins to double-flip her off while vanishing into the portal. With that, Maria shakes her head with a smile as Cyzk says, "Christmas came late for ol' Kev."

"Ya gotta love that son-of-a-bitch." Maria sighs big, and as everyone nods in agreement, she thinks for a second then laughs at herself, saying, "You know, when I first thought this thing up, what, thirty years ago now? I always pictured myself buttoned up in a CIC, or in the C-Three, or in some bunker somewhere in the thick of it all, but for the life of me I never envisioned myself going...shopping?" She chuckles, "I'm a diversion. Doing my part is taking my girls out fricken-fucking shopping of all things!" Maria shrugs then holds her shot glass up and says, "Nancy."

Maria, Scott and Bill may own this mission, but Nancy Yoon is the commander of the Carrie Nation, so it is up to her to give the toast to send them off. Nancy takes a step out and raises her glass, but she pauses for a second then lowers the glass to think about it. With a nod she then raises her glass to say, "People, here's to the first baby step, Jackson, Burke and Chang...never forget."

That toast was unexpected, and it hit them all hard, so like a Greek chorus the whole of them repeat '*never forget*' before they knock back their shots of rye.

Each one of them now step up to the table to stack their shot glasses upside down, in turn, one on top of another, and while they do this, Bill calls out, "Tee time is in five hours and fifty minutes."

Scott laughs, "Shit flies at zulu-noon, people!"

With everyone now making their way out, shaking hands and giving well wishes to each other as they do, Maria gets Sandoval and Cyzk's attention and pulls them aside with Cricket and Green.

As Jessica, Jacob and Peña step away to powwow with Scott and Bill, Sandoval says to Maria, "I understand the priority."

Maria cringes, "I'm sorry Beth, but we need you elsewhere."

"Couldn't ask for a better mission than this as a last mission!" She then looks at Cricket and asks them both, "Does he know?"

Cricket laughs, "My boy is clueless."

"*Ninguna pista!*" Maria nods, "Again, I am sorry, Beth."

Sandoval shakes her head, "Will you shut up about it already! Tell ya what, how bout I get back at you when you least expect it?"

Maria worries, "I don't like the sound of that."

Sandoval leans in to give Maria a bro-hug while laughing and saying to her, "I am hating you!" And as she turns to walk away, "Next week, I'll be hating on you still. Next month...maybe just a tad? After that, fuck'd if I know!" She spins around to throw her hands out, "It's a God damned mystery!"

Cyzk knuckle taps Maria as he follows Sandoval out, so Maria turns to Cricket and Green saying, "FIS is gonna flip when we hit Polaris so, remember, you guys don't know shit."

Cricket smirks, "I have no idea what you're talking about?"

Green throws out, "Plausible deniability is my middle name!"

"Good!" Maria then asks Cricket, "You gonna be okay with Bill being gone a lot? I was expecting you to put up a fuss!"

Green snorts, "You saved his ass."

Maria looks at him and, "Say wha'?"

Cricket just looks at Maria and, "I love the man, all my heart I do love the man! Couldn't ask for a better man! He is the most giving husband and amazingly attentive father you could ever hope for, but the trade-off is that he's the most overprotective mofo you could ever imagine! If Jade cries he thinks she's dyin' from something and if she sneezes or coughs in his pea-brain she's got pneumonia or the plague! There is a limit to this level of meddlesome motherfuckery!"

Maria is trying not to laugh, "Yea, I kinda picked up on that. Get 'im the fuck outta here before you strangle his ass, right?"

Green laughs, "Oh, god, you know she will!"

Cricket looks at her and "Being gone a lot will hopefully break him of it or...I'll break his face! If he spoils our Jade, you know I will kill his ass, and deader than dead!"

"Okie dokie!" Maria laughs, then, "Your wish—my command."

"Good, 'cause talkin' sense ain't makin' no sense!" And with Jacob, Jessica and Scott stepping up to them, Cricket asks Maria, "Where are you all gonna be again?"

Maria cringes saying, "Kansas City? We're goin' to a mall."

Jessica rolls her eyes and corrects her, "The Plaza!"

Maria turns towards Jessica with a flat deadpan expression, then turns back to Cricket and says, "The mall."

Cricket asks Jessica, "Isn't KCMoe's from there?"

Jessica nods, "Yea, we took Eight to The Plaza to visit José, surprised 'em both, and I fell in love with the place."

Maria points out, "Yea, we did a fly by on the way in to the hotel last night and, it's January, right? They still had their Christmas lights on...in January!"

Jessica points out, "You have to admit it was pretty!"

Maria nods, "Okay, I'm not one for that shit, but it was."

Scott asks, "Angela is with?"

"Sharing a room with Monique and Peanuts! I got 'em all at the hotel! Jordan and her girls are in one room, Diego an' Cap is sharin' one with Paula and Brie. Eight and Copper have a single and, come to think of it I'm sharing a room with Jessica Burke! You've heard of her, right? Don't say this aroun' the skank but, if she has two too many—she snores like a god-damned chainsaw!"

Jessica goes, "The fuck!"

"Sweetheart, yea, you do!" Jacob laughs, then he asks her, "Where is Seth gonna be? He's with Carlos and Josav?"

"Yea, du Conde and them are goin' to a KBOS shoot. They get to watch them film a fight sequence with Cloé in it. And since it's a closed set, McElroy is taking Luc and Lilith too!"

Jacob looks at Cricket and Scott, saying, "For the camera they fight like in slo-mo, Tai Chi style, and speed it up in the edit."

Scott goes, "That's gotta be fucking hilarious to watch!"

Jessica nods, "It is."

Maria turns to Jacob, saying, "Hey babe, love to chat but we paid for those nice-cozy beds and my ass needs to be in one of 'em!" She pokes him in the chest, "I'll be goin' to the rendezvous in Jessie's seventy-four. She'll have the one-oh-one and she will bring everyone back to the Church Key on Sunday."

Jacob gives an uncomfortable smile, "Diego read me the riot act. She was demanding that I show up on Thursday." Maria grits her teeth so Jacob points at her, "Act surprised, will ya, please?"

Maria shakes her head, "Sixty-fucking-seven, like uuugh."

"Everyone is gonna be there and Pete will man the barbeque!"

"Since Peter's barbecuing I won't bitch!" Then, thinking about it, Maria says, "About the time you're staging for Polaris I'll be picking through a Cob Salad so, for me, for once, manage the shit and stay the fuck out of the fight for my peace of mind, okay?"

Begrudgingly, Jacob nods, "I'll do my best."

Maria throws her hands out, "Your best is all I can ask for." She then pats him on the shoulder, "Fly friendly, Buzzard Chow."

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