

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
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TIME: 00:18zulu (local 03:36mst)

Along the edge of the cliffs, between the Spike and Orb West, overlooking the mouth to Bludger Bay, is a network of outdoor patios and a micro-amphitheatre that are served by an underground lounge that is frequented by both locals and tourists. The lounge is expanding to accommodate a new bar to serve two brand new restaurants under construction that will flank it, those being *olá* and *Tabula Pasta*.

If you are not at the casinos then this lounge is the only place on the Church Key that serves drinks all day, every day and through the night. It's called Twenty-Four-Seven—even though Sapphire has a 32.4 hour day divvied up into 36 hours of 54 minutes each or, more specifically, 60 minute hours with a 0.9 of a second-second.

Twenty-Four-Seven just seems familiar and cozy.

There are always people here, a constant stream of people from different worlds and different time standards, and for them it can be breakfast, lunch, or midnight or whatever. Most everyone goes by what is referred to as E-Z time, or the Earth/Zulu standard, and they do this because it is easier when traveling. What they don't realize is that they are referencing UT8 and not zulu itself—and these clocks can be off by a half second or more but who's counting?

A pair of fighters, a Thunderbird and a Cerberus, drop from orbit and descend along the eastern approach. They level out coming around the pyramids and Orb South, pull a one-eighty and silently slip over the cliff-side lounge. Slowing to a near hover, they land and shut down by the grassy knoll in front of the Spike.

In their JACCS, Jacob and Peña fly back to the northern most patio, the one permanently reserved for the SA, and set down across from Maria who has been telling Scott and Bill stories while waiting.

"Give me a sec!" Maria says to Jacob, and while he and Peña are taking off their full helmets, with the canopies attached, Maria continues, "Scott, your daughter, the entire day her mouth was pukin' out crazy shit and would not let up!"

Scott cringes, "I'm so sorry."

Maria puts her hand out, "No, don't be, it's not what I meant. We were all busting a gut the whole time because of her!"

Bill wonders, "I can only imagine!"

Maria snorts a laugh and, "Get this, an' this was the best one of the day. Because of the quinceañera the museum staff recognized us so the director came out and asked to give us a tour, and Monique said yes before I could tell her to shove off." Maria thumbs to her right and, "So, there were these marble statues of, like, you know, maybe David or Atlas or whatever, and there was your daughter staring up at one with that look, ya know, that look she gives—"

Scott goes, "That little scrunched up brow she does."

"Yea, that's the one!" Maria throws her hands out, "So, the Director leans in towards her and asks what she thought of the statues and Angela points to 'em and says to her, 'You mean him, Theodore?' The Director asks, 'Theodore?'"

Scott is shaking his head, "I don't know if I want to hear this."

"Oh no, motherfucker, you are gonna hear this!" Maria points over her shoulder, "So, Angela goes, 'Yea, and that's Alvin over there! I mean, with the squeaky chipmunk voices they got, what else would they be called?' So, the Director asks, 'How did you come by these names?' So, Angie, points to them and says, 'Okay, you really wanna know it's the chipmunk junk! They're too small even for me!'"

With everyone cracking up, Scott shakes his head, laughing, "She's just like her mother. Exactly like her mother!"

Bill nods big, "Oh yea, we remember!"

Maria laughs with, "An' later, comin' out the modern art wing she said, and I quote, 'Scream of Nature? Looks like he screamed while wiping his butt with the canvas and went, *Well, looky there!*'" With everyone laughing even more, Maria goes, "The painting was on tour and everyone was ogling over the damned thing but, uh-uh, Angie was right! It was a dumb-ass painting."

Jacob asks, "Was the Director offended by that?"

Maria shakes her head, "No! The Director quietly pulled us aside and told Monique and I that the kid had good taste." With them all nodding in wide-eyed astonishment, Maria asks, "If you and Scott

want to come along, we're all goin' back."

Jacob mockingly points out, "An art gallery...at a mall."

Maria snarls, "It's a museum...by The Plaza."

He smiles and asks, "Hear about Taiji?"

"I just got an earful about Taiji. Shit I did not want to hear."

Peña adds, "Yea, Taiji has become a genuine murder fest."

Bill agrees, "No shit."

Maria laughs, "Right now you got my undivided attention so, waddya got for me, chuckle-fuck?" She sits back and braces for the bad news, "I took myself out of the status loop for a reason today so, here I am! Give it to me both barrels."

Jacob asks, "You want the money shot?"

Bill leans in towards her with a grin, "You know you want it!"

She scowls at Bill, then throws her hands up, "Why not?"

"Okay!" Jacob looks at Peña who shrugs so he turns back to Maria saying, "Thirty...that's it, thirty!"

Maria does a double take, "Shit serious?"

Jacob continues as Green approaches with a bottle of rye and shot glasses, "Yea, it's unexpectedly low. Kati's people did shoot down hundreds but only seven of 'em were killed. Homer gave up the sites without a fight so they lost only eighteen by our CAS pilots when some of the sites didn't throw in the towel fast enough. We did shoot the crap outta two Epée. Even blew one in half but it keep goin' like..." Jacob accurately mimics Leon's accent with, "*It ti'z but a scratch!*"

Maria's brow scrunches up, "We lost...what, five?"

"Yea, that about sums it up!"

Maria's eyes blink in surprise, then, "Anyone I know?"

"Ya, Dante."

"Sergio?" Jacob nods yes, so Maria shakes her head and grunts, "God damn it, that sucks! Anyone else?"

Jacob nods, "Yamamoto."

"Hu? Who's that?"

"Usagi."

"Still don't follow."

Jacob points to the dais by the cliffs, "Wabbit."

"Oh, fuck no!" Maria's face is genuinely pained as she shakes her head, "Son of a bitch! That really...fuck!"

"Yea, it sucks." Jacob agrees, then adds, "We were about to tangle with their fighters that got past Kati so, if you were the one that got that cease-fire called up then you were the one that saved a lot of asses. If we would've gotten it on, the KIA would have been a whole lot higher for both sides."

With tears in her eyes, Maria shrugs, "Yea, whatever."

Green has stepped up and as he sets each shot glass down he says, "Alexander, Caesar, Tamerlane, Napoleon, Zhukov...Ramirez."

Maria huffs, "Green, how 'bout you fuck off!"

Green shakes his head while saying, "Uh-uh, Tiger Bitch, no can do! The net is abuzz with every crazy-quilt wearin' mil-fag singin' up your praises, and nobody in the media has a clue how to spin this! You have blind-sided the motherlovin' skittles outta everyone."

Bills adds, "Told ya they were gonna flip their shit."

Maria had a carryon bag next to her chair, so she pulls it up and slams it into Bill, "How 'bout you get the fuck outta here!"

Bill is laughing, "Where? Ya'll haven't told me yet!"

"Anywhere but here would be a good start!" Maria grumbles, and with Green pouring the shots, she says to Bill, "Okay, my orders are for you to go to the Iron Maiden and relieve Sandoval. She is to report to the Carrie Nation and relieve Yoon. Yoon comes here and takes your job! They know you're comin' so...you okay with this?"

Bill is in bug-eyed shock, "Don' be pullin' my leg!"

Maria hands him a crested silver-star, "The Iron Maiden is yours, Field Marshal. Cricket packed your bag here, and we'll figure on gettin' you back to the Key every couple of weeks to see her and Jade. Sound like a plan?" With Bill nodding yes, and Green passing out the shots she adds, "The red-eye for U-Ey is leavin' at two, be on it."

As Bill takes the shot glass, "Hot damn!"

With Jacob taking a shot glass, Maria says to him, "Graves, you are now off the leash." Looking at him she nods repeatedly then, "You know what to do."

Jacob glances at the shot in his hand and quietly says, "Yup."

Green holds up his shot glass and gives the toast, "Here is the first of many toasts to Marshal, Maria Lynn Ramirez." He laughs and then adds, "And as ol' Vossler would say, you didn't fuck this monkey. Oh, hell no! You've done fucked King Kong!"

Laughing, they all knock back their shots except for Jacob and Peña. Jacob reverently holds his out and pours it over the ground.

Maria quietly says, "Angel's share."

Scott asks, "For Dante?"

As Jacob nods yes, Peña reaches out with his shot glass and pours it out while saying, "For Wabbit."

Bill asks, "Weren't you two close?"

Peña shrugs as he leans in and is the first to set his shot glass upside down on the table, "We were regular."

Maria whispers, "I'm sorry."

While standing Peña says to her, "Don't be."

As he steps back she asks, "Want some time off?"

Peña shakes his head, "Naw, that shit comes with the job."

After Bill, Scott and Maria, Green stacks his saying, "No shit."

Jacob has the last glass but he hesitates in closing this ritual, and as he places it on the top, Bill calls out, "Hi-hooooo!"

Green and Scott join in with, "Hi-hooooo!"

Peña also sings along, "Hi-hooooo!"

Jacob gives a little smirk as he lets go of the glass, all the while saying, "Hi-ho...hi-ho...it's off to work we go."

After Peña and Green butcher the whistling part, they all quietly sing along, "Hi-ho...hi-ho, hi-ho, hi-ho—"

Maria cuts them off, "You guys are stupid!"

They all start laughing with Scott saying, "Forget thee not."

Green nods in agreement, "Not while we're still a-breathin'."

Jacob nods towards Bill, "You wanna lift, FM?"

With Jacob, Bill and Peña heading to the fighters, Scott asks Maria if, "You want us to hang out for awhile?"

She shakes her head, "No, why don't you take the red-eye and go spend some time with your daughters."

"Seriously? I got work to—"

Maria cuts him off, "No, ya don't. It's out of our hands now."

Green huffs a laugh, "She just let Ol' Carrion out of his cage."

Scott agrees with a wide-eyed look, "God help us."

Maria looks up at Scott, "When Yoon settles in we need to go over the contingency options if he gets whacked."

"We gonna limit the instances if they manage ta ghost 'im?"

Maria shakes her head, "No, we're not gonna tie his hands." She looks away and, "He asked me not to tie his hands."

"Damn, that's asking a lot."

"Just so you know, the tradeoff for this is Security Services withdrawing the bounties on his, mine and Peña's heads. In fact, all personal bounties have been walked-back by Hartcourt."

Scott nods, "That's good to hear. What about the CDF?"

"Hartcourt has no say there but...they'll soon get the hint." Maria then turns to Green, "With Vossler gone, I was wondering if you can help me with Ground Round?"

Greens shrugs, "Not a problem."

"Tomorrow I wanna go over with you how to expand the FIS foot print on the Church Key. Vossler is good with the plans as is, but I want another set of eyes...your eyes."

"The office buildings?"

"And the apartment complexes, and the food courts, an' retail and we gotta make it all pretty and shit. Also, I will acquiesce to the PADF having policing responsibilities on the Church Key."

"They want to start that this March."

Maria points to herself, "Under our rules."

"They already said that was acceptable."

"In writing."

"It's in the contract."

"I'll sign it after Cricket."

"Cricket will sign only after the Alliance signs."

Maria smiles at Green with approval, then suddenly she goes off, "Oh, yea, fountains! I want to push some stuff out from around the central court and throw in some water treatments just for giggles. We are on a water planet so let's use it how 'bout?"

Scott starts chuckling, "Where'd that come from?"

Green asks, "Ya'll were at The Plaza, right? Kansas City?" Maria nods yes, so he says, "We should give this project to Cricket."

Maria agrees, "Sure, we'll take her with us when we go back."

"I was there when I was a teen, she'll get some killer ideas."

"While pokin' around the webs I saw this one in Arizona that shoots a stream up into the air some thirty-stories at the top of every hour. It's kinda cool."

Scott raises his eyebrows, "I like that idea!"

"It sits in the middle of this small lake, but ours needs to be some kind of...wading pond with different patio levels and, you know, those jets of water kids can play in, an' shit."

Green nods with surprise, "Family friendly! I like that."

"I really want it to be a place people would want to come to. Cricket is on board with making the FIS approachable, and this would definitely be a good start."

Green points out, "We have nine-square clicks to play with. Think we can expand this idea and squeeze in an actual park?"

Maria shrugs then says, "Yea, but if I see one fucking clown doing balloon animals I'll shoot the cock-sucker myself!"

Scott laughs, "Get in the back of the line!"

Maria has pulled Jacob's shot glass from the stack and, as she pours a shot for herself, she says to Green, "I'll see you at eleven after I sleep this bottle off but, before we meet, let the Muckrakers in the GA know that, in no uncertain terms, will the Annex or the CXi switch from an observer mission status. Make it crystal clear that, in spite of us being permanent members on the Security Council, we do not carry a vote nor the power of veto. So, the operative word to convey is?" She then touches her lips in a mocking, "Oh yea, period!"

"I'll remind them of our status." Green smiles, "But when you really think about it we wield the greatest veto of all."

Maria nods, "Yea, we don't have to do shit."

With them gone and a starry sky above, Maria was looking to enjoy the tide coming in, the waves crashing below and spray shooting up but, as it is the lounge and patios surrounding it are jumping. The Church Key Junket flight from Las Vegas landed a half an hour ago and they are still on Mountain Time. To these people it's around 5:30pm and in Nevada that happens to be time for dinner! Unfortunately, the restaurants here are in the middle of their four-hour switch to morning fare and prep for the next day's lunch menu. Here at the lounge they can at least grab something other than cold cuts and pastries.

What Maria finds humorous is that most people are constantly surrounded by and riding around in floaters and gliders but here, with Jacob and Peña flying back over the lounge, fighters will always draw

the people's attention like a moth to flame. It's like everybody has to stop and gawk—reason being is that there is an honest to god pilot flying it that can actually fight with the thing so, when you think about it, the coolness factor is completely off the scale.

The northernmost patio is reserved for the Annex, and it is considered the best patio here with the best views. When the lounge is crowded, like now, people always approach this patio and if there is nobody here the ghost droids will allow them in even though it is roped off. The three droids standing guard around Maria are maintaining a respectful distance because they can tell she wants solitude.

An SA trooper in a JACC looks wickedly-evil on their own, but the skinnier ghost droid looks flat out sinister by comparison. Maria watches as two couples step up to the rope. The droid that is guarding it flashes into view for just a second so that solves that problem! Maria feels a twinge of envy because where normal people can be scared the troopers of the SA have learned to turn fear into aggression and, in this world, emotions not under the thumb means death.

To her the greatest luxury would be to feel normal again.

With all the people there, Maria finds it difficult to enjoy the patio, the tide and the view, so from the tacnet she pulls up the patio's entertainment screen and here she selects her favorite recording.

A lifelike hologram of Usagi Yamamoto materializes on the dais, sitting cross-legged with three metal pan drums, and next to her is Oscar Peña with a pan drum of his own.

He wonders out loud, "What'll we start the set with, Wabbit?"

Usagi smiles at him, "Let's try...how 'bout Sleep Dirt."

Peña starts a rhythm and asks, "Tempo right?"

She nods and after a few bars Usagi jumps in—tapping out a sorrowful melody with her fingers on the cold steel drums.

After slamming a shot, and a minute of them playing, Maria is unable to hold back the tears that are now streaming down her face, nor the fitful sobs that are making her gasp and choke.

Trying to compose herself, Maria looks down at her hands and, with a frown, she wipes them both off on her t-shirt.

Looking down again, Maria recoils inside.

What she sees is not coming off.