

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 04:10zulu (local 17:05mst)

It's late afternoon here on the Church Key, and at the flight line outside the Spike there is a mixed cargo and passenger build of the HWG99, an *a4* configuration, that is not close to being ready to launch. On the deck at the top of the ramp, outside the cockpit, are twelve pallets of cargo destined for the City of London facility that need to stowed, that being secured in the hold, before they can take off.

This is a load-master's job but the crew is not here yet.

There are forty-eight seats at the back of the hold, towards the front of the ship, and passengers are already starting to load up. Forty-five passengers are on the manifest to be dropped off in London with the cargo, but another passenger was added an hour ago and now the ship must detour to Los Angeles to drop them off first.

At the top of the ramp, among the pallets, Maria is on the tacnet and talking to Paleo and Maggie who are on Prypiat, "You two still have that PacMan tagging along with ya, right?"

Maggie says, ["Yea, an' we each got three of those micro recon droids they gave us with the nanoids."]

"Good, okay, Blue Boy was their leader and the female is his daughter, so we suspect that there may be a power play between them when she gets back up north."

Paleo laughs, saying, ["I don't know if you've been keeping up on what's going on here but, last time I looked, these Jabberwocky's happen to be animals?"]

Maria throws out, "I know, I know, intelligence is not always an indicator of sentience, but we have reason to believe that there is a lot more going on here than what we've been told. Why Prypiat covers up the existence of these animals, well, you're gonna find out why!"

["So, we're sluthing, hu?"]

Maria has been going from pallet to pallet to check on their marked weight while laughing, "You got it, scooter!"

Maggie asks, ["Animals, plural? There's more?"]

"Yup! After you dust the Jabbers and put that to bed, come back down and look for two critters. One is an ugly fucker called a bunyip, an' then an even uglier fucker they call the bander."

["As in Bandersnatch, seriously?"]

Paleo says, ["Yea, they got a Lewis Carroll fixation here."]

"No shit!" Maria takes a pallet jack and starts to move pallets around and up against the wall for strap-down, "Piper's granddaughter showed Jessie a pic of a bander she drew so, okay, think of a prehistoric smilodon the size of moose. An' here's the fun part, they've got two eyestalks like sunflowers and a huge mouthful of those smilodon fangs that pivot independently. The incising teeth are on the actual jaw, separate from the fangs, so there is a lot of incentive to keep some distance, but they usually steer clear of people!"

["Why would that be?"]

"Most everyone on the Vista is packin' heat."

Maggie says, ["Mutual incentives, so where do we find 'em?"]

"At night, on the Vista! Let's say wherever the jabbers are *not* you should be able to find the banders. I bet they'll return to that valley by the time you get back." Maria has dropped a pallet up tight against the wall and pulls the jack out to go for another while saying, "Just settle the Jabber situation first. Then the banders."

Maggie then asks, ["The bunyip, isn't that, that hairy croc with a bundle of tentacles sprouting out of its face?"]

Maria slams the pallet jack into another one and, "Yea, look for those if you got the time. They've got spider eyes, eight of 'em, and rows of freakin' mako shark teeth. The eight tentacles around its mouth are a meter long so don't be kissin' the bitch."

Paleo laughs, ["Purdy lil' thangs, hu!"]

"The indigenous animals on that planet are seriously fucked up, so I guess that's why they're popular to shoot. I've heard there's a huge underground market for doin' that."

Paleo points out, ["Hunting and defense shooting are legal."]

Maria adds, "Yea, you're right, but trophy hunting is *verboden*. Wildlife Management in New Brisbane has dropped all tags and fees and declared open season on the herbivores because their numbers

are exploding—and I bet’chya that correlates with a lot with dickheads out there shooting the predators just to get their jollies.”

[“Okay, cool, I see where you’re goin’ with this.”]

“I want a couple of each found and dusted. Also, if you see any groups of people out there that are engaged in, oh, I dunno, hunting maybe? I want you to confirm what they’re bagging.”

Maggie says, [“We’re on it, boss!”]

Maria slams a pallet against the wall of the hold and stops to say, “Keep me apprised if anything really stupid happens out there, otherwise I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Paleo throws out, [“One last thing, Missis Hartcourt had droid cameras deployed all around the bend here. I pulled up her channel and she was livestreaming every one of the cameras in real time.”]

Maria stops and takes a huge-deep breath in an attempt to contain her rage, “You’re not kidding are you.”

[“No ma’am, one kush-edit is spreading like wildfire.”]

Maria takes another deep breath and asks, “Do you feel it?”

Maggie laughs, [“Yea, buddy! Right now, inside, I bet you’re hopping up and down, kicking the shit outta everything and screaming motherfucker at the top of your lungs...that about right, boss?”]

“Yea, Maggie, you know me too well.” Maria hoists the next pallet up and pulls it around, “Let’s chat tomorrow, guys. I’ll send you both a text when I’m free.”

Paleo adds, [“Hey, the upside is, so far, the response by the public is overwhelmingly positive. In that sad-emoji sort of way.”]

Maria almost laughs at that, “How ‘bout you fuck off, hu?”

Laughing, Paleo says, [“Can do, as ordered!”]

With them offline, Maria shoves this pallet and two more against the wall of the hold, and as she pulls the jack around for another she squats behind the pallets, out of sight of the passengers walking by, while the tears flow for Piper. Struggling to regain her composure Maria wipes them away and hops up to finish this. Clearing her mind, Maria focuses on the job and inside ten minutes she has them weight balanced between both sides, and as she starts to strap them down, Deputy Marshal, Jesus Zazueta enters the hold, recognizes Maria, so he stops to ask her, “Hey, marshal, need some help?”

“Naw, I got this.” Maria then stands and, now realizing its Zazueta, she laughs, “Zaz! Jesus, babe, how the hell are ya?”

“Mook is comin’ around so I can’t complain!”

"That's really good to hear." She then gestures towards the passenger seats and asks, "London?"

"*Mi nanna* is a brit."

"No shit! *Mi homie* 'as got a limey in the woodpile!"

"Yea!" Zazueta laughs, "You should see the culture shock on her face when she comes to LA! The Heights ain't her style."

Maria nods with a laugh then says, "God, what I wouldn't give for King Taco about now."

Zazueta shrugs and adds, "Yea, or how 'bout Tommy's?"

Maria pokes him in the chest while snarling, "You know, you're the second person I've told to fuck off in five minutes!" With Zazueta laughing, Maria looks around saying, "Who else we got?"

He points to the back and asks, "Save ya a seat?"

Maria nods, yes, and as he turns and heads in she calls out to him, "Would you mind grabbing me the number-three breakfast burro from the automat and a joe?" He nods, yes, so she adds, "Black!"

Zazueta gives her a thumbs up, so she gets back to putting the anchor straps on the pallets. With the straps on she starts popping the tensioners on each one to tighten around the pallets—and it's here when the crew finally shows up.

With the pilot and crew chief stepping up the ramp, the pilot is bitching way to loudly, "I don't know, chief, some stupid fuck decided to reroute our trash run to London for LA, and all to drop some dumb ass off at the Klick! Now I'm gonna lose my pink line and..." Stepping onto the top of the ramp they see Maria finishing with the anchor straps, so he throws his hands out, "What the fuck is this?"

The chief asks Maria, "Why you dickin' with my load?"

Maria has just set off the last auto-tensioner, so she stands and turns towards them, "Just helpin' out guys!"

With the chief off to check on the pallets, the pilot motions to her, "Whaddya doin', hu? You don't have the stack sheet, so we may end up having to redo the whole god-damned strap-down!"

Maris shrugs, "Didn't mean to make a mess of things."

The pilot then calls out, "How'd princess load master do?"

The crew chief shouts back, "Actually, Zam, it ain't half bad!"

"I used to do this job a really long time ago..." Maria says as she pulls her clip on insignia board, with a die-cut silver star on it, out of her back pocket and adds, "In fact, a long-long time ago."

The pilot's jaw drops when she clips it on, "Oh shit! You're—"

"Two in one! I'm the stupid fuck that rerouted your trash run, *as well* as the dumb ass you're dropping off at the Klick."

As the crew chief steps up, the pilot throws his hands out, "Ma'am, I'm sooo sorry! I didn't mean to—"

"Drop it!" Maria turns to ask the chief, "Is it okay?"

Nodding, *yes*, he goes, "Yea, we can run with it."

Maria throws her hands up, "Then let's run!"

As they turn towards the cockpit, the pilot whips back around to apologize more, "Ma'am, again I am sorry!"

Maria starts laughing, "Fuck off already, okay! Let's get this on the hump, Zam!" And with them hopping into the cockpit, Maria goes, "Oh, and Zamboni! We got'chya a new window over London! NATS will hand ya the pink line in about ninety-six minutes, so let's see if you're as good as they say you are."

Maria slips past the bulkhead and into the passenger cabin where she finds Zazueta in the back, and plops down in the empty seat next to him. He hands her the burrito and coffee, and as they both unwrap their food and take a bite, Maria says, "That's three in ten."

Maria nonchalantly offers Zazueta the bird after he snorts a laugh, saying, "Only three? Damn, you're losin' your edge."

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It is now 5:30zulu Tuesday the 18th, but here in Los Angeles it is still 21:30pst Monday the 17th of February. Or, in the alternative, one could say it's 9:30pm if they happen to be one of those people who still reference the old Ante/Post Meridiem timekeeping devices like most non-space faring civilians continue to do.

Anyway, Maria was impressed that Staff-Sergeant, Zamboni lands the ship with the gear in the squat position, and doesn't allow the gear to compress—leaving a ten centimeter gap between the bottom edge of the ladder and the deck. Point is, when Maria steps off the ladder, at the top of the Klick, the ship starts to rise slowly up into the sky when her own mass was removed from the equation.

One could say it was a remarkable feat of *almost* landing.

Jessica was waiting for her, and as she steps up beside Maria, both watching the ship climb steeply towards the north by northeast for space, Jessica quietly throws out, "Sorry 'bout Piper."

Maria huffs, "I'm not ready to talk about that."

Jessica nods, then asks about Zamboni, "Can we share 'im?"

Maria looks up at her, "I'm gettin' the fastback, right?"

"Yup!" Jessica nods her head towards the ramp beside them, and as they start down, "Sandoval will have the babyback delivered here this Friday, so take the fastback now if you want."

"Sure, don't need to be told twice!" Maria thinks, then adds, "Okay, we can share Zamboni until you find a WISO you can work with. I need a pilot, you need a sidekick. Ya oughta make sure it's someone you wouldn't wanna fuck, so I'd pick a chick."

"You do know I dabble in those."

"But you wouldn't marry one."

Jessica nods, "Point made!"

At the bottom of the ramp they enter the top floor of the Klick, which would usually be a utility floor in most buildings, but when they cross through the elevator bank they step into what everyone calls the staging room—which is actually a glorified game room, bar and lounge. Here is where people from the Annex wait to board ships heading out of Los Angeles, or hang out when they got nothing else better to do, but tonight it's reserved for Maria and friends.

Stepping up to the bar, beside six pool tables and rows of console games beyond those, Maria and Jessica run into the three protest leaders from last November, with Maria shaking each of their hands while saying, "Professors, Wyandotte, Dowds, and Stockmyer! I do wanna thank you three for coming. Now, we have three more joining us that are flying in from DC, they'll be here shortly, but to get new intros out of the way this is my stepdaughter, Jessica Burke."

Jessica, reaching out to shake hands, "Yea, I work for her."

Dowds says *hi* and Wyandotte says *hello* to Jessica, but when Stockmyer takes her hand, "Pleased to meet ya, Scarab!"

Maria smiles at Stockmyer, "My, we've done our homework!" She then slaps her hands together and goes, "So! How 'bout we rack 'em up and down a few pitchers while we wait?" She then points to the floor then at the robot behind the bar, "Now, from here on out we're on a first name basis, cool beans? We got chow comin' in an hour, an' if ya'll want somethin' other than brewskies, our bar-bot here will bring you anything you ask for!"

With Jessica hopping up on a barstool to watch, they split into two teams with Maria and Wyandotte against Dowds and Stockmyer, and after a few minutes of pouring beer and polite small talk, Wyandotte makes the break—and says, "Maria, we've talked amongst

ourselves and, considering what happened last New Year's, we realize that we're not here for you to listen to what we gotta say."

"Sure about that Lloyd?"

Stockmyer adds, "We were all going to bow out but, then, curiosity got the better of us so...spit it out!"

With Dowds stepping up to make a shot, Maria nods, "That's what I like, I like smart people. I like people who can cut through the bull and get right to the point, and that's you'z guys!"

While looking for a shot, Dowds asks, "Anyway to end it?"

Maria looks at him and quietly says, "No, Bill, there isn't."

Wyandotte points out, "We know you didn't start it."

Maria's eyebrows rise, "I dunno 'bout that?"

"They blasted your ships, right?"

Maria turns to Stockmyer, "Whaddya think, John? You boned up for today, being a historian an all...wat'chya got on me?"

Stockmyer puzzles over Maria and realizes there is no beating around the bush, "Considering what went down on the third of January, well...anything anyone thought they knew before the third is now down the shitter. I can only offer speculation at this point."

"Then spit it out, dude! I wanna hear what you're thinkin'!"

Stockmyer's shrugs, "Boning up on your history, I now realize this war was unavoidable." Maria motions for him to keep going, so he throws out, "It's obvious to me now that you set it up, you baited them to attack when you wanted them too, all to control the outcome."

Maria nods yes, then asks, "Aaaand?"

"Aaand..." Stockmyer points at her, "What's got me confused is why you haven't destroyed their means of production yet?"

"Okay, if I simply bomb their shit then, yea, I could bring the hammer down on them, easy! They'd sue for peace but then we'd be back where we are now, twenty or thirty years down the road, and *that* I don't want. Oh, an' all ya'll wouldn't want that either!"

Dowds asks, "I don't get it, why can't you work things out?"

Wyandotte says to him, "Why ask why, Bill?"

Maria points out, "Well, Lloyd, it's not obvious to everyone. I think John, here, can attest to the fact that the vast majority of modern war is supported, engineered even, by financial interests who lurk in the shadows providing for their side's budgetary excesses."

"You're going after *those* guys!" Stockmyer realizes, then says with amusement, "I didn't think I'd ever see it! This is not just a war of attrition you're waging here, but a war of derivatives."

Maria smiles big, "Ding-ding-ding! All right, John!"

Dowds almost takes his shot, "What are you talking about?"

Stockmyer goes, "Each Co-op operation is budgeted for under contract by its own hedge fund. The problem each fund faces is that variance and loss is covered out of pocket if it exceeds budget."

Maria glances at the other professors while thumbing towards Stockmyer, "Professor smarty-pants here hit the nail on the head!" She nods towards the professor with a smile of approval and a voice of praise, "You got it, John, the big picture plan is to red ink their asses into oblivion and *then* bomb their MOP into the stone age."

Wyandotte points out, "You blew the hell out of Polaris."

Stockmyer nods, "An' that's the red ink, Lloyd."

"I heard that was set aside for Orion."

Maria sighs big, "Yep, we stopped 'em from invading Orion, an' that was the real prize in their minds, but this whole time we've managed to stick it to 'em by giving them the Pleiades—just to fuck their budgets up with whoppingly huge variances. The debt will be so overwhelming it will take next to forever to pay it off. And, because of how they finance each mission, or acquisition as they call it, they can't extricate from current gains nor can they defend it all."

Stockmyer rolls his eyes, "Wow."

Maria nods, "Wow is right, dude."

His face scrunches up a bit, "Then, why are we here?"

She leans in, "Ever hear of the CXi?"

They all look at each other, so Wyandotte asks, "That's you?"

Maria grins, "Yea, it's my baby!"

Dowds, having just made a clean shot, claiming stripes, asks, "Why would you be doing this? I mean...you're the SA!"

"I know this will make your head spin, Bill, but peace *is* our profession! Only idiots think you can maintain peace by forging swords into ploughshares. The purpose of the CXi is twofold. The primary focus is exploration for science, and under the banner of academia. Science will determine how we go about that and governments will stay the fuck out of it."

Wyandotte goes, "Seriously, science for the sake of science?"

"Crazy idea, hu?" Maria shrugs, then adds, "The second part is to control human expansion an' that's because, you have to admit, we kinda fucked up our little three-hundred parsec radi bubble of space! Going forward, the Thousand Light Year Limitation Treaty will continue to be enforced and going outside of it will be supervised."

Stockmyer reaffirms, "So, we *are* limiting free rein human expansion to only the one-k limit. Not beyond it, right?"

"Anyone going outside the three-oh-six partition will need to justify being there, and anyone blasting past the three-thirty parsec partition will be run down like dogs." With the professors nodding with approval, Maria adds, "So, I now have three space stations and three Executive Director positions I wanna fill with you three guys."

Dowds says, "We're not in the natural sciences! Why us?"

"Ya really wanna know? I have all these sciences, biology, astronomy, geology, plant-ology, whatever, and none of 'em see eye to eye! I need people on top that don't have their dick in the mix." She then points to Dowds, Wyandotte and Stockmyer, "Here we got Philosophy, Political Science and History. You are all nightmarishly smart, published and, to top it off, all of you are honest and morally upright, financially solvent *and* ya got no weird kinks to speak of."

Wyandotte asks, "Still doesn't explain why?"

"Honestly?" With the three nodding, *yes*, Maria throws out, "You've got big personalities, and brainiacs from *all* the fields respect you, and you can motivate the shit outta people! For three years, you've motivated thousands of couch potatoes to crawl out from their parents basements to protest my ass! Who's can top that?"

With Cricket, Paris and Caesar now stepping through the door into the lounge, Maria gestures to herself then points towards them, "But, if I can't convince you, maybe these guys can?"

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With a tacnet com-alert on standby, Maria steps out into the elevator lobby with a cabeza King Taco in hand. Behind the glass the professors are having a blast laughing it up with the Xhemal, Jessica and Cricket, so Maria launches the com link as she delights in taking a bite from the three-hour old, cold taco.

Paleo comes online, ["Sorry about bothering you, boss. We talked about it, and Maggie and I thought you'd wanna hear this."]

Chomping away on the taco, Maria shrugs big, "I figure you wouldn't be bothering me if it wasn't good enough, so wazzup?"

["We followed the female up to a small encampment about four-hours north of the valley. We're compiling the video for you, and you'll have it for show-n-tell in ten minutes, but the short story is that when she lands several come out to meet her. In that high-pitched squawk they do she goes blah-blah-blah, and they go blah-blah, and then she says something that makes them react as if she just told 'em Blue Boy was killed or somethin'. Best as I could surmise!"]

"Did you get good audio for us? We'll need that."

["Well, yea, but what happens next is that this real big guy, almost the size of Blue Boy, he comes out from these trees and gets in her face. He goes blah-blah, and she goes blah-blah, and he pushes on her. So she gets right back in his face—and while looking up at him her hind leg whips around and fucking guts him on the spot!"]

Maria does a double take, "What? You gotta be kidding!"

["No! His shit, intestines and everything, spills all over the ground and, in disbelief, when he looks down at it, she rips his head off in a single snap of her jaws! I mean, Mag and I started laughing our asses off! You know, like, what else were we going to do?"]

"Like, call me?"

["And, here we are! The others just simply bow their heads to her, so if there was a power play here then I guess that was it!"] Maria shakes her head as Paleo continues, ["Maggie is dusting the last one now, and the PacMan will follow them with an extra micro droid. It looks like they're pullin' stumps for wherever north they're goin'."]

"Okay, thanks for keepin' me apprised! Let's chat tomorrow." With Paleo disconnected, Maria just shakes her head and then starts laughing to herself, saying, "Wow, *that* is fucked up!"

Maria slips back into the party but keeps to herself until the video drops in her tacnet inbox. Thinking to herself, *why the hell not*, she gets everyone's attention, tells them all the Cliffs Notes version of the story, and then plays the video.

This alone cinches the deal Maria was making.

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