

112

locusts of control

LCTN: BETELGEUSE (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271 (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-JANUARY-1-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 00:01zulu

As a lowly east side chola, Maria is here to fuck this monkey...

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. This lil' detour from their sightseeing junket of the Orion Nebula on Air Force One was planned for, but they have no idea what they're about to witness.

The demo is just sixteen minutes away, but this "event" was already initiated some 37:30 hours ago when the Annex launched the firing sequence to their QP-Gun. Those in attendance are not clear on what it is they're here to see, or that it already happened, nor are they aware that they are all about to squeal like a scalded-ass ape.

The people are running around offering toasts and celebratory cheers with the hundreds of flutes of champagne Maria had poured and ready to go when New Year's rolled over just a scant minute ago. The smiles and well wishes are honest, but somewhat reserved, all because they have no idea where they are or how big this ship is.

They know they're standing in a stadium, and this stadium is in what exactly? The normally transparent floor they are walking on is currently occluded, like black obsidian, and even though light is not getting through they can feel a slight radiance of heat drifting up from it, so whatever it is they're here to see—it's close.

They don't notice α -Orionis slowly appearing below their feet.

The Nefer Key delegation was brought in thirty-minutes ago, after the other delegations have settled in, and in that half an hour the station's Group Marshal, Nancy Yoon, with her SYLNb neuro-cybernetic sidekick, Carrie, have been making the introductions of the Nefer Key

delegates to each Earth delegation in order of importance.

Nancy timed it so that they would approach the United States last, leading into the New Year's rollover followed by good cheers from the crowd. With sparkling mead in hand, the toasts made by Nancy then President Mofid were well received, but during his toast, Jessica steps out of the portal at the top of the mid-point ramp.

Encased in an armed JACC this did not go unnoticed, and she looks doubly menacing with a BR1-M2 in hand, where she paths into Mofid's mind after the toast, <"Oi, *ya amar*. How ya doin' babe?">

Mofid smiles slightly as he thinks, <"I can't wait to see this! Is that you in the JACC at the top of the ramp?">

<"The only way I can hide out in plain sight."> Jessica steps to the side and adds, <"Twelve minutes, so look surprised, dude!">

With Jessica out of the pathway, Snoopy and Mooch emerge from the dark portal, and with their colorful plumage flowing around them they start down the ramp. Maria and Scott then exit the portal and follow those two towards the stadium floor below.

At the bottom of the ramp Mooch grabs a couple of glasses from the mead table, and as Maria and Scott step past them he hands one over to Snoopy. They raise their glasses to the crowd in salute, then slam back their drinks.

Mooch hands Snoopy another glass, "More glug, babe!"

Snoopy smiles, saying, "Oooh, don't mind if I do!"

Now stepping out to the middle of the stadium, Maria looks around while saying, "I wanna thank you all for coming today!"

Mofid shrugs, "It was the only way to get everyone here."

Maria nods, "Without raising suspicions, yes."

Next to Mofid, Luc is snacking on wasabi peas when he says, "We're here for that demonstration."

Maria points out, "Partially, true. There's more to it."

"I fear I'm to blame for this, correct?"

Maria smiles, "We are direct, aren't we."

Luc smiles back, "I learned from the best."

"Well, Mister de Prima, you're the—"

Luc cuts her off, "Isn't tonight on a first name basis?"

Maria admires Luc because he is a fast learner, so while trying not to laugh she says, "Luc, the Nefer Key was simply the catalyst."

Mofid shrugs, "What's going on was...inevitable."

Luc nods and asks, "Then I'm not to blame?"

Maria goes, "Luc, everybody here blames you, it's just that there is so much blame to go around we all get to bask in it!"

Luc looks long and hard at her, then asks, "So, this is not about me testing the Fly Swatter?"

Maria gives a low chuckle, "No, this is very much about you testing your *fecale s'arrêter*. You did twenty-seven test shots!"

Scott adds, "Twenty on a nebula behind M46, and seven on asteroids and comets inside the cluster."

Maria points out, "Testing a choke mechanism?"

Luc nods, "Yes, for particle convergence. We toyed with it for some time and now we finally installed it and shot tested—"

Maria cuts him off, "Twenty-seven shots. Not two or three, which I would expect after our meeting, then holstering it back up! No, you did twenty-seven, and I knew it was to test the choke, which needed to be tested and all, but...it got us ta thinking."

Luc nods big, saying, "So, you made your own quantum particle cannon. I was half expecting that, but this was quick!"

"We don't fuck around, Luc." Maria holds her hands up, gesturing to the ship around them, "See, we had the components in hand here, but we had to figure out how to make that magic happen!" She motions for Mooch and Snoopy to step forward as the massive tacnet holo-display fades in above with a model of the Carrie Nation, "I'll let these two give ya a run down on what they did!"

Snoopy steps up and puts his claws out to grab onto the virtual controls, as Maria says, "This is Master-Sergeant, Snoopy!"

Snoopy waves, "Hey, everyone!"

"And this is Gunnery-Sergeant, Mooch!" With Mooch bowing his head to the attendees, Maria adds, "As the project designer and manager, I'll have Mooch take the floor!"

Snoopy runs the display while Mooch addresses the crowd, "Like Marshal Ramirez said, we had all the tools in place. We simply needed to repurpose them!" He thumbs above himself, saying, "This is one of our battle stations, the Carrie Nation, aka, Hippo-One." Snoopy points things out like a game show hostess as Mooch continues with, "As you can see, we're at the bottom of the dish side, that little cavity there is the stadium we're currently in, and the floor is transparent to the outside, as you will see in just a few minutes."

Mofid knew about the Carrie Nation, so as planned he asks, "How big is this ship we're standing in?"

"Mister President, sir, it's diameter is six-point-nine kilometers across and two-point-two-five vertically, from center top to bottom."

The hush that comes over the crowd is noticeable as Mooch continues, "On the top of the station, what Snoopy is now pointing at, in the middle of the dome side, we had a plasma gun for the longest time that was kind of useless, that is until we got our claws on it. The spooling drum is four-hundred meters tall by four-hundred across, with the gun cylinder running through the middle of it. Reconfiguring the drum and gun from a plasma pulse mechanism to quantum particles was surprisingly easy, considering."

Mofid asks, "Considering what, Sergeant?"

"We had a huge budget and free rein over the project!"

Snoopy points to the massive magnetic variable aperture in center of the dish side, while saying, "A budget we barely touched."

Mooch nods in agreement, "Yes, a lot of the conversion was simply programing and recalibrating the drum, barrel, and the choke."

Luc asks Mooch, "You and Snoopy did most of the work?"

"No, sir, we did all of it."

Luc is humbled by that news, then asks, "What does it fire?"

"In terms of quantum particle mass?"

Luc nods, yes, saying, "It's size is, well it's big, sooo?"

Mooch turns to Maria who says, "Yours spools anywhere from zero-point-four-two, to maybe a half a gram. That correct?"

Luc holds up a wasabi pea, "About this much mass!"

She asks, "Were we close in our estimate?"

"Yes, point-four-eight grams."

"For today's demo we kinda wanted to go big!" Maria has already reached around the mead table and pulled a fired clay brick out, where she now tosses it onto the floor at Luc's feet. The thing tumbles, hangs on edge, then falls back with a resonate thud.

In visible shock, Luc blurts out, "You're kidding!"

Maria goes, "This is visually representative. The actual mass we spooled and launched, over thirty-seven hours ago, is a quarter of the size more than the brick at your feet, but ch'ya get the idea!"

Mooch adds, "Fourteen-hundred and forty-one grams."

Luc's jaw visibly drops, where he overcomes his shock to ask, "What's your gun's cascade to failure?"

Mooch asks, "Yours was, what, point-five-six or five-eight?"

Luc says, "Zero-point-five-eight."

"Ours is five-thousand, six-hundred and fifteen...grams. Our safe spooling limit is forty-eight hundred grams. Fifty-two hundred is allowed if we think we need to push it."

Mofid asks, "But your shot was fourteen-forty-one."

"Affirmative, sir."

Mofid shakes his head while quietly saying, "Jesus."

"Yes sir, the QP-Gun we ended up with is more...way more than a little on the excessive side."

"What did you shoot at with fourteen-hundred grams?"

"What did we shoot at?" Maria quietly wonders, then asks, "Guys, can you put up the tactical grid for everyone?"

Above the stadium the holographic tactical display goes up that shows the scale in astral units. All 125au from where they are to the star, the just over 3au from the surface to the point of impact at 0.5au short of the core, and another scale showing a smidge over 128au all the way back to the starting point—where they are now.

With the animation of the shot sequence sped up, Mooch goes, "The shot sequence was twenty-minutes and fifty-three seconds, which included both the nebula and coronal burns as well as the excavation cut to deliver nine-hundred and sixty grams to the target zone, a half an AU short of the core. We originally calculated and settled on six-hundred and forty grams to blow the target star, but we were asked to boost it by half...just for giggles."

Maria points out, "I wanted to make sure it got done."

Mofid asks, "What star are we talking about?"

"We had to go big! If we would have shot a brown or red dwarf there was no way of hiding it. If we blasted a red giant that's on its last leg then everyone would shrug and go about their day!"

Boxter speaks up, while looking down at the red giant that is appearing under their feet, "I believe we're talking 'bout, Betelgeuse?"

"Give that man a cigar!" Maria laughs, then points at him while asking, "By the way, how 're you and Piper doin'?"

Boxter snorts a laugh, saying, "With all the long faces and the White Star champagne, we're having a bloody good time of it!"

Maria smiles, "We appreciate ya comin'! Try the mead yet?"

Boxter smiles, "Oh, we'll get to that shortly!"

Piper adds, "We be 'avin' a-ripper of a good time, Mar!"

Confused, the British Prime Minister asks, "We're going to watch you shoot the bloody thing off?"

Mofid tells him, "No, they already fired it."

Mooch says, "At ten-thirty hours, on the thirtieth."

Luc asks, "How many of these ships did you say you have?"

Maria goes, "We have a second one in this class. We also have three more that are twice the size and...all of their guns, plasma for these two and gamma for the other three stations, have already been converted to the Q-P configuration."

Hearing this just now, Mofid's shoulders sag, "My god."

"But wait, there's more!" Maria nods up towards the display, where it switches over to the Iron Maiden and she points up to it, "Always busy, we've been building replacement platforms and, like the quad-pod engines in the back of the Iron Maiden, they can switch back and forth from thrusters to QP-Guns all with the flip of a switch."

Mofid asks, "All of these ships will be given this feature?"

Maria cringes slightly, "Well...they already got it."

Luc asks, "What's their mass output?"

Maria looks to Mooch who says, "Twelve grams...per engine."

Luc realizes, "And four engines per ship."

"Yes, that's max, not the cascade. Four engines, combined, is a hundred times more than what Delta Echo can put out."

Maria looks towards Boxter, and with a smile she asks him, "You didn't hear any of that, right Boxxy?"

Boxter is snickering as he fights to control the actual laughter in him, "I have...no...no idea what you're talking about, madame!"

Piper adds with wide-eyes, "Not a bloody clue!"

Nancy quietly tells Maria, "Ninety-up!"

With a minute and a half to go, Maria points to the display above that's now showing Betelgeuse blowing up from the inside.

Maria goes, "This is a real time data-model we captured over seventeen hours ago with a tool called WormTrac, but we synched the display here with the star that's about to blow so you can see what's

going on inside without the nebula in the way."

Mooch goes on to say, "And it's about to pop."

Snoopy quietly adds to that with, "Enjoy the show!"

After a few seconds of silence, with everyone switching their gaze between the display above them and the image of alpha-Orion below their feet, Maria has a moment to think about things.

She looks towards Luc and says with a nod and a tight smile, "Ya know, Luc, when it comes to dick waving contests it's always about the size that you're swinging around. Now, from personal experience, the fact is it's how you use it that really matters. In the end, one's locus of control is of all importance."

Luc continues to look at the display above, wondering how they did this, seeing the inside of the star as it's exploding, so he asks Maria while pointing at the display, "This was captured in real time?"

"Yea, crazy hu?"

Luc then looks down at the red giant below their feet, and after a few seconds of gnawing on what Maria said he looks up at her and smiles, "Ya know Maria, by the looks of it, from where we're all sitting, to us, you guys in the Annex are the locusts of control."

Maria glows with delight by the insult, "I like that!"

Luc recoils slightly, "You're welcome?"

"I gotta make it a plaque for my desk!" Maria wags her finger at him, saying, "You got a way with words, Luc! We need to rub elbows a lot more than what we've been doin'."

Luc shrugs, "Okay?"

It was at that moment the star on the far side blows out and, like a bursting bubble on millisecond bullet-time, it pops with the explosive energy hitting the corona, and a massive-scorching volume of light bouncing off the nebula as it burns it away.

In the stadium the glow from the nova event is in a boxing match with the filter built within the floor. As the radiance increases the filter overcompensates and via this yo-yo effect the dying star is winning this contest—with it getting brighter inside the stadium each passing second. The only sound anyone here makes, in the short minute watching this, is Boxter and Piper cracking up with laughter and applause as Betelgeuse is being ripped apart.

At the one-minute mark, Maria turns to Nancy and tells her, "It's approaching nineteen minutes after the hour, babe."

Nancy nods in agreement, "Yep, it's time we boogie!"

Maria sighs, "Or, our shoes will start melting onto the deck."

With the edges of the star starting to shred, Nancy nods big while saying, "Ya got that right!"

Through the tacnet, Nancy sends the command to withdraw.

Suddenly, the view below their feet goes into reverse and the star reconstitutes then shrinks away into a tiny dot in the distance as the MDDSH engines of the station take them far away. With the filter in the stadium floor having been switched off, Betelgeuse is now just another red blip in the star field of white and yellow blips.

Seconds later, this view is wiped as a new star field appears...

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