

LCTN: BETELGEUSE-11 (alpha-Orion)
CORD: SAO-113271.NC (129pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-DECEMBER-2-TUESDAY
TIME: 04:10zulu (local 21:12mst)

Maria is dog tired.

They held the red-eye run to the Carrie Nation till after her meeting with Hartcourt. She intended to only catch a twenty minute catnap to reboot but she ended up sleeping all the way.

Last time she was on Hippo-1 was in May.

This was her command for the longest time and she was proud of it, but now she commands all and she's sick and tired of it. When she was in charge of the Carrie Nation and the five battle platforms assigned to it she longed for her previous command. That was the Phoenix-Marauder, and though a flying junk heap by the end of the war it was her flying junk heap. And when she was in command of that she longed for the days she didn't command at all. At this point, like Bob, retreat is beyond her reach.

The meeting tonight took its toll on Maria and she realizes that Hartcourt was right—she could have resolved a lot of issues by simply shooting him. She knows it would only be a temporary fix because some of those waiting in the wings for Hartcourt to die make him look like a saint by comparison.

Harcourt is lawful-evil, as Maria is perceived as lawful-evil so best stick with what you know.

The rescue mission on Orpheus Eyot was such a monumental triumph that Maria did need to make an appearance and share a beer with the team, but the fact is she needs sleep even more. If it wasn't for Kiplinger and his family being on board here she would have found an excuse to bow out.

As it is Maria is stepping down the ramp of the red-eye with a

serious case of red-eye fatigue, and the jogging in place and hopping up and down is not helping one bit. She has nanoids in her that have never been used that can give her a 'snap out of it' jolt but she has always taken the old school coffee or energy drink path. Those have negative consequences impacting her ability to sleep later so, for the first time ever, she flips the mental *jolt switch* and boom! Like chomping into a capsule of buzzkill a tsunami races from the chest outwards and her fatigue is washed away—just like that.

Maria blinks her eyes wondering how she's going to pay for that little miracle later. There is a sleep aid, called the *K.O. switch*, that she's going to have a go with later. Now she has no choice because things are coming to a head and her personal techno phobias will have to take a back seat for once.

At the quarters set up for Kiplinger and his family Maya opens the door and says, "I have no idea who you are, lady, but you seem bloody important. Come on in!"

Maya walks over to the other side of the room and leans through the doorway, "Oi, poppers, someone here for ya."

Kiplinger and Hannah step out from behind Maya and he grins big, "Hannah and Maya, I would like you to meet my arch enemy, nemesis and all around pain in my arse, Marshal, Maria Ramirez."

Hannah is still trying to wrap her brain around what's going on, "Thank you? I don't know what else to say, Marshal."

Maria laughs, "Good enough for me, but you sure knew what to say to my people earlier."

Sheepishly, Hannah apologies, "Sorry 'bout that."

Maria takes Hannah's hand and gives it a shake, "No biggie! That was expected. I understand Marshal Graves told you that we already have you set up with a home, in my neighborhood in fact, and reserve funds with more than enough to pick out your own furnishings and transportation. You'll have everything you need on New Sydney. The schools are topper than notch, as you Aussies say, and, Kip, you can start your new job in about...how about March?"

Hannah is a little amazed, "Thank you, I guess, but why?"

"Why not?" Maria shrugs, "We got tired of them knocking off good people. Especially those tryin' to make a difference."

Kiplinger says, "We really appreciate all this, Marshal."

"Do what you can to help Bob un-fuck the FIS. That's all I ask. Also, from now on, since we're gonna be neighbors it's Ramirez or maybe Maria? *Hey you* works for me too!" Maria puts her hand out

to shake his, "That about makes us even-Steven, 'kay Ranch!"

"Fuck that, come here you!" Kiplinger swats Maria's hand out of the way and he yanks her in to give her a big hug.

As Kiplinger pulls back, with watery eyes, Hannah, with tears pouring down her face, pulls in to Hug Maria while saying, "Thank you. For my family, thank you."

From the doorway Maya frowns and asks, "Hartcourt, he was really gonna ghost us? All of us!"

Kiplinger says, "That he was, dearie."

"Well that seppo-speakin' wanker!"

Maria looks at her, "Maya, if you only knew."

Kiplinger says, "You'll have to tell me what transpired. To have been a fly on that wall, aye!"

"Okay guys, we're gonna have a barbeque tomorrow in the late afternoon with the breach and recon teams and everyone at a planet called Second Hand. Bob and Michal Pitney will be there."

"Is that that prison planet of yours?"

"Not exactly, yes, but when you see it you'll love it." Maria then says, "Okay, you're all stocked up and buttoned up here so let me run and we'll touch base 'round noonish. Sound like a plan?"

All nod heads so Kiplinger walks Maria to the door and asks, "What is this place? Didn't see it from the outside but I believe that it's bigger than your capital ships."

"We still enemies?"

"As of 12:37 today, my time, I'd have to say we're now the most chummiest of chums. Hell, I can trust you with me life!"

"Which means I can now trust you with mine."

"Like a shag on the rocks!"

Maria believes him, "Remember the Death Star?"

"Which one, from the original or the reboot?"

Maria thinks about it, "Oh, well, I do like 'em both but the reboot was the one I was going after."

"I love them flying the trench in that one. It was a ripper how they flew sideways to shoot the vent hole under that awning being in space and all. Bloody good entertainment."

"Ya, and Luke and Anikan were not whiny pussies."

Kiplinger laughs, "Daresay you be right!"

Maria nods, "Well, ours are dinky by comparison. Just under seven kilometers wide and split in the middle. To to give you an idea what they look like they've been called Jehovah's Yo-yo."

"Still, that's bonkers!" Kiplinger thinks about it and it sinks in, "They, plural?"

"That's for the first two. The other three are ten clicks wide."

"We never knew about 'em!"

Maria corrects him, "Ah, no, you did. Well, your Command and Control kept it to themselves, and your moles were instructed never to report on them except as stationary assets. They didn't want an arms race over shit that would break the bank and they couldn't use." Before Ranch could ask Maria adds, "See, for weapons delivery they're a little on the excessive side, way-way overpowered, but as a base of operations they are fantastic being all mobile and shit."

"Which is why we never could find them." Maria nods yes so, Ranch asks somewhat excited, "Planet killing lasers!?"

"You know the flail guns, the plasma pulse cannons some of our troopers have? Well, for the two littler ones that's what they got except that they're huge!" Maria wags a finger up for emphases, "And I have to say those cannons could very well be situationally useful, but for the other three I'm not so sure about."

"Don't hold back now. I'm all a twitter!"

"Gamma lasers like, über gamma-ray-burst gamma lasers!" His eyes bug out and Maria adds, "We use M type stars and larger as a backstop when we do a test shot. First time out we hit a brown dwarf and that was dumb! Apparently it did a fusion pulse and puffed up quite a bit. Hours later it belched a solar flare—on a fucken' brown dwarf! Seven months after that it had a convection flash over event that lasted a week, so..." Maria's eyes roll in feigned embarrassment, "We'll not be doing that again!"

01010110-01101111-01100100-01100101-00100000-01000001-01101110

Deep in the bowls of the Carrie Nation everyone has been waiting for Maria to show. The wet and recon teams were tuckered out so they took off early after only one beer leaving Jacob, Cyzk, Kiel and the four Xhemal sitting around nursing their second can.

The cargo holds at these levels of a battle station are rarely frequented by active combat troops. Only robots and retreads in the geezer brigade ever come down here so why they are is a mystery to

all except for Jacob—and he's not talking just yet. The ambiance of this place is like a major industrial distribution center that is currently off-hours with the lorries, loaders and heavy lifters battened down tight. It's kind of spooky with all the dim lighting and the faint but lingering aromas of oils, solvents and the burnt-metal smell of space setting the tone. Eerie and cool all in the same breath.

Nobody is supposed to have open containers of alcohol anywhere on the ship except for the wet deck or the living quarters, but Jacob is at a high enough level that, with the right clearances, he's been able to do pretty much anything he pleases. This was a special occasion so Marshal Yoon, the current commander of the Carrie Nation, gave her blessing to Jacob's rather odd request because she'll be comin' around with Maria when she comes.

Marshal, Nancy Yoon, the field marshal from the Iron Man (SA14) who took over for Maria when she took over for Bob, is usually agreeable to whatever Jacob wants. In fact one of the conditions of her assuming command of the Carrie Nation and the platforms under it was that Jacob and the Iron Maiden (SA36) were to continue to answer directly to Maria thereby taking Yoon out of that loop. Yoon didn't want the headache dealing with Jacob. The Iron Maiden continues to supply, refit and chill out at Hippo-1 but that's about it. Unorthodox, yes, but it was the best commander Maria could finagle into the job and in turn that was Yoon splitting her hand against Maria's soft-17. In Maria's mind it's just as well because it's better to deal with Jacob's shit directly than having to endlessly channel back and forth through Yoon. Every one of the battle platform commanders, including Yoon, wanted Jacob to take over for Maria but she needs him where he is for what's comin' over the horizon when it comes.

While waiting for Maria, Jacob has spent the better part of a can of beer telling the Xhemal the story of *The Little Cartel That Could*.

Where to begin?

Jacob glanced over how the Hyades was originally set up as a series of cooperatives because by the end of the 21st Century the general sentiment around town was that corporations were inherently evil, and that the 'bigger the badder' truism was a tightly held belief by most lil'folk. Looking back at what happened in the Hyades, and its many disperit cooperatives, the age-old adage 'nature finds a way' has since become a universal axiom and social network meme—just swap out the first word in that line with your noun or trending irony.

The corporations discovered various loopholes and used their body of shareholders to buy out claims and stake-holdings through brokers or proxy agents. Those shareholders then contracted out the management of said claims and stake-holdings back to an affiliate of

the parent corporation indefinitely. Near the end of the 22nd Century the very people everybody wanted to keep out of the Hyades ended up controlling every bit of it—lock, stock and barrel. By then the now consolidated Steel Chain Cooperative had such immense power that the remaining private claims and stakes were misappropriated through very obscure ‘salvage and recovery’ clauses that were buried in the fine print of the original Co-op agreements, or they were outright hijacked through eminent domain. Now that the SCC owns and/or manages everything in the Hyades, and with the finest of accounting juggling-acts (i.e. corporate chicanery as is the norm) they end up sitting on record holdings while showing little to no profit, and paying virtually next to nothing in dividends to the original shareholders and what few average-Joe claimholders that remain.

Jacob then brushed over the thirty odd years of insurrection, violence and United Nations compulsory recognition of the all-volunteer Military Alliance Deputation which intervened in the Hyades as the standing representative of the UN-DPKO to enforce the resolutions voted in on behalf of the local jurisdictions who are in fact slave to the SCC itself. (breathe) In short, the United Nations was now mandated to support the very entities it once fought to deny.

Obviously, for this story, those cans they were nipping away at were the Rapture Red Ale tall-boys.

Jacob notices Maria and Yoon stepping up from the shadows so he finishes with, “Ya know, guys, out here they saw the shit going on in the Hyades and they knew what was comin’. Marshal Ramirez can expand on the details, but the short story is they brokered a deal that revoked mining patents that were mothballed, so when the Co-op found out all their claims outside of the Hyades were now void they about had the shittest-hemorrhage on record!”

Jinx concludes, “So, that’s what started the fight.”

Maria picks this up, “There’s more to it. The rallying cry for the Pleiades was *you claim it you work it*. The U.N. deal also blocked any future proxy acquisitions, co-op mergers, and all third party management. Basically, the way it was supposed to be in the first place. The best an investor could do now is throw money at a claim and hope for the best. Anymore, nobody outside the local co-op is allowed to control shit, so that shit went tits-up from there.”

Snoopy shakes his head, “This is all about money?”

Jacob puts his hands out like a scales, “No, it’s about the Hyades with wealth-subjugation versus the wealth-participation of the Pleiades. Over there is the worst form of corporatization where the many produce wealth for the few. Here, they have a labor and capital participation model where all involved are enriched.”

Snoopy laughs, "Then it's about the money!"

Maria laughs too, "I wish it were that simple, Snoop. There is a lot of reasons why and money is least of it."

As Snoopy nods, Jinx asks, "Weren't we part of that M.A.D. group at one time?"

Jacob nods, "Ya, originally, but we were put out here with a mandate to protect the frontier...so we did just that."

Cyzk laughs as he hands both Maria and Yoon a beer he opened for them, "You bet, we took the side they did not expect!"

Kiel adds, "My, weren't they surprised."

Maria takes a swig of her beer and says, "I want to thank you Mooch, Gwascious, Jinx, Snoop...you guys did a fantastic job." She then gestures to Cyzk and Kiel, "Kacper and Michelle, you and your people were spot-on as always."

She then looks at Jacob, "And, I got to hand it to you, Jake, you were right. Hartcourt is not evil per se but driven, and so much so I think he actually got a stiffy being played like that."

Jacob laughs then asks, "Told ya he would. Did he believe you about the drones?"

"Yes, he did."

"Have they been released to Kip?"

"Last chance to call this off. All I have to do now is to throw the switch and it'll be hot."

"Go ahead and throw it, Tiger."

There was a short silence where, without fanfare, the drones in the Hyades are switched over to the biometric N2 readings from Ranch Kiplinger's family. The failsafe is slave to Jessica, and that is the logical choice, but this choice still makes Maria uneasy because Jessica is still a bit on the young side. Maria has more to add to her plate but this thing is a one shot deal that should never arise.

Maria asks Kiel, "How long did it take to chill Hannah?"

Kiel shakes her head, "It took Chancellor Kiplinger about five or six minutes to calm her down before they could unstrap her."

Cyzk adds, "She still lunged at 'im when they let her go. I thought she was going to snatch Kiplinger's face from his skull."

Maria grunts, "Ya, I'll bet."

After a few seconds of awkward silence Jacob asks, "You guys wanna know why we're sitting down here?"

Kiel volunteers, "It goes without saying that everybody has been wondering about that."

Yoon speaks up, "I'm curious."

Jacob starts gesturing to everyone he mentions in sequence, "Why we're here, okay, Nancy, this is your ship. Kacper, you know physics and studied the outcomes at Nu Ara at length. Michelle, you know everything there is to know about Razorbacks. Slicks, guns, large or small you know it all."

Maria looks over at Yoon, "Curiouser and curiouser."

Jacob asks, "Kasper, what happened to Nu Ara after the shot. Can you give our feathered brothers and sisters here the four-one-one after that total fuck up of mine."

All four of the Xhemal look at each other and Gwascious speaks up, "That was you?"

"Ya, that was my-bad."

Cyzk looks over at the four Xhemal, "What happened? Science fuckin' fiction is what happened. Nu Ara is what Mars used to be. It also lost its magnetic field and was quickly losing both water and atmosphere. The crust and mantle were thick and cold, so when the spider hit it burned fifteen percent of the surface and burrowed all the way to the core which popped out three weeks after the shot. Right now it's a floating shell of what used to be a planet and they're already starting to mine the core."

Jacob asks, "For argument's sake, what would have been necessary to totally destroy it?"

Cyzk shrugs, "Three, maybe four times the mass of a spider which is a half-ton at one-gravity. Say about four times that mass would have melted the crust and turned the planet inside out."

Jacob then asks, "How about if twice that mass hit?"

Cyzk, not expecting that question, blinks his eyes, "Well, four tons, that would result in...a massive spray of planetary material, specifically the core, ejecting out the other side. It goes without saying that the rest of the planet would be blown out like a concentric ring. It would be pretty damned spectacular I might add. Hell, I'd want front row seats!"

Kiel asks, "So, I'm supposed to take a Razor and punch it into a planet on a forced jump? Any chimp can do that! And that's a whole lot more tonnage than a couple of spiders."

Jacob's head sags and he says, "Ya, I know. What I'm thinking about is gonna require two ninety-eights synched together."

Yoon pipes up, "That's a lot of mass. What do you propose we hit with that?"

Cyzk has been thinking about it, "If you're considering a gas giant or a brown dwarf then you'd be right on the money."

Jacob shakes his head, "Still, not enough mass."

Everybody looks at each other wondering if what they heard was right, with Kiel asking, "Okay, then what is it you want to hit exactly?"

Jacob asks Yoon, and she knows perfectly well what he is asking about, "We still don't have a use for it, right?"

Yoon smiles, "No, it's all yours, Jacob. Put it to good use!"

Confused, Kiel asks, "Put what to good use?"

Jacob's hands spin in the air and he thrusts them towards a dark shadowed area by the elevators. Just then that dark area lights up showing a gigantic black rock, a diamond the size of a house, cradled in that space with clamps coming from all directions.

Maria takes a step forward and whistles real low, while Kiel asks, "Barn Diamond? You want to weaponize Barn Diamond?"

Jacob says, "A little spit and duct tape, string a few coat hangers between two ninety-eights and there ya have it!"

Cyzk asks, "Isn't this a wee bit overkill?"

Jacob replies, "Depends on what you're hitting."

Maria looks at the rock, "This isn't the weapon is it?"

"That's right. What you're hitting is the weapon."

Maria has stepped up to the diamond suspended in huge cradles from floor and ceiling and reaches up to touch it, "This is very troglodyte of you, Jacob."

"Why, thank you!"

While stroking the rock, Maria looks back at Jacob, "Polaris, Abbie-Baby, right?"

He touches his nose with a smile.

Maria asks, "The nova flash will hit them in how long?"

"A little over thirteen and a half days. The ejecta will be moving at a pretty good clip and that will take another nine weeks."

Maria looks back at the rock, "This is so nukin futs."

Snoopy asks, "How many is this thing supposed to kill?"

Jacob thinks about it for a few seconds and goes *pop* with his mouth while putting out his hand showing zero, followed by him asking Snoopy, "Want to manage this one?"

Snoopy nods his head big, "Ya, I want!"

Maria glances over at Snoopy, "Then this is your project. Continue to make us proud, Snoop."

Jacob adds, "Work with Kacper and Michelle on this. If you can I'd like the mission profile, preliminary design and early sim model in about four months. Can do?"

Snoopy goes, "Fuck ya!"

Maria adds, "We have eight more of these rocks on the other stations. I'd like to have plans and sims for them added to that?"

Jacob corrects his time line, "Make that six months."

Snoopy responds with bright-eyed gung-ho, "Can do!"

"We'll just build this one, though." Maria pats Barn Diamond, "And from here on out we'll call it, Terrence."

Jacob looks at Kiel, "Michelle, I hear Jinx and Gwascious both would like to fly guns. Wanna take them under your wing?"

Kiel smiles, "Never thought you'd ask." She looks at Jinx and Gwascious, "Okay, girls, ready to blow shit up?"

The two nod yes while they chirp and whistle with joy.

Maria looks at Mooch and goes, "And while we're at it, Mooch, my little brainiac. Have I got a job for you."

000000100010