

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
TIME: 14:30zulu (local 14:06mst)

In the C3, at the top of the Spike, Colonel Karan has Victoria's undivided attention, "Well, Major, you're trending and it appears that your approval metrics have shot right through the roof."

Victoria huffs, "I'd rather this had been a private affair."

The Colonel nods in agreement, "Because it wasn't word has come down from the Air Marshal. You are to tender your resignation as Squadron Leader immediately. After the coronation you will be invited back into the reserves as a Lieutenant Colonel."

Victoria scowls, "A Wing Commander...and what if we refuse?"

Karan smiles and points, "If not then my orders are to strip that crown off your shoulder and bust you down to one-pip."

"I should have shot that reporter."

"The people like their fighting monarch." Karan then snorts, "So, for a heads up, the bill for your VC is being drafted as we speak."

Victoria snarls, "We will not hear of it."

"Royal assent is not a power of veto. You will turn it down, yes, but expect it to be pinned to your bodice. The people will demand it of you." As Victoria's eyes narrow with rage, the Colonel laughs, "And, as the Yanks say, buck it up buttercup."

"On that, we insist on a DFC awarded to all the flight crews."

Karan agrees, "Done!"

"And while we're at it, throw a CGC up for the Nippers."

"Isn't the Lieutenant two short of a pair?"

"He found his trousers today."

It was just then that Maria steps up while tucking her t-shirt into her BDU pants, "We done here, guys?" Both nod yes so Maria reaches up and pounds an Ewa pin from the Order of the Smile into webbing over the chest plate of her JACC, "Here, this is for you."

"What is this?"

Maria smiles, "You're now part of the club, Orderu Zajebiste. You earned it like the rest of us, so you get to wear it like us."

Victoria looks over the black and red Ewa face and points to it while saying to Karan, "This means more to me than a VC, Colonel."

Maria throws her hand out, "Whoa! Whoa! You mean to say that a VC is going to a Queen Victoria? Are you shitting me!"

Karan says, "That's about the size of it."

"That's so..." Maria chuckles, "Comically apropos!"

Victoria shakes her head while Maria hands her a tray of the Ewa pins, "You're not helping, Love."

"These are for your crews." Maria then flashes two fingers, "Two things, your replacement Warthog will be available on the next pick up." She then taps Victoria in the chest, "And you, you are invited to my new year's bash. I'm sure you'll have a previous engagement, but mine will be in Southern California, seven hours after your soiree, and I figure you can catch some Z's on the way out."

Victoria ponders the offer as Kevin Vossler steps up beside Maria, "That's putting the squeeze to my calendar."

Vossler quietly whispers to Maria, "Hartcourt is on the line."

Maria nods and says, "Mikey and the Xhemal will be there!"

Victoria squints, "Those feathered alien beasts?" Maria nods yes with a big smile so Victoria goes, "Pencil me in!"

With Victoria and Colonel Karan gone Maria and Vossler step through the center of the C3 for the office, while Voss giving her a run down, "Okay, Hartcourt is on hold and we also have du Condé here."

Maria huffs, "Okay, I'll take Hartcourt now and put du Condé on hold. This shouldn't take long."

Vossler points to the ground, "No, ambassador du Condé is here now! He's here! We have him in the lobby."

"Wait, what?"

"This is the story so far. As soon as the shit hit the fan Lebedev raced off for New Brisbane and du Condé came here."

"New Brisbane! How did we find out about that?"

"That was from Field Marshal, Graves."

"How the fuck did he—"

Vossler throws up his hands, "I don't know, but we just confirmed from another source that Levedev is there! Graves is on hold waiting to talk to you and du Condé."

"This is fucking surreal." Maria gestures to the office attached to the C3, "Let's get to Hartcourt."

In the office, Vossler says, "You can't bring up Lebedev."

"Well, d'uh!"

Maria opens the line with Hartcourt, "Box, glad you could make it. Hope you weren't waiting long but we can cut this short if we agree to rubber stamp the ROEs from last time. Sound good to you?"

Harcourt frowns while nodding yes, ["Yes, that could work but we would like to consider an addendum going forward."]

Maria shrugs, "If you're looking to pull some teeth...now is as good a time as any!"

He assures her, ["No, Marshal, I think you'll be agreeable."]

"Let's have it!"

["Two things, Earth and Sapphire maintain neutrality for sure, but we would like to add Pripyat and Second Hand to that mix."]

"Ya, ah..." Maria glances at Vossler who nods yes, "I don't have a problem with that! The second thing?"

["We would like to expand the annual truce by twenty-four hours. Pushing the start from midnight on the 22nd to twelve-hundred hours on the 22nd, and from midnight of the 2nd to twelve-hundred hours on the 3rd, standard Zulu time. Is that acceptable?"]

Maria is taken aback, "That's an odd one?"

Harcourt rolls his eyes, ["We experienced...administrative problems last time. Padding this may alleviate the travel crunch-time my people were troubled with visiting their families over holiday. You know how that goes."]

Maria shakes her head in surprise, "Oh, okay! I don't know why not? You got yourself a deal."

Harcourt almost smiles, ["Let's chat on the second."]

"Love to, but..." Maria wags a finger at him, "How 'bout you make your first move. We'll chat after that."

Harcourt then smiles, ["Sounds like a deal."]

Signing off, Maria slips out to the lobby and is a little shocked that Jacob’s son, Peter Ribot is here with du Condé, “Pete?”

du Condé shakes Maria’s hand, “Thank you for seeing me, Marshal. Colonel Ribot is part of the discussion we are having with you and the Field Marshal. Mr. Graves is standing by, is he not?”

Wide-eyed, Maria says, “Ya, he’s waiting.”

du Condé hurries, “Then let’s not keep him waiting!”

00110010-00101011-00110010-00111101-00110101

Maria suddenly finds the emotions hitting her overwhelming.

Unbelievably, this whole thing went off without a hitch, and more so now because the almost debacle at uTau and the unplanned mission and battle on Nufa have so completely convinced the Co-op of the ‘blind side’ narrative of this ruse. Maria can now simply leak the actual truth as a false rumor in counterpoint to further strengthen that narrative. In Maria’s mind this all ended up better than perfect.

Having talked to Jacob, du Condé and Peter, Jacob is now wrapping up the situation at uTau while Maria steps out to finally tell the crew in the C3 what really went down because of them only Vossler knows the truth. Everybody there believes that 45,000 people, the crews of eight battle platforms, are now dead and standing in the middle of the C3 she can feel the dread and melancholy that has descended over them all. People who thought they were responding to a catastrophe and were spot on in doing their jobs because of it.

Tears well up in Maria’s eyes and for the first time in her life Tiger Bitch, sometimes called The Ice Queen, Hell’s Barrister, or Babe Satan by a small contingency, can’t find the words. She not only feels their grief but her own loss as well. Only fourteen from the Annex died today, five on Arrakis and nine on Nufa, but of those two she knew personally and one was an old friend. Someone she loved.

Between the tragedy of that loss and the triumphant grand slam on a plan that only had a projected three-to-one odds-out chance for success, Maria doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Her mouth is agape but she’s incapable of forming words.

Maria turns and rushes towards the office while transmitting to Vossler, <“Tell them, Voss.”>

As Maria slips into the office, followed by Peter and du Condé, Vossler posts overhead the hologram tactical map of their rendezvous zone out at U-Turn. In the map they see the twelve Mbande class ships, the new mini Iron Maidens they’ve been building and secretly

stashing away to replace their aging battle platforms. On eight of the ships the status menu shows a full complement and crew—each with a whole division ready for action.

Vossler announces, "Everybody, we only lost fourteen people today, not forty-five thousand. We couldn't tell you what was going on because we needed you to perform your jobs while not knowing the truth. Our apologies for keeping you in the dark but you have our sincere gratitude for doing such a bang up job in pulling together the Rapid Reaction Forces necessary for Arrakis and Nufa. That was a truly herculean task."

Shocked by hearing this news and seeing the tactical feed, the C3 crew does not know how to react, and from the office they now hear Maria cackling like a crazy woman—her laugh/cry dilemma was obvious to them and it appears that she found the winner. The door swings open and she steps out with Peter and du Condé following her, both with a case of champagne in hand.

Maria radios Nicole, "Red, get your ass up here!" She then shoves a bottle into the chest of a geezer brigade corporal and while opening up another bottle she shouts, "We motherfucking did it!"

The corporal with the bottle asks, "What did we do?"

"We lost!" The cork pops and Maria goes, "I know celebrating losing sounds pretty fucking counterintuitive but, trust me, this is the best thing ever! You guys here kicked serious ass!"

The C3 crew is shocked, amazed and delighted, chatting between each other as Pete and du Condé start passing out bottles.

The corporal asks, "So what's the plan now, Marshal?"

Maria gestures to the map above them, "Isn't that a beautiful sight, hu?" She turns to the corporal, "I'll give you guys a full rundown on the plan tomorrow, but to answer your question...the plan is to lose and keep losing until we spread 'em out thin."

Then it dawns on the corporal, "Thin then turn it around?"

Maria taps her nose as Vossler adds, "Corporal, at first I thought it was bat-shit crazy but...we just pulled off the impossible."

Maria takes a huge swig off the bottle she opened then pushes it into Vossler with a big smile, "Thanks, Voss!"

He takes the bottle, "Jesus, you sure did fuck this monkey!"

Laughing, she then hugs Peter, "Thanks, Pete."

Maria then turns to du Condé and says, "Hey, Tristen!" She grabs him, pulls him close, gives him a big kiss, and then a quiet little whisper in his ear, "Thanks, Sarge."

01000110-01010101-01000100

The Warthogs have been zipping around the desert picking up pilots while dropping 20/20 bombs in MOAB mode on their downed Thunderbolts. A forty-thousand kilo blast makes short work of the wreckage but this is more of a prophylactic measure than an actual necessity. Without the plasma sequencing codes it would be virtually impossible to replicate tech salvaged from the Annex, and without the software one would be left with a high-tech doorstop if they did.

Now, with most of the AO policed, Jacob orders everyone out except for the three-man teams under Anthony Gudici and Zach Nelson, who are recovering the last two pilots that died in the fight, and Jacob who is escorting the last Warthog on its way to pick up Peña far from the Moloka'i preserve then head back for the rest.

Jacob would rather another fighter or two be present but he does not want to take any chances on an incident. Security Services has four of their own drop ships leap-frogging around the desert dropping off recovery crews and picking up pilots.

Jacob and the gunship keep a respectful distance, with Jacob also flying in a low and slow non-threatening manner. Orbiting south of Peña, they have to wait until the Security Services drop ship takes off with their pilot.

Noticing the SA ships doing lazy turns over the dunes, and his own dropship closing in to pick him up, Macquarie shakes Peña's hand, "Ay, beaner, it's been stout-ripper if I say so myself."

Peña laughs, "You know how to get ahold of me, Porter. You ever find yourself on Sapphire during leave look me up!"

Macquarie assures him, "Pints and Sheila's, mate!"

From the cockpit of his Thunderbolt, Jacob is watching the Security Services pilot shake hands with Peña then fly up into the hold of the waiting SS dropship just as his link to Maria opens.

In the window is du Condé, Vossler, his son, Peter and Maria opening with, ["Sorry we were keeping you on hold."]

Jacob goes, "No biggie! Now is good."

Glancing at du Condé with a suspicious eye, Maria says flatly, ["From what I understand, it's Voss and I who don't have any clarity on the connections here. Wanna bring us up to speed, maybe?"]

"Tristen, let 'er have it both barrels."

du Condé sighs, and then with a less severe French accent, ["Marshal, originally I was an Annex Staff Sergeant, Abel Blanchett."]

["Are you shitting me? You're really one of us!"]

["I was with SA-Nineteen and was attached to the Paper Cuts group early on. We were trying to devise a way to get a mole into the diplomatic corps of one of the Security Council members."] du Condé then throws his hands up back in character, ["So, *le reste est de l'histoire!*" And, I have to say, it's been *fabuleux!*"]

Maria frowns, ["Can I ask who your contact is?"]

["The last twenty-five years has been with Bob, directly."]

Maria glances at Vossler who says, ["This was unexpected."]

Maria then points to Peter, ["What about him? How'd he get to be part of the in crowd?"]

du Condé nods big, ["Ah, that was Fifty-Two's doing. When I came on board, taking over for Lebedev, she told Peter what I really was on our first meeting together."]

Peter quickly shares, ["She said she didn't want anything hidden between us three. Sorry we had to keep this from you."]

du Condé adds, ["The Colonel was family so, as she said, she felt more comfortable with...the openness over intrigue."]

Maria asks, ["Are you afraid for your life if this gets out?"]

["I'm afraid for my livelihood. I've come to enjoy the job."]

With the Warthog picking up Peña, Jacob connects privately to Maria, <"I just found out about du Condé last May, hon.">

Maria turns her head towards Jacob on the monitor and responds, <"I'll kick your ass about that later."> She then says to Jacob verbally ["So, what about Lebedev? What's gives?"] She then points to Jacob while talking to the rest, ["I want to hear him first."]

Following the Warthog, Jacob says, "Well, when Hartcourt contacted me I saw Lebedev in the background behind him."

Maria thinks, ["Him being there was no coincidence."]

"Exactly! So, the condition for transferring him to you was me getting to chat Lebedev up."

["Seriously! And what did he say that torqued your crank?"]

Jacob shakes his head, "He was very pleasant, and it's not what he said—it's what he didn't say. I'll forward you the file."

["Okay, so what does you scrying little brain say to you?"]

"He wants the FIS. Not to destroy it, like he's been banging on about, he wants to take over. Tristen, can you confirm this?"

du Condé gestures, ["That's exactly why Bob sent me here. To personally give you a heads up, and open our dialogue."]

Maria sees the big picture and puts her hands out, ["Let me get this straight...they plan to pull the Co-op members out of the UN and join the FIS after they rub us out?"]

du Condé wags his hand, ["Yes, but...no-no-no, not exactly. The SA is so deeply incorporated in the charter and enforcement side of the FIS that they just want to beat you down enough to win and make you their puppet."]

Maria laughs, ["Well, that ain't gonna happen!"]

Jacob gets a proximity alert and says, "Guys, I got a problem to deal with. Mind if I cut out?"

Maria, signs off with, ["Ya, hon, go take care of whatever, and one other thing... You and your people did a stellar job today so, when y'all get back, the first round is on me."]

Jacob immediately switches over to Gudici and Nelson's squad channels, "Wopper, You guys recover the bodies yet?"

Gudici is huffing, ["Ya, Buzzard, we're clear. Nelson and I are one-klick west of Moloka'i and ready for pickup."]

"We see you on the tactical. When the Warthog sets down I want you to load up and then turtle up. We have two Cottonmouths out at ninety kilometers and coming in hard."

Nelson laughs, ["I thought there was a truce?"]

Jacob nods, "Yep, Hedge, but that was with Security Services. These guys are ARC and they have not acknowledged the cease fire. The HWG will be landing in less than a minute."

Gudici radios, ["Roger wilco, Buzz. Load and turtle."]

Jacob switches to the CIC of the Iron Maiden that showed up just minutes ago, "Jerry, you get through to these clowns yet?"

One can hear the stress in Jerald Starks voice, ["Naw, they are not responding so...you're gonna haf'ta dissuade them or put 'em down yourself."]

"Their Command and Control is not responding?"

Stark laughs, ["Hell, I'm on line with Security Services and Arrakis is not responding to their calls! We just launched a squad of 47's in case you want 'em, but Security Services just offered a helping hand in taking them out. You just say the word."]

"Thanks but...let the SS know I got this."

[“Quick mop this thang, will ya, FM?”]

Jacob punches the throttle and shoots out towards the two incoming fighters, “I hear ya, Jerry. Don’t play with my kill.”

The ARC is pissed because the Annex shot down six of their F40g Cottonmouths and damaged four others. These two escorted those damaged one’s home and are back out looking for a target of opportunity. The Cottonmouths are vicious little fighters for sure—well armed and fast as hell. It’s just that the Thunderbolt was originally designed to make quick work of them being better armed, faster and just as maneuverable.

Jacob makes a low altitude, high-speed sweeping loop around them and instead of staying high and together, as Jacob would think they should, they split up with one coming down to play.

It would be obvious to anyone in the know that this is a classic baiting tactic, the idea being that if the Thunderbolt goes after the one that came down low then the other could boom on him from above. Instead of closing in on the one that dropped to low altitude, Jacob continues his wide loop and climbs for altitude setting himself up between them. Staying directly under the guy above, Jacob assures himself the dive avoidance advantage because the Cottonmouth will compress if the pilot charges in too fast.

After twenty or so seconds of this playing around, Jacob realizes that he has to break up this standoff so he pulls over into a steep dive towards the Cottonmouth below him and, as predicted, the fighter up on high immediately dives in after him.

The attack run, even with a missile in the air taking the lead, did not play to the Cottonmouth’s strengths and Jacob easily evaded both with a vectored pitch then loops around the two as he climbs.

Now with positions totally reversed, Jacob at high altitude and the two Cottonmouths at low altitude, Jacob notes that this was way too easy, “Waddya think, Bud?”

Over the tacnet, Bud says, [“Dafuq, is what I think. These guys are idiots. How `bout ya bag `em and let’s get outta here?”]

“You’ve been quiet this afternoon.”

[“Fuck, I’ve been sitting here fappin’ away at watching you work. What do you want me to do?”]

“Kick yet?”

Bud snorts, [“When you do something spectacular enough for me to kick you’ll hear me moaning like a bitch, okay? If in doubt that should clue you in.”]

Jacob laughs as he texts to the Cottonmouths through the IFF responder, <YOU TWO HAD ENOUGH? :D>

They text back <FUCK YOU SA POS>

<ITS JACOB GRAVES...YOU STILL WANT TO PLAY?>

<YA RIGHT AND IM THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND KMA>

<WE DONT HAVE TO DO THIS>

Instead of climbing towards Jacob, the two make a break for the grounded Warthog, and inside a few quick seconds each launch a cluster-bomb at it—which was actually dumb because the Warthog has an endless supply of missiles and guns by comparison. Four centipede missiles were pickled off and two intercepted the bombs while the other two chase the Cottonmouths away.

Jacob just shakes his head and texts, <HAVE IT YOUR WAY>

To evade the missiles the two fighters split apart again, and each is forced to drop another cluster-bomb in air-mine mode to take out the centipede climbing up their respective asses. Unfortunately for the leader, Jacob was already on top of him.

In a very tight turn, with Jacob hot on his tail, this pilot is astonished by the ability of the Thunderbolt to turn inside him. Before Jacob gets his reticle on target the Cottonmouth rolls up and over the Thunderbolt. Jacob pulls a reverse skid, rolls and when he pitches in a tight nose over—that's all she wrote. The 88 fires and the right wing and canard are both stripped from the Cottonmouth which starts to spin wildly out of control. The pilot immediately detaches the cockpit then ejects from that.

The wingman was already hauling it around from over five kilometers out, intent on getting the pilot who just shot his buddy down, and even though Jacob's fighter was in a low energy state that distance allowed him to make it up. In seconds the Thunderbolt was breaking Mach 1 and charges in for what looks to be a head on pass.

The Cottonmouth pilot was not going to chicken out on this, but Jacob is neither stupid nor suicidal. At one and a half kilometers out Jacob rolls out in a corkscrew away from the hail of bolts and the centipede missile fired by the F40g. As he passes the fighter, in his wake Jacob leaves three micropede missiles that punch headfirst into the Cottonmouth.

The wreckage, with the cockpit attached and the dead pilot inside, tumbles out of the sky and smashes onto the rocks below.

With Jacob doing a leisurely turn back for the Warthog, he hears Stark from orbit call out, ["That last one was stupid."]

Jacob quietly agrees, "What a dumbass."

["By the way, what was your score this afternoon?"]

"I don't know. I'll have to count it out later."

["We have clearance from Security Services to bug out. We'll recover the flight and the HWG and you if you want a lift."]

"No, I'm heading directly to the Spike. See you tomorrow."

["Righty'o! SA-Three-Six, out."]

Jacob is seconds from passing over the Warthog gunship that is already lifting off, "Wopper, you guys are clear to launch."

["We're on it, Buzzard Chow."]

"Need me to tag along?"

["Negative, we have the Iron Maiden watching over us."]

"Roger that. See you back at the homestead." Jacob then switches over to Bud's com, "We're outty!"

As the Thunderbolt rears upward and blasts into the sky in what pilots call Saturn-Five Style, Bud replies, ["About damned time! I'm signing off, sweetheart. Wake me if you need me."]

Finally Jacob is left to his own thoughts.

He knows the score, bagging one cruiser and four fighters for a career total of 201, and he does find satisfaction excelling in this bloody business, but it's the blood, the actual killing that he finds no joy in. He knows of one pilot that survived, and that's a plus, but many died by his hand today and that's the tragedy of combat. Whether you see the results of your handiwork or not it's all the same. The guilt will eat at Jacob, yes, but at least it won't eat him alive like it does others.

Peña scored big by taking out two cruisers, five fighters, an IR5, plus damaging another one, and the post-combat reflection for him will be severe for the cruiser he obliterated. Jacob takes note that he must make time for him and a bottle of rye and soon.

Jacob has the ability to push these thoughts out of mind when necessary and for the first time today he can breathe and let that mind wander but, as things go, it didn't wander far enough. At the edge of space when his fighter kicks into MDDSH and races off towards Onn, the sterile rocky-moon of Arrakis, it hits him like a slap to the face.

Few people are mentally connected at the hip like Jacob and Maria. He felt fear for her safety today but knew deep down she was going to come out of that desperate fight without a scratch. It's after the fight that he was really worried about because, as tough as Maria

is, there is always a point where overload will trump fortitude, and as tenacious as Jacob is even he could crumble in her position.

Jacob can suddenly feel Maria—he can feel her split between not knowing whether to laugh or cry from both the elation and despair that currently possess her. He can feel her joy from today's impossible success and he can also feel the lamentable dread of her personal loss because Angela, the indelible Ten Klicks, is gone.

A loss that touches him as well.

As Jacob slips past the magnificent desolation of Arrakis' one dead moon he chooses to lighten that burden and take possession of the latter—and for a fleeting moment tears well up in his eyes as he is overcome by that despair.

□□□□□□□□□□