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a bag of unwanted cat

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The red dwarfs of apón-Pup are part of a binary star system with the larger of the two over thirty-four AU away. The smaller B star has a handful of orbital objects and none of them had what a human would call a proper name-o for the longest time. In the mental and written Nefer Key manacle-speak they were represented by symbols that had more in kind with Korean Hangul glyphs, not interchangeable with their normal mental glyph language, and the original meaning of that writing style has since been lost over the last two-million Earth years after the Nefer Key integrated that dialectic symbology.

Most science and tech from those early days still held to those odd-ball glyphs as a descriptive attribute but, with human languages encroaching on their peacefully stagnant little universe, especially by English exploding onto the scene since the late 20th Century, Jason took it upon himself to come up with real names when he returned from a reconnaissance (i.e. sightseeing) trip in 1998.

Jason had a flair for languages, having been a pirate and all, and on this trip the one thing that shocked the hell out of him and Jacqui was the sheer variety and abundance of consumer products on the Earth. They were both enthralled by the endless choices of chain restaurants and they were also amused by how the people made great fun of them—yet frequented them with gusto.

They themselves had to hit the gym while on tour.

Rome had a robust market economy with products from the world over, and where Egypt and Persia kind of creeped the Nefer Key out Rome impressed the hell out of them. Rome had a system that they could wrap their brains around and they did hold them in high esteem. When they came back in the 9th century they were amazed

that things sort of slid backwards, but in the 17th century they were doubly amazed that the human beings were bouncing back.

This trip they bagged Abeeku, Jacqui, Jason and *le français*.

Shocked by how fast things develop with this species they decide that they should come back a little sooner than usual and thought that 300 Earth years should about do it. Reason being that just maybe, by then, the seeds of industrialization will take root.

They blew back into the system in February of 1997 and were completely blown away by what has transpired while they were gone. It was a herculean challenge to catch up because Jason knew English, yes, but his was clearly a Caribbean dialect, something useful when attending a Renaissance Festival but nothing comparable to what now dominates the planet. They stuck around permanently this time to study, record and sample everything they could until 2103 when they made the official first contact.

It was necessary because what took the Nefer Key 120,000 Earth years to figure out took this species just a few short decades to perfect and push towards commercialization. For the Nefer Key it was an eye opener to watch how humans went about developing spacial displacement drive. Where the Nefer Key see some pressing need then work towards developing a solution, humans, on the other hand, will tinker away and create solutions and then go out to look for those needs. To the Nefer Key this is decidedly an ass-backwards way of thinking and in their minds they hold all the cards.

So, here's Charles Washington, sitting in his home office being consoled by Jason and Marcus who says, "You know, Chuck. Nobody knew the affect your wife would have around here."

Jason adds, "You gotta see the silver lining, boss man!"

Charles says, "Silver lining? I feel like a bag of unwanted cat. Three years and these people have not warmed up to me! How am I supposed to do your job if they think I'm gonna flip their apple cart?"

Marcus shakes his head, "What do you think this job is?"

Jason laughs, "You *are* here to flip their carts!"

Charles shrugs, "How am I gonna build what the Nefer's want if these people avoid me? How's that possible?"

Jason leans in, "They've got a good thing goin' here! They don't wanna have that fucked up."

Marcus throws out, "Look, it took the people a long time to warm up to me. I went through the same shit and you have to be patient. And just so you know, because you haven't figured it out yet,

the Prime Minister on our little world is playing politics. It's a façade job because whoever is in that office has go through me before they can wipe their ass...and now that I think about it I never did clue you in did I?" Chuck shakes his head *no* so Marcus continues, "Okay, well now you know and the sooner you can take the reins the sooner I can bow outta here! What's holding us back is—your cards are not all on the table. There can be no secrets between us."

"Okay." Charles huffs, "You say the Nefer's really do respect our privacy. This is not a joke, right? They really do?"

"They respect our need for privacy totally. They don't listen in on our conversations. They don't rifle through our communications. They sure as hell could ransack our minds and get what they want but they don't."

"And why is that?"

"It's about trust through respect—even though they know we're conspiring with Earth, we're conspiring to do what exactly?"

Jason adds, "See, Star-man, we know they have toys that can wipe out entire planets, whole systems, and with that they feel pretty damned comfortable in their position. Hell, I would."

Marcus reveals, "In their far-far way back history the Grays were enslaved for a short period and when things got bad, faced with becoming Nefer tartare or not, they chose not and wiped that race out. When they apply themselves...well, I'd say they're a tad obsessed with exterminating threats. The Grays don't know how to fight but, I'll give 'em this, they sure as shit know how to destroy."

Chuck wonders, "Then why have us around?"

Jason laughs, "See, dude, we're the in-between go-to option 'cause for them they're all about either holding hands and Kumbaya, or playing the Daleks fuck you card."

Marcus prods, "Let me ask, if something were to happen and they needed us to come to their aid or defense would you do it?"

Charles thinks for a few seconds then nods big, "You got me there, Marcus. I would. In a heartbeat!"

"Good, because they already see *you* as in charge." Marcus then counts on his fingers, "Not only are you a general, but you're an astronaut, a walking encyclopedia of astronomy and astro-navigation, you're a student of military history, and to top it off you're an avid shooter who knows his shit. Like I've said I'm out of my league."

"You keep saying that."

"And I just spelled it out for ya."

Jason then smiles, "Star-man, the Grays know your objective is to tell the folks back home where we're at. They already know this so, no matter how you look at it, it's pointless to deny it or continue hiding it from 'em. You want their complete trust, right?"

Charles blinks twice, "Would be nice."

"Then spill your guts. Not everything, just the fun stuff! Make them part of our little intrigue. They'll get a kick outta it!"

Marcus drives it home, "You see, they know why we picked you was for that reason, and if Earth ever finds out where we're at it's because the Grays made a mistake. To them it's an acceptable risk if they can win you over by being open and trusting you explicitly but, like Jason and I, we figure you're in it for the species."

Charles then asks, "What if we...turn on 'em, maybe?"

Marcus laughs, "Well, you wouldn't. You couldn't! You'd get no cooperation from the yokels 'round here. They won't bite the hand that feeds them and, as you say, they give zero fucks about Earth."

Jason laughs, "Follow, dude? They've *not* been picking the best and brightest for their little eugenics experiment. Getting you four was a huge boon to the effort but you—you were hand selected for this gig. In the eyes of the Gray's you swing seriously big balls and they only like to work directly with people they respect. Marcus here has built them an army three times and every time he's gone back it had to be rebooted because of what we learned."

Marcus sighs, "This last time I threw my hands up because now I'm out of my league. Since then these people have gotten soft."

Jason frowns, "We've got a big-tough job ahead of us, mon." He then asks, "By the way, did you ever settle on the small arms options? The thirty com-block is still killin' it, right?"

Charles perks up, "Ya, the Kraken round, most definitely, and we decided on the Tavor V-series, with the quick change barrel, but that cyclic is hit and miss at low Kelvin so until we get that ironed out we're gonna go with a Galil platform to start."

Jason nods with approval, "That's kinda cool. Short round?"

"Zach and I are constantly debating that one but I think we got it narrowed down to the 357 SIG and the 40."

"Dude, that's gotta hurt bein' a forty-five guy and all."

Charles shrugs, "Everything's a compromise."

Marcus then clearly states, "And that is why you are here, General Washington." He then thumbs towards the kitchen, "I have to ask, what the hell have you been cooking? I've been smelling it for

two days now."

"It's Saint Patrick's Day!" Just then Rachel enters the room, "Hey, Prime Minister, look at this! It just came in."

Charles pushes his monitor around showing a picture of their daughter with a new born in her arms on his social page. His social page account is named "Chuck Barris" and his CIA contact was the person who came up with that one. Even though it's a fictional person he has still collected over a hundred friends. Only his children and the intel community know who this Chuck Barris really is.

Rachel yelps, "Oh shit!" She slips in between Marcus and Jason and sees the text reading, *Rachel Simone Washington*, and almost shouts, "Oh my God! She's gorgeous!"

Jason nods, "Primo, that is one cute little critter!"

"Hey Marcus..." Charles nods his way, "Luc and Lilith and Jason is going to be here for dinner. I know it's last minute but how 'bout you join us? I insist!"

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Over a plate of corned-beef and cabbage, Luc is surprised that he likes it, "I love your spicy foods. Mexican and, Thai being my fav and all, but this! If I'm going for bland then this is the bomb!"

"Oooh!" Lilith chomps down on another bite of meat and rolls her eyes, "Corned beef? Sounds like ass but, damn!"

Luc turns to Charles, "Collectively, our people classify a lot of what your species does as barbaric..." His eyes bug out a bit, "And I have to agree on some points!" His shoulders sag, "But, the payout, the results like this are just tremendous!"

Charles is amused, "I take that as a complement?"

"Oh, by all means, yes!" Luc then remembers, "Chuck."

Lilith adds, "Like, I used to think guns were abhorrent."

Jason laughs as he thumbs over at Lilith, "Ya, now the little misses here outclasses me at the range. It's humbling."

"My fellow..." Lilith smiles, in the know, "Nefer's, consider me unclean because I enjoy doing barbaric shit with my husband."

Luc adds, "Now that's a hoot-an-a-half because it's great sport for us to fuck you humans senseless! We think you're sexy-hot, but there is some resentment that all your Earth thingies are slowly creeping their way into our lifestyle...which they have!"

Marcus throws in, "I can't fault them for thinking that but it is small minded. Remember the PS2 consoles?"

Luc jumps on that, "You're right, I agree! It looks like we're being forced to evolve culturally. Too many old-timers *are* kicking and screaming while being dragged down that road, buuut—"

Lilith finishes the thought for him, "It is for our own good."

Charles just had a dose of clarity about the Nefer Key that wouldn't have been possible before the conversation with Jason and Marcus earlier that day. He looks around the table at Rachel, Luc, Jason, Lilith and then Marcus who clearly sees a unified future.

Taking a deep breath, Charles quietly says, "apón-Pup."

This is when he really-realizes how smart the Nefer Key really are when Luc blinks, and then looks at Charles while thinking out loud, "Greek for missing, and...Puppis, I believe?"

Charles says, "For the system here, yes."

"How appropriate..." Pleased with himself, Luc then asks in perfectly inflected French, "*Gros Rouge et Rouge Deux?*"

"Luc, look, the intelligence community assigns code names for things like...like with Delta Echo for example."

"Yes, we know about Delta Echo."

"No, that's a designation. The code name is, Dildo Express."

Luc's jaw drops, "That's so—"

Lilith again finishes his thought, "Fucking funny!"

Luc laughs, "That's a riot! What else can you share?"

"Ah, well..." Charles rubs his eyes, "Look, the MI6 has a Kiwi attached to the CIA and he came up with the coding scheme for this thing here and, well, it's kinda different."

"I'm all ears!"

Charles spins a hand between the ceiling and the floor saying, "Theirs-Ours, or..." Gesturing to Jason, "What Goofy-Foot here calls *Leurs* and *Notres*, this binary pair is code named, Dolphin Reel."

Lilith sighs, "Beautiful creatures!"

Jason to himself, "Ya, but they can be asshats."

Luc snorts, "How delightful!"

Charles clears his throat and, "Since you have this gray skin and no hair, well, it's a Dolphin coding theme!"

"Go on!"

"What they came up with for the two planets for Dolphin Reel are a bit off-color to say the least."

It was Rachel that says with a laugh, "Now I'm curious!"

"Well, *sashimi* is a dish from Japan and sometimes dolphin is on the menu so, it's Sashi and Imi.

Luc is cracking up, "Oh, my God!"

Lilith is grinning as she clings to Jason, "This is a scream!"

Astonished that this is going over as well as it is, Charles then points to Luc, Lilith, Jason and Himself, "You are Moko, Opo, you're Jack Sparrow and I'm Pelorus Jack. All of them famous Dolphins, except for you..." Pointing back to Jason, "Yours is a pirate."

Luc catches his breath, "This is the best shit ever!"

Charles then peers at Luc with a coy smile and a challenging look, "Luc, Marcus keeps talkin' up about how smart you are, but I wanna throw you a zinger."

Luc bows his head to accept, "I'm game."

"My last shot of Jim Beam if you get this." Charles adjusts in his seat and then, "The agents call your crew on Delta Echo something. The one hint I'll give you is that it's a play on words."

Rachel has already figured it out, so she turns and scolds Charles while laughing, "That's not right!"

Charles puts his hands out, "Don't say anything, Mud!"

Luc thinks for a second, aware that Charles knows that he has the entire human internet at this disposal and, even though he has supercomputers to mine it, the interface for him is an image of Luc's own mind digitally and seamlessly tied to his. The logical place to start would be with the code names and those that get a return on phonetic or rhythmic parings. He got one hit that, on the surface, makes no sense but with the human sense of humor it flashes at him like a neon sign because his crew was predominately female, and to top that off what Rachel said to Charles makes it obvious.

Luc gives a little smirk as he says, "Moko Harem."

Everyone cheers and explodes with laughter after Charles squints at him with, "Damn, you're good."

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