

LCTN: 32-TAURUS-5A (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76339.0301 (42.33pc from SOL)
TIME: 10:20zulu (local 288:07mst)

Kvasir is the name for the star 32 Tau. Originally the locals were calling it Odin but they missed IAU Open Registration by a few milliseconds so the posted alternative Kvasir it became. The names for the other key bodies in the system went through without a hitch but, as it turned out, Kvasir and Odin were interchangeable depending on which side of the Mead you were talking about.

Mead, that is Mead of Poetry, is a hot high-mass brown dwarf that is substantially a borderline low-mass red dwarf orbiting Kvasir at six AU. Kvasir is intensely bright but this far out it's the high infrared output of Mead that keeps this little system of thirty moons warm, specifically Fjalar (fē·a·lar) and Galar.

Galar is an iron-carbon planet and the main reason anybody comes to Mead. The moon is a witches brew of hydrocarbons available to anybody who wants to land and scoop or drill for it—smokers need not apply. Where Galar is hot, orbiting close to Mead, Fjalar is farther out where it's not so hot.

About the size of Titan, Fjalar is an icy Nordic wonderland. It is tidally locked and gripped in a perpetual glacial epoch with an exposed patch of liquid ocean the size Australia that continues around the planet under the ice. The waters are teeming with life but on what little crust there is on the surface only traces of moss and fungi cling in desperation.

Two industries that thrive here are refining and sport fishing.

With the exposed ocean constantly facing Mead, the outside side, the side facing away from the warm brown dwarf, is where this planet is at its coldest and where refining what is collected and brought in from Galar takes place. That operation is an ecological disaster zone about the size of Connecticut, and in spite of the constant protesting

by treehuggers over these industries, pretty much everywhere, the harsh reality is that there are no trees on Fjalar to hug and the pollution is contained and doesn't hurt a damned thing.

The inhabited region, the side closest to Mead, the side with liquid water, has been christened Svalbard, not New Svalbard, so if anyone ever talks of Svalbard then chances are they are talking about the one on Fjalar and not the one at the Earthly crossroads where the Arctic Ocean meets the Barents, Norwegian and Greenland Seas.

Svalbard here is the inverse of Svalbard there, and here the waters are encircled by ice sheets and mountains. Also, the sea in this here Svalbard is dangerous, not because hypothermia would kill you in minutes, it will, but because the local fish are large and would love a human popsicle while it was still bobbing like a cork. The apex aquatic predatory critter in this ocean is a smart water-breathing killer whale like fish the size of a 737 so if you're out to catch one of these things your boat will need to be the equivalent of a Zumwalt class destroyer.

Fishing here is a very-rich man's sport and people will pay a cool million to man a harpoon cannon for a week—all to bag a fish that tastes exactly like vertically farmed prime rib at a millionth the cost.

One of the few cottage industries that has sprouted up locally is international diplomacy, and over a thousand kilometers away from everything else, and thirty more away from the shoreline, is a very stylish convention-sized complex called Ny Hopen.

This Hopen, as opposed to the Earth Hopen, has long ago taken the place of Reykjavik as mankind's one-stop diplomacy shop. The locals built and maintain the facility but when you want to lease it they'll simply hand the keys over to you and leave—you provide your own catering and support staff. More isolated than secluded, for total security it can't be beat!

Three hours ago, and ten minutes ahead of schedule, Annex Chief Master Sergeant, Chang, set their Razorback down on the airfield about a half a klick from the Ny Hopen complex near Lebedev's Trident Star Clipper that landed just minutes before. Where Nicole has been head of security for this effort she was always focused on protecting her father, Robert Jackson. Chang is the lead for the revolving team that's been shadowing Michal Pitney.

Because they were ferrying FIS Secretary General Wilkinson, a handful of his advisors as well as Michal, they were able to sign out the executive coach from the Spike without any trouble. It was what these things were built for. After both of their ships were inspected inch by inch by Tillsdale's people who were looking for anything amiss, specifically nukes, they get a clean bill of health before Tillsdale was notified of the results.

Once Tillsdale was assured that it was Nicole Burke's face and voice on camera during the inspection of the Razorback, he and his entourage dropped right on in, and predictably so, an hour late. With his ship landing on the other side of the Ny Hopen complex, and out of sight of Nicole and Chang, they enter the facility at 9:58zulu—just as the umbra of Mead started to blot out Kvasir.

Nicole, in her JACC fighting suit, exits the building and steps up to Chang, and while popping her canopy, "Hey-hey, Master Chief! Three years and they're finally face to face. Any word from Top Side?"

Chang nods his head ever so slightly, "The Grigori just sent us an alert an' I'm wonderin' if you really want to hear this or not?"

With a grim smile, Nicole shakes her head, *no*...

As part of security, everybody is restricted to an archaic and forgotten WiFi in the ISM 2.4-GHz band which has an extremely short range even when boosted. This limits the feed they are getting from Jackson in the meeting to only his visual cortex as video-point-of-view as well as audio. It's not exactly the rich-dynamic interface they would prefer but at least it's something. During the talks nothing is allowed to transmit in real time from Ny Hopen but, as is the way of the Annex, the Razorback is in a 2-way connection with a fire team of three ghost-droids on top a mountain peak some twenty-three kilometers away.

All around Ny Hopen they have thousands of laser diodes that flash the site in a consecutive sequence every second in the exact same NeHe green-light at 520nm. Not in a direct beam but in a sweeping-flat dispersion looking for scattering or a break in the light. Get to within three or four clicks of Ny Hopen and you are going to be spotted cloaked or not. Taking advantage of this admittedly primitive but effective tech, the Razorback has its own green diode that is shooting at the mountain peak and sending all of Jackson's and their own real time live feed—which is then relayed to the droid's Razor parked on the ice another thirty clicks downrange.

When the ghost droids have something to convey back to them they flash the Razorback's skin with a laser in a slightly different 523nm frequency, anywhere in a narrow convergence, and since the Razor's skin will absorb both these light impulses the message will be received loud and clear without anyone the wiser.

Chang hands her a cigar, "Red, they said...six geese a-layin'."

Blinking her eyes, Nicole takes the cigar and, while looking at it she huffs, "Six of 'em...six. Fucking kOri assholes."

Chang bobs his head up, motioning for her to present him the end of the cigar, and as he lights it with a spotting laser in burn mode he adds, "Kuzma's Mother was authorized."

"*Mat' Kuz'ma.*" Sighs Nicole as she puffs then, in turn, lights Chang's and asks him, "Send Crackerjack the unlock?"

"Waiting for you. Just say the word."

As they both puff on their stogies, she notices the Trident pilot stepping out of his ship with a mug of hot coffee in hand, and as he waves to them and she waves back, "Relay it to the device."

After a few quick minutes of them enjoying their cigars and watching Kvasir fade away, sliding in behind Mead, Chang looks at her and says, "Baby Ivan is spooling up...we got ninety."

Both close out their view of Jackson's feed as it continues to transmit with theirs to the droids on the mountain top.

Nicole puffs on the cigar then tries to suppress a laugh and fails, "How did you remain a Chief for sooo damn long? Chang, of all people, you should have been a Field Marshal for fuck's sake."

Chang chuckles, "Sometimes it pays to be the least achieving in a world of over-achievers." With Nicole now laughing, he goes on, "Trust me, it was hard to do! If I could have gotten myself busted to squad leader I would have in a heartbeat." And with another puff he adds, "I was gonna retread after the first of the year anyway."

Nicole shares, "I endeared myself to my superiors by pissin' 'em off at every turn, and still got promoted. I'm glad Sandy ended up with the Thirty-Six. I would have hated that job."

"I hear ya, sista..." Chang smiles big, "How 'bout I buy ya a tall cold one when we're pushin' polygons."

"Lookin' forward to it!"

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"So, that's it. Three and a half years of your shit and you are gonna walk in here and throw out an olive branch like it's a Yule Log, just like that." Bob slightly snarls at Tillsdale, "Try again."

"Come on, mate! Why so suspicious?"

"Check your numbers, mate." Bob stabs his finger at the document in his hand, "You mean you are going to pull out all troops from the Pleiades if they, in turn, honor the expired mining patents your cooperative still lays claim too—for more than a century?"

Tillsdale gives him a boyish smile and a shrug, "Bob, out here the letter of the law only applies in spirit, and it's not like we're pushin' 'em out. We're offerin' a three percent gross or fifteen percent net to the current stake holders, whichever is higher! And, of course, think of the fiver we're droppin' on the local guvs!"

"Of course."

Wilkinson speaks up, "You know Tilly, babe, if you would have offered this years ago we wouldn't be sitting here now."

Michal adds, "Why the change of heart?"

Tillsdale looks at them, "Michal an' Stewie, we've been looking at the numbers. War is a tad bit expensive, and now that we've had time to evaluate your ops, the local golliwogs 'ave been only picking the low 'anging fruit. They've barely scratched the surface and there is so much more to be 'ad! Now, if they let the pros in those gollis will make way more ka-ching than they ever could on their own."

Wilkinson says, "We call 'em Wildcats, out of respect."

Tillsdale smiles, "Drillin' or scratchin' sod, it's all the same."

Michal asks, "So, as a condition, the Hyades will join the FIS?"

"With the TPZ treaty there's nothing holding us to the UN! All Stewie needs to do is to grease the skids for us and we're in!"

She looks to Lebedev and he adds, "Da, Michal, I can see your concern. My job here is to see peaceful end to this conflict. If that means losing Hyades to FIS then so be it. They are outside Thirty Parsec Zone and our plate is full inside it as it is."

Wilkinson asks, "What about those wildcatters who don't opt for this? What if they stick to principal and tell ya to shove off?"

"Those who fold we give 'em a tidy bonus and pull the troops. As for the others, well...they'll lose anyway and, believe you me, principal always bows to money in the end."

Bob's eyes bore through Tillsdale as he quietly parrots him, "Principal always bow's to money. Sure 'bout that?"

"Oh yea, mister white-hat here. You would be the exception."

Lebedev interjects, "Marshal Jackson, I believe we can find a way to bury hatchet between you and Security Services."

Tillsdale offers up, "As a sign of good faith we'll immediately stand down our forces on Taiji and Ngāti Whā. It ends now." And with a smile and pump of a fist he goes, "Waddya say, mateys? We're here to make the magic happen, not fuck spiders ya know."

Lebedev nods, "Da, I believe we can find copasetic end to hostilities. You know it would be nice to come witness treaties signing at FIS Assembly inside your Spike."

Wilkinson glances at Bob and Michal and then back to Tillsdale with a nod. "I don't see a problem. I'll put it up to a vote."

Tillsdale hops up and offers his hand to Wilkinson who stands to shake it, "Then we have an accord! Smashing!"

With Lebedev shaking Wilkinson's hand, Tillsdale turns to offer his hand to Michal and Bob who just look at him, so he prods her with, "Come on, Mikey! I'm not all that bad...well, not like they say!"

Michal, sitting like a rock next to Bob, shakes her head and asks, "Who were you going to pin it on exactly? I'm curious."

Tillsdale pulls back with a surprised look, "Come again, love?"

Lebedev looks at them and nods with a slight smile, realizing there is no reason to deny what they already know, "We paid the locals for information on our meeting, all under table but documented well. We knew the right party and we knew their price."

Bob looks at Tillsdale, "The kOri's have it out for Michal but won't go after her in a neutral territory, but here collateral damage will be minimal and your indignation would be felt by the entire Hyades and, from stumpy to garbo, they'll do anything you ask of 'em."

Michal adds, "This would allow you to move on Orion."

Bob nods in agreement, "The cascading effect means you'd take the whole region and, I have to say, it was well played!"

Tillsdale shrugs, "The kOri do need to be put down."

Bob nods in turn, "In due time but, instead of us half-stepping it out to get a face of super-nuke..." He points to Lebedev, "They have six, count 'em, six cobalt bluer waitin' for us up there." As Lebedev chews on that Bob turns back to Tillsdale and, in an app-window in his visual cortex he clicks on *Device Spool Unlock*, and says while looking at the confused Tillsdale, "Passcode set...diet of worms."

"Come again, mate?"

"*Dee-et der vorms.*" Says Bob in a crappy German accent, then he huffs a laugh, "But for us here it's more of a Jan Hus moment than a Martin Luther one, but ya got to be a student of history to know the significance of it all. Right, Vasily?"

Lebedev remembers out loud, "*Ya pomnya*, as many devils as there are tiles on its roofs, I would enter...and so you have, Bob."

"Tilly, we don't got a lot of time to explain but let's just say we'd thought it'd be advantageous for us to demonstrate and share with you a spooling-to-cascade event." Bob reaches out, "Something never done before in the wild! Let's experiment, shall we?"

Bob sets a miniature quantum-particle generator on the table and spins it like a dreidel. A small tear-drop shaped generator the size of a kiwi fruit, it spirals for a few seconds then falls over, taking long

and heavy rolling loops around the point where he spun it. It hits a napkin and this stops its movement.

Bob smiles, "We were saving this for a special occasion."

Tillsdale recoils, "Bloody blue-balls! It's spokes are missing!"

As Tillsdale bolts out of the meeting room at a dead run, with his entourage struggling to grab their stuff to follow, Wilkinson looks at the generator in horror, "Fuck-me-dead!"

Lebedev laughs and asks Bob, "What is output?"

"Bye Stewie! It's been fun!" Bob waves to Wilkinson as he races out the door following the others, then to Lebedev with a shrug, "Eeeeh, about two-oh-nine...two-twelve? It depends."

Lebedev pulls out an ice tray that was in the chair next to him, it has frozen vodka shots he was saving to celebrate them closing the talks, while asking Bob, "In pet-i-jewels of course?"

"Petajoules, of course."

Bob and Michal stand and step round the table to face Lebedev, and as they each take a shot glass in hand Lebedev asks, "We don't have much time I take it, yes?"

"Not much at all."

"You two must come visit me in Vegas³ soon and talk turkey for a spell." And as they raise their glasses Lebedev gives the toast, "It's been my honor to know you, my comrades."

After they down the shots, Michal cheers, "*Nostrovial!*"

"See you soon, my friend." Bob says to Lebedev, and turning to Michal he pulls in close to her and quietly declares, "I love you."

With a sly smile, Michal gets him back with, "I know."

And as their lips touch...

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Quantum particle generators are as ubiquitous as double-AA batteries were centuries before. These things are everywhere and are as safe as safe can be. At the size of a grape they power children's toys and at the size of a skyscraper they are used to drive space stations as large as the Carrie Nation.

The kiwi generators are used almost exclusively to power military tech, and with triple redundancy three are used in the JACC. These things have so many failsafe mechanisms that nobody thinks of them as dangerous—until now.

The universal kiwi design has two output spokes that cross over in the generator to restrain how the unit splits virtual particles, converting them into unstable-orphaned quantum particles, and to prevent a buildup however, these features are missing here.

Quantum particles like these are way overpowered, and this generator has now spooled up about a nanogram, one-billionth of a gram, where the containment tops off. With no place to go the excess cascades out and interacts with actual matter, and this happens just when Tillsdale is about half-way across the tarmac to his ship.

The blast was fifty-plus megatons in equivalency.

The droid's Razorback, the one sitting on the ice fifty-three kilometers away from ground zero, launches and zooms straight up and over the shock wave that takes two and a half minutes to reach it. Flying around the stem of the mushroom cloud, that is still hot to the touch, the ship fights violent updrafts as it dumps tons of dust and gravel out of the back of the ships hold. Consisting mostly of charred iron and diamond meteorite, with these updrafts and crazy winds the debris will be scattered far and wide.

When the hold is empty the Razorback picks up the fire team and high tails it out of the area without being seen.

With the mushroom cloud reaching all of seventy kilometers in altitude, and Ny Hopen now a massive crater filling with water, the kOri pack up their cobalt bluer bombs and make tracks for Saiph.

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