

111

roadside picnic

LCTN: CALAR-3 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: M45-B002 (133pc from SOL)
DATE: 2313ce-APRIL-15-TUESDAY
TIME: 09:11zulu

Always cautious, the Nefer Key exit their jump ninety-six light minutes away from Calar-3, and it takes them all of forty minutes to leisurely transit the 1.728 billion kilometers to the rendezvous orbit a mere one-million clicks above the surface of the brown dwarf.

Also always fashionably late, today by over eleven minutes, Delta Echo slips into that orbit which is clockwise by their orientation, and inside a few quick seconds after they drop out from their spacial displacement field the Iron Maiden blows in. Within a genie blink, it stops on a dime two clicks behind Delta Echo and, because of its orientation, in a counterclockwise orbit by comparison.

The beauty of space travel, or a chigger itch of an annoyance, is the constant reorientation when establishing up as opposed to down at any given system. Usually the axial hub above a counterclockwise spin denotes north, and there are some exceptions but they usually have to do with the orbits of objects out of synch with the host star like with Prypiat and Chernobyl out at 83-Tau.

At any rate, SA36 maintains its upside-down orientation while it immediately executes a full on one-eighty spin before dropping out from their MDDSH soap bubble. Then, while Delta Echo executes a nose down quarter-turn to orient their underside docking port to the tail end of the Iron Maiden for mating, a Warthog and four fighters drop onto the deck of the Maiden and roll up onto two elevators that descend into the hanger deck below.

With the alien ship at a right angle to the platform, and the more nimble of the two, Maiden Control calls out, ["Delta Echo, you are clear to approach for docking."]

Luc radios back, ["*Merci!* Thank you for the clearance, Maiden

Control. Please confirm, docking adaptor is the IBDM-five standard?"

["That's affirmative, Delta. Three meters with eleven petals."]

["Copy! Approach to contact at 0.025 meters per second."]

["Roger that, Delta. Docking approach 0.025 at contact."]

["Approach rate confirmed. Delta Echo on final."]

In the sixteen minutes it takes for the Nefer Key ship to make contact and hard dock, two bisE models of the Thunderbolt, and a captured F51a Gryphon-Anzu roll out of the first airlock, park and shut down beside the second airlock. Hopping out of the Thunderbolts are Jacob and Kati Connors, and sliding down from the Anzu fighter is Porter Macquarie, a First-Lieutenant from Security Services.

Porter steps up to Jacob and Kati, where he salutes them and then shakes their hands, "It's been a lovely outing, aye!"

Jacob smiles as he pulls the Major's insignia off his ACE suit, "Thank you again, Porter! It went off better than we thought it would. Sorry, but I have to bust ya back down to First Lieutenant."

Porter laughs while saying, "Truth be known, I'd rather have the stipend over the crown! Let Angie know it all went well?"

Jacob gestures over to the Warthog that is waiting for him in the airlock, "We'll let her know! See ya around on the Key!"

Porter trots off to board Michelle's ship sitting in the airlock, and as the airlock starts to close, Kati sighs, "What a great guy!"

"And a damn good pilot." Says Jacob as he waves to his son sitting in the cockpit of an F308g, in the airlock next to the Warthog.

"I sure do hope he makes it through what's comin'."

"I can't think about that." Jacob pats her on the shoulder and as he steps away towards the elevators, "I gotta go dismount. Thanks for all your help, Kati! An' that was some mightily-insane navigation you pulled out of your ass like a frickin rabbit!"

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Called the sail, this structure connects the top 'dome side' to the bottom 'dish side' of the Iron Maiden, with the trailing third of the expansive flight deck on the dish side running along both sides of the sail. Most of the sail is utilitarian, chock full of mechanical shops and stowage, but the forward quarter of it is the inverse² to utilitarian.

Called the stack, this massive space is a hotel like atrium with twenty-five structural decks. The whole forward wall is a triple layered

mix of transparent Alon and carbon diamond compounds that gives a fantastic view of the forward half of the flight decks and the underside of the dome segment. All walls and guardrails in the atrium are made of the same transparent compounds—making this place stunning.

With decorative plants, ivies and dwarf trees everywhere, if you were not already aware that you're standing in a military capital ship you'd swear to God that you were in a five-star hotel!

The bottom of the atrium is called the wet deck, which is a lounge, sports tavern, or rave, and that depends on the time of day and day of week. The top deck is the quarters for the Field Marshal. Deck 18 is where the ballroom-sized receiving foyer is, and from there a wide service-tunnel runs from the foyer all the way back 700-meters to the docking port at the very tail end of the ship.

Bob, Maria, Scott and sixteen-year-old Jessica are standing in the main foyer waiting for the Nefer Key representatives to show. For safety's sake, they use wheeled golf carts inside all of the SA capital ships, and even though these vehicles are super-fast they had to install governors to slow them down while in the ship. There are vehicles available that would be more in tune with ship operations, yes, but these are street legal and have a tactical value to them. Their largest eight-seat build that's bringing the Nefer Key to the foyer has been on several missions, and if you know where to look you'll find nine bullet holes that have not yet been patched.

Anyway, they were greeted by Jacob and Gerald Stark, the guy who actually runs the Iron Maiden, and with him is his sidekick known as Chinh Phung, whose proper name is Phung Thi Chinh. Like with Glados at the Spike, she is the SYLNa android that seamlessly links into the ships AI, and here she represents the ship as an entity onto itself. Every capital ship in the Annex has one, but what's kind of unnerving is how these androids refer to their ship in the first person.

The Nefer Key representatives, those being Luc, Lilith, Aat, Charles Washington and Robert Graves, are mentally dropping their jaws at the sight of the atrium. As they pile out of the cart they can't help but look around and drink it all in.

With Chinh making the introductions, and everyone shaking hands, she and Stark leave as Jacob guides them all into a twelve-seat conference room attached to the foyer. Three walls to this room are also transparent, and the sight of Calar-3 slowly rotating into view of the entire stack is staggering to behold.

Luc speaks up first, "Marshal Jackson, I want to thank you for meeting with us on such short notice."

Bob goes, "Not a problem, Mister de Prima."

"We hope this did not put you out considering the...tensions between your organization and those in the Hyades."

"Well, that is putting it mildly." Bob then points to him while saying, "And since you apparently didn't get a lot of love last January out at Home Base, and on the fourteenth last month with Kiplinger, it appears to us that you've come to the end of the road."

"I did hear you people tend to be...direct." Luc perks up with, "And considering that, on occasion, I have been accused of being nosy and meddlesome, I'm going to have Charles Washington speak for us, an' since you are the Consulate Marshal for the Annex—"

Bob puts a hand up to cut him off, "Please excuse me, I hate to disappoint ya here but you were very specific in your request to meet with me, and that's why I'm here, but my core function with the Steel Annex anymore is entirely ambassadorial to the FIS."

"We thought you were in charge?"

"Were, yes, past tense! I no longer have command authority. Today I am here solely to observe and advise. The person in charge of the Annex, in a command role, is Marshal Ramirez."

"Hey!" Maria gives a wiggle-finger wave towards them.

Bob then adds, "You have my sympathies."

Maria smiles at that, "We're on a first name basis here, Chuck! So, Luc, Lilith, Rob, Aat, you can call me Maria, or Mar, or call me a God-damned bitch! Lord knows I've heard that one come back at me more times than I can count."

Charles smiles, "Is Mar okay with you?"

"Sure, but you'll end up calling me a fucking cunt by the time you leave so, I'll give ya the option of using that up front!"

With all of them smiling, Charles snorts, "No...no, Mar is fine."

"Suit yourself, Chuck!" Maria pats the table, "Now, ground rules, you'll get no bullshit from us so I expect the same. I'm not gonna lie to ya, not gonna jerk you around, and I'll venture to guess that if you knew it was going to be *me* you ended up talking too today then we wouldn't be sitting here now. Am I right?"

"That...would have been a possibility had we known."

With wide-eyes she goes, "Very diplomatic way of putting it!"

"Thank you!"

"Let's get a few things on the table and out of the way first. You know, stow some shit and clear the deck before we tackle the bigger issue of world peace, m'kay?"

Charles nods, "Sure!"

"The first thing is, you wanted to meet, Scarab! Okay, now, obviously, like Robert here, we figured you were interested in using Jessie as a conduit between you and us, and our first thought was, oh hell no!" Maria then raises a finger, saying, "But, then, we noodled over it for a spell and, through our maniacal cackles an' hand-wringing we thought sure, why the hell not?"

Charles wonders, "Why the change of heart?"

"Well, Jessie can take care of herself and, honest injun, from personal experience, this'll all probably blow up in your face."

Charles asks, "Then she is our conduit?"

"It's a done deal as done can be!" Maria then leans towards them and, "Just so you know, you can't pull the wool over her eyes, just as she can't pull them over mine."

"I think we'll be able to hold our own."

"Think again...and I'm not saying this because I hold sway over her, or she has some undying loyalty to me. I have neither of 'em, no, she's not exactly what you could say is, housebroken, so..."

Jessica looks at Maria and quietly says, "da fuck!"

Maria tries not to laugh as she continues, "To give ya'll fair warning, our lovely and endearing Jessica hates everybody—equally. She doesn't play favorites, so if you fuck with her you'll...end up with a tiger by the tail. Again, you've been warned."

Jessica looks to Luc, Charles and Robert, "Guys, I'll be nice."

Robert says, "Why? We were just told you were a handful?"

Jessica shrugs with, "I may be an asshat but, today, I choose to be the nice guy." Then via her mind, Jessica says privately to Luc, "<Sit back and let this play out. Today, Maria is the handful.">

Maria nods towards Charles and Luc, "When we're done here you can get Jessica up to speed with what the job entails, cool beans?" They nod yes so she asks them, "Now, that wasn't hard, hu?"

Charles says, "No, honestly, that surprised us."

"Ya didn't have to fight for it...so, you can see that I'm not at all unreasonable!" She turns to Robert, "So, Bobbie, baby, it looks like you were the first conduit for the Nefer Key?"

Robert says, "For the Security Council members, yes."

"The permanent sitting members?"

"Specifically, yes."

"So, curious minds, who...is doing the job now? I mean, you're lookin' pretty spry for a dead guy!"

Robert shifts his weight and, "My son."

Maria shrugs, "A name would be good!"

He doesn't want to say, but goes, "Marcus."

"Marcus Graves, from Arizona? Who has a daughter, Sandra."

Jessica is fighting the laughter that is starting to overwhelm her ability to suppress it, and as she continues to fight laughing out loud, Jacob gives a little huff while maintaining a deadpan expression.

Robert says to him, "We were not expecting to see you here."

Maria goes, "I asked him here, and I could have had someone else bring what he's bringing to the table, in just a few minutes, but this was just too damned good to pass up!" She then turns to Luc with, "And since you claim that you're nosey and meddlesome, I'll have you know I'm the sullied queen bitch of nosey and meddlesome!" She then looks to Scott, "See, Scott, you happen to be the key-log to my nosey meddlesomeness today! When they said Charles wanted to meet you, claiming you were his distant issue, his descendant, it got us to thinking...we have nothing on you! We know nothing about your background, or your family or...anything!"

Scott says, "I wanted to keep it private."

"We respected that! Then again, we could have asked, but we decided to pry since they made that claim." Maria turns to Charles, "First off, I just want to say it is my honor to meet you, Charles. Here I'm sittin' across from *the* Charles Washington, the first man to step on the surface of Mars. A genuine hero!"

Charles says, "And it's my privilege to meet you, Maria. Your reputation precedes you and it has a long reach."

Maria nods, "Yea, that's what I've heard. Anyway, always nosey, we ran a comparison of Scott's blueprints to yours!"

Charles is taken aback, "You have access?"

"Sure do! President Cruz went all out to see that we could get to them when...we already had access, but sometimes it's just nice to ask for permission. You can see who your allies are!" She points towards Charles and almost laughs, saying, "The point is, Scott is not your descendant. Nope, sorry to say that was not a possibility from the RFLP comparison we ran. No, what we did find was even more interesting and I'd like to share those results!"

Luc speaks up, "Mar, if I may?"

"Sorry, Luc, everything is on the table today." She turns back to Charles, "What we found out, Chuck, is that Scott is not your descendant. Nope, this guy here happens to be your...ascendant! That is, your immediate ascendant."

Charles blinks in thought and goes, "oh."

Realizing she hit a nerve in Luc, and a sore spot on Charles, she takes a deep breath and, "Sooo, ya didn't know?"

"No, I didn't."

Jessica quietly says, "But wait, there's more!"

Maria goes, "Since we're on a roll, I thought maybe there's more to this? So, we started bouncing everyone's gene sequencing against everyone else's and ya wanna guess what we found?"

Charles shakes his head, "I'm rabidly curious!"

"Luc, would you like to share with everybody before I puke out what we came up with?"

Luc nods, and turns to Jacob, "Yes, your grandfather happens to be Marcus Graves, our conduit, but your grandmother, Hether, her maiden name is Washington. She's the daughter of Luke Washington, the son of Charles, and Luke's wife was...is, Rachel Kay."

Jacob's eyes squint while asking, "Kay? As in—"

"Yes, she is the daughter of Jason Kay. Your great-great grandfather, just like Charles Washington happens to be the same..." Luc points to Scott, "And Scott, here, is your—"

"Great-great-great grandfather." Jacob turns to Scott and, through clinched teeth, he asks, "So, what's your story?"

Scott shrugs, "My name is Abeeku. In my first life, back in the mid-seventeenth century, I was an Ashanti warrior in Africa before being captured and sold into slavery. In that life I escaped the sugar cane fields in Jamaica, became a Maroon fighter, and years later the Spanish caught me. They thought they killed me, but Luc and Marcus, your grandfather's namesake, rescued me and gave me a new life. Not exactly a meaningful one, but a pleasant one!"

"So, you are aligned with them, then."

"Not exactly one-hundred percent? Maybe fifty? I've sort of been AWOL, for quite some time, and they wanted to take this opportunity to reel me in, but in the Annex I've found a forth life. With my wife and daughter I have a family."

Maria lets him know, "Since you have working contacts with the United States military, we'll have to inform President Cruz."

Scott dreads asking, "So, my time here is up?"

"Not by a long shot! No, we're not letting you go."

Luc says, "With what's coming up, we want him safe."

"I'll find a way of getting him into planning, that'll work?"

"We'd rather take him with us—"

Maria cuts Luc off with, "Dude, not a chance in hell with what we've invested in him. Scott's valuable, but now he's priceless."

Jacob turns to Scott and motions between them, "Did you know about this before today?"

Scott shakes his head, "No."

Jacob thinks about it, then, "Since we have to work together then nothing changes between us. Our family connection stays in this room. That is, if you wanna work with me?"

"Yes, it's a deal." Scott nods, and he then turns to Charles, "Sorry I didn't keep up on our connection. I was very busy...making a whole lot of connections for the Nefers!"

Maria looks to Luc, "Before we get to the main course, I was wondering why you guys were spreading his seed so far and wide? You know, curiouser and curiouser!"

Luc looks at Maria, and after a pregnant pause in thought, he gives it up, "Abeeku, Scott to you, was a windfall to our eugenics program. In him we discovered a clearly partitioned genome with a small population of first-sib and first-cousin re-coition, but a genetic thread with no detectible congenital defect, disorder, syndrome nor appreciable chronic condition. In the clearest terms, he was...clean!"

Maria goes, "But that's not the reason."

"Exactly! See, before humans we spoke via telepathy, we still do, but it's not what you think. We developed a vocabulary of glyphs because with thought alone, it takes forever to convey a thought that another would understand because when everyone had their own dialect of thought then nobody can communicate, so...glyphs! While rubbing elbows with humans we had to revert to speech where we were rudely made aware that one can convey ideas faster and with greater clarity through your languages over our glyphs and telepathy. And, that was a very bitter pill for us to swallow."

Maria has a look saying, *what's the point*, "Okay?"

"Our focus, what we could not achieve with our own species after many a millennia, was to develop a bloodline with a stable and cognizant prescience. We've had members of our society develop this

trait but once they are discovered 'in the wild' and we try to harness this power, they become unstable and uncooperative. What we have learned with humans is that those who exhibit 'exacting' premonitions tends to have the foundation for precognition."

Jacob volunteers, "My aunt."

Robert adds, "Yes, clairvoyance did not set well with her."

"She killed herself."

"Tragically, and because your mother had difficulty dealing with her premonitions, we couldn't bring her on board."

Luc picks this up, "Females in our species do better with it where males in yours are more stable exhibiting the extreme skill sets. We're not even close to knowing why that is."

Maria asks, "But why breed Scott like a triple-crown winner?"

"Like most human males his premonitions were not cognizant thoughts per se, but a foreboding or a gut feeling. Scott's gut feelings scored off the chart, and where he ignored them—we didn't."

Scott turns to Maria to ask, "Considering the work, can you blame me for not turning down the job they offered?"

"Nope!" Maria turns to Luc, "Thank you for being candid!"

"You're welcome." He then points to her, "What about that main course you promised?"

"Since you insist." Maria shrugs, then says, "I talked to Cruz about your visit. The key players on Earth said they weren't involved so it was out of their hands and, you not liking the lack of results, ya'll went to go see Kiplinger. Ol' Kip told me that since there was no fighting going on he was not sure why you were upset?"

Luc protests, "Everyone knows it is coming!"

"Yes, Luc, everyone knows it's coming."

"If you know it then you can stop it!"

"Why the fuck would I do that?"

"How could you want war?"

"I don't, it's just that there's nothing I can do to stop it!" Maria leans in to say, "We all know they're gonna throw the first punch but we're not sure when that'll be? There is a lot of in-fighting and some want to false-flag an early start, which would be bad for both sides. If it's delayed long enough, then I know the conditions for SCC command to throw it, *and* I control those conditions."

"So, you are going to start it?"

"Not quite, I'm providing the triggers for them to start it."

"But how can you make the effort to help them!"

"Fact is, I'm not lifting a God-damned finger. Ya know, you'd be surprised by how little of an effort this is for me!"

Luc almost shouts, saying, "We can't have this!"

Maria smiles, "Here's Chuckie, whose supposed to talking for you, and there you go running your suck! Like you did with Kiplinger?" Maria nods, "And it got us ta thinkin'...what is it, if anything, can you do about it? The problem with the Annex is...you can't find us."

With Luc keeping his lips shut tight, knowing he screwed up, Charles volunteers the obvious, "Yes, we can't find you, and with that we have very little to fall back on when making demands."

"Exactly...but, what would you be willing to do if given the chance?" She shrugs, "See, we can't take that chance so we sent Jacob Graves, here, to go forth and track you down!"

Maria gestures towards Jacob who takes the floor, "The Orion Trust conducts a infrared sky survey on a regular basis and this was the IRAS-Eight survey to build on the Infrared Astronomical Satellite catalog. We piggybacked another set of sensors on the Orion Trust station out at HIP-31827, which is outside the expansion bubble but within the lightyear limitation. The toolset is called 'gravtrac' and with it we discovered a whole mess of activity out towards the star cluster M-46. This activity was profound in a region fifty parsecs out past the Calabash Nebula, but short of the partition marking M46 by maybe thirty parsecs." With Luc and Charles getting uncomfortable with this, Jacob dishes out, "So, yesterday we ran out there, short by about fifteen parsecs, and there we were able to narrow down our search to a binary red dwarf system, IRAS8-P7399X98U8."

Maria grins, "Curiouser and curiouser, what did you find?"

"Thank you for asking, around the smaller of the red dwarfs we identified a binary habitable system you call Dolphin Reel, and here we found a whole shitload of your ships, hundreds of them, all as large or larger than the Maiden, parked in all of the Lagrange Points in the system." Jacob nods towards the display at the end of the conference room table, "Here, on the monitor, I'd like to share with you some home movies we made while out at Dolphin Reel."

With the display going live, all from Jacob's point of view, "This is my point of view from my Thunderbolt. In the Razorback, a Warthog gunship configuration, we have one of our Deputy Marshals, Michele Kiel, in the other Thunderbolt is Senior Chief, Kati Connors. Piloting the United States Marine Corps, Bulldog fighter happens to be

my son, Lieutenant-Colonel, Peter Ribot, and in the Gryphon-Anzu is a Major, Porter Macquarie of Security Services."

Luc mutters to himself, "Principal of Segmentary Opposition."

Jacob wonders what he said, "Come again?"

"It's nothing...please continue."

Jacob goes, "How 'bout we let the audio speak for itself?"

The audio-chatter part of the pilots flying around the huge ships goes live, with Porter Macquarie saying with some astonishment, ["Fuck me! It's like a bloody Roadside Picnic 'round 'ere!"]

Michelle asks, ["What in the hell is a roadside picnic?"]

["You should watch the movie if ye be wonderin'!"]

Peter Ribot goes, ["I thought it was kinda dull."]

["Aye, but it does have a huge cult following!"]

Peter snorts a laugh, ["The movie is so boring I wanted to slash my wrists by the time the credits rolled!"]

Katie asks, ["Pete, isn't your family in show biz?"]

["That's why I watched it. My brother-in-law, Carlos Sanchez, wanted to do a remake and we had to talk him down."]

["Everything is a remake of a reboot anymore."]

["Fuckin' tell me about it."]

Michelle laughs, ["That's the truth!"]

Jacob goes, ["Okay, guys, do we have the counts now?"]

Michelle says, ["Yup, we got 'em!"]

["And?"]

["Here it's two-hundred and thirteen. Over on Lagrange-Four it's one-ninety-five. The two L2 points have sixty-five behind Imi and Seventy-three behind Sashi. The barycenter in the middle has—"]

Katie cuts her off, ["Shelly, you got that missile farm, right?"]

["Yea, I do."]

["Couldn't we just blow the whole kit-n-kaboodle an' scram?"]

"Well, you get the idea!" Jacob has cut the audio feed, and as they continue to watch them buzzing around the huge ships in the L5 region, Jacob then points towards Sashi, "And what does that look like to you guys? Delta Echo? If I were a betting man it looks like they may be heading out to a hasty rendezvous, maybe?"

"Fucken hell." Charles mutters to himself as the Anzu fighter pops its landing gear and presses them to the side of a massive ship.

Jacob hears this and goes, "Not only were they not ticklish, these leviathans were totally non-responsive to us buzzing around them. We flew all over the area and got dick for a response."

Charles says, "If we come after any one of you—"

Maria finishes with, "You'll be coming after all of us."

Jacob adds, "That's how we rock."

Maria looks at Luc, saying, "Peace is a wonderful thing, Luc, but it's at a premium. What people like you don't realize is that peace at all costs, costs all the things."

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At the ship's central kiosk, on the far edge of the atrium on Deck 18, Jessica is standing there with the Nefer Key representatives, "Luc, Lilith, I'm looking forward to working with the two of you."

Lilith smiles at her, "Yes, that's two of us."

Luc, still butt sore, adds, "Same here."

Jessica switches over to telepathy and says to both of them, <"You'll be surprised how easy I am to get along with!"> She then thumbs over to Charles and Robert while reverting back to verbal speech, "Scott's free if you want to chat with him, I need a couple of minutes with these two!"

"Sure!" Luc nods with a smile, "I am looking forward to our future encounters. You seem like a lot of fun."

With Luc, Lilith and Aat stepping off towards Scott, standing by the conference room with Bob and Chinh, Jessie turns back to Charles and Robert with a snarl, "We do not talk about my brother."

Charles goes, "Aaaah, I was just about to ask."

"Let's clear the air up front, my brother is what the Nefer Key has been striving for, so get them to bow out of the Geisha Hut crap! Greenfield your involvement because the next shit-storm that's comin' will blow up in your faces. So, get it done!"

Robert goes, "We were never involved with that side of it."

"Doesn't matter! If your fingerprints are found on it, in any way, it will taint you, the people will hate you! Bow out now."

"Luc has invested a lot of time and effort to get—"

"You're not hearing me. The Nefers will get access!"

"Will Luc be able to talk to him soon?"

"In a couple of years, maybe?"

"I think Luc wants to talk to him sooner than later."

Jessica cringes slightly, "It's not that simple."

Charles dares to ask, "How bad is it?"

Jessica huffs, "I'm trying to get my brother to adulthood without him having a psychotic breakdown or suicide."

"It's that bad?"

"You have no fucking idea." Jessica is about to cry when she says, "He's a little boy! What he sees *everyday* is horrific beyond words. He's a small child, and he sees and experiences things that *nobody* should ever have to see."

Robert says, "So, it's that bad."

"It is that bad!" Jessica pulls it together with, "Luc will get to meet him, and talk to him, in just a few years—when he is stable. The one condition will be that Luc cannot ask any questions."

Charles huffs a laugh, "Seriously, no questions?"

"Not a one, and you know what's funny, Luc will fuck that up!"

Robert goes, "No surprise there. Oh, to be a fly on that wall."

Jessica snickers, "Don't worry, Robert, you'll be there!"

Charles asks, "Can you give us anything to convince Luc?"

"Twenty-seven." Jessica pulls a small gift card with balloons on it, and hands it to him while saying, "Open it and take a look!"

He opens the card and written on it, in a child's handwriting is a nonsensical math formula: $20+7=\text{☺}$

He shows it to Robert who asks, "What does this mean?"

Jessica shrugs big, saying, "When you guys figure out what twenty-seven means, then you hand the card to Luc!"

"When do you think we're gonna meet?"

"Don't ask, Seth will ask for you."