

Destination Azahar

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CONTENT: exhib ScFi

UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 33 - Settling In

Zephyrus received clearance to approach the Azahar spaceport behind *Chronos*. The two ships had arrived within an hour of each other. *Chronos* had already advised Azahar control that *Othello* was still in Earth orbit when they left and could be expected within a week or so.

Some of the CSM volunteers had opted for the standard augmentation package, but others followed Ensign Clark's lead and went for strength and speed, but less mass and a lower center of gravity.

Chester's den mother, Sonia, was very pleased to be pregnant again. She was prepared to do anything for Chester after he had the medical technicians turn back the clock for her. She looked just like she did in high school when she was the homecoming queen. She loved sex now that she had discovered men with dicks more than five inches long. Front door, back door and throat were all fun. The previously beaten down and broken woman craved contact with a big dick. She denied Chester and his friends nothing and was thrilled whenever she was allowed to take on three at once.

Chester remained short of the two-meter stature that Miguel had selected. It was a bit strange for him to look up instead of down at Miguel when talking with him, though. Chester had even considered shedding a couple of inches after he had bulked up, to make negotiating tunnels and passages easier. But that didn't appear to be necessary.

Miguel had increased his stature and greatly increased his equipment. While he fell far short of Big Bud, he now sported a much longer and slightly thicker weapon behind his fly. Martha and Veronica were adjusting to being concubines and were very comfortable with Miguel, both socially and sexually. Martha now looked more like Veronica's older sister instead of her mother and continued to sport large breasts that could completely engulf Miguel's new cock. Veronica stuck with a trimmer athletic build. She could run, jump, swim, play tennis and engage in other physical activities without her unfettered tits getting in the way or bouncing painfully.

Martha and Veronica had become insatiable sex kittens and believed that they were only days away from breaking down Chester's incest inhibitions when he was assigned his own pod in Barcino and moved there with Inez, Dorothy, Judy and Sonia.

It turned out that both mother and daughter shared an infatuation with anal sex. Neither had ever tried it before, but Martha hinted that she liked what he was doing when Miguel teased her backdoor while plowing the front. When Martha heard Marvin's concubines' claim that he was the all-time backdoor champion, she lobbied for a tryout and Miguel finally relented. Being sandwiched between the two powerful men was the pinnacle of Martha's sexual experience.

Inez was not happy with her lot in life. She broke down and started crying while visiting her brother one Saturday afternoon. "He doesn't want me!" the distraught girl wailed. "He's had sex with everyone but me! Why doesn't he think I'm pretty enough to take to his bed?"

Miguel was at a loss, confused, and very conflicted. His sixteen-year-old virgin sister was complaining because his best friend *hadn't* fucked her. "You're very pretty and incredibly sexy," Miguel told her, but she wasn't convinced even when he added, "If you weren't my sister I'd jump you in a heartbeat."

Miguel had to backpedal when Inez pointed out, "There are plenty of brothers and sisters having sex around here. Even mothers and sons are known to fuck and nobody thinks anything of it. Maybe I can come live with you?"

Martha and Veronica stifled their chuckles at Miguel for painting himself into a corner, but didn't fare any better when they tried to help. Martha sighed, "I must have done too good a job of raising him to respect girls."

All eyes turned to Miguel when he snorted while trying to hold in a laugh. "What?" He asked defensively, "Chester is always very good to women... until now, it would seem. I really can't talk to him about this. Even though you're my sister, it's really none of my business."

"*What!*" Veronica exploded with her fists on her hips, "That asshole brother of mine locks Inez in a closet and you're not going to do anything! Just wait until I see that insensitive jerk! I'll...!" Veronica was shaking a fist in front of her face.

"You'll do nothing!" Miguel said emphatically. "I can't risk someone seeing you pounding on your brother. You could be zapped and recycled before I know anything about it!"

"They wouldn't... Yeah, I guess that could happen, huh?" Veronica slumped down almost as depressed as Inez. "This is so lame. I have a perfect excuse to razz my brother and some stranger might kill me to protect the jerk. This sucks!"

"Maybe not," Martha mused while tapping her chin with her index finger. "Where is Chester now?" Martha asked Inez after whispering something in Veronica's ear that got her laughing.

A wary Inez hesitantly answered, "He's giving Judy and Sonia a break from the kids by taking them to the waterpark with Dorothy. Why? What are you two going to do?"

"Nothing evil," Veronica assured Inez; then blew it by adding, "Well, not evil enough to get us recycled."

"Veronica and I would like to go to the park after we freshen up a bit," Martha said as she traced Miguel's jaw with her finger and kissing him briefly. "Let's make it a family thing. Why don't you take your sister to the park? Nikka and I will join you in a bit." She patted Miguel's cheek with her open hand and withdrew, dragging Veronica by the hand.

Miguel knew that his conniving companions were up to something. He had foolishly worried that his sex life was going to suffer by have his heartthrob's mother along, but her mother had turned out to be every bit as hot and much more creative than her daughter. Her repertoire of sexual games was impressive and her seductive ploys endless. He thought about bracing Chester that a storm was brewing, but decided that it might be better if he could play the innocent in whatever the pair was scheming.

Chester was surprised to see Miguel and Inez at the kiddy pool and jumped out of the water with a baby in his arms to greet them. "*¡Hola, compadre!* What brings you guys to the kiddy park?"

"I couldn't believe it when Inez told me you were being so domestic. This is a totally different side of you." Miguel seemed confused when he added, "I keep getting these flashes of Singapore, Rio de Janeiro and..."

Chester's eyes cut to Inez and back to Miguel. He held up a hand to stop Miguel, handed the baby he was holding to Inez, and pulled Miguel aside. "That's the past, my friend, that's the past. I'm a family man now."

"You have four amiable companions, Chester." Miguel looked past Chester's shoulder at Dorothy and his own sister. "At least two of them are as young and every bit as hot as those twins in Singapore. Man, Dorothy looks like more than you deserve, and my sister...! There are guys who'd give up their left nut to tap her. Tell me, is she as good as she looks? I'll bet that Singapore chick isn't half the..."

"Miguel!" Chester's stage whisper could be heard a hundred meters away even without Darjee nanite-enhanced hearing. "Don't talk like that about your sister, man. She's a nice girl, and she's still a virgin."

Miguel shouted even with Chester trying to shush him, "Still a virgin! What's wrong with you, man? Are the other women in your pod working you over that much? Who's in charge of your house? You or them? If Inez belonged to me and wasn't my sister I'd let her know just how sexy she is two or three times a night!" Miguel relaxed his neck and let his chin fall to his collar as he shook his head. "I wouldn't be able to help myself."

"Will you not yell about things like that around the kids, please?" Chester was clearly agitated and, more surprising to Miguel: he was embarrassed!

Just about then Martha and Veronica arrived in matching wraps and micro-bikinis. The brightly colored scraps of cloth were hardly more than the joke about two Band-Aids and a cork, but in some of the colony's parks they would be overdressed. The wide brimmed droopy hats weren't needed to protect them from the sunshine, but they did lend a dramatic effect to the ensembles.

The two women bracketed Miguel and gave him a kiss on the cheek as they squirmed against him. He put an arm around each woman's shoulder and the whole thing would have been no more than the old PG-13 rating had they not made such a production of massaging his ribs with their breasts.

"Mom? Nikka? What are you doing here in those outfits?" Chester was clearly shocked and more than a bit embarrassed. He kept glancing at Inez to see how she was responding to the show featuring her brother and two wild and crazy sex fiends.

"What?" Martha stepped back and did a surprisingly graceful pirouette considering that her beach slippers were four-inch come-fuck-me platform heels. "This little thing? I just threw it together at the last minute. Don't you like it?"

The string of the bikini was totally hidden in her butt crack and the nipples on her unfettered breasts would have worked out from under the tiny triangle of material that wasn't big enough to conceal her areolae had her nipples not been swollen enough to catch on the thick hem around the perimeter of the soft patches of cloth.

Chester got wood even though Inez was giggling and the target of his arousal was his mother! Shifting his gaze to his sister didn't help a bit. She wasn't quite as graceful as Martha when she did her pirouette, but her slight clumsiness only enhanced the effect of her trim curves and rippling musculature. Chester's wood was turning to iron and there was no chance of hiding it.

Veronica cooed, "Ooh, is that for little old me?" She stepped close enough to stroke Chester's cock through his shorts with her open hand before he jumped back out of her reach. Veronica laughed at him before telling Inez, "You're one lucky girl to have a babymaker like that in bed with you."

Inez dropped the hand that had been covering her giggles and wailed, "He doesn't think I'm good enough to sleep with! He never touches me! I think he's sorry he picked me as one of his companions. He clearly likes to bed the others, but I remain unwanted and untouched. I never even get the chance to suck him!"

Chester was as confused as he was shocked by Inez's outburst. It eclipsed his being ashamed of his sexual reaction to his mother and sister. "I... But... you're a virgin, and I

didn't... Huh? What's going on here?" He looked at his longtime friend, who was retreating to give the three women room to work him over. "Miguel?"

"Hey, this is none of my business, buddy." Miguel shifted his attention to the baby that Inez had given him. The ploy was an obvious attempt to extricate himself from the pending melee.

The two underdressed women bracketed Inez to comfort her. Their petting of the gorgeous girl did nothing to weaken Chester's erection.

Dorothy had been quietly laughing in the background. She moved to the edge of the wading pool behind Chester and divided her attention between the three kids playing in the water and the three women in a cluster in front of Chester. She did her best to hide her mirth as she exclaimed, "You've *never fucked her*? I'm so sorry Inez. I thought that he was just keeping you for himself when he never included you in one of our group sessions. I had no idea he was being such a beast to you! I'm so sorry for being so oblivious to your suffering. I promise to pay more attention to you... starting tonight!"

Chester swung around to confront this new threat. Dorothy showed a lot of backbone as she stood up straight and giggled while looking him in the eye.

"You, too?" Chester knew that he was surrounded with fewer prospects for survival than the Seventh Cavalry at the Little Big Horn if he tried to fight back. He relaxed his shoulders and sighed as he turned back to face the original threat.

Martha and Veronica had upped the stakes. Inez had been stripped naked and was being fondled by his mother and his sister!

"How could you ignore such a pretty flower?" His mother asked as she stroked the tangled mat of hair that covered Inez's pubis.

Veronica couldn't speak until she released a turgid nipple from her mouth. "You should be ashamed of yourself, brother. And, you have no idea what you're missing! Inez responds like a well-tuned sports car."

Chester held up his hands, "I surrender! I'm sorry if I've upset or insulted you, Inez. I've been trying to do the right thing by you. I've always found you attractive. I've done my best to be respectful because I really like you, and you're my best friend's sister." He walked up and put his arms around the naked girl who tucked herself into his strong arms and began crying softly.

It took almost a full minute before she looked up at Chester with red and swollen eyes. "So, are you going to fuck me yourself, or would you rather trade me to someone who will?"

Chester busted out laughing, "You've been hanging around my vulgar sister far too much! It will be my honor to do the deed. Do you want it here on the picnic table, or can you wait until we get home and find a spot that's a bit more comfortable?"

"I can wait," Inez answered as she wiped the tears from her eyes with the backs of her hands. She gave Chester a wicked smile, "But not very long. Your mom and sister have really got my coochie itching!" She accented the remark by gently rubbing her sex with her left hand.

"Can you watch the kids for a while?" Chester asked Dorothy as he took Inez by the hand and led her toward the exit. "It seems that Inez and I have some long overdue business that needs my urgent attention."

A beaming Inez turned back and mouthed, "Thank you," just before she and Chester disappeared.

"Well, Christmas is coming a bit early this year, but I'm not sure who is the recipient of the present that's about to be opened," Dorothy sighed.

"Has anyone looked at a calendar? Christmas is only days away," Martha remarked.

Adm. Grayson did his best to not get irritated by the marine guards doing their thing as he approached the CIC. He'd wanted this meeting in his office to avoid all this, but had allowed Colonel Bryant to talk him into using one of the high-tech briefing rooms attached to the command center.

When everyone was finally seated, Grayson turned to Lt. Col. McClusky, "I trust you're adjusting to the bizarre joke someone at headquarters foisted on us by scrambling together marine and navy ranks, Colonel."

He didn't wait for a response before adding, "Reading your record reminds me a bit of myself except I would never engage in or even approve of your off-duty activities. But this is a whole new ballgame and few people out here will bat an eye about any of that.

"You are here at my request because of your planning and operations skills. Air operations against Sa'arm capital ships will not be a part of your current duties. This isn't the 1940s. The Sa'arm have very effective targeting systems and defensive weapons. Scores of attack craft are destroyed before the defenses are overwhelmed enough to allow a few strike planes to deliver ordinance effectively.

"Colonel Gotti here has been training with some experienced tunnel rats to develop strategies and tactics for close combat in tight spaces. He will be assaulting the Sa'arm using underground tunnels. I can't see any way for you to support his objectives.

"Colonel Bryant, on the other hand, is planning a classic beachhead assault and can benefit from classic SAM suppression, ground attack, and close air support missions. Pilots and ground crews are in route to Azahar. Most of them are new recruits, but there should be enough experienced personnel for you to create training programs."

Col. McClusky looked around the table before focusing on Grayson, "What is the objective of the beachhead?"

Grayson replied, "The overall plan is to neutralize a Sa'arm gestalt that has invaded a system and created a colony. They'll be allowed to establish a colony from a hive ship; then we're going to take the planet away from them: Colonel Gotti will root them out while you and Colonel Bryant distract them. I want the two of you to draw the Sa'arm into large-scale ambushes on the surface."

"Tall order," McClusky remarked with a nod.

Sergeant Waters looked up his buddy Raymond Budzinski shortly after processing in at Camp Timmons. Budzinski directed him to the newly promoted Lieutenant Clark for permission to have Misty fly him and his surfer pals to the east coast to check out the waves. It turned out that the top daredevil pilot, a girl named Nancy, was off-world at the moment.

Misty was every bit as skilled a pilot as Nancy, but she didn't take chances. Talking her into lowering the ramp while flying low over the ocean at wave top level to let crazy people jump out with surfboards would be a challenge even for these bronze-bodied surfing gods.

The orange color of the water had the surfers disoriented at first, but the white foam and brown sand were very familiar. One beach had ten-meter waves building up more than three kilometers from shore. The tops didn't begin to break until they were 100 to 200 meters offshore.

A quartzite ridge jutting from a peninsula broke the left flank of the wave sets. It was a few miles across the sets to where the continental shelf tapered into deeper water delaying the buildup and break until just before the waves hit a cliff face. It would be suicide to ride the center of the long waves into the breaking zone or to within 200 meters of the shore on the right flank. But even a beginner could ride to the sand on the left flank when the waves were breaking after they reached the ridge. The experienced surfers cautioned the others that low-low tide made the ridge a deathtrap.

The pickup had netted some really nice boards as well as babes. The replicators made replacement boards as easy as picking one from the list and collecting it from the big replicator facility in the colony supply room. Having to use breathing masks was a bit of

a nuisance, but the hardcore surfers didn't let it distract them from catching some bodacious waves.

The stretch of beach in the lee of the ridge became a popular place for people to play in the water and watch the idiots challenge the Grim Reaper on little pieces of fiberglass, Styrofoam, and wood. It became popular enough to warrant the installation of a domed observation point and transporter nexus on the cliff overlooking the breakers.

Another tourist attraction was the artificial lake. Margret had added a refrigeration plant near the end of the pipe. The slurry of ice and water it discharged onto the rocks maintained a freezing temperature for scores of meters downstream where the hot atmosphere and direct sunlight finally melted the last of the ice. The current was gentle enough to allow a cold layer of water to build up along the bottom in the deeper sections.

Feeding stations were installed at various locations down the length of the lake, and with the help of the biologists from Earth and their frozen cargoes, Azahar soon sported a small population of fish. This would be the only animal life outside of the protective domes for many years. The vegetation placed along the shoreline remained stunted by the high concentration of carbon dioxide, but some aquatic species fared well in the warm shallows and the now cool depths.

Greenery and other organic colors were appearing in a number of the domed parks and playgrounds throughout the common areas of the colony. Even this limited landscaping lessened the nostalgia in most people, and increased it in only a few others. The AI collective was baffled by the way plants and animals calmed the mood and attitude of the most barbaric of the humans. Here and there a ship's AI began to allow small caged animals to be brought along when they were present at an extraction.

The marines who were calm and relaxed, almost civilized, while in an Azahar recreation area, seemed to reach their aggressive peak faster and sustain that peak longer when hostile behavior was again required. The AI community considered this a paradox that required further study of the humans.

Within a week of arriving at Azahar, Chester and Miguel were aboard the new *Tarawa*-class assault ship *Veracruz*. Both men had volunteered for duty as Marines, expecting to be assigned to a combat platoon. They were baffled to learn that they had each been inducted into the Confederacy Marines with the rank of Commander and were assigned to a combat engineering company. Their military training would be worked into their schedule, but their first duty assignment was to participate in creating the tactics and equipment needed to neutralize entrenched Sa'arm.

Their first training mission was to find and map the underground complex at Camp Timmons from orbit. Colonel Bryant outlined a war game scenario where one company would defend the complex and rest of the battalion would assault it. He had to break up

some of the companies to separate those platoons who had knowledge of the complex from those who didn't. Only Marines who had no knowledge of the network of tunnels could participate in the assault. This increased the defense force to the equivalent of more than two companies.

The reactors installed at Camp Timmons were the clean, environmentally friendly Darjee fusion generators. No one wanted to contaminate Azahar's atmosphere with the dirty isotopes typically discharged from Sa'arm reactors. Once the geologists in the assault company had identified all of thermal plumes originating from the surface and eliminated those that were of geothermal origin, one of the remaining plumes was marked dirty by an exercise referee.

Chester designated locations for seismic sensors and technicians dispatched instrument probes to soft land at those coordinates. Their initial source for a shock wave was a 2,000-pound (900-kilogram) granite sphere that acted like a random meteor. It proved to be inadequate both in impact accuracy and sound wave production. The next device was of similar mass, but it soft-landed in a precise location before detonating a sequence of shaped charges that sent sharp shockwaves into the ground.

It took a few detonations and several hours for Miguel to analyze the wave patterns and create a general map of the natural layers of rock in the target area and develop a general plan of the underground facility. The process of placing sensors and analyzing the results usually took weeks, but with the assistance of the AI and a group of skilled technicians, a lot of the grunt work that Diego and Rawlings generally did themselves was distributed among several others. There was no substitute for the intuition of Diego and Rawlings, but the help they were given greatly accelerated the process.

With a subsequent group of sensors and a device of Chester's design that looked a lot like a pile driver, Miguel and the AI were able to use the interference patterns from the echoes off the deeper rock layers to create a three dimensional map of the underground facility. Details such as blast doors and the interior structure of the massive chamber could not be precisely rendered from the seismic data, but the general size and location of rally points and the network of tunnels were shown in remarkable detail on the diagram.

Commander Porter had no prior knowledge of the replica Sa'arm complex at Camp Timmons and used Miguel's map to plan an assault that would isolate the Sa'arm units in the staging areas by establishing ambushes that intercepted reinforcements.

Acoustic sensors and ground penetrating radar would be used to detect Sa'arm units that tried to reinforce those under attack by independently tunneling from other staging areas rather than follow the existing passages. Porter's plan detailed the deployment of acoustic mines to make independent tunneling hazardous to the Sa'arm. He believed that his marines could defeat the Sa'arm if he could limit the rate at which they could engage his troops.

Veracruz dropped Porter's command in a single wave along with a score of tunneling machines. The Marines were underground in minutes and making their way to their objectives. Commander Kehoe had his entire company and the bulk of Charlie and Easy Companies defending the complex. This put the attacking force far below the historical five-to-one numerical superiority needed to successfully assault an entrenched enemy.

The Sa'arm units were as deaf as a post, and placing that restriction on the Marines playing the role of the Sa'arm defenders in the tunnels while giving them enhanced command and control communication capability was a challenge. But it didn't matter when units from other parts of the complex headed toward the points of attack. If the defenders remained in the confines of the existing tunnels and were restricted to the weapons that the Sa'arm were known to prefer, then they couldn't get enough combatants into a firefight to repulse the attackers.

Clark and Budzinski had placed shaped charges in many of the tunnels they defended that would have decimated attackers using the existing tunnels, but Porter's men made their own tunnels and only a few of the attackers were judged as casualties when the detonations were simulated. Budzinski didn't like to lose, but this time he was encouraged by the outcome. It looked like they really could root out the Sa'arm and beat them at their own game.

The next step would be to try the tactics against real Sa'arm defending a real installation. Tulak was an obvious choice, but the long siege and various sorties to the surface may have altered the way this gestalt reacted to ground threats. The Tulak gestalt may have even changed the strategy of their tunnels.

Sa'Triste was a long way away and the generals were anxious to see results. There was also the issue of extra radioactive contamination from all the heavy hydrogen becoming helium during the pounding Sa'Triste was subjected to when a few Marine casualties had been left behind. It wasn't ruled out, but it was not at the top of the list of potential targets.

The generals wanted something nearby that had only recently been invaded by the Sa'arm, preferably an otherwise uninhabited planet in case the Sa'arm decided to be sore losers and play dirty. A key fear was that the Sa'arm would suicide with dirty bombs before the last of their forces were overrun and take out the Confederacy forces with them.

Scores of corvettes were dispatched to scout the systems along the edge of Sa'arm space. Once a few candidates were identified there would be several reconnaissance missions to put boots on the ground to survey standard Sa'arm surface and space defenses while the Texans used their magic to find out what could be expected below the surface.

In the meantime the Texans were authorized to celebrate their success in one of the empty domes at Camp Timmons. They had replicators working all night to create the sides of beef and other makings for a traditional Texas barbecue. They even replicated

several kegs of beer to celebrate the successful assault. There wasn't enough space to invite all of the residents of the planet, but the participants in the war game and several others who supported the effort were included.

Budzinski and Miller complimented the quality of the beer, but Diego and Rawlings were disappointed. "This stuff tastes more like bottled beer than draft beer. The keg in my quarters is a lot better than this, and it's getting stale," Diego complained. "Something's missing."

The Texas barbecue wasn't the only celebration of the season. Tuan had noticed that surfboards weren't the only large ticket items being retrieved from the replicators in the colony supply facility. A number of Christmas trees were being carried through the passages by adults sporting big smiles and typically accompanied by giggling children.

Tuan had commandeered the original community center and sealed it for remodeling. He didn't share his plans with anyone other than the AI.

He gathered most of his family together midmorning. "You know, we didn't do much to celebrate Christmas last year other than a few trinkets for Bea's youngsters. We need to do something massive this year."

"It's a bit difficult to get into the Christmas spirit when the odd thunderstorm is the only thing that blocks the oppressive heat around here," Nancy complained.

"I guess we could turn the temperature down a bit without stressing the cooling towers too much," Celeste suggested.

"I know that Naveen has hemlock, spruce and pine saplings in some of the greenhouses," Margret volunteered. "None are large enough to be a decent Christmas tree, though."

"Does it really have to be a live tree?" Celeste queried. "I've seen a lot of people with replicated trees. There are some really nice metal and plastic trees available from the replicators along with the trimmings and other classic decorations."

Judith stuck her head into the conference room and asked, "Are you guys thinking about decorating the place for Christmas? It's a bit late, isn't it? I mean, it's less than two weeks away. The plaza outside the governor's office and the research campus has had a huge tree for a couple of weeks."

Tuan laughingly replied, "We don't have retailers around here pushing shoppers into going nuts the day after Thanksgiving. In some cultures, where the holiday isn't overly commercialized, Santa Claus puts up the decorations when he visits on Christmas Eve. We're not too late for *that* tradition."

Kent, Anna, and Carla were very excited about having a Christmas tree in the family room. Even Nora reluctantly showed interest as brightly colored packages began appearing under and around the tree.

On Christmas Eve Tuan made a public announcement that Santa Claus had brought a piece of the North Pole with him to Azahar. Anyone interested in meeting him should drop by the old community center in Barcino, but they should bundle up against the cold.

Most of the main floor of the center was a large slab of ice surrounded by deep banks of snow. Several replicators had been installed to supply the adventurous with ice skates and the less adventurous with buttons, sticks, carrots and lumps of coal for making snowmen.

Leroy had a ball dressed as Santa Claus and his scantily clad elves were soon entertaining a long line of munchkins — and were rotating through a warm room to keep all of their exposed parts intact — these munchkins wanted to sit in Santa's lap and tell him what they wanted for Christmas.

Rebecca approached Lesa while their kids were in the queue to talk to Santa. "I'm sorry for avoiding you, Lesa. The fear Karen and I had no longer applies."

"Fear? You were afraid of me?"

"No, no! We weren't afraid of *you*." Rebecca was hesitant as she took a breath before continuing. "We didn't want to be around you in case the men who were responsible for Charles, Phillip, and Franklin's deaths were connected to someone... well, someone like your father."

Lesa smiled, "They were. Not to someone like Daddy, but to some shady thugs. What you must think of my father.

"I compromised those relationships before my detectives made contact with any of them. There was no risk of reprisal. I wish you would have talked to me,"

"Would you have listened?" Rebecca asked. "You were crazy possessed before I knew what you were doing."

"Probably not. I wouldn't have wanted you to be implicated." She reached out for her old friend. "Can we put it behind us?"

Rebecca just nodded as she stepped into Lesa's outstretched arms.

Clark was pleased and relieved to see Rebecca and Lesa reconciled. He moved to intercept the kids who wanted to investigate why their mothers were crying.

More than the typical number of youngsters went to bed early Christmas Eve after having been worn down from playing in the snow and being caught up in the general excitement of the carnival atmosphere.

Residential replicators were busy through the night producing most of the requested items. Unfortunately ponies, puppies, kittens and baby ducks were not available creating some disappointment on Christmas Day. Again, the AIs took note of the impact on both adults and children.