

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-DECEMBER-4-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 04:23zulu (local 08:15pst)

It is still early Mimisday morning, eight whole hours after the start of Twilight 360, and with Chernobyl high in the sky there is a soft cottony gray surrounding it as the light reflected off the gas-giant highlights the cirrus clouds above the Jacoby's Stump airfield. Except for the rain storms scheduled to charge in at around lunchtime, the sky will remain this way for about another seventy hours until it starts to darken for twenty-six right before the star Zemu rises in the west.

For the people who visit New Brisbane, on the planet-moon Prypiat, with its unbelievably long stretches of twilight and surprisingly predictable weather, it is ridiculously mind-blowingly enchanting.

For the five-hundred million residents here it's old hat.

When someone from Prypiat visits Earth, with its twenty-four hour day synched up with an actual day-night cycle, it is shockingly difficult for them to adapt to the cheerfully bright sunlight, imprecise seasons, and who the hell knows what the weather will be?

A large stretch limo slips onto the airfield and parks beside the Trident Star-Clipper, next to the Security Services hut. Piper climbs out of the driver's seat, and riding shotgun as her guard is none other than Staff-Seargent, Smyth, of the Honey Badgers.

It is 8:15 local and the Razorbacks are just now on approach. They would have been landing on time if it wasn't for Prypiat Traffic Control holding them up in orbit waiting for clearance. The two ships from the Pleiades already had a pre-clearance to enter their airspace to land here, but these ships were from the Steel Annex so the PTC reaches out to ask, "*Aren't we at war with them?*"

Be that as it may a clearance is a clearance, and this happens

to be a neutral territory, so the local head of Security Services gets on the horn to yell at the controllers, "*Land those bloody things!*"

Leading the two in is an executive coach build of the new HWG101. Like how the ASF47 was cut down to the 74, this here is a gangsta chopped version of the 99 that's only seven-meters shorter, close to a meter shaved off the top, but it has all the same everything save for a thirty-five percent cut in cross-section and weight taken from the fuselage. This thing was built for speed and is believed to outrun anything that flies except the Kali, the Dip and the Thunderbolt.

It looks like Paleo scores again with this crazy idea.

The 101 lands vertically without a bounce, rotates on a dime and slips across the taxiway onto the apron to park beside Boxter's Star-Clipper. As the ship squats and drops the ladder in the back, a Warthog gunship, with Michelle Kiel at the helm, sets down on the runway where the 101 landed a minute before and holds position.

At the ladder, which is actually a staircase built in an access ramp, Piper calls up, "Permission to board, ladies?"

At the top of the ladder, in her JACC fighting suit, Maria bids her to, "Come on up, Piper!"

Piper climbs up into the smartly appointed interior of the ships hold, and is taken aback by the blazing-white decor, "Well, I say, for a diplomatic transport isn't this insufferably decadent!"

The clones all shout, "Piper!"

After Eight, Copper, Peanuts and Cap get their hugs, Piper turns to hug Angela, Connie, Mini-Monique, and Diego, "All of you are so beautiful, and that was a wonderful celebration to be part of!"

Diego smiles, "More fun than I thought it was gonna be."

"Terribly fun by all accounts, but you did very well, my dear Sian, and, considering the crowd you were on display for that would be an understatement." Piper now turns to Brie Kiel, Michelle Kiel's now fifteen-year-old daughter, and says, "Brie, my-my, it is shocking to note that you are as smashing as your mother at this age." They hug and Piper adds, "And naturally blonde too! Such a rarity."

"Thank you, Piper! Me mun said to call you Piper."

Piper now turns directly to Maya Kiplinger, Ranch and Hanna's daughter who has had a make-over to totally change her appearance, and knowing who this really is Piper says with a sly and knowing smile, "By simple deduction, I believe you must be Jessica's cousin, Zoe!"

Maya offers her a handshake while struggling with American parlance and accent, "Pleased to meet ya, ma'am."

"It's Piper, my dear." Reaching past the handshake, Piper pulls Maya in for a little hug and pulls back to whisper privately to her, "I am delighted, beyond words, that you and your family made it out."

Maya worries quietly, "What if someone recognizes me?"

"That would be wishful thinking on their part? You sound nothing like your old self and everyone has a doppelganger or two running around." Piper touches her face and smiles, "I think you'll enjoy the Brillig tomorrow, Zoe. In fact, I know you will!"

Maya breaths easier, "I hear it's a lot of fun."

Piper looks around and, "So, I don't see your cuz?"

Just then, Jessica slips out of the pilot's cabin, in an unarmed JACC fighting suit, and as Maria comes out of the WSO's cabin in front of her she says, "Okay, well, she's yours to fly. Here's the keys!"

As Maria signs off on her type-rating sheet on a tablet, Jessica asks, "Here's the keys? What's that?"

"Nothing." Maria shakes her head and then tells her, "Your new Seventy-Four will be at the Spike when you get back, but if you are going to carry passengers I want you to use this thing. And, since Bud has volunteered to be your personal ghost, and we're sharing this ship, you can solo when you take it out." Maria pokes Jessica in the chest, "What surprises me is that you have made no mistakes whatsoever, but considering you I shouldn't be so surprised."

Jessica smirks ever so slightly, "You've seen me in the sims."

"Yea, and you fly just like your dad. It's eerie how you two are alike. It's unnatural."

Jessica nods, "Nail on the head!"

Piper steps up and, "Oi, you two!" As she leans in for a cheek-to-cheek kiss with Maria and then Jessica, Piper continues with, "Dress fitting is at ten local and we meet Cloé for lunch at one at my establishment, so we've got oodles of time!"

Maria nods, "Michelle has got your toys outside!"

As Jessica dismounts from her JACC, and the girls start to pile out for the limo, Maria leads Piper to Michelle's gunship out on the runway. The ramp is down and a squad from Security Services have loaded six crates onto an electric cart, and two of them have already been cracked open by Michelle.

Stepping up to Michelle and Sergeant Smyth, Maria reaches into the crates to fish out a full magazine then a BR1-M2 while saying, "Here is what I promised. You're familiar with our BR1, right?"

Piper nods, "In four-seven-five, and a fine weapon at that!"

Maria hands her the M2 and the mag and says, "Instead of the grenade launcher on top it has a recoil-compensator that slams forward and sucks it in. There is no kick and no flip, but the shock wave that comes out of this thing will no-shit ruin your dental work, so if you death-grip this bastard say goodbye to any fillings you got."

Piper slaps the mag in and drives it into battery with, "Loud?"

"Ninety decibels. That's all. No need to suppress it."

"Right!" Piper looks out and, "I see a tree that's encroaching onto our flight path. Think we should pinch it back a smidge?"

Maria smiles, "Never thought of this as a gardening tool, but why not? Oh, and the N2 interface is in your queue."

Piper lines the red dot sight up on a tree that's two kilometers out, and asks, "Eyes on target, let 'er rip?"

"Send it!"

The shot from the M2 sounds like an electrical slap when the bolt comes out of the rail. Instantly, the tree trunk is shattered but the explosive bolt itself detonates a meter past exiting the tree and the force from that blows the debris back in their direction.

It takes four seconds for the sound to reach them where Piper shudders slightly saying, "ooooh, I think I kicked on that one!"

Maria nods with a smile, "First time, every time!"

Admiring the M2, Piper glances at Sergeant Smyth and says to him, "Mr Smyth, if I recall there was something you wanted to say?"

"Yes mum..." Smyth nods and, "aaaaah, aaam—"

With Smyth struggling to speak, Piper helps him out by saying to Maria, "Our Staff-Sergeant is quick with the bullets, but he falls short on eloquence. Mr. Smyth happens to be Isabelle's father."

Maria goes, "Oh!"

Smyth finally finds his voice, "Marshal Ramirez, Madame, I want to thank you for sending the girls out last summer."

"It was the least we could do considering the circumstances."

"I am indebted to you and your people."

"You owe us nothing, Sergeant. How is she doing?"

"Izzy is a right happy little girl! No more nightmares."

"That's good to hear."

With Jessica stepping up to them, in her everyday BDU pants and t-shirt, Piper says to Maria, "On that note, Boxter and you did discuss opening up a direct line between your organization and our Honey Badgers and we would like to make...Lieutenant Smyth, here, our liaison!" Piper smiles warmly towards Smyth, "He has a knack for bypassing impasses and, well, bucking protocol and thumbing his nose at rank to get results! Boxter and I, we adore self-starters and, well, Sir, you drew our undivided attention."

Maria says to them, "Your contact will be Shane McElroy. He's a PFC4 in our Strategic Planning group."

Noticing the confusion in his face, Piper adds, "Their PFC4 is the equivalent to a Warrant Officer-Three. The Annex ranking takes a little getting used to."

"McElroy used to be an Inspector with the NYPD. Trust me, if you're a self-starter you two will hit it off. And if you need anything, he has direct access to me if something comes up."

"Yes Madame." Smyth turns to Piper, "Lieutenant, seriously?"

"You really impressed us on your...taking the initiative on the Ipswich project. Oh, we do want to be notified of any messy business that may come along, and preferably before getting wet."

The new Lieutenant Smyth grins, "Yes, mum."

Piper breaths deep as she hands him the M2, "Lieutenant, at the end of the flight line is a wind sock I've asked to be taken down. It's taking too long, would you be so kind?"

"If you say so, mum."

Piper says to Maria, "Watch this man work."

As Smyth pulls the weapon up to sight the target, he asks Maria, "This bastard is sighted at?"

Maria says, "On ballistic rounds, five clicks out of the box with a one-meter rise. The impulse bolts are flat for fifteen clicks."

With glee, Piper pats him on the shoulder, "A bottle of Suntory if you make this shot!"

Zeroing in on the target, Smyth says, "Mum, if you ask me you are a little too loose with your wallet."

Piper snorts, "Better my wallet than my legs."

Smyth almost laughs as he says, "Do we get a vote?"

He fires and the bolt punches through the pipe below the sock and, exploding a meter behind it, the fireball and the vapor chine from the shockwave shreds the sock into spiraling tatters.

Michelle Kiel, watching through her spotting binoculars in her JACCs helmet, says, "That was four klicks. He nailed it."

Maria adds, "I'm impressed."

Piper smiles, "Not bad, sir! A bottle well earned."

At the eight second mark, the pop from the explosion is heard as Michelle ask Jessica, "Did the girls like the powered take off?"

Jessica nods, "They thought it was a blast."

"Did you curl the leading edge at all?"

Jessica grins, "Nope. I squatted aft with a three-degree pitch on the deck, just like the ninety-nine. At eighty-five percent power the thrust was pushing the damned thing forward, in spite of me stomping on the breaks, so I had to let 'er go or it was gonna shred the tires."

Maria adds, "It was scoochin' like crazy!"

Michelle asks, "Did you WEP it at all?"

Jessica shakes her head, "Not a squirt. At seven-hundred meters it rotated on its own to five-degrees on the deck, and lifted wheels up at under a thousand. All on it's own, nice and pretty like."

Maria shrugs towards Michelle, "Sorry, we're not putting guns on the thing." She turns to Piper, "Well, it's been fun! Michelle and I have a detour on the way back, we're testing a little something on the Black Stump so, keep me posted and have a blast, girls!"

Piper laughs, "I noticed the tockley sprouting under the nose! If that's a Pazuzu gun I'm sure you'll have a banging good time of it."

Maria cringes slightly, "Yea, ah, ya'll noticed that."

Piper leans in, "If it helps I didn't see anything. Mr. Smyth?"

Smyth nods, "Sad to say me eyes are on the blink too."

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The massive glass wall behind the chef stations arcs up high and overhead into the ceiling of Piper's restaurant. It faces west and south and embraces the weather, twilight and sun cycles in the West Banes. The thunderstorm raging outside, with the lightning and sheets of rain being whipped onto the glass high above, is acoustically muffled and contrasts directly with the dry warmth, wood and brass décor.

It is cozy in here at a steady 25°C with indirect, and one could even suggest, romantic lighting. The ambiance and menu are geared strictly to a woman's sensibility and it shows. Even the waiting staff consists of dapper middle-aged men in utterly fantastic physical shape

with salt and pepper hair and this itself is a huge draw.

With all the girls in the party mobbing Cloé as she steps inside, Jessica slips away to sit with Boxter who is waiting for her in an elevated booth along the north wall that has the best view of both Chernobyl above and the tables below.

"I want to thank you for allowing us to move our meeting up while we lunch today. I have had my hands full of late."

Jessica smiles at him, gives him a little hug, and as they both sit, "If it keeps me away from that goofy shit then I'm all for it."

Boxter notices his granddaughters ganging up on Cloé with the rest, "It's farcical how my young kin-lings now speak highly of Cloé when they used to pay her the littlest of mind. It's unsettling how our cultures attribute celebrity to those who make...believe yet overlook people who make a real difference. It's nonsensically...tragic."

"Amen."

"I want to apologize because I took the liberty of ordering for you ahead of time so there would be no delays." Boxter perks up with, "This dish is what I order every time I come, and you do look like a savory kind of gal. If it's not to your liking I'll have our waiter fetch whatever your heart desires. On or off the menu."

"I'm really not a pasta person so I'm sure it'll be fine."

"We're also going to join in a bottle of Lambrusco. Normally a blanc would be in order, but its sweet effervescence is a fine contrast."

"Lambrusco?"

"Oh, you must trust me on this one, my dear."

"I do...so, how's it coming with Tillsdale's replacement?"

"To risk sounding cliché, Noah Wanganui has proven to be a bit of a sticky wicket. Clint, his youngest having joined the Annex, has made our effort challenging, a tough sell, but the dirt dug up by Eight seems to have...stifled the higher chorus of voices in opposition."

"You have confidence in 'im?"

"In the sense that he'll get too big for his soiled britches? Oh, most assuredly, yes! I'm counting on it." He subtly points up in the air, "Like attracts like, incompetence is drawn to its own. The snooker cue playboy will surround himself with all the right people, and with ol' spit-n-polish Bristol in command of the CDF, well, what better formula could there be for...success! I don't know of another off hand."

Jessica just shakes her head, "I'm tryin' to figure you out."

"What, your brother hasn't shared anything with you yet?"

Jessica knows better than to deny what Boxter has already figured out himself, so she asks, "How would you know that?"

"Seth is good, but his age and impatience gives him away. How 'bout you tell the little scamp to say hello next time he's sneaking around." Boxter gives her a little smirk, "And if the little bugger is not sharing then I believe he is faced with that 'knowing paradox' that troubles your efforts. You know, Bletchley Park and all."

"How do you know that?"

"A good guess? It's the only thing in history that matches on all fours what you're trying to accomplish with...The Alter of Chains."

"Since you brought up The Alter." Jessica looks at him and, with pain on her face, says slowly, "We have a friend...and we don't know how to bring something to his attention because—"

"The best course of action is to do nothing." Boxter finishes her thought, and with Jessica nodding yes he realizes he is that friend, "How 'bout we cut to the crash then, yes?"

Jessica hesitates, then quietly says, "Bobby."

Boxter blinks and, "oooooooooh, Blue Boy came down for her." A thousand emotions race through Boxter but after a half a minute in deep thought, his lip quivers slightly as he asks, "Will my Piper suffer?"

Jessica is about to cry, "no."

Boxter takes his napkin and dabs at his watery eyes, sniffs and asks, "Will she get the beast?"

With Jessica nodding yes she says quietly, "I'm sorry."

Boxter pats her on the hand and assures her, "I so admired you and your brother's strength leading up to the loss of your mother. I do believe that you looked at this from every angle, and now faced with the prospect of emulating you...I have to say I learned well by your example." With a stiff upper lip he finishes with, "You have my gratitude for not shying away from this. The irony being she has always said, to kill that...monster is worth dying for."

"We all love Piper. Spend as much free time as you can with her, but don't make it obvious."

"Yes." He wonders, "Without Piper what will become of me?"

With the waiter approaching them, Jessica looks Boxter in the eyes and assures him, "You will do very well, but I can't say anything."

Boxter realizes, "Because it can ruin not-said outcome."

"I'll be there for you. What I can share is that you'll be looked upon as a 'man of peace' after this."

Boxter rears back slightly, and, "That I find comically absurd."

"No, really!"

"They...those beasts are aware?"

Jessica nods and, "Language, oral history, the works! Not quite as agreeable as the Xhemal, but...you'll see!" She looks down at the dish of pasta placed before her and goes, "hu?"

Boxter nods, "Yes, beige, not quite beige, but this is the most visually bland offering on our menu, yet deceitfully flavorful."

The waiter pops the cork on the wine and says to Jessica, "You'll love it, miss. I know you will. You look like the type."

With him done pouring the wine, Boxter says, "Thank you, Captain." And with the waiter stepping away, "He is the most drooled over of our waiting staff. Even the young girls that come here and see him are rendered...moist. Too bad for them he's partial to The D."

"Captain?"

"Smithers, he moonlights here. Sixteen air-to-air kills before signing on to my Badgers. We like hiring exceptional people. I hear that you're getting your own Seventy-Four soon! My analysts tell me you are...lethal. The Captain in his Djinn and you in your T-Bird, what a contest that would make!" He gives a sinister little grin, "If you are interested, I arranged for the simulators in Security Services to be free this evening but I apologize that we only have the modeling for your Thunderbolt handy. Still, what a throw down that would be!"

Jessica is trying not to crack a huge smile, "Yea, I'm definitely up for that. It would be a blast! I'm curious, who are you going to put your money on?"

"Me, I don't gamble, but if I were to make odds, the Captain with his extensive experience, and you...your pedigree, I'd have to say it would be even Steven as they say."

"I fly just like my father."

Boxter frowns, "Oh, if you wouldn't mind making your victory seem like you...worked for it? I'd rather not have the Captain's spirit dashed by getting roundly-n-soundly trounced by a nubie."

Jessica nods with an agreeable, "Got'chya."

"I have to say that your father's eleven-kill streak, the week after last, well, my pilots will not stop yammering on about it. The interesting thing of note is their undying respect for him by saving his ship the way he did, and not punching out like he should have."

"My father is sorta complicated."

"I would suggest differently."

"Beatrix meant a lot to him."

"And yet reported to be negligent of his PDBi-AI? What I do know is that, long before you were born, he was in a tryst with an android, a one Glados. Maybe there were unrequited...feelings?"

"She's back in his life."

"Yes, as a SYLN-b now, and with their renewed interest in one another I have to say he is, indubitably, not complicated at all."

Jessica was about to take a bite and puts her fork down, "And, how would you know about any of this shit?"

Boxter gives a wickedly evil grin, "Long reach?"

"Jesus, dude, you kill me! You have eyes everywhere."

"Unfortunately, I do not have you or your brother's eyes."

"You have eight and the clones wrapped around your fingers."

"Not so. Fifty-Two is like herding cats and I am a yarn ball of activity. As long as I keep scratching their noggins and rubbing their bellies I'll be of interest but, more sooner than later, they will tire."

"You know which side I'm on."

"Yes, but after today's discussion with the Major, in due time we may find ourselves on the...same side. We can only hope!"

Jessica laughs a little snort, "And I got a hard-on for hope."

"Yes!" Boxter smiles and introspectively says, "Even though I tried to assassinate your grandfather, various attempts and always a step or two out of reach, I have to say that the world is a lesser place with him and your mother gone."

"Yup." Jessica nods, then finally takes a bite of the angel hair pasta on her fork and is shocked, "Oh, my god! This is good!"

Boxter smiles, "Thought you would like it! Grated asiago with oodles of butter and a smattering of sea salt." He holds up a fork with the pasta twirled on it and, "See, angel hair is thin and capillary and holds onto the butter like nothing else. This dish is the very reason Piper came up with the name of this restaurant."

"Tabula Pasta. I don't get it?"

"It is derived by the concept of a tabula rasa, which is a blank slate. A wax note taking device from ancient Rome which has become one of many argumenta on the...nature versus nurture debate."

Taking another bite, Jessica goes, "Okay, I'll plead stupid."

"Stupid you are not." Boxter gives a little laugh and, "Point is that pasta is the perfect analogy for tabula rasa wherein it's all the same ingredients and yet you have a virtually endless variety of cuts and shapes that you are at liberty to do with as you please!"

With Boxter taking a bite, Jessica goes, "I think I get it?"

He nods then says, "And therein lies the bitter fallacy of the argument. Pasta may be a blank slate, yes, but each final form lends it to very specific uses. You see, angel hair cannot itself be stuffed like a shell or a manicotti no matter how much it desires that outcome. All the well wishes and prayers in support from its brethren pasta will not make it so!" Boxter holds up another twirling of angel hair and, "Just as manicotti fails to perform this feat of magic with...butter."

Jessica takes a sip of the wine and, "This tickles my nose!"

"It contrasts well with the asiago, does it not?"

She smacks her lips, "Yes, it does. It's surprisingly good!"

"I am glad." Boxter smiles and, "Piper and I built this place for the fun of it, but we do carry our own note."

"So, you have no debt hanging over the operation."

"True, but we do measure our success on a level playing field against local competition and...so far we have been very successful."

Jessica suggests, "You need to put one on the Church Key."

"And in New Darwin, yes, but would you have a suggestion on a possible location on the Church Key? If so, I have people who can deal with negotiating the lease and zoning issues."

Jessica shakes her head, "Vossler has the final say and he'll think it'll be a kick in the ass to have you build this there. I know just the place, so it's already a done deal."

"I wouldn't want to put you out like that."

"By the Spike there is a cliff-side outdoor lounge, and beside that is the perfect spot. The sunsets, which are spectacular, and the tides coming in and out below are, well, it's perfect!"

"That sounds smashing!" Boxter is genuinely surprised, then dares to ask, "Before the Major gets here I have to ask, in case you are privy to this info. Since my granddaughter will not say, while she is here on the coming holiday, was...was she on Taiji?"

Jessica's shoulders drop and she says, "No, she and Clint were with three-six-oh-three on Ngāti Whā."

"oh my." Boxter frowns, "That was a terrible fight."

"Just so you know, Mook has been grounded over the next few months. They will not be anywhere near the next operation."

"You mean, Polaris."

Jessica deadpans, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Boxter pats her on the forearm with a warm smile, "I don't rightly know what your exact plans will be, but please assure Marshal Ramirez that she has...my blessings."

"I'll let her know."

Boxter then says, "We have so many fun activities lined up for you and the girls over the next few days but, I was wondering if we could maybe take a little jaunt...a little spin in that ship of yours?"

Jessica nods, "How fast do you wanna go?"

Boxter rolls his eyes, "How much fast you got?"

"Piper would get a kick out of it."

"Exactly!"

Jessica asks, "Powered-runway takeoff?"

"I've three miles of runway, wouldn't want it to go to waste!"

"That's at least six-G's if I WEP it. I only have four, forward facing seats so that's you, Piper and how about the Captain?"

"Yes, indeed, and can we add my youngest, Samantha?"

Jessica laughs, "Samael, sure!"

"You remember!" Boxter grins, "You know my oldest, Piper, aspires to be Piper, but my Samael is looking to fill...my shoes."

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