

LCTN: 54-TAURUS-B6 (Hyades cluster)
 CORD: SAO-93868.0207 (49pc from SOL)
 TIME: 09:00zulu (local 13:06mst)

Most star systems consist of binary pairs and Primus Hyadum is no exception. Primus Hyadum is the name of the primary “A” star that is young, big, red and already starting to die off. Two-hundred AU from that is the much smaller “B” star and this thing is also young, with an orange hue, but it has a long life ahead of it.

When time came for IAU name registration, of the thirty-six submissions for B it was the prank application in Esperanto, Oranĝo, that won that race by seven seconds—and this pissed everyone off. Now days it’s just Primus Hyadum, because they happen to be circling Primus Hyadum, and if anyone has to expressly put a name to the actual star their planet is in orbit around then it’s now referred to as Baby-Prime and pretty much everyone today is okay with that.

Oranĝo, the IAU name for γ -Tauri-B, has been forgotten.

Then there is the ongoing argument on whether the primary star is actually Primus or Primis or Prima Hyadum, but the locals have drawn a line in the sand for Primus and have told the IAU to get bent.

Anyway, the sixth planet in orbit around the expressly stated Baby-Prime is called Zemlya Dva, which was a web-translator phonetic alternative to the Russian Cyrillic for *Earth Two*, and this has been kind of problematic. See, Russian nationals occupied the planet first but the place has since been overrun by a flood of Australians, now a ninety to one ratio, and they have their own way of naming things.

To them Zemlya Dva is simply Rock, Slime or The Nuddy.

Zemlya, because everybody everywhere here has dropped Dva from the name, is the one planet closest to Earth in every respect except for life itself. Here it’s more like how Ngāti Whā was in its early days where bacterial organisms have exploded and is now choking all

the low salinity oceans. Having consumed almost all the free CO², the bacterial life has dumped ridiculous amounts of free O² into the seas and the atmosphere. Only just recently have life forms developed that utilizes O² in its metabolic processes so, finally, the huge swaths of dead organic matter in the oceans are just starting to compost.

Hence, Slime by the locals along the coasts.

Zemlya, articulated with only two-syllables, has all of twelve continents, the same number of oceans, and every bit of the exposed land mass is barren rock with no soil or dirt to be had. Geologically active, with at least two or three volcanos somewhere on the planet spewing clouds of dust and debris up into the sky, this activity promotes rain—lots of rain—and everyday with the rain.

After all is said and done, our Gamma Tauri Bravo Six is a wonderfully clean place to live, as long as you stay away from the coasts, has twelve-million residents and the few major industries that flourish here on this rock are focused on vertical farming, warehousing and distribution.

Commonly referred to as GTB6, it's actually the third moon spinning around GTA5, the fifth planet orbiting Primus Hyadum itself, that is the industrial Cthulhu of the Hyades Cluster. What was called Schooner, now Scorch, is being stripped bare by industries that are pumping out all kinds of products, from thousands of factories, and then packing it all off to GTB6 for storage, picking and shipping.

GTA5 is where most people here commute to for work, and GTB6 is where people live and lounge around away from said work, so when the Basilisk, SA26, pops into the system everyone is completely taken by surprise when they popped in over GTB6 and not GTA5.

Ooops...

See, of primary interest during a time of war is targeting and crippling your enemy's means of production, and GTA5 represents ten-percent of the Co-op's manufacturing capability. The Annex did not go after this juicy target in the previous war, and even though they have made no overtures to go after it this time around—GTA5 is the most heavily defended planetary system in all the Hyades.

In low orbit around the third moon of GTA5 are over twelve hundred spider missiles in M3 mode. Above that are eight Épée WECG cruisers in geostationary orbits, and in the atmosphere, at about ten thousand meters altitude, are anywhere from one to two-hundred F51 Gryphon-Condor fighters running a constant round the clock 24/7 CAP (21/12 if splitting hairs) with another eight hundred Condors ready to fly at the drop of a hat. With layered triple-A, ground-based troops are utterly superfluous so, in short, GTA5 is a mission planner's dream job

because *everything* here is a target ripe for bombing.

This is in sharp contrast to GTB6 which has got dick.

What Zemlya does have to draw the interest of the Annex is a sprawling CDF base that is considered a light-duty administrative op with no actual military value. It exists solely to host troopers coming out of active duty stations and, like New Darwin, channel those troops and their money into the local cities for R&R.

So, when the Basilisk drops five Razorbacks along with their fighter escorts there was no BDF presence here to oppose it. Any response must come from GTA5 and, as it is, the sixty fighters that launched from there will take almost thirty-five minutes to get here and in position to make a difference—where the SA will be in and out and long gone inside twenty.

On this drop the Razorbacks have all stuck together in a tight finger-four formation with their escorts flanking. The fifth ship is right behind them and happens to be Michelle Kiel flying the same Warthog from earlier that day on Jacoby's Stump. She is surrounded by six F308 ghost droid Cwn Dawg fighters, but these are not the throwaway J and K conversions. Here we have the 'Mako' M models, configured from ships pulled from the F380 Cerberus production lines and retooled into ghost droids, and these blocks are keepers.

Trailing after them is Jacob in his Thunderbird and Peña in his Cerberus, and with the lead ships breaking thirty-thousand meters altitude, Jacob points out, "Dog, dude, I just realized something!"

Peña grits his teeth, ["Every time you realize something at the last motherfucking minute, I have come to realize how really stupid I look for overlooking that last minute motherfucking something you point out! What is it this time?"]

Jacob grins, "You forgot to name this mutherfucker!"

["God-damn it! You had me thinkin' I forgot somethin'!"]

"Well, ya did! You're the mission planner, so you name it!"

Peña grumbles, ["*Pinche puto!*"] With the head Razor leading the way, at twenty-five thousand meters they begin to pull out of the 90° vertical dive, according to the mission profile, so while monitoring this Peña starts to say, ["Okay, this is a cakewalk, so—"]

Suddenly there are repeated buzzing sounds on the channel as pilots press and hold their mic buttons, so Jacob notes, "I don't think the team likes that one. Even though it may be a cakewalk?"

["I didn't say to name it that! But, last Sunday I did call this thing here the 'mutant pygmy brother to distractamundo' didn't I?"]

Now at twenty-thousand meters they are on a very shallow 5° decent path, and with them starting to slow it down, Jacob points out, "No, if I recall correctly, you said it was the 'mutant pygmy son to the brother of distractamundo' remember?"

["Sure! Okay, let's go with that!"]

"How 'bout shortening it to, like, mutant pygmy?"

["If we gotta, but I like the full version of the name, myself."]

"Okay, instead of making an executive decision, let's put it to a vote. Let's hear it if you want, cakewalk?" With no clicks on the channel, Jacob then asks, "Or do you want, mutant pygmy?"

With repeated of clicking on the channel, Peña huffs, ["Okay, assholes, mutant pygmy it is! You fuckers have no sense of humor."]

Michelle Kiel comes on the line and, ["No disrespect, FM, but when you two get going you two sound like a couple of retards."]

Now with mad-crazy clicking on the channel, Jacob laughs, "Why yes, Guns, that's the, ah, general consensus I think?"

Hitting sixteen-thousand meters, Michelle's ship and her six ghost droid fighters peel off and roll back towards a large thunderhead cloud formation behind them, and while breaking and entering she goes, ["Okay, these will do nicely! See ya'll next year, guys."]

"Sorry about ruining your Christmas, Guns, but it was the only way we could think of to sneak your ass in here."

["Nope, Buzzard, I volunteered for this shit. Just make sure my Brie has a good Christmas, okay? I'm holding you to that!"]

"She'll have a great time. I guarantee it."

["Okie dokie, this is Gun Crazy goin' cold. We are on radio silence until the third. Fly friendly, out."]

Peña follows that with, ["Bust one on 'em up for us, Guns."]

With no response, and none expected, they fly level for a few more minutes at Mach-2, and then initiate their final decent and breaking while approaching a huge lake coming up over the horizon.

On Zemlya there are a ton of streams, lakes and rivers and, unlike the oceans, these bodies of water are squeaky-clean. Because boozing it up, gambling and whoring gets sort of old, the big R&R draw for the troops coming to The Nuddy are water sports. Speedboats, skiing, parasailing, whitewater rafting, kayaking, scuba, and to round it all off—the cherry on top is sailing—for those who want to engage in water sports while they booze and whore it slow and quiet like.

Anyway, the ships are racing towards New Lake Eyre but,

unlike its namesake back on Earth, this one is full of crystal-clear water devoid of salts. Now over the water, with the fighters spread out, the ramps of the Razorbacks snap open and hundreds of droids and drones start to spill out as the ships streak down the middle at 300kph.

Blaxton is the main city in the region and is sandwiched in the middle between lakes Eyre, Frome and Torrens. That Co-op base is on the far side of Blaxton, between lakes Frome and Torrens.

With the ghost droids flying off towards the coast away from Blaxton the PacMan drones start methodically approaching each boat on the lake looking for anybody in a CDF or BDF uniform or in field kit. Not finding any such targets, they quickly move from one boat to the next without engaging—*id est*, not shooting at any of the people.

With only a single column of egress from the racking in the hold of the Razorbacks, the ships have to hold rock-steady for a count of ninety seconds to offload the entire compliment of robots. If it were a company configuration with a two-column egress it would take just forty seconds, but here it's an unwavering ninety-second run.

With Peña and Jacob high above them, Peña says, ["That's a lot of boats, dude. That's a lot of eyes on us."]

Jacob agrees, "Yep, an' that's the idea!"

["Think they'll get the hint this time?"]

Jacob laughs, "I sure as shit hope so!"

["What's the count now?"]

"On Taiji it's twelve-hundred wounded and it's climbing, but slowly. Those casualties are not even close to Nufa."

["They got a count of five-thousand now, right?"]

Jacob shakes his head as the Razorbacks finish offloading, snap their ramps shut and start to climb out, "Actually, it's pushing a solid fifty-three-hundred and those numbers are not slowin' down."

Jacob and Peña had switched to powderpuff pink camouflage when the Razors went low, so Jacob asks, "Hey, Oscar, you up for making a low level pass? You know, shits and giggles?"

Peña grins big, ["You have to ask?"]

"Let's do it! I'll stick to your nine-o'clock and match you."

As the Razorbacks and their escorts hit two-thousand meters and break south, Jacob and Peña switch the camouflage on their ships from the pink to a visible matte-black. They dive in a split-S and shoot across the lake at a leisurely Mach-1. Thirty meters above the surface, vapor chines repeatedly flash over their fighters.

At three-quarters of the way across the lake, they both skid vertically by pushing their tails down and pulling their noses up in a partial Pugachev's Cobra maneuver. This quickly bleeds off much of their forward velocity but, instead of rotating their noses back down, these two nut-cases push their engines to maximum thrust and add WEP on top of that. For every second, at max WEP, the system will spritz sixteen-liters of liquid cryogenic helium into the engines all along the quantum particle-annihilation blades—converting both ambient air and cryo-helium into a high-pressure superheated plasma. With this, both fighters explode straight up into the sky, Saturn Five style.

Trailing plasma exhaust spikes that are as long as the fighters themselves, within seconds they hit Mach-2, and at five kilometers altitude they rotate upside down and roll out of it—as they chase after the Razorbacks that are now eighty kilometers downrange.

The eyes of every person on the boats here are glued to the Thunderbird and Cerberus running parallel over the lake. Their exit leaves no doubt as to who these two pilots were.

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The crew for Michelle Kiel's mission on GTB6 was carefully selected for their abilities and adaptability. Flying the Cwn Dawgs we have two instances of Paleo, two of Maggie Prather and two copies of Bud Sheatz. Normally you would only employ a single instance of any one ghost on a mission, but these three have respawned so many times they have gotten used to randomly running into and working with themselves in the field. Since they're on strict radio silence these three can anticipate each other's moves, and working with a copy of themselves makes it even doubly so.

Flying as the ghost co-pilot on Kiel's Hog is Angela Simmons, who happens to be a superb Warthog-gunship pilot but, other than Michelle, the only alive-n-breathin' crewmember, functioning as the missions Weapons Systems Operator is PFC4, David Gilroy.

Pretty much each and every Warthog gunship in the SA has the Missile Farm pod installed as a 'just in case' they are needed sort of thing. As part of the Close Air Support role, fire support missions are a common occurrence but your everyday WSO will almost always defer to weapons from the Missile Bay instead of the Missile Farm pods. Your average fire support mission requires anywhere from one to maybe twelve of the 20/20 cluster bombs which is easily handled by the bay—where the pods have a bazillion of these weapons, 1,404 in the standard loadout intermixed with 468 Millipede missiles. The pods are very effective when used but the underlining problem with them is that they are a time consuming bitch to support and swap out.

WSO's avoid using them like the plague.

A mission planned with the express purpose of using the farm pods as the primary weapons platform of choice is a rarity to behold, and the best guy to run such a mission just so happens to be Gilroy.

The historical problem with launching a Missile Farm barrage is that over a hotly contested piece of turf, when it makes tactical sense to launch one, it has this weird cascading effect that tends to work against the opposition. The ship with the pod requires a lot of elbowroom to move around because once this thing gets going, and the enemy realizes the attack for what it is, every defensive weapon they can muster is going to be launched against the farm. That is, where it was because the Warthog is always moving in some crazy random zig-zag pattern to avoid the bombs coming in at them and, in good turn, to detour some of its bombs to the location where those defensive weapons came from.

As long as they keep shootin' an' scootin' and don't hold to any one location or vector for too long, like more than twelve to fifteen seconds, and if the operator is good, like Gilroy, then the operator and ships AI come across more like Virgil Fox and arch-angel Sandalphon together hammering out Bach's Little Fugue in G minor—but here it's with a Missile Farm pod instead of a cathedral pipe organ.

In the thunderhead, with lightning bolts busting right and left, Michelle laughs, "The Condors are backing off, what a hoot!"

Gilroy, studying the topography of their target zone and the proposed points of attack, asks, "How many did the droids hit?"

"Seven so far, and they are all bugging out."

Each of the seventy-five ghost droids they dropped over Lake Eyre are carrying the Maw Duce and eighty Micropede missiles, so Gilroy says, "You think these Co-op ass-hats realize how much we already control the air over Blaxton?"

"I think they kinda get the idea now."

"You figure out how you wanna do this, honey-buns?"

"That all depends on where you wanna go?"

Gilroy flashes the translucent topographical map up on the transparent aluminum-Alon wall between them and points to a spot on the map, "Can you get me there, sugar?"

"That's the place?"

"That high mesa is the sweet spot between Livingston and Blaxton. I think I can use the point-eight-seven gravity and elevation to extend our ballistic reach quite a bit. If not, we only have to fire on

one DC and then scoot over for the next."

Kiel looks at the map, sighs big, and then points to a valley two-hundred kilometers southwest of the mesa, "If we ride this thunderhead till dark we will end up around here. If we keep to the shadows by day and move at night, taking the long route, we can be on that summit across from the mesa inside two weeks."

"From there we can then watch what they're doing!"

"An' we'll have a couple weeks of F-an-K to sort things out."

Gilroy nods, "Sounds like a plan!"

Kiel ponders their route and then asks, "How's Scott?"

Gilroy looks up at Kiel, and in his standard everyday snarky-flamboyant style, "Honey, for once I've got no idea of what to make of Mr. Beefcake! In the past I have always been the seventh-inning stretch between you bitches, and this is the first time he's ever been serious about marking days on a calendar with me."

"Are the kids warming up to you?"

Gilroy snorts and, "Ya know, I'm a lot to take in so most kids keep their distance, but Burke's two have gone way beyond welcoming open arms, they've pulled the red carpet out for lil' ol' me!"

"They're a couple of good kids!"

"They got this weird vibe about them. Can't quite put my finger on it but...it's like they can read my mind? Anyway, Scott's lil' Angela just throws herself at me! Kids have never taken to me in the past so I never paid 'em mind, but these three are all over me like I were a pumpkin-spiced latte!"

Kiel laughs, "You're a fucking scream to be around and, to be honest, you are hot as hell...even for being such a campy fag."

Gilroy smiles, "Well, thank you, sweetheart!"

"Don't mention it!" Kiel then just shakes her head, "Ya know, nothing personal Gilroy, I love the shit outta you, but the next time I plan a mission with this much F and K in it...I'm gonna make damned sure it's with someone who puts out!"

Gilroy snorts, "You know, my little honey-pot, eating at The-Y may not be my cup of tea, but sometimes...I just want a nice steamin' cup of Jo—sie as a change of pace! You just might get lucky!"

"I don't think I've gone five weeks without getting laid, so don't you be yankin' my chain, mutherfucker."

Gilroy quietly says to himself, yet loud enough for her to hear, "Had to start somewhere...an' it'll be like goin' home."

Kiel snorts and quietly mumbles, "Put a smile on this face and I'll be your *okoge* for life."

Gilroy heard that and asks, "Wha'd you say there, blondie?"

"Oh nothing, Dav'eed!"

"Hum!" And while starting to plot the first of many surveys of the proposed fire mission, Gilroy nods and mumbles, "Looks like we're gonna hav'ta put a smile on that frowny face of yours!"

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"Those are some mighty big shoes to fill."

In the booth at Tabula Pasta, with the storm raging outside, Boxter adds, "Yes, for perambulation I've been endowed with size twelve aqua flippers." Then beams, "Piper delights in the novelty!"

Jessica looks up and quietly says, "I am *not* touching that!"

"Oh, lookie! It's the Major, and *not* prompt as unusual." With her rushing into the restaurant, Boxter adds, "By her hurried step one would think she may have something of interest to share...no?"

With Jessica biting her own lips, Boxter gives a knowing smile as Major Lynn approaches their booth all the while calling out to him, "Sir, we have a situation out at Primus Hyadum!"

He puts a finger up and says, "First things first, Major. Would you like Pappardelle? It is what you...always order, correct?"

"Sir? The situation—"

"Major, we are both aware that my...reach does not currently extend to Primus Hyadum but, honestly, of more pressing concern at this very moment is ordering your lunch!"

"Sir, I dispatched Ratel Team Nine."

Boxter thinks for a sec and perks up, "Then problem solved!" He smiles warmly, "Madame, are you in the mood for your favorite, the Yabby tails in garlic-white with the Romano, or the special for today, a pungent mushroom Marinara with grilled bratwurst?"

Lynn knows that Boxter is already aware that it will take time for the Badger crew to reach Primus Hyadem so, to playfully downplay the urgency of the moment is his way of slowing things down, to step back with clear heads and maybe rethink choices made, so as to the question she visibly deflates and says, "Aaaah, the brat."

"Excellent choice, I'll have it sent out with a dry Merlot!" Boxter gestures for Lynn to, "Please, join us, Major!"

Jessica hops up and gives Lynn a quick hug, and as Lynn sits next to Boxter, across from Jessica, her slightly pursed lips gives away how frustrated she is, so Boxter swirls his hands in front of himself and sighs big, "Breathe, Major. You really need to take a deep breath and exhale big on the by an by. You take things oh-so seriously."

"About as relaxed as I'm gonna get, sir."

Boxter nods and looks to Jessica, "This drives the Major loco. She has important information for me, and she made a critical decision on all our behalf and believes that it...should not wait!" He turns to Lynn and, "But, answer me this, is there anything I must do about it at this very second? Be honest."

Lynn blinks and nods, "No, sir, we have a half an hour."

Boxter verbally thinks, "If I had the luxury of that much time for most of my affairs." He then announces, "Since Gamma Tauri was an unexpected move, and to entertain your sense of urgency, I have but two questions. What did they drop on Scorch and...how, pray tell, did they get out? I mean, with all those particle batteries in orbit! They'd have to get their hair mussed."

"Not Scorch, sir, they dropped on Rock."

Boxter, with his mouth open in surprise, sits back and after a few seconds he huffs a laugh and quietly urges her to, "Oh, do go on!"

"They dropped a shag of bots over Lake Eyre. The ghosties jetted-off for the south beach. Those cloaked an' scattered and appear to be humping a bit of kit but, the PacMan started a survey of the watercraft in the bright of day without cloaking. They completed Eyre and are now spreading out to lakes Torrens and Frome."

"Casulties?"

"None so far."

"I wouldn't expect any, our troops would be in civies." Boxter then asks, "You do understand the message being relayed, yes?"

Lynn nods, "Five by five, sir."

He turns to Jessica, "See, the base on Zemlya Dva is basically a staging post. A flop house for drunkards toddling in from R-an-R, and yet..." Boxter then looks towards Lynn, "You sent a wet team. I gather the local command failed to receive the same message."

"Exactly, Sir. The base commander, Ingersol, he has ordered all leaves cancelled. He intends to go on full alert and lock the place down. He also requested a react contingent."

Boxter grins, "Bravo! Excellent call, Major! Team Nine will land and reach fail-safe when?"

"Thirty-two minutes, sir."

"Please, do green-light them to proceed."

Lynn, in the Security Services-N2 module, launches the orders and, "It has been done, sir."

"If that drooling dolt, Ingersol, fails to cooperate then, well, by all means send a...lovely bouquet to the family." Boxter then turns to Jessica with, "See, the smart move would be to extend leave to everyone, cut them all loose into the city and abandon the base in its entirety. Our Badgers will see to that outcome."

Jessica wonders, "I was under the impression that you were having a blast with the mayhem protocol."

"Oh yes, I am! The protocol is sinfully delicious! It's just that on Taiji and Nufa the regenerations are hitting specific budgets. The tiny problem with the base on Zemlya Dva is, well, anything that goes on there will hit the general fund...and the thirty-eight billion in bonus' earned by Security Services this year will not transfer till the fifteenth. On behalf of our people Major Lynn made the right call to intervene, but then..." His eyes wonder off then pulls back in on Jessica, "Still it makes me wonder what little Mary Lynn is up too?"

Jessica shrugs, "I couldn't say."

"More specifically, you can't...say." Boxter smirks, then sighs, "I will dare to share than the last few weeks have been immeasurably entertaining. The command chain on Taiji has shown some remarkable competence in rooting out those...evil little PacMan drones of yours. Even though the casualty count has been high it's become manageable but still...General Giáp is a no-show!"

Jessica deflects by asking, "What about Nufa?"

"Nufa, now that has been a rofl an' a half! See, my dear, places like Nufa is where the Co-op deposits all of their washed up commanders when put out to pasture green, but in their lap you threw a chance for a...a do over, and they have not disappointed! Left to their own devices the troops have been tripping over themselves as if they are out chasing after Pokémon, but at the regimental levels you'd swear to God they were on a bloody fox hunt!"

Lynn throws out, "And the foxes are winning."

Boxter nods with a laugh, "Yes! As is Pikachu."

Jessica asks, "Isn't the casualty count stupidly high now?"

Lynn rocks her head to the side, "You could say that, Jess."

Boxter adds, "Problem is that Net Basha is throwing a tantrum and local command is doing the...best they can."

Lynn smirks, "Which is not saying a lot."

"The numbers speak for themselves, and just minutes ago they've crested fifty-four hundred...after only a week of self-abuse."

Lynn nods with, "Projected forty-eight billion in red ink."

Boxter smiles at that with, "The two things that I find rightly amusing is that, first, those combat bots are reported to be calling out squeaky little war cries like '*banzai*' and '*spoon*' or they lament an apology like '*me so sorry*' as they fire on their victims but...you knew that." With a smile, Jessica gives a little shrug, so Boxter continues with, "The second thing that caught my attention is that the troops, knowing they are *not* going to die, are taking inordinate risks, but here to be shot by one of those...mechanical fiends is considered a badge of honor. What's truly remarkable is that our more shiftless troops seem to be going out of their way to intentionally...get wrecked!"

Jessica is startled by that, "Why?"

"Depending on the severity of one's injuries, it's anywhere from nine to twenty-four months of convalescence on the corporate sugar-teat. Then when you throw in the added incentive by collecting a blood-stripe and bonus for basically...taking an arrow to the knee, well, the prospect for some is irresistible."

"That's kinda nuts if you ask me."

Boxter laughs at that, "What's nuts from our perspective is that on Taiji the CDF can still collectivize on their losses—and they are still in the black for this quarter, but just barely. In keeping with their fierce reputation, I was expecting some resistance before the end of the budgetary cycle, especially from the house of Perth so..." He looks Jessica in the eyes and suggests, "Let them know there is still time to make a splash!" He then delights in saying, "Nufa, on the other hand, each traumatic amputation stands as its own variance and...from the look on your face I believe you find this all amusing?"

Jessica almost laughs as she says, "Ya know, Boxter, there is a lot to take in from you guys but, what throws me for a loop, is that it's not tactics or logistics you talk about here, for you at this level, here you guys talk about fricken budgets!"

Boxter rears back in surprise, "How profound of you to notice! The contemptuous reality at the tippy top is the dehumanization of armed conflict by rendering it all into...ledgers and the...color of ink. Fact is, it is most soul-crushingly distasteful."

Jessica snorts, "But you're so good at it!"

Lynn laughs, "I take that as a compliment!"

"Why yes!" Boxter points in the air, "Quite unlike the budgets for the Steel Annex. Now, those happen to be an incomprehensible fiction and annotated to distort, to mislead...designed to fabricate, obfuscate, bait and...switch. I must say that the bean-counters who came up with *that* Gordian Knot of mystifying complexity deserves our undying praise and respect."

Jessica nods with a little smile, "I'll let 'em know."

"For us, thank them." He then adds. "To our government and military leadership it conveys a sad, abet pathetic story of financial ruin and...an unravelling logistical infrastructure."

Lynn adds, "Brings a tear to me eye."

Boxter nods in agreement then says, "But for us and the greater intelligence community it paints a much broader...radically different picture. Oh, for this to come to an end and...compare notes." He sighs, "My patience is bound to wear thin."

With Major Lynn's food delivered to her she thanks the Captain, and with him stepping away Boxter says, "Anyway, it's time we get down to business at hand."

Jessica leads with, "Since I have the first item on the agenda, the short answer is, yes. Ngāti Whā is on the back burner for the duration, but she is curious as to why?"

"Oh..." Boxter comes clean with, "The shares for that mission and the import company that championed said mission both pancaked into the dirt so...I swept it all up! Because I carry that note I'm at liberty to turn the screws when I choose. The shares were sold at cost to Security Services' Bonus and Pensions division. The abbreviated response is that Ngāti Whā becomes a protectorate, the tariffs go away, the prices stay jacked up, the locals see up to a twenty percent higher return by giving up distribution, and Security Services continues to get fat bonus' and a fully funded pension plan going forward."

"How about swapping out the CDF with your people?"

"That has been negotiated. Since the Pleiades is short on infrastructure the focus is now on Orion and they want the hell off Ngāti Whā. Security Services' control will be by appearances only."

Lynn adds, "Money talks, love. The farmers on Ngāti Whā are already aware of this arrangement, and with the rates we are offering under contract—they will not want to trim these sails."

Jessica nods, "Okay, she'll be okay with that."

"Excellent!" Boxter says, then dares to suggest, "Now, as for the main purpose of our meeting today, that being our future state as

a joint venture going forward. We did review the Marshal's plan and template and we would like to put this discussion off until after the first of the year. Maybe sometime in mid-January or soon after?"

Jessica wonders, "Is there a problem?"

"From us? Oh no, most definitely not!" Boxter shakes his head slightly, "As I conveyed to the Marshal, the plan happens to be utterly brilliant, and generous to both parties. It's just that to invest in the plan we require other people's skills and...some of them may not see our end goals as inevitable just yet."

Lynn adds, "That is, until the dust settles after Polaris."

Jessica pulls up her tacnet calendar and, "I don't know shit about what you're talking about, Major, but let's go with Saturday the eighteenth. Sound good?"

Boxter huffs a laugh and, "I'm not sure off hand what day of our week that is, but it is totally acceptable."

Lynn motions to get Boxter's attention, and whispers, "Dan."

Boxter goes, "Oh yes! Lest I forget. We were wondering if we can impose upon you for one little...task, if you're up for it?"

Jessica shrugs, "Do I hav'ta kill anybody?"

"Not yet?" With Jessica laughing at that, then gesturing for him to continue, Boxter says, "Over the next few years some of our more competent commanders are bound to make regretful choices hostile to the less competent in...leadership roles and, well, they are destined to fail. There is a most accomplished commander whose life we would like to see preserved for our soon to be future."

"If I can reach 'em, sure! Who's the guy?"

"A one, Maroochy Dan."

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