



jacc in the box

PART 04

of blood and stone

EXCERPTS: Chapters 67 and 68

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LCTN: APÓN-PUP-B2B, (Calabash Nebula)
CORD: IRAS8-P7399X98U8 (1,534pc from SOL)
DATE: 2119ce-MAY-05-FRIDAY
TIME: 01:17zulu (local 21:30mst)

High up from Charles and Rachel's cliff side home, Port Royal at night is a breathtaking sight. Catering to both civil and commercial traffic recreational sail is the most numerous vessel type moored in the harbor. Every permutation of rig you could imagine, from the simple sloops to rigid-foil trimarans are anchored here, but the dominate rigs as far as the eye can see are the dhow and old school felucca.

The port complex is butted up to the main city of Ipet Hah, and where the architecture of the city is a mix of ancient Egyptian in the core, surrounded by classical Roman everywhere else, Port Royal is a contrast of Egyptian stone permanency salted with modern glass contemporary and, esthetically speaking, these styles don't clash at all. Branching out from Ipet Hah is a new and ever-expanding suburbia, whose style is akin to American Southwest and Pueblo, but the people adapted well to having elbow room instead of being stacked one on top of another back in the city like they have been for millennia.

Most of the residents here on Imi came from old world human civilizations where toilets and baths were communal, with no concept of personal space, so the odd freakishness of western modesty eludes them still even though they now enjoy a sense of privacy.

The surprisingly difficult things to adapt too were transitioning from the Roman 'always left' standard to the modern 'always right' for roadway traffic, but that happened before Charles and Rachel came so the people could not blame them. What the locals could point at them for was the hated metric system—which everyone here resented being crowbarred into their world. Giving up their *passus*, *congus* and *uncia* for meters and liters and grams was like pulling teeth.

Yet, to industrialize on par it was necessary.

Now, long ago human males were first brought to this world as romantic surrogates, to take the heat off the Nefer Key males, and this was a positive thing in the minds of those captives then. To trade one subjugation of short lives, hunger, hard labor and violence for one of long lives, full bellies and endless sex in the service of, what they believed to be, petite gorgeous gray goddesses was a no brainer for them. What little down time they did have these humans just didn't sit on idle hands—they built things, lots of things, and this impressed the shit out of the Nefer Key. The old city temples were designed for their pleasure and is a sprawling complex still in daily use with pools and baths, luxurious couches, oil lamps with incense, and drapery flowing in the breeze for as far as the eye can see. Where across the way on the planet Sashi the Nefer Key live in an up-scaled but stale vision of Tomorrowland, by contrast, the warm esthetics of Imi was shockingly aphrodisiacal to female Nefer Key sensibilities.

Point being, these primitive humans erected massive stone structures and gardens with clean running water with little more than timbers, rope, levers and chalk lines. Two million years ago, the Nefer Key themselves were primitive captives and when they gained their freedom they walked right into advanced technology and bypassed these intermediate periods of development altogether. What humans accomplished here, without the aid of computers, robots and heavy machinery, was a miraculous feat by Nefer Key standards.

Another thing that impressed them to no end, something they found both counterintuitive and bewildering, was the human ability to fight and even wage war amongst each other—a concept the Nefer Key seems to have lost after thousands of generations of the easy life.

They just couldn't get the hang of it so they fetched Marcus, and when Marcus realized he was finally out of his league they then groomed and snatched Charles up with surprisingly little effort.

With their toga party for Marcus breaking up we have Jason, Lilith, Charles, Rachel, Maat and his Nefer Key wife, Aat, looking out over the harbor. A short throw below them is a felucca heading into the bay, and in it is Marcus reclining in a large pile of cushions with Claudia Willoughby snuggling up to him.

Sex under the stars or the shine of Sashi, like now, is the reason for most of the sailboats here. You can work them manually, yes, but pretty much all of the boats are computer controlled and sail themselves—you just have to shove off and dock manually and this allows the riders to attend to other pressing matters.

Rachel nudges Charles, "We're gonna hav'ta get a boat."

Amused, Charles agrees, "Yup, we can do it under the stars!"

Rachel coyly says, "Waddya mean we?"

Charles huffs a laugh as Rachel gives him a guilty shrug, "I've been meaning to have one made but Marcus is giving us his."

"No shit!"

"Tomorrow, that's our boat." Charles thinks about it and, "When was the last time he was with a woman? A human woman?"

Aat speaks up, "That would be before we got him."

Lilith notes, "Human babes have always been in high demand around here, and are spread thin."

Behind them, Claudia's Secret Service agent, Zach, has stepped up while saying, "Yea, but I think Claudia has made up for the lack of numbers. She's been making the rounds."

With everyone smiling and nodding at that, Maat thinks about it, "Prima and Marcus were mostly exclusive, and he hasn't been with anyone since she died. I'm surprised Claudia got him on that boat."

Rachel looks to Aat, then her husband, "No offense, Aat, but would you turn her down?"

Aat quickly throws out, "I didn't turn her down!"

Maat looks to Rachel with a smile, "What she said."

With everyone laughing, Charles looks to Zach and asks him, "Everything ready?"

Zach nods big, "Yup! We just got done fixin' the place up, and right under the wire. The facility is old but the decks will hold."

Rachel looks at Jason and asks, "You really want to do this?"

Jason gestures towards Marcus in the boat drifting away and declares, "I love this man. It's my gift. I'm obligated to him."

Charles speaks up, "Jay, remind me not to exchange gifts with you when I'm feelin' kinda blue."

Lilith turns to Zach and asks, "So, Secret Service man, I've been meaning to ask. You got any ideas for our training? I have a bunch of us girls ready to do this so, what do I tell 'em?"

Zach asks, "Want me to tell her, Chuck?"

"Might as well..." Charles then says to Lilith, "I was hoping for a way to go easy on you, but that ain't gonna happen. Tell her, Zach, and don't sugarcoat it."

Zach huffs then, "We looked high and low for ways to cut corners with your people but we can't. To make you into soldiers is a

tall order because you grays have no discipline, none of you have had any hardship whatsoever, and to top it off you're lazy as fuck. It takes your people forever to get anything done, and the worst of it is that none of you have worked an honest day's work in your lives! What we're gonna half'ta do to you people, to instill discipline in you, well, it ain't gonna be fun and that I can guarantee."

Charles points out, "The one thing in your favor is that you are all in great physical condition and you're going to need it."

Lilith blinks then asks, "Need it for what?"

Zach shrugs big, "Paris Island?"

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Sitting across from each other in a dark passage, with stray beams of light peeking through the cracks around the doors covering the entrance, Marcus and Jason are waiting for their turn. They can hear the crowd outside, a mix of human and Nefer Key voices, all of them shouting and cheering for whatever is performing to the driving ninety mile an hour beat of an African drumline.

After the longest silence between them, Marcus looks up and says, "You are being inordinately quiet."

Jason shrugs, "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know, say something maybe?"

"Something." With Marcus shaking his head, Jason then asks, "Okay, I'm curious, how was Claudia?"

"Fantastic...but it made me miss Prima all the more."

Jason nods with understanding then, "Hey, when we get out there, do we say like, *nos morituri te salutant* or what?"

Marcus chuckles, "Nobody ever said that shit."

"Oh, okay...so, Luc gives a speech and it's on?"

"Yup."

After another silence, they hear Zach call out from the other side of the door, "One minute, you two."

Jason looks Marcus square in the eyes and reassures him, "Remember...with blades, CQB, I'm a god. Nobody can beat me and you know that. You're gonna feel more alive than you have in a long time but, for this to work, for your desired outcome, you gotta fight me. Don't be a puss and I'll get you where you wanna go."

With the crowd cheering, Marcus says through clinched teeth,

"I don't want you to get hurt."

Jason smiles, "Who do you think you're talking too?"

Marcus nods, "Point made."

"There's a stack of timber out there waiting for you, but you have to fight me to get to it." Suddenly the doors open, and as the light pours in, Jason stresses, "In this here theatre in the round, let's not make it look just good, dude. Let's make it real, okay?"

As they stand, Marcus asks, "Don't hold back?"

Jason singsongs, "That's the idea!"

Stepping out onto the sandy floor of the arena there are over twelve-thousand in the stands cheering for them. Walking away from Marcus and Jason are thirty costumed Zaouli dancers of mixed races who are waving to the crowd, and lining up with another two hundred men along the perimeter of the arena floor—Egyptian, Syrian, Roman, Jew, Gaul, Thracian, Scots, Mongol, Zhou, Nippon, Welsh, Norse, Ashanti, Songhai, and the Guro who brought the dance.

All here to honor their long time commander and friend.

Marcus and Jason are dressed for the moment with metal greaves on their shins and manicae protecting their arms, but where Marcus has one on his right side Jason gets both arms covered.

Before them are five Zaouli dancers. All have the smiling and angelic Djela mask, but each costume is framed radically different. In front of Jason is an orange cheetah and a rainbow parrot themed dancer, and before Marcus is a green and brown bison and a purple gazelle. Between them is a master Guro dancer in a black and yellow honeybee stylized costume. With the drumline hammering out a walking beat the bee performs a complicated foot dance as the other four strut around with a bladed weapon in hand. Two swinging a dagger tipped Mainz-Fulham style gladius, and two with gracefully curved yet exactly honed falx-like sica.

The four thrust and spin the weapons in the air, working the crowd up into a frenzy, and as the drums stop the bee dancer freezes. Suddenly the drums bust into hyper drive and all five kick up dust in time with the beat—their upper bodies suspended and unmoving as their legs and feet go stomping wildly in lockstep. They hold out the weapons and slowly approach the two combatants, all the while the bee hauls over a large scutum shield for Marcus.

The drums break-beat and then continue on as the dancers now load Marcus up with a spare gladius on his left side with the scutum, and the free gladius in his right hand. Next is Jason, and the second he is handed his two sica the five Zaouli dancers pick up the

beat of the drums and stomp-dance away to the edge of the arena all the while gladiator cassis helmets are lowered onto their heads.

It's only the purple gazelle that hangs back with Marcus and Jason in the middle of the arena. Now solo, with his feet tearing it up, little gray hands flip horsehair whips back and forth to the rhythm of the drums. After another half-a-minute of him dancing he and the drums suddenly stop and the dancer whips back his mask.

It's Luc behind the mask, and with the crowd now cheering wildly for him he says to both Jason and Marcus, "Ya know, when my tongue turns white, I hope that I have the foresight to make damned sure everybody is annoyed with me."

Jason snorts, "You got that now!"

Luc nods with a smile and says, "We love you, Marcus."

Luc steps back and pulls a wire mic around to speak to the crowd, "We are here today to celebrate the life of our friend and loved one, Marcus Cnaeus Septimus." With a sweep of his arm, Luc motions behind them towards a funeral pyre. The pyre is beautifully stacked with Roman banners draping over the sides and a fasces adorning each corner. Luc adds, "Our gift to you, awaits."

With the drums kicking in, Marcus watches as Luc walks over to hug Maat who was in the parrot Zaouli dance costume and Abeeku who emerged from the bison costume. In the stands behind them he has everyone cheering him on, all except Charles and Rachel.

Charles is taking this especially hard.

Marcus looks to Jason and asks, "So it's on?"

"Yep..." Jason gestures towards the pyre, "I'm gonna hate to touch a match to that thing. Even with your ass on it, dude!"

Marcus reaches out with his gladius and says, "Honor."

Jason crosses that blade with his sica, "Damned straight."

Historically, gladiatorial bouts between professional gladiators was pretty much the WWE of the ancient Roman world. Many people died on the sands of the arena but few of them were from pro-stock. The high-end professionals learned to make it look good so working together to make a good show of it the crowd would, more often than not, give an up-vote for the loser to fight another day. Sad to say that attrition got the better of them in the end. A lot of capital went into a 'seasoned' gladiator so for one to enter into an actual no holds barred death match was indeed a rarity—and that working together thing to make it look good kind of went out the window.

But, for today its opposites day...

Having been a centurion for the longest time Marcus logically gravitated to the Murmillo class of fighting, and having once been a boarding party duel-wielding asshole of a pirate Jason instinctively opted for the Thraex.

A good thing since these classes matched regularly.

The battle starts off simple enough with Marcus making quick stabbing thrusts towards Jason, as one would while fighting in a tight formation in the field, but Jason swats them away with ease.

After the tenth thrust, Jason flips the helmet off his own head, "I can't see shit!" Then motions for Marcus to, "Step into it!"

Marcus steps into it by leaping forward and thrusting out hard. For the casual observer it looks pretty good, but Jason can see that he was intentionally throwing his aim off towards the side, so in a huff Jason punches down on Marcus' helmet, "Get serious!"

As Jason rolls past the strike he pops Marcus in the back with two quick slashes across his shoulder blades to get his attention.

Fuming, Marcus scrunches his shoulders up from the pain. He then rips his own helmet off and stomps towards Jason. He thrusts his shield out and slams it into Jason who jumps back just as the gladius slashes out where he was a second ago.

Jason nods big with a grin, "That's the idea!"

Marcus again steps in and thrusts out perfectly, Jason parries it away with the left sica while with the right sica he flips it around the shield and slashes Marcus in the chest. It is a superficial cut but it bleeds like hell and it makes him drop the shield. Now mad, Marcus pulls the spare gladius with his left hand and sets to work.

Jason is impressed by the thrust and slash combos that Marcus now throws at him. This is a style that Jason has never seen and it is totally amateurish—and yet so surprisingly effective. Marcus will not let up and the three times a gladius snags on the manicae covering Jason's arms it prompts Marcus to push even harder.

After about a minute and a half of this thrust, slash and parry barrage, Marcus is now obviously losing steam, so during a slight break in the action Jason says to him, "Give her our love."

Jason has finally spun the sica around in his hands, with the blades now along his forearms, and after three more quick attacks and blocks he steps inside where Marcus can't get either gladius around to fight back effectively. Jason slashes Marcus' left arm and he drops that gladius. They grapple for a few seconds and when Jason hops back Marcus lunges at him. Jason pushes the gladius away with the blade in his left hand, but with the one in the right he drives it home.

The hooked blade slips in behind Marcus' left clavicle and Jason sinks it deep into his chest cavity—slicing through the brachial veins, lungs and piercing the heart. Marcus drops to his knees in total shock by the suddenness of this strike.

In the arena it's now so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

Marcus looks up at Jason with the handle of the sica moving in time with his heartbeat, and with blood filling his chest and his lungs near collapse he has very little time left, but the confusion and shock on Marcus' face suddenly gives way to a far and distant yet joyful recognition. With that, he silently mouths her name, *Prima?*

Jason does well to hide the grief that overwhelms him, and before he pulls the sica from Marcus he says, "Go to her."

68

cannon break

LCTN: ELECTRA-4 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76131.07 (134pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-21-THURSDAY
TIME: 10:05zulu (local 09:33mst)

Jacob pops into relative space high over Sapphire, and dashes down to one-hundred and sixty kilometers altitude before dropping out of the MDDSH spacial displacement field. It pops like a soap bubble leaving him with a forward velocity of just under supersonic, which is no big deal, but he exits the dash without wings or rudders attached to his fighter which is kind of a big deal.

They had already been ripped off long before he jumped.

He instantly switches on the anti-gravity drive, because it's the easy option, and when he does he feels a bump and hears an electrical 'zit' from behind the cockpit. This is followed by an alert that the AG drive has just dropped off and the left MDDSH nacelle is also now down for the count. In the tacnet, projected in his visual cortex, he gets dished up a delightful little image showing the path a 7.62x54 bolt where it entered the fuselage from behind, then ricocheted against the top-port razor engine, followed by it puncturing the AG drive unit. Turning on the AG killed both it and the port MDDSH node.

Jacob says to himself, "Houston, we have a problem."

Bud comes across his headset, ["Well, this ain't good."]

"No shit, a triple failure."

["I can't say you ripping your wings off going after those two IR5 was a failure per se. That was intentional."]

"I got 'em didn't I?"

["I'm already dead so for me it was a hell of a ride."]

"It was a hell of a ride!" Jacob laughs, then switches coms and asks, "Trixie, you got any ideas?"

The ship's imbedded computer AI, named Beatrix, responds, ["Yes, ejecting would be in order."]

"The fuck! You've been flying with me now for twelve years! I am not gonna let you go, Trix!"

You can almost hear Beatrix pursing her lips, ["Let me put it to you in terms you will understand, copy me over to your PBDi and punch the fuck out!"]

Bud laughs, ["What she said!"]

Jacob argues, "Trix, I'm sorry I ripped your wings off to bag those two Kali, but I did it and I still managed to get us outta there!"

Beatrix agrees, ["Yes, but I got a tail full of Long-Legs for that stunt. Look, my recommendation now is to eject."]

"I can get you on the deck."

Bud protests, ["Will you listen to her?"]

Jacob shakes his head, "I got pitch, I got roll, I got this."

The aerodynamics of the Thunderbolt airframe produces a considerable volume of lift without said wings and rudders, and the elevator and ventral fins both provide pitch and a significant amount of roll if needed, it's just that Jacob has to maintain a high enough velocity to keep it all in the air. Beatrix flashes up three potential flight paths into the Church Key and Jacob picks the first option.

Jacob says, "Bud, alert civil CK-Control that this is a mayday. We'll be coming in below the common flight paths and drop in on the main six-klick runway. Maybe fifteen minutes or so? Trix, at subsonic, what do I gotta do to maintain level flight on the approach?"

Beatrix says, ["Keep it over eight-hundred kph at a three to five degree pitch. You'll have to play with it coming in. To land, reverse vector full power for three seconds and you'll cut forward velocity by half. Any more than that and without the wings we'll drop like a rock and crush the gear."]

Bud speaks up, ["Dude, the breaks will not hold."]

Beatrix confirms, ["They'll strip out at over two-fifty kph."]

Jacob comes back with, "I know. We'll cannon break."

Bud and Beatrix both go, ["Cannon break?"]

"Yea, cannon breaking! We'll fire the twenty-three at full power and empty the drum-magazine."

Bud laughs, ["You'll burn the gun out, d'uh!"]

"Trixie, we've torture tested the guns like this, right?"

Beatrix informs them, ["At twenty percent power, what we usually set the twenty-three-three for, we can fire for two whole seconds. Cool for thirty and fire again. At full power we are limited to a quarter-second burst because if you fire for more than a half-second the gun will seize up if you try to fire it again."]

Jacob asks, "But if we don't let up we can empty it, right?"

["Correct, every test proved those results. Doing so will burn the gun out and it will not be recoverable."]

Bud goes, ["Wait, what? You're fucken' nuts!"]

Here's the deal, for close air support (CAS) pretty much all fighters carry a cannon called the 23 that fires the 23mm rocket assisted micro-nuke bombs with a 1,000 kg yield. The most common is a single barrel weapon called simply enough the 23. Some guns are a two-barreled reciprocating bolt in a 'Gast gun' configuration called the 23-2. On the other hand, the Steel Annex came up with a gnarly three-barreled rotary gun design for their Razorback variants and the Thunderbolt designated the 23-3. Nobody ever uses the 23-2 or 23-3 designation and refer to all of these weapons as simply the 23. Now, the Razorbacks and the Cerberus uses the 23 like fricken crazy, but the Thunderbolt rarely, if ever, finds itself in a CAS role. Jacob has never had the opportunity to fire the 23 on a mission until now.

Beatrix adds, ["Bud, the twenty-three with a reciprocating bolt or rotary chamber will seize while firing where the twenty-three-three will go right on firing as long as we do not let up. All stress tests of this weapon system confirms this finding."]

Jacob also adds, "Paleo did this in a simulator and it worked."

Bud thinks about it and, ["Man, I still say eject."]

Beatrix throws out, ["Fire time for the twenty-three-three, to empty the drum, is approximately sixteen point two seconds."]

With the Church Key coming into sight, Jacob steepens the decent and says, "Bud, you're on radios. Trix, defeat the gun settings and config weapon trajectory for maximum range."

["Field Marshal, at a maximum ballistic profile the rounds will reach thirteen kilometers altitude and drop down range from sixty-six to sixty-eight kilometers. That depends on the tail wind which is about twenty kph. Detonation will be two-hundred meters altitude."]

"Perfect!"

Bud informs them, ["FYI, C-Three says to eject."]

Jacob snorts, "Yea, right."

Bud laughs, ["That's exactly what I told 'em!"]

"Thank you!"

["Doesn't take a mind reader."]

At thirty-five kilometers distance Jacob calls out, "Feet dry."

They are now flying over the peninsula towards the civil airstrip, north of the pyramid complex, and coming in at four hundred meters altitude they are descending rather slowly.

It takes only two and a half minutes to cover that distance, and as they approach the end of the runway, only fifty meters up, Jacob says, "Trixie, if the gear collapses and we skid then that's okay, but if you are about to roll—only then do you eject me. Got that?"

Beatrix says, ["Got it."]

Now over the runway Jacob concentrates, "Let's stick this!"

He pitches the nose level and punches the reverse-vector of the razor engines to full power for a count of three. Reverse vectoring has this weird push me-pull you effect where the intake suction-thrust fights against the rearward-thrust being channeled above and below, and opposite the direction of travel. This still manages to cut their speed down to just below 440 kph. The ship is now dropping fast so Jacob pitches the nose back up to 12° and this creates a huge pocket of lift above the Thunderbolt and dramatically slows that decent. While deploying the landing gear the covering hatches rip off, but the gear holds firm as they make contact with the runway.

He touches down and rotates better than perfect, but the problem now is that they are coasting at over 400 kph—and not slowing down one bit. When they cover half the distance of the runway he switches trigger control to the 23 and fires.

The muzzle is by the cockpit, at the root of the starboard nacelle opposite the other gun called the 88, and where the 88 sounds like a shrieking rip the 23 is like a jackhammer going off. The weapon fires over seventy of the 23mm rocket assisted bombs per second. The bombs arc slightly up as they streak away while the ventral fins sweep left to compensate for the cannons off-center torque. At 16.25 seconds all of the 1,160 rounds in the drum are gone, yet the force from this weapon has not only stopped all forward momentum but has pushed the ship backwards—now rolling at a brisk 5 kph in reverse.

With a plume of heat rising up from the muzzle, warping the air on the right side of the cockpit, Jacob takes a deep breath and, "Okay...I think that'll do."

He pushes the drive management control forward and the thrust from his razor engines pushes his Thunderbolt forward. Jacob taxis off the runway and pulls onto the ramp that is a straight shot to

the Spike all the while Bud radios to CK Control that they're clear and that they should check for debris on the runway. He then informs the C3 they are taxiing in their direction. It takes less than three minutes to reach the Spike, and with them approaching the grassy knoll near the entrance there is already a crowd forming.

As the ship stops at the knoll, Bill Nguyen and Kevin Vossler are already taking a quick walk around it. Surveying the damage they just shake their heads as they count the crush fractures on the canopy as well as dozens more on the fuselage and left elevator. They also count only one actual entry hole in the back, which must have been the culprit that took out the AG drive.

Jacob opens his canopy and as it tilts forward the distant explosions from the 1,160 bombs finally reaches the Spike. Like a muffled rolling thunder, everyone looks towards the west but they cannot see the explosions that happened three minutes and forty seconds ago down range.

Hopping out, Jacob floats down to Bill and Vossler and pops his suits canopy while Bill gives a low whistle, "You are the talk of the town! When we heard you were gonna land this heap we had to come down and see for ourselves, and you did not disappoint!"

Vossler agrees, "Mighty-mighty fine flying, FM."

Jacob asks, "How long to make her airworthy, Bill?"

Bill shakes his head, "Nope! What we got here is a total."

"Come on, man! Can't we sneak some parts in or somethin'?"

"No can do, buckaroo! All the forty-seven lines are down for retooling, and nobody is going to give one up—even for you! And before you ask if we can slip wings out of the seventy-four lines that will not happen for a bis-E conversion. It's a total."

While shaking his head, Vossler smirks, "Should have thought of that before you went after that Kali."

Bill goes, "Two Kali."

"Two? Nice!"

Jacob nods and asks, "So...whaddya got for me?"

Bill smiles, "Seventy-Fours, only..." He gestures towards the cavernous hanger under the Spike, "In this gaping maw here, in the bowels of God's Own Punji, I got thirty-two Seventy-Fours primed for bear. The sixteen on the right—they're mine. The sixteen on the left has had not one flight hour or portion thereof with a human butt-cheek in the seat! Go pick yours and just give me the tail number."

Jacob huffs, "WEP is He rated, right?"

"Just like the Cinderblocks will be, but if they sit idle then it's cryo-nitrogen. If you got an hour we can re-tank it!"

"Naw, cryo-N is good enough."

Bill nods, "Just so you know in this universe, the Forty-Seven has always been the fastest off the line...until the Seventy-Four."

"Ya, it beats it in the quarter but the T-Bolt always takes it in the stretch...every time." Jacob starts for the dark hanger while he thumbs towards his junk heap of a fighter, "Park Beatrix underground and nobody touches her! My ship here is a legend, got that?"

"Righty'o! Nobody touches her, I guar'ontee!" As Jacob steps into the dark underground hanger, Bill calls out to him, "Remember, on the T-Bird everything is exactly the same...just different!"

With the suits canopy still in his hand, Jacob stops just past the underground opening and waits for his eyes to adjust. After about a half a minute, two lines of fighters come into clear focus.

Where Beatrix manages his Thunderbolt, the CHiP AI from his personal PBDi unit works his JACC, and where Beatrix is exceedingly nice and friendly Jacob's CHiP, whose avatar is based on the fictional animated science fiction character Asajj Ventress, is crass and direct, <"All of 'em look like cookie cutter what the fuck, if you ask me.">

Jacob laughs at that, "Yea, Asajj, my sentiments exactly."

<"They look so damned fragile.">

"Made of the finest Ural-grade Stalinium."

<"Remains to be seen, so...which to choose?"> She then erupts in a curious excitement, <"Hey! Look at the tail numbers.">

Jacob reads the first one as 31409 and the second one as 31423, so he snorts, "I think I'm thinking what you're thinking!"

<"If it's here then that's the one!">

They walk down the line of fighters and the second to the last airframe they find 31415, so Jacob smiles, "Well, I'll be damned!"

<"Yea, baby! Let me tie into it for ya!"> Within seconds she links into the ship and fires it up, <"Power up initiated. Trixie and Bud are uploading now. Three minutes, a reboot and she's yours!">

Jacob stares at it and wonders how small it looks.

Called the Thunderbird, the ASF74 uses exactly the same air surfaces of the ASF47 Thunderbolt as well as the same landing gear and weapons systems. Only problem is with a 40% reduction in mass and cross section of the fuselage also means a 25% cut in missile load out but only a 10% reduction for the 8.80mm ammo drum. This nip

and tuck job to the 47 was to gain greater maneuverability—all to take on the Djinn in an honest turn fight. Then again, the Djinn can't skid for shit so, in Jacob's mind, what's the point exactly?

Jacob starts laughing, "That cockpit looks so little!"

<"You always go for the tight holes!"> His CHiP snarks. She then displays the skin options and says what they are as they flash up, <"So now, we got matte, glossy, camo green, pixelated gray, desert tan, sky blue, and your all-time favorite...tiger-stripe PK!">

Jacob just shakes his head as the ship's skin rolls over to pink with light tiger stripes, "I hate that color."

<"Yea, but it works.">

"Thanks, Asajj. I'll take matte for now."

With it changing she says, <"Hop on in and I'll sign off.">

Jacob floats up and slips into the cockpit. Sitting in the couch he takes a long minute to look around—realizing that everything is small and cramped. It's the same as the Cerberus cockpit, copied over from the IR5, which is even smaller than the Gryphon cockpits.

Scooching down, he clamps in as the canopy lowers over him.

Beatrix speaks up, ["As you would say, love the digs. Flight parameters are uploading and compiling. We can taxi out and launch in thirty seconds. Remember, the main gear have the powered wheels like the bis-E blocks. Sixteen kph max."]

Bud wakes up, ["Well-well-well, what have we here!"]

Jacob thumps his shoulder into the canopy, and then the other side, "Damn! Tight as a fist."

Bud laughs, ["You can kiss Saturn goodbye in this thing."]

Jacob activates the wheels for taxi, "Ain't no wiggle room."

Silently, they roll out and turn towards the hanger entrance, and halfway to it a familiar silhouette appears in the light.

Beatrix announces, ["We are now ready for powered flight."]

Slowing to a crawl, Jacob huffs, "Or maybe not?"

With the silhouette of Maria raising her arms and crossing them above her head, Jacob brings the ship to a stop five meters short of her, so Bud goes, "Let's see what she wants?"

As the canopy opens and Jacob unbuckles he says to Bud, "How about you go talk to her."

["Nega-tory, you got this!"]

"Coward." Says Jacob as he hops out of the ship and steps up to Maria while taking the full helmet off his JACC, and as he opens his mouth to say *hi* she puts a finger up to her mouth with an audible *shush* indicating to him that he needs to shut up.

"I got an alert from Taiji, before you jumped, and I pathed your file!" Maria takes one step towards Jacob and, "I thought I would come down and say, hi! Then before I could get my ass in gear I hear you performed this aMAziNg landing! I mean it's one for the books but, on the way down it all started to worry me just a tad..."

Jacob opens his mouth to apologize but Maria puts two fingers up to his lips and, "Shush-shush-shush! See, that shushing sound I'm making, means for you to keep your gob-awful yap shut. Feel me?" She takes a deep breath and, "Thinking we need to have a chat about this, and to save time, how 'bout I talk for you too!"

While using her hand like a puppet, mimicking *Jacob*, Maria goes back and forth while speaking for both of them, "*Sorry 'bout making you worry, hon.*" — "That's okay! How's Peña?" — "*He's fine, not a scratch.*" — "And after catching a blue shell up the ass that's good to hear! Now, Trix switching off the governors so you could go after those two IR5 on the deck was pretty ballsy." — "*Kinda scary if you ask me.*" — "Yea, ripping your wings off at over Mach five-three would make my butt pucker too!" — "*But I did splash those two bastards didn't I!*" — "YES, yes you did! Got yourself a double ace on one sortie now did ya!" — "*Plus one!*" — "Plus one..." Maria is about to blow her top when she says, "Let's count together, shall we—"

Glados, suited up in a JACC, has been approaching Maria from behind and says to them, "So, I got your orders. We're leaving early?"

Without breaking her predatory gaze into Jacob's eyes, Maria responds to her, "I talked to Scott, the drop on Ngāti Whā has been cancelled for today. We're gonna switch targets and pallet drop those bots on Nufa and probably GTA5 next Wednesday."

Glados nods, "Primus Hyadum! That'll freak 'em out."

Maria turns her gaze to Glados and asks with a happy voice, "Hi! Just wondering, are you two...still an item?"

Curiously, Glados goes, "Yea?"

Maria nods big, "Good! Glad to hear, tight bonds..." She then points to the fighter, "You're air combat rated now so, how many hours you got so far?"

"A hundred and twenty-eight in the ZoMug, thirty-two in the Thumper and, to date, I have eighty-three in the HoMug."

Maria's face scrunches up slightly, "HoMug?"

“H-M-M-G, for Holy Mary Mother of God.”

Maria laughs, “That was quick!”

“Yes, it was. Word is nobody can tell them apart until they get right on top of ‘em, and by then it’s too late.”

“So, you’re comfortable flyin’ this, the HoMug.”

“Like everything else, easy to pick up but a bitch to master.”

Maria smiles at Glados, “Okay, you’re driving...” She then points at Jacob, snarling, “Don’ you be sayin’ a fuckin’ word, *pandejo!*” Maria again shifts gears and smiles at Glados, “My orders are for you to take him to One-Klick, and Mac will pick you up in an hour! Now, go hang at Monique’s, have a few drinks, a few laughs, fuck your brains out and I’ll see you tomorrow at eleven hundred hours Pacific time. And if you haven’t guessed it by now, chuckle-fucker here is off the clock for the next four days. Not a call, not a text, not a peep!” Again she snarls at Jacob, “An’ that means shit outta touch, mutherfucker!” Maria bodily turns to him, hopping mad with balled fists, “When I told you, you could get back into the shit didn’t mean for you to MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME!” She shouts, then asks, “Feel me?”

Glados chimes in with, “I’m right there with ya!”

Maria looks at Glados with a cruel deadpan, “Saddle up.”

With Glados slinking off towards the fighter, Maria gets in Jacob’s face, “If it wasn’t for Diego’s quinceañera tomorrow I’d be stomping your shit about now!” She starts to laugh and can’t suppress it, “I’m so angry! Get outta here before I lose my cool!”

As Maria turns away she shouts, “Glados, that’s One-Klick, one jump, not one deviation or I’ll disappear his ass!”

With Maria stomping out of the hanger, Glados slips up beside Jacob with a smile, “I say you got off pretty easy.”

Jacob just puts his hands out, not saying anything.

Amused, Glados asks, “Coming?”

69

never knows best

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.000au from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-22-FRIDAY
TIME: 21:10zulu (local 13:10pst)

After a hundred and fifty years in a plummeting real estate market, Descanso Gardens has quintupled its footprint in the Verdugo Hills. Now on the third iteration of the beloved Japanese Tea House, across the expanded lake sits the brand new Shōgun Castle adjacent to the century old Cherry Blossom Forest. It's November and the blossoms are not going to blossom for a few more months, so the Cherry Blossom Forest goes for a cut rate this time of the year. Not as cheap as it would be in August, but Maria was able to lock the price in when they scheduled Diego's quinceañera four years ago.

The castle wasn't part of this event but the Gardens threw it in at no charge because they can't lease the castle separate from the forest, so this was a big win for Maria and the family.

It ended up being a bigger win for Descanso Gardens when they were shown the guest list and who RSVP'd.

Because many of the attendees are high profile, security for today is astronomically tight. The park is still open for business so on top of the three dozen or so visible Secret Service agents is a whole company of ghost droids running around the place arm-n-arm with Delta operators, and where the park is open the airspace was closed off for five kilometers in all directions. Orbiting overhead to enforce the no fly zone are four 'beauty and the beast' teams consisting of a white USAF Bulldog fighter and one of the new SA-Cerberus fighters shadowing them as their wingman.

Esthetically, no one likes the Cerberus and pilots have called it the Beluga out of spite, but now that it has proven itself as a monster in the CAS roll it's popularly referred to as the Evil Beluga around these parts, or Waluga for short.

note: full book to post upon completion...