

**LCTN:** 54-TAURUS-B6 (Hyades cluster)  
**CORD:** SAO-93868.0207 (49pc from SOL)  
**TIME:** 15:25zulu (local 10:07mst)

When your expectations are so low, it is nice to be surprised!

The last four weeks stuck on this Warthog, slithering in and around the rock formations of Zemlya Dva with David Gilroy, an avowed bottom by day, ended up being a lot more fun than she ever could have hoped for. Problem is, Michelle Kiel dreads the fact that their daily dance and horizontal-mambo seasons have come to an end.

Even though she was amazed by how masculine he could actually be when she was on her back, the thing she'll miss most are the long-long conversations with him...mostly about nothing.

Michelle can't be jealous of Scott, like she has been of Maria, Nicole and Cricket all these years, but she realizes that she can only kick herself in the ass for falling asleep at that wheel.

With a few minutes to go before launching the mission, Gilroy, sitting across from her in the WSO seat, looks up and asks, "Have you picked one for 'new roflstomp shimmy' yet?"

Gilroy has this strange penchant for naming the fire-missions he designs, as well as playing music as he and the HWG pilot sit and wait it out—all while the ship's AI runs the program by launching the weapons as well as zig-zagging the ship all around to avoid any return fire, and today is no different.

Michelle nods, then reaches out for the transparent alon wall between them and taps on it. Her desktop pops up and she touches a file, swipes across the screen and drags the file from the desktop to drop it on the open wall separating them. He leans in and reads the file name as 'NRS.'

"WebM format, it's an oldie I take it." Gilroy looks up and his eyes focus in on Michelle as she nods, yes, so he smiles, "Well then,

it's a mystery we'll take to the queue!"

Michelle shrugs and says, "It defines our last four weeks here better than anything else we've danced to."

He wags a stern finger at her, "It was your one task for this mission today, so it had better not disappoint!"

01101001-01100100-01101011-01100110-01100001

From the bridge of the Iron Maiden, with the CIC above them, Bill Nguyen is standing there with Beth Sandoval. Outside the thick-layered window they see Phoenix-Marauder, SA15, and Pandemonium, SA33, streak out of the system for Taiji. Left behind are the beloved Dante, Xerxes, Apache and the Basilisk. Where the Hannibal and Tamerlane are already being set upon by an army of maintenance droids, to be reconfigured for the PADF, these four are going to be pulled apart so that their constituent elements can be incorporated into the next twelve Trung battle platforms currently in the construction carousel floating in orbit around Gore Point.

There happens to be six Trung for the Annex in orbit but they have not been fully outfitted so, when they are, the Phoenix-Marauder and Pandemonium will join the Hannibal and Tamerlane.

With the eighteen new Mbande platforms spreading out to leave, Bill gives a quick huff and says, "Well, Sandy, those two are off to drop on Taiji, and you have two more drops before meeting the Mbande at the rendezvous. So, I hav'ta say, my work here is done."

Sandoval points out, "You and Scott have earned your keep."

With him looking up and around, admiring the surroundings, he says, "That may be, Lil' Missy but...you get the fun part."

"I can't lie, it is, but it's also a daily migraine."

"I wouldn't know." Bill glances outside then turns back to Sandoval, saying, "Okay, Captain Kirk, go get 'em!"

Sandoval rolls her eyes, "Please!"

As the Mbande shoot away, Bill asks, "Tell me, is it like that?"

"We've already carted a bunch of science dweebs around for the CXi on the side and, well...with them it kinda is, sorta?"

Bill asks, not so jokingly, "Wanna trade jobs?"

Sandoval shakes her head, "Aaaah, no. Make that fuck no."

Bill huffs a laugh, "Doesn't ask to hurt!" He then high fives Sandoval with, "Go get 'em, Koopa! Leme git outta your hair."

01010010-01011001-01001110-01001111

Because of all the noisy commotion, prevalent while flying in combat, when a pilot is in a bind and they hit WEP, for War Emergency Power, they never really notice the sound of the cryogenic valves as they strain and creak while twisting open, nor do they hear the shriek of tiny turbines pumping cryo-nitrogen into their razor engines—where it is exposed to a shower of quantum particles that annihilate each other thus expanding violently into a blisteringly-hot gaseous state which can dramatically increase thrust out the tail [okay, breathe].

These mechanisms kind of boosts your speed...a lot.

Nowadays, with the safety-razor engines, it's cryo-helium in your tank for WEP but He in a liquid state is really cold. Like -269°C cold which is right above absolute zero at -273.15°C. It is a bitch and a half managing liquid cryo-He, but for those rare moments when your ass is in a sling, and by chance the bad guys happen to be climbing up said ass, liquid-He gives way better results than liquid-N which is far easier to bottle and store. In the last four weeks the ship has leaked out over twenty-percent of its cryo-helium, because it's helium, but what they have on hand is more than enough for today.

Sitting here in the middle of a wide mesa on top of a high bluff, in the vicinity of the cities Livingston and Blaxton, with the last of the targeting adjustments made that morning, David Gilroy looks up at Michelle Kiel and huffs, "Well, sugar, we is doin' it!"

Michelle nods, "Cool!"

Gilroy smirks, "Eva'h hear of Katyusha Artillery?"

She shakes her head, "No?"

He laughs, "This is Stalin's stiff-one right up the tube!"

Seconds later, with the mission clock rolling out to 15:30, the firing program starts off by opening the cryogenic valves and spooling the turbines to pump helium to the missile farm pods—which is critical for cooling them down during the firing sequence.

At the exact same time they notice on the tacnet the three anti-air sites around their targets going up in massive explosions.

Gilroy sighs, "Droids, ya gotta love `em!"

With the one and only token flight of two F51c Condors on patrol over a thousand kilometers to the west, they are now at liberty to fire away without any enemy intervention.

He then points toward Michelle and says, "Two-minutes and fifty-five seconds of let 'r rip as of...now!"

With the rocket powered cluster bombs being punched into the air, rotating and then shrieking off towards their predetermined targets, they launch sixteen missiles per second between the two missile pods. Outside it sounds like the iconic Katyusha rockets, yes, but from inside the Warthog the boost phase of the rockets hammers through the fuselage and sounds more like the unending-tremelo roll of a kettle drum, but here it's sort of muffled and not loud at all. What both of them do hear loud and clear is the song Michelle picked as it starts to play, with the video itself filling the wall beside them.

As a sunflower flashes on that wall, and the percussion intro starts, Gilroy's jaw drops in bug-eyed astonishment, "You did not!"

Michelle, taken aback slightly by Gilroy's extra flamboyant over the top and dramatic reaction, asks, "Bad call?"

"Oh, hell no my little honey pot!" With his hands going up, rocking out the best one can from the confines of a JACC fighting suit, in the WSO seat of a Warthog, Gilroy sings along, "I'm headin' down the Atlanta highway! Lookin' for the looove, getawaay..."

*Love Shack* was not the something Gilroy was expecting from Michelle, but the song and video is apropos, and perfectly frames the fun they did have over the four weeks stuck here on Zemlya Dva.

While these two groove along, they monitor the attack as the 20/20 cluster bombs scatter their bomblets, or hit in MOAB mode, all over the many storage and distributions facilities out and around the industrial zones by the cities of Livingston and Blaxton.

Most of the heavy work at these facilities is done by robots, all driven by AI overseers, so any collateral damage, *i.e.* civilian deaths, should be minimal at worst.

01000110-01001001-01001110-01000101

The first time one hears about the Country Club Plaza, in Kansas City, Missouri, they think, *whatever*, but if one actually goes there they are shocked by how gorgeous everything is. In a Moorish style akin to Seville, Spain, this place is street upon street chock full of stores, restaurants, sculptures and fountains everywhere you turn.

Considering that this is the heart of America, and even though many of the stores here are exclusive to Manhattan and Rodeo Drive, the exceptional \$\$\$\$ setting actually serves the \$\$\$ budget.

It is winter here in KCMO but surprisingly it has not been that cold this week. Unfortunately, a snowstorm is charging in from the northwest and should be rolling in, in about twelve hours, but Jessica and Monique believe they'll be long gone before it hits.

What's unbelievable to Maria and everyone is that it is cold, yet sunny without a cloud in the sky. Stepping outside in the chilly morning air to walk from the hotel to a café, at a corner crosswalk while heading east, Jessica tells everyone to stop, close their eyes and point their faces up towards a sun that is still low in the sky.

With the cool-nippy air swirling around them their faces are embraced by the warmth of Sol, but it was Angela, the six year old, who came to the realization, "It's like the sun is kissing my face." And with everyone nodding in agreement, touched by the sentiment, she then wrecks the moment by saying, "An' he got *big* lips!"

In the café, across the street from the Giralda Tower, they are hitting up on the pastry bar, and with everyone else taking a seat with their food, Angela steps up to Maria and Jessica, puts down her plate then wiggles her fingers at Jessica as if putting a hex on her.

Jessica asks, "Wha'?"

Angela points to a huge-sticky cinnamon roll with a mountain of cream cheese icing on it, "You're gonna help me with this here."

"I'm watching my girlish figure."

"Small world, that's two of us!" Angela picks up the plate and then says, "But where you're worried about wearin' that high-tech stuff, I'm saddled with stardom!" With both Maria and Jessica giving her a deadpan-squint, Angela shrugs, "Yeeeee'll ain't buyin' it."

Maria tries not to laugh, "Nope."

Angela nods and walks off, lamenting, "It's salads! Salads an' salads an' more salads foreeeever! My kingdom for a burger!"

Jessic calls out to her, "That's for lunch, babe!"

With Angela out of earshot, Maria asks, "Carlos regret it yet?"

"No, she's killin' it with the ad libs." Jessica snorts a laugh, "Let's put it this way, they don't know what to do when she actually gives a line the way it was written! Carlos says she is magic."

Maria nods, "On Diego's special, the public's consensus is that someone has gotta be writing her lines. They don't believe she's real."

"Not surprised... Oh ya, Carlos wants to cast Eight as Bishop." With Maria gritting her teeth, Jessica asks, "Ready for status?"

"Nope." Maria then asks, "Do I need to hear it?"

Jessica shrugs big, "No, no need to really."

Maria nods, "Okay then, spit it out."

"Scratch two divisions."

Maria takes in the news and bobs her head in understanding, and after a few long seconds she quietly goes, "Fifteen-thousand."

"The wounded and captured will be traded tomorrow."

Maria then shakes her head slightly, "What a fucked up honor system. It's like Giáp is banking on them tripping over their own dick." She then stares at Jessica and, "But you know, don't you." Jessica's guilty eye-roll says it all, "Twenty-four divisions each. It's even-Steven now, but you know how many the general has in reserve, right?"

Jessica nods and quietly adds, "Ten-twelve million."

"I don't want a blood bath, but you ain't tellin' me shit."

"Pleasantly surprised, remember?"

"Fuck off."

Jessica smiles and, "General Alcock's floater went down."

Maria nods with a huff, "I'll bet."

"The others are in New Darwin. They'll detour to Calar-Three when they leave after the inspection. Box tends to be prompt."

"Yup." Maria nods again, and after a long silence she says, "The girls can't wait to go to that God-damned art museum."

"Yeeea, Eight won't shut up about it."

Maria wonders, "Is it that good?"

Jessica, with a sly grin, "Pleasantly surprised, remember?"

01010011-01101110-01010011

With the last of the 2,808 cluster bombs and 312 of the short vertically launched Centipede missiles, known as the Millipede, being fired, things didn't become 'suddenly quiet' as one would expect. The last bomb punching out in boost phase is followed by a huge flushing sound accompanied by crackling metal as liquid-He is blown into the pods to purge any residual heat caused by the boosting motors.

A lot of the tubes in the pods will be damaged by the flush but with cryo-helium they can double-time the firing sequence. A normal fire barrage like this is hairy-scary because of all the return fire the AI has to dodge. Targeting the sources of that fire is the one thing the humans can do because it does not require split-second reaction time, and it does keep them busy while the AI labors over the sequence and all the flat two-dimensional angular-serpentine maneuvers.

With no enemy forces here to contend with, all Michelle and Gilroy did was ride out the fire mission while bobbing their heads to

the music. The last maneuver the AI does is to execute a standard E3 program before handing off control to Michelle. With the pitch up, entering the jinking-sequence, they leave nine distribution centers and over three-hundred storage facilities in smoking ruins.

With stick in hand, Michelle cancels the crazy-rollercoaster like escape and evasion program, and after leveling the ship out she does a quick mental checklist and, with their six ghost droid fighters racing up behind to escort them out, she starts a shallow climb for space.

Hearing the singer on the video laugh out, 'Tin roof...rusted!' Michelle looks at Gilroy and asks, "What's that mean?"

Gilroy shrugs, "Fuck'd if I know!"

Michelle smiles while admitting, "Thank you for the *not* boring mission, David. Honestly, I didn't want it to end...so soon that is."

"Shared sentiment, blondie." Gilroy then points up with an excited look on his face, "How 'bout a consolation prize! When Mister Throw-Me-Down ain't around, and you're in town, I'll come put a smile on that face of yours so, how's that sound?"

Michelle starts laughing, "Shut up!"

Gilroy feigns indignation, "Wha' you don't want?"

"YES...yes, I want."

"I be lookin' forward to it, good buddy!"

Angela Simmons, the ships ghost co-pilot for the mission, cries out, ["Enough already! Christ, don't you guys ever shut up!"]

Gilroy asks, "Wonderin' where you've been!"

["Watchin' you two fuckin' around for the last four weeks!"]

Michelle gives a knowing smile, "Have you been watching us?"

["Aaaah, had to fap to somethin', but why I'm butting into your cloyingly-sickeningly sweet, hurl-tastic of a conversation, we got those two Mothera racing in. Like, d'uh!"]

"We'll be long gone before the M&Ms would be any trouble."

["Don't we have something we could be, you know, testing?"]

Michelle and Gilroy look at each other, blinking and frowning in confusion, and suddenly they both realize, "The Pazuzu gun!"

["Like, double d'uh!"]

Gilroy asks, "Angie, the Griffons are sluggish at Mach what?"

["All of the Fifty-Ones can't turn for shit at Mach three. These bastards are comin' to ya on a silver platter at over Mach four."]

Michelle levels the ship out and, "Breaking radio silence."

David calls out, "AP up!"

As Michelle radios the six fighters behind them, Angela says, ["David, it's all in your good hands...good buddy!"]

They have to wait three minutes until the Condors are in range so as Michelle keeps the ship steady David monitors the shot. The Pazuzu gun under the nose of the razor has a built in tray where it can stage three of the smart, maneuver on the fly, arch-penetrator sabot rounds for a quick triple tap. On Black Stump they tested these as well as the micro-nuke plugin and, lo and behold, here we have three of those things in the tray!

Also in the nose of the Razorbacks is a binocular optical scope that Michelle deploys. On the screen the Condors show up as little dots but increase in size, pixel by pixel, and at 120 kilometers they are now ninety-eight pixels across, from wingtip to wingtip, where the railgun fires two of the penetrators at a half-second interval.

Like at an Arkansas Turkey Shoot, working it from back of the line to the front, in quick succession the two Condors are hit squarely in the nose. Due to cavitation their fuselages puff up slightly as the arc-penetrators rip on through, but it is when the 1,000kg micro-nuke bombs goes off, as if it were an afterthought while exiting the back, the two ships explode from behind and blow apart exactly like one would envision giant-Kaiju confetti poppers.

With big-eyes and slack jaws, shocked and amazed by these results, Gilroy, Michelle, Angela and the six droids trailing behind them shout and cheer as Gilroy howls, "THAT's what I'm talkin' about!"

After a good-long hearty laugh, and wiping away the tears, Michelle pulls the Warthog back into a lazy egress for space, while saying, "People, I think this here thang is a keeper!"

Angela chuckles, ["You can kiss the baby hammers bye-bye!"]