

TIME: 20:15zulu (local 17:02mst)

Jacob pops into relative space high over Sapphire, and drifts down to one-hundred and fifty kilometers altitude before dropping out of the MDDSH spacial displacement field. It pops like a soap bubble leaving him with a forward velocity next to zero, relative to the oceans far below, which is no big deal, but he exits the dash without the canopy attached to his fighter which is kind of a big deal.

It got completely shot away thirty minutes before he jumped.

He instantly switches on the anti-gravity drive, because it's the convenient option, and mostly to prevent his ship from spinning out of control as it goes into freefall—transitioning from space to an altitude with the millibars necessary for atmospheric flight. Without the canopy he is exposed to the vacuum of space, yes, but in his JACC the severe buffeting from the high-altitude winds while leaving the planet, Yunga, was simply an annoyance. What extended beyond annoyance, and into excruciating, was where the spiral blades that snipped his legs with the force of a JATO-rocket powered Guillotine, below the knee on his right and above the knee on his left, have no thermal protections. When leaving Yunga, the freezing winds that slammed into the stubs of his legs caused such extensive frostbite it destroyed two centimeters of tissue past the blades.

Entering the atmosphere of Sapphire, he gets to do it again.

Yemi Kagame blows in from her jump forty kilometers away and has been orbiting Jacob and his fighter, ["How you be doin'?"]

Jacob is exhausted from the pain, but he manages to laugh, "I've been better, Ouchie! Thank you for taking care of those two guys that were on my ass for me. I owe you for that."

["You be *maga-kolo*, you know, crazy-crazy! Next time you no hear me, and target fixate like that, I'm gonna let them have their way wit' you'z! You get me?"]

Jacob sighs big, "Okay, I'm sorry, I hear you! Let me focus on this and you can bitch me out when we get on the deck, deal?"

["Yea, I be gonna bitch you out sometin' fierce!"]

Dropping through the thermosphere Jacob gets another dose of severe buffeting, then slamming about while continuing their decent through the mesosphere, which would be next to nothing if he had a canopy, but passing the stratopause things seem to settle down so Jacob continues his decent at 45° while keeping it below 500kph.

This whole time, Jacob is shouting and cussing angrily from the pain, followed by hysterical laughter with an occasional curse or two because excruciating transitions into the realm of blistering hell fire that is soon followed by...nothing. The agony he feels is wiped away as dopamine finally kicks in and he is left panting and sweating as they approach the top of the clouds marking the tropopause layer.

Jacob switches coms-channel, "Bud, you busy?"

Bud is furious, ["Wha? What the fuck do you want? I'm not talkin' to you! I don't talk to dead people!"]

"We made it out, didn't we?"

["We should have been splattered just outside of Juat, that's what should have been!"]

"If you won't do what I want, then I'll have Trixie do it!"

["What the fuck do you want then?"]

"Contact CK-Control and let them know I'll be landing at the Spike flight-line. Then tell C3 that I'll be landing outside and...I'll need medical assistance when I get there."

["One step ahead of ya, I already did it!"]

"Okay, wha'd they say?"

["It's not what they said, but what Ramirez said!"]

"Oh, fuck...she say she'll be out there waitin'?"

["How'd ya guess!"]

"I'm sooo fucked!"

["I'm gonna have fun watchin' this!"]

Trixie adds, ["I'll have the popcorn ready!"]

"*Et tu, Beatrice?*"

Trixie goes ["Let's just say that I felt a curious unease by your behavior today. I was wondering what oblivion felt like, but you got your ass handed too you without plunging us into that dark abyss."]

Jacob laughs, "Listen to you talk!"

["Thank you! Yes, after all these years, I think Bud's poetic chops are starting to rub off on me?"]

Bud goes, ["Well, Trix, I'm glad to be a good influence!"]

Jacob asks, "Don't you upload to your concierge instance?"

If an AI could smile then Trixie does with, ["Well, you got me there, Field Marshal! You could say this is my side job now."]

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Because they are carrying non-combatants, Zamboni lands Jessica's babyback vertically on the touchdown markings just past the blast pad on the western end of the six-kilometer runway at the Church Key Civil Spaceport. He immediately turns off the runway and back around to the taxiway that runs from there to the Spike.

They reach the flight-line in front of the grassy knoll that's in front of the entrance to the Spike. Shutting down, Zamboni hops out first and, after a quick visual inspection lap around the ship, he calls up into the ladder well and gives them the all clear to exit.

Coming in to land are Jacob and Kagame's Thunderbirds.

Zamboni reaches Maria while Jessica, Scott and Monique lag far behind, trying to get the lethargic Angela out of the ship, so Maria says to Zamboni, "Sorry 'bout that, Zam."

"No, it was good that I was there. This was an exceptionally bad day for everyone. I still got that flight to DC?"

"They'll be ready to go after dinner. About nineteen-hundred Eastern-Standard? That'll be zero-hundred zulu. Cricket will be going with you, but I don't know if Jessica is still gonna WiSO for you or not? We do have tons of alternates!"

Zamboni shrugs, "I'll take Vossler if he's free!"

"Remember, you'll be flying as Air-Force-One when President Mofid and Esma are on board. Don't forget that, okay?"

"You keep reminding me!" Jacob's fighter has touched down, and as it slowly inches up to the knoll, Zamboni laughs then points out, "Aaaaah, isn't that guy's canopy missing?"

With Vossler, Glados and Nancy Yoon stepping up to the knoll, next to them, and an EMT crew exiting the hanger with a hoist and a mechanical gurney, Maria says, "Yea, he's why I'm here."

"Is it Graves?"

"How'd ya guess?"

Zamboni smiles, "Just a hunch?"

With everybody out of Jessica's babyback, they all watch as the Thunderbird's forward landing gear taps on the curb at the edge of the knoll and collapses out from under it letting the fighter's nose drop by 8° thereby slamming into the face of the slope. Propped up by the forked nacelles, they cut into the grass and dirt.

From this, Jacob's right shin and foot, amputated by the suit an hour ago, slides out of the cockpit and drops to the ground.

As Jacob reaches over to his left arm that's gripping the drive management control and, while he pulls it away in a slow rip, Nancy laughs and asks him, "How ya doin' Graves?"

Jacob nods as he inspects the silvery blades where the suit cut his arm off below the elbow, "Couldn't be better, Nancy!" He then shrugs while looking around at his ship, asking, "Waddya think?"

Nancy nods big, "Looks like a fixer upper! I think we can get 'er back into the air in about three weeks? Four on the outside."

Vossler chuckles, "But for you, I think its' gonna be awhile!"

Maria steps along the port nacelle and hops down to sit on the edge of the cockpit, and as she helps pull Jacob's canopy and helmet assembly off she asks, "How ya doin' Chuckle-Fuck?"

Jacob introspectively rolls his eyes, saying, "I've been better?"

Maria points to Kagame, who has just stepped up, and asks, "You, Yemi, what happened out there?" Jacob is about to open his mouth but Maria snarls at him, "Shut the fuck up, I'm asking her!" She again smiles at his wingman, "So, what went down, exactly?"

Kagame goes, "Well, Marshal, it was a trap. It be like d'is, Gilroy launched da missile farm and six Djinn pop up from behind stands of trees and go after 'im! Gilroy downs the first two but da second pair kill 'im. Day got kiloton warheads that slam his ship into da ground and dey gut it with three of those t'ings!"

Maria points down towards the cockpit, "How'd this happen?"

"Well, Buzzard here, he order me to hang back as he go after second pair and 'e down both with Mews. The last two were hot on his tail and d'ay empty on him with long-legs and wontons. The bolts weakened the canopy and a twenty-three landed! They got these shots in overhead before my missiles get 'em."

"You shot both of them down?"

"Yes, mum! I git 'em bo'f!"

With Jacob tossing his severed hand out the front of the cockpit, Maria says, "Thank you, Yemi. You did good!"

"You gotta knock some sense int'a his crazy head!"

"Trust me, you can count on it!"

Everyone from the babyback watched Jacob toss his hand overboard, and Angela, realizing it's him, flies off the handle and races up the knoll and onto the nacelle—ready to pound his face in. Angela dives for Jacob but Maria catches her in midair.

Swinging her fists at him she starts to scream, "Asshole! You asshole! Uncle J, I'm gonna break your face! God-damn it!"

Jacob grabs a hand as Maria grabs the other and he shouts over her rant, "I got him! I got the guys who killed David!"

Maria says, "He got 'em, honey!"

Finally understanding what they just said, she stops fighting them to ask, "You got them? All of them?"

"Yes, sweetie, he did!"

Jacob adds, "And Yemi got the guys who shot at me."

Angela asks, "I have to let this go then, right?"

As Maria nods, yes, to Angela, Jessica has stepped up on the nacelle on the other side of the cockpit, sits, and while surveying the holes in the cockpit she asks, "Seal Club Valley?"

Jacob nods, "Yup!"

"Looks like, today, the seals clubbed back!"

Jacob starts chuckling, "No...no shit!"

The EMT crew has reached the Thunderbird, so the chief asks, "You flyin' or do we hoist you out?"

His assistant goes, "The suit says he blocked the pain meds."

"Then give it to him!"

Jacob protests, "No, that makes me fuzzy an...shit."

The chief smiles, "You feel that?"

"Nope!" Jacob blinks then says, "I didn't want to feel dopey."

"Too bad! We need you all loaded up so when we get you upstairs we can extricate you without a fuss."

With the EMTs preparing Jacob to hoist him out of the cockpit, Everyone hops down from the ship and Maria goes, "Since we have the core here let's settle some things now while he's still awake."

Jacob speaks up, "Yemi, you're now flying for Connors."

Kagame nods, "She's not crazy like you, so sure!"

"Connors will be taking over CAP while I'm out."

Maria asks, "You want Peña running RRF?"

"If you don't mind, that's what I want."

Maria nods in agreement, "Okay!"

Jacob looks back and forth between Maria and Scott, "I can still plan things from a hospital bed."

Maria grins, "Yea, and I'm expecting you too!"

Monique speaks up, "Maria, does he have to recuperate here? If it wouldn't be any trouble, we would love to have him!"

"For a double leg regen, he'll be in bed or on wheels for the whole first year. You really wanna deal with that?"

Monique shrugs, "His children and grandchildren would love to spend time with him and, since Angela and Eight will be residing there during their shoot, I think it would be a grand idea! Don't forget, you installed a secure connection to One-Klick!"

Jacob shakes his head, "I don't want to be a burden."

Monique clutches her hands, "A burden you would not be."

Maria smiles, "I think it would be a great idea! As soon as we get him boned and bagged we'll drop him off on your doorstep!"

Monique claps her hands with joy, "*Oui!* It will be fun!"

"We'll work out the treatment schedules." And as the EMT crew starts to hoist Jacob from the cockpit, Maria now turns to Scott, Nancy and Glados, "Okay, Peña will have RRF while he's laid up. You guys work out the next couple of weeks and touch base with Chuckles while he's in and out of surgery." Maria turns to Jacob, "Hey, think you can still do Mission Oversight?"

Jacob is dangling in the air as the hoist is swinging him from over his ship to the gurney, "If they come to me, no problem!"

Maria points to Jessica, "Whenever there's face to face time, you're gonna haf'ta be the taxi! Sorry 'bout that."

Jessica shrugs, "Not a problem!"

"If Samantha is in town then feel free to have her tag along on these runs!" Jessica gets a look on her face so Maria smiles and says, "I already know 'bout you and her. Boxter told me."

Jessica points out, "It's nothing serious."

"Okay, then it's not a problem!" Maria then turns to Scott and Nancy, "Oh, yea, one more thing on the Boxter front. Michelle Kiel is not to be assigned to any combat mission or risky operation going forward. Not even a panty raid! From here on out she is restricted to diplomatic corps and glad-handing missions only."

Scott asks, "What's happening there?"

Maria shrugs, "Talked to Box. Everybody recognized her from the video of them making contact with the Jabberwocky's."

"I thought Co-op leadership wanted her dead?"

Maria thumbs back towards Jessica, "Yea, that is until she got involved! Now their Corporations Commission is losing their shit. They want Michelle safe so...it's the least I could do for 'em!"

Nancy says, "She's scheduled to lead the Cue Ball mission when they find the pathway. She a go, or do we get someone else?"

"Did the pathfinders find a path yet?"

Scott goes, "We got five mapped out but they're kinda jinky. We think early May we'll have a clean avenue through the nebula."

"Keep her on it for now." With it starting to rain, Maria throws out, "Oh since they're setting traps, we got Ninety-Five Tau tomorrow, right?" Scott and Nancy nod, yes, "Okay then, how 'bout we send in Cŵn Dawgs and not React? Get a feel for whazzup before Peña goes in to start some shit, cool beans?"

Nancy nods, "Done!"

Maria points out, "Not to sound paranoid but everything is now a trap until it's not. Let's keep that in mind for the time being."

Glados throws out, "We have some fresh intel that suggests the Nine-Fivers may be deploying nukes as booby-traps."

"Yea, and?"

"Megaton yield nukes."

Maria blinks, "That's the dumbest thing I've heard this week!"

"It does sound goofy, but we should play it safe."

"We're sending in Dawgs, so we'll see which stupid prevails." Looking up at the clouds and the rain, Maria asks, "Is there anything else we need to talk about now?"

Scott shakes his head, "Nothing that can't wait for later."

Maria turns and looks at Jacob who is on the gurney with the EMTs strapping him in, "Monique and the kids are going to join us for dinner with Mofid and Esma. We'll touch base afterwards."

Jacob has already hoisted little Angela up on his lap, and with Monique, Jessica and Seth at his side, ready to follow him up to the hospital floors, Angela says, "We'll get Uncle-J upstairs first."

Jessica asks, "The dinner is on Two-Ten?"

Maria says, "Yea, come as you are, see you at twenty-one hundred." She then asks Scott, "By the way, how's the car?"

Scott glances at Monique and says, "Don't take this the wrong way, sweetheart, but to me it's a box on wheels! Everyone there thinks it's the coolest thing they ever saw so—"

Maria cuts him off, "I saw pictures of it. It is the coolest thing ever!" She pokes him in the chest, "One more thing going forward, I need you to take over some human resource duties for me."

Scott shrugs, "With CivX picking up I expected as much."

"Okay, cool, let's you, me and Nancy reconvene tomorrow."

As this impromptu meeting is breaking up, with Monique, Jessica and Seth hovering around Jacob as the others head back into the Spike, Glados' eye twitches as she asks Jacob, "Need anything?"

Jacob realizes something is wrong, "No, I'm good."

Glados nods, "Okay...let me know if you do."

And that's it, she turns and walks away.

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With Monique in the trauma surgery suite with Jacob, as he is being prepped for extraction, along with Angela still sitting protectively on his lap, Jessica steps out into the hall to talk to her little brother.

Seth is looking out over the flight line, thirty stories below, and as Jessica slithers up beside him, he says, "I take full responsibility for each and every act that I have committed so, in the interest of being constructive, be specific when you chew me out. Okay?"

Jessica nods, *yes*, as she looks down over the flight line with him, then says, "What happened today was a very exacting outcome, and *not saying* how and when David was going to buy it—"

Seth drives the point home, "Gave us that desired outcome." He looks up at her with a smile, "I love it when things come to fruition and reaffirms my...vision." He looks back outside, "What happened today was insurmountably beneficial to both you and Angela. One errant word or crossed-wire would have FUBAR'd the whole thing, and the beauty of it is...I didn't do anything!"

"You told me last October."

"Cryptically? Had to say something back then for the dominos to lead up to this morning! On that note, we'll need to send the SA portraits of David, Nicole and Angela's mother to Dolphi!"

Jessica scowls, "She knows?"

"About me?" Seth looks up at her, "Yes, I needed her on board and she can be trusted, and now that she's part of our little intrigue she can be trusted in spades." He looks back outside, "I'll give you the full rundown tonight after dinner."

"I'm supposed to WiSO for Zam tonight."

"Vossler will be taking your place."

"Oh, okay... After dinner, then I guess you'll be getting me up to speed on why today had to happen."

Seth nods, "I can...for Little Klicks, yes, but, for you, it'd be better for you to let this play out without knowing and, considering how badly I played you, big sis, I'll give you that choice."

Jessica rolls her eyes, "Butterfly effect?"

He drolls, "D'uuuh, what else!"

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