

103

damnatio memoriae

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DATE: 2323ce-JANUARY-14-SUNDAY
TIME: 23:20zulu (local 10:00pst)

It may be late-Sunday evening most everywhere, pursuant to Zulu-time and our CE-calendar, but here on Prypiat it happens to be early morning Wednesday, the year 9-610. A year, the time it takes for the planet Chernobyl to orbit Zemu, is just a smidge over 20 Earth years so here the 9 in 9-610 indicates the current year since the ANZAC Ninth Exploratory Task Force landed on Prypiat, two centuries ago, with 610 denoting the week count for the current year.

And yes, the settlers who followed them, and got fed up with the stumpies ruling, became the House of Anzac on Taiji.

A week here is 11 days of 26 hours and 12 minutes each, so on next Wednesday's High Moon there will be a planet wide New Year's celebration when it rolls over to year-week 10-001.

Michelle Kiel, the de facto ruling head of state here on Prypiat, now the sole stakeholder in the *Kiel Landgut GmbH*, an estate that acts as the leading SCC lender, as well as the sitting Chairman for both the Cooperative and the Corporations Commission, planned her wedding to not upstage the up and coming New Year's holiday. Long ago when they cut their week back from 12 to 11 days Wednesday became the calendar weekend, so this being a double-digit rollover Michelle is springing for the citizens to take the week off—and those who do work "the estate" will offer them triple time.

This wedding is the Hyades social event of the CE-decade and, where Piper's funeral was a downer, today they have a new Kiel in charge. Shelly has been making political waves in the short week after being installed on the Commission, and carrying the notes for the war means she proxies all the votes.

Then again, yet again, no one here dares to unseat Michelle...

Anyway, here we are at the Star Castle of Prypiat, located on the largest island on the southwest corner of the Bribie Stumps island chain, and this thing brings the idea of a bastion fortress to a whole new level. The Kiel's built it to keep the indigenous fauna out but, instead of opting for one of the many *trace italienne* patterns popular in Europe in days long past, for the Star Castle we have a perfect five pointed concave equilateral decagon, pentangle-star.

Simply put, your garden-variety pentagram.

The thing is striking to look at, with exterior walls constructed from a locally sourced dark-pink granite. Angled at 75° from the base, the polished surface of these walls are featureless all the way to the ramparts running along the top that's 38 meters up, but an eight-story height doesn't look so high up when you compare it to its width which is two kilometers between any two points of the star.

This facility was city central when people first migrated here, mostly from New South Wales and Victoria, but when the islands were cleared of predators then everyone left to set up a practical city closest to the farms on the Queensland Vista, and with New Brisbane firmly established, the Kiel's ended up with the Star Castle—lock, stock and barrel. Some factions did bitch about that but, when looking back a short ways, the Family Kiel did pay for the damned thing.

Jacob comes blowing into a high orbit over Prypiat and, when his IFF is pinged by the PTC, the controllers immediately hand him a pink line pathway through the heavy mid-morning traffic. After cutting in between the congested orbital tracks, he drops straight down over New Brisbane and follows one of the many military flight corridors that crisscross the whole of Bribie Eyot. Like most civilian airspaces altitude is in feet so, when approaching the stumps at an altitude of 15,000 feet, he gains clearance from "Deutsch Insel" for an at-will VFR decent and vertical landing in the central courtyard of the castle.

Coming in from the east, Jacob orbits the entire island as he loses altitude, and then tightens it around the Star Castle for the last 1,000 feet. For the second and final orbit he notices a string of gliders and floaters lined up at the red-carpeted receiving area at the only ground entrance to the castle that's located at the nook between the northern and northeastern spikes. As his Thunderbird swings around, approaching the southern spike, the Kiel's family wing, he receives a priority clearance to approach and enter the courtyard from over the receiving area where the gliders are offloading passengers.

Jacob radios back with, "Roger that, DE-Control. On final."

Approaching the portcullis, the entrance to the castle, Jacob's ship flutters slightly as he transitions from flight via aerodynamic lift to gravity repulse, or more commonly known as AG drive. Floating over

the red-carpeted receiving area, just twelve-meters over the rampart, his ship drifts ever so slowly over the wall and past three HWG101's that are parked near the entrance. He touches down in the center of the courtyard with a slight compression bounce to the landing gear, and waiting here for him are Maria, Jessica, Peter and Piper Jr.

The ship's canopy opens and Jacob grabs a carryon bag from the jump seat as he hops out. Landing in front of them, he hands his bag to Peter and pops his suit's canopy, "I miss anything?"

Maria just slowly shakes her head at him, "Fashionably late and stylish motherfucken' entrance, don'chya think?"

Jacob snorts, "Sorry? Made a lil' detour?"

Trying not to laugh, Peter says, "Well, for starters you missed the breakfast, the dedication, and the Tilak has been delayed!"

Jacob wonders, "Come again, Tilak?"

Piper smiles, "The bloody Hindi's have rubbed off on us all!"

Jessica has already looked into the gun ports on both sides of the cockpit and notices that the speed tape patches that cover the muzzles of the five-barrel rotary cannon are missing, so she thumbs at it while asking her father, "Looks like the Polyken has been blown off of the rails of your eighty-eight so, wha'...Maui?"

With a tight-lipped roll of the eyes, Jacob grimaces, "Rongo?"

Maria asks, "Rongo on the table?"

"As a diversion, but Maui is the target."

Maria nods, "They really won't be expecting that."

Jessica asks, "So, pop, how many grapes did ya squish?"

Embarrassed, Jacob cringes, "Two?"

Jessica shakes her head, "Fucktard."

Knowing he's wrong, Jacob huffs, "I'm sorry."

"Ya know, you didn't have to recon today of all days."

He shrugs, "It was on the way?"

Jessica looks at him, "Give me a fucking break."

Maria interjects, "It was really stupid of you."

He protests, "Got some great intel out of the sweep!"

Maria points out, "It's not gonna make any difference, is it?"

With his Thunderbird starting to turn around and taxi back to park among the 101s, Jacob points at her, pulls it back, then realizes,

"No, it really won't make a bit of difference."

She nods, "And you knew it going there."

Jacob sheepishly admits, "Yea, I kinda did."

Maria grins, "Jessie's right, you are a fucktard."

Piper goes, "If I may, me mateys, as you people would say, we kinda need to get this on the hump."

With Peña floating in to land his b-mod Cerberus where Jacob's fighter was sitting, Peter nods back towards the southern wing, "Right this way, pop!"

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The storms came through at 10:30 and left at 12-noon, like clockwork, and with twenty minutes until High Moon, i.e. 13:00 hours, we have Boxter's Star Clipper touching down here in the courtyard. The ship slowly rolls up to the red carpet leading into the southern wing of the castle and the ramp drops onto the edge of the carpet.

The groomsmen step out of the vestibule lobby, where we have 5,300 attendees waiting patiently for the wedding to start, all to escort the bridesmaids back in. First we have four-year-old Jade come down the ramp to walk in with Michelle's three year old son by way of David Gilroy, Nigel the Third, with Piper Jr attending to them. Next we have Angela, who is now ten, walk in with thirteen-year-old Robert, Piper's adopted son and clone of Robert Jackson. Then it's Peanuts walking in with Jacob's favorite wingman, Yemi Kagame, whose black tuxedo is identical to the guys in the line but cut for a woman's figure. Lilith walks in with Seth, and Copper with Alex, Jacob's clone, followed by Cap and Jessica—who is also in a black tuxedo with her hair up in a Dutch-ribbon braid. Next is Brie and Peter, followed by Diego who'll be walking down the aisle solo as the maid of honor.

Now, the bridesmaids are wearing pleated, off the shoulder, tea-length dresses but where simple E.Coli is the most common source of spider silk nowadays, the fibres for these and Michelle's wedding dress was sourced directly from legions of, *Argiope-sutenresu*. The recently developed "stainless silverface" spider looks just like any other run of the mill Yellow Garden Spider, but the silk it produces functions like it has Scotchgard built directly into the fibroin-threads. Once it's woven into satin, the fabric will repel everything and absorb nothing, which means that shimmering white is the only color option you're gonna get with it. This holds true for their shoes where, *peau de soie*, the uppers were custom cobbled out of the same material.

Spill a merlot on any of these garments and it skates right off!

Finally, we have Michelle herself coming down the ramp of the Star Clipper escorted by the Mountain Troll, her great grandfather, Nigel Kiel. Michelle's dress is also an off the shoulder mermaid cut with absolutely no lace or features of any kind. With the panels stitched vertically, this snug gown clings to her as if it were knit, and the skirt flares out at the knees to an ever so popular modest-elliptical train. The simplicity, cut and sheer elegance of this dress accentuates the hips all to exaggerate her already buxom-hourglass figure and, like with Victoria, jaws are dropping at the sight of Michelle walking in!

So, to catch up, the actual wedding for Michelle and Jacob took place just the day before during the rehearsals, when everyone was in casual sweats and cut-offs while they were saying their vows, but today is the social/political media circus for everyone here on Prypiat. Funny thing is, with the Hererro's in attendance, the crews for *iFamilia Cubanaza!* have undercut everyone else and are providing the techs and octodroid cameras for this event at no charge. Sure, they'll be getting a killer episode out of the footage, and Michelle is counting on that, but at least they will be controlling the narrative and not the newsrooms out of New Brisbane. Since Michelle and Jacob are from the Annex, and they are at war with the people attending this wedding, the goal of the Cubanaza crew is to make Michelle and Jacob appear human, friendly and engaging—not the sworn enemy as eluded to and reinforced by the local press outlets.

Then again, Michelle's generosity leading up to New Year's has blown the populace away! They now think of her as a breath of fresh air, and the waves she's been making has pretty much trashed all of the negative press New Brisbane has been projecting over the last few weeks.

Inside the south wing an orchestra has been staged on the third level balcony above the dais, playing Handel's Water Music, and they have timed this whole thing beautifully. At 13:00 hours sharp, right at this year's final week rollover to 9-611, the wedding march begins with them playing the Water Music's *Menuet*. The bridesmaids and groomsmen pace themselves perfectly, and when Diego reaches fifteen meters out, Michelle and Nigel step off when the orchestra switches movements to the *Lentement* and then seamlessly jumping to the *Lento* when they are halfway down the aisle. Yes, at the end of the wedding they'll hop back and play the subdued *Presto* on the way out, but only a handful of people here know classical music enough to notice the sequencing changes.

The bridesmaids on display are all amazingly beautiful, yes, but Michelle's walk down the aisle in this tight wedding gown has a Brazilian *Samba no Pé* vibe to it, but the difference being is that here it's to Handel making it even more mesmerizing. With the bridal party

ascending the dais, each pair splitting at their assigned level, Michelle approaches the steps with a clear mind. Now that she and Jacob are already married the butterflies and jitters she feared are gone, and now it doesn't feel like she's climbing the gallows. The pressure is off so both she and Jacob can relax and have fun while going through the motions for the crowd and the cameras.

As Michelle and Nigel reach the platform at the top of the dais they meet Boxter, in a deacon's stole, who will be officiating for today, and as his assistant we have Eight at his side, robed in an acolyte's alb with cincture around her waist. To their left is Diego and to the right are Jacob and Peña, but where both are in the same black-on-black tuxedo that everyone else is wearing, the shirt for Jacob's tux is sewn out of the same bolts of shimmering silk used for the dresses.

The orchestra shifts quietly to the movement *Allegro Molto*, and as Boxter warmly bows his head to them, Nigel smiles back with, "Hey ho, Boxy! I be on time for once!"

Boxter's eyebrows rise as he goes, "Never thought I'd see the day, but then I never thought I'd hear them butcher Water Music."

Nigel addresses Jacob, "O'ello, Mr Graves!"

Jacob nods back, "Mr Kiel."

"It be Nigel now. We're all on first names here on out."

Boxter nods while saying with minimal mouth movement, "Well everybody, since we have three minutes here to kill...for show." He looks to Michelle and, "I have to say you've been a busy little bee, Shelly. Moving quickly I see! You want to build a middle class."

Michelle shrugs slightly, "I don't fuck around, Uncle."

"No, you're not the type. It would've been helpful if we had a heads up, or maybe some input on the direction you're taking this?"

Michelle's eyebrows rise, "Proverbs eleven : twenty-nine?"

Boxter nods, "I remember stressing the importance of that passage to you when you were an ornery...little cur."

"Yea, the lesson stuck." She nods towards her grandfather while saying, "You two were leaving me no choice, and I can't run this thing without experienced people, so you guys didn't get a vote."

Nigel says, "We would have helped you through this, Shell."

"And how many would die in the interim?" Michelle lets that sink in then adds, "That is not what I wanted to inherit."

Boxter rolls his eyes with, "She makes a good point."

Nigel asks, "You think the CLaW will fix things?"

Michelle says, "The C-L-W to start, then the CLaW just a few years down the road when things have stabilized."

"The people will see you as a deliverer, love."

"No, they won't see me as a commissioner asshole."

"*Touché!*" Then quietly he adds, "Little ripper roo, you."

"Clacker applies to both of us, Nigel!" Boxter asks Michelle, "Tell me, the IMF was all for what you proposed, weren't they?"

Michelle informs him, "They jumped on it, and I hear it was because they wanted our float to undercut the CXi for the UN."

Nigel snorts, "The Gnome ratbags already lost."

"I'm not givin' them a heads up."

"Those people are comically...stupid." Boxter adds, and then points out, "You are aware that when this all goes arse up, and distribution tanks, the civis are going to riot."

Nigel adds, "They'll be goin' after the stumpies and politicos."

Michelle nods, "I know, but I'll let them blow off some steam before I intervene. We have to allow some eggs to break."

Boxter nods towards the crowd behind her, "But afterwards, you'll have these stumpy pavlovas running things."

"After I pull their teeth." Michell stresses to Boxter and Nigel, "You know, you guys are gonna hav'ta make yourselves real scarce when the people go on a tear."

Boxter, in deep thought, nods with a smile, "My-my-my, you two are going to be a formidable pair."

Jacob shrugs, "Me? I'm just along for the ride, Boxxy."

"Then this fool shall be servant to the wise in heart?"

Jacob reassures him, "My idea, exactly!"

Boxter stares at him and, "I'm holding you to that."

Nigel speaks up, "Jacob, just be aware that your life before today, in my eyes, is *damnatio memoriae*. As I said, from here on out, you are family."

Jacob smiles, "Family? Wait until you meet the Hererro's!"

"Jesus!" Nigel snorts a laugh, "I'm looking forward to that."

"They are business...savvy." Boxter nods, then says as he raises his hand to signal for the orchestra to stop, "As fun as this all is, we need to get to the business at hand!"

With Nigel handing Michelle off to Jacob, and stepping down off the dais, and as the orchestra winds down, Boxter steps towards the edge of the platform to address the crowd, "I would like to thank you all for gathering together, here today, to celebrate the union of Michelle and Jacob. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you."

Twelve percent of the crowd responds, "And also with you."

After the opening prayer, and the choir beside the orchestra sing the cloying *God In The Planning*, half of the twelve percent who are active in the church chime in along with them—but at least the choir covers up how gawd-awful some Anglican hymns can be.

Eight opens the bible for Boxter to recite, "First Corinthians, thirteen...four through six. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always...perseveres."

He nods where Eight closes the book and steps aside while he looks over the crowd, "This is the theme for today, love. We accept these verses as gospel but, the sad fact of the matter is these are aspirations, not absolutes. In spite of what we would like to personally think of ourselves, as children of God we are all broken—not by design have you, but by will. By our flawed choices and who we gravitate towards. As we meander through life we broken beings lose sight of this truth, as well as many of the truths graciously revealed to us in the word. For too long lip service is paid out to compatibility, and I am one to acquiesce and admit there maybe something to be said for compatibility per se but, when simpatico is put in perspective, it's not who you lay with that matters as much as who...you wake up too."

"One must concede that, when it comes to compatibility we beings tend to focus on qualities that we believe are important where, in time, we discover them to be factually trivial. In the same breath, we clearly overlook the little things, one's hidden quirks and foibles where, much later, these failings may be revealed as monumental. Realize this too late and it's at that point love...may fail."

Boxter points upwards to emphasize, "It's not enough to know thineself. What is important going forward, and most difficult, is to confront one's own shortcomings head on before they come at-issue. Corinthians throws down a challenge for Michelle and Jacob—as it does for all the children of God. That is to sort out and overcome your hidden failings..." Boxter reaches out and brings their hands together, "All to preserve the love that brought you together as one. What I level on Michelle and Jacob today is simple and direct. The challenge

put forth to you is to become the shining example for all of us here to aspire too. So...you up to the task?"

They had absolutely no idea what Boxter was going to say, and it hit home. With Jacob nodding, yes, Michelle is almost in tears as she smiles, saying, "Thank you, Uncle."

Boxter smirks ever so slightly, "Can I get an Amen?"

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Like every Brillig since the war started this reception is also a serve yourself affair, with no waiting staff to be had. During the wedding, transports quietly landed and disgorged the food, tables and chairs, and it was all set up and ready to go when the attendees poured out from the south wing after the ceremony. Also, from behind the eastern wings they wheeled in fire pit platforms loaded with beef, lamb, pork and bumble on spits that have been cooking all night.

There may be over five-thousand people here but there is twenty times more food than they could possibly eat so, with the little guy in mind, after this event Michelle already planned to have it all shipped out to key locations in the poorest neighborhoods of New Brisbane. Security Services is handling the transport and distribution so this is guaranteed to be an orderly affair and, like Boxter noted, 'They will feast for days on this bounty.'

Most of the orchestra is now outside for the reception and, in line with Michelle's idea of revelry, they have switched hats and are now a swing band for the next five hours. Many of the people here have only heard old-school big band music in media, but to actually hear it live for them is a mind bending experience. Between the music, dance floor, food and drink, this reception is beyond crazy fun for everyone here.

With Boxter and Nigel escorting Michelle and Jacob, making the rounds from table to table, the band has reined in the tempo with a compilation of slow dance tunes starting with Moonlight Serenade. For Maria and Sasha this is kind of like a speed bump to them, so they slither back to the tables and plop into the chairs across from Monique who is surrounded by Victoria, Esma, Cricket and Adolphina.

"Hey mom!" Laughs Diego, who is heading back out to the bar-b-que pits with Brie, Jessica, Samantha, Cloé and Rufus Tyrol.

Maria blows her daughter a kiss and, when they fade into the crowd she grabs Monique's glass of wine, downs it all, then laughs at her while saying, "Thank ya, babe!"

Monique's nostrils flair slightly as she takes a deep breath

while trying not to laugh. She takes the empty wine beaker and slides it across to Maria, "The Cabernet, please."

Maria laughs and picks up the beaker, "I'm on it!"

Sasha adds, "Make that two!"

Maria gives Sasha a quick kiss and as she stands she asks, "Ladies, anything else?"

Victoria holds up her full glass of cranberry juice and shrugs with a smile, and at the same time Esma points to her and Adolphina's empty beer bottles, "Cervesa, hon! As many as you can carry?"

Sasha stands, saying, "I'll help ya!"

The drink tables are many, open, and even though there are lines, they are short and fast. Standing in the line next to them is a ravishing Japanese lady that looks a few years younger than them but, on close inspection, the very faint crow's feet by her eyes says she has more than just a few miles on the odometer.

Maria says to her, "I noticed you with Boxter's girls?"

"Yes, though I'm the one here with nothing to do."

Maria offers her hand, "Hi there, I'm Maria—"

"Ramirez, your rep proceeds you." She takes Maria's hand, "I'm Sally...Sally Fukushima." Maria turns to introduce Sasha and Sally goes, "Sasha Zinovenko?"

Sasha shakes her hand, saying, "It's Ramirez now."

"Hanging out with Boxy, I got'ta know all the players."

Maria's eyes go big and points at her, realizing, "Hone—"

"Ona, retired." Sally nods, "Let's cut the bullshit, Boxy said you knew about me and, to clear the air, all we ever did was talk."

"Really?" Maria is taken aback slightly, then, "Cool!"

"Box is, first and foremost, a gentleman. He never touched me, except for the first time I met him. That first night at his hotel room, decades ago, I tried to ply my trade and we spared for about, I dunno, four seconds maybe?" Sally then holds up her index finger, "He dropped me to my knees with just a finger."

"No shit! You'll have to show me." Maria shifts gears, asking, "So, you're sayin' Boxy and you are...involved?"

Sally nods, yes, "Recently betrothed."

Again, with the big eyes, "Really!"

"Really! You cool with dat, bro?"

"Yea!" Maria nods big, then, "Why don't you come join us?"

"I don't want to be an imposition or a fifth wheel."

"Okay, don't make me hog-tie your ass and drag you over!"
Maria then cringes big, "That didn't come out quite right?"

Laughing, Sally goes, "No, it did, perfectly!"

Maria looks towards Sasha while thumbing at Sally, so Sasha pointedly asks, "Hone Ona, for real, hu?"

"The real deal!" Sally nods, then, "Retired!"

Sasha smiles big, "Trust me, babe, you'll fit right in!"

01000011-01000010-01000011-01010010

It's early evening and Seth is sitting by the 101's near a fire pit with a pig on a spit that hasn't even been touched yet, all the while watching the party continue to rage on, and even though the festivities are not slowing down, a small number of people are starting to leave.

"Hello, Seth." From the shadows, Boxter steps into the light and asks with a smile, "So, what do you think of the Star Castle?"

Seth sips from a tall glass of chianti, and, "It's...okay, look, Monique's chateau is ornate but this place is...kind of ridiculous."

"With all the sculptures an' ornamental bric-a-brac, the Kiel's have elevated the concept of ostentatious to orbital levels of...well, you nailed it, ridiculous!" Boxter then wonders, "I am curious, son, why are we putting our first time face-to-face off until tomorrow?"

"There's someone I need to talk too before she leaves."

Boxter is obviously curious, "A sheila?"

Seth's eyebrows rise, "My future."

Boxter motions towards the glass, "Fortification?"

"d'Elsa Classico, sorry for pushing our meeting out so late."

"You were very specific about ten, and it left a significant gap on my calendar, so I'm not opposed if you want to...move it up?"

"No, you'll need to save that gap for Samantha."

"Funny, she hasn't asked me for the time."

"She's not aware of it quite yet."

"Dare to clue me in?"

"Let's just say...you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Boxter smiles, "Where have we heard that before?"

Seth nods, "Yes, stepmother has rubbed off on all of us."

"Upon reflection, I have to say it is probably for the better."

With disbelief, Seth asks, "Even you?"

"Especially me, so your encounter is coming up shortly?"

"Seven minutes." Seth shrugs, "It's something I saw coming the day the war started. I was sitting with Nicole, my mother, and we were watching Diego steal a base while eating French fries."

"The importance of this moment is...astronomical, I take it?"

Seth laughs, "I wouldn't have put it that way but astronomical kind of lends clarity to what's about to happen to me."

Boxter goes, "Then I'll bid you success, and step off here."

After a few paces, Seth calls out, "Your transformative sermon today was thought provoking, and it kept everyone's rapt attention."

Boxter turns and says, "Thank you!"

"But, sadly, and I am being sincere, it pains me to say that you won't be officiating for our wedding."

"Aaaah, Syleste will be the lucky one!"

"The reading you do give will be well received."

"And...you already know what I'm going to say then."

Seth shrugs big, saying, "I wouldn't want to spoil it for ya."

Boxter smiles warmly, "Well, we should let you get to the task at hand, even though you already know the outcome."

Seth notices Lilith in the distance, "I do have choices."

"No, young man, you already made your choice." Boxter then presses Seth by asking, "Looking forward to it, this future you see?"

Seth nods, yes, so as Boxter again turns to leave, Seth again calls out to him, "What Michelle brings to the table, the results you get in the end, will be far better than what you worked so hard for."

Boxter turns back, "You will elaborate on that tomorrow?"

"I'd be a shitty oracle if I didn't but, by then, there'll be more pressing matters at hand. I can assure you that the final outcome will end up remarkably...savory to the palate."

Boxter's shrugs slightly, "Sure about that?"

Seth tries not to grin, "Prepare to be pleasantly surprised."

01000010-01101111-01000101-01000110

It's 18:30 Wednesday here on Prypiat, but for the ninety-nine guests on the groom's side of the aisle it happens to be 6:50 hours, Monday morning pursuant to the not hair splitting E-Z time standard. Many of his guests have Monday off and have acclimated to local time, with hotel rooms and no intention of leaving anytime soon but, for those employed by the FIS and the SA on the Church Key, today is a business day and they are now running late.

Under the eerily beautiful Twilight 360 sky, with Chernobyl in its full glory, the band has just started their last scheduled set, but between 'Song of India' and 'Cotton Tail' the conductor announces that they'll tack on another two sets after this one.

With the guests giving a resounding cheer to the news, at the edge of the party, halfway to the parked 101's, Caesar and Chell are hugging the Nefer Key attendees as they are leaving. With Luc, Lilith, Maat, Aat, and Alexi now walking past the fire pits and tables of food that are being prepped for transport—a puppy's Nerf ball squeak toy drops from the dark sky towards Lilith's head.

With a small chirp the thing bounces off her noggin, and with it coming back down, Lilith catches it in midair.

As everybody is laughing at this, Lilith slowly turns to look at them where both Maat and Alexi are pointing at Seth who is sitting on a bench ten meters away, with Luc saying, "We'll be waiting for you."

Aat assures her, "Take your time, hon!"

They motor on past her, heading towards the portcullis and the Razorback waiting for them outside the wall at the receiving area, but Alexi turns back and shouts, "Make it fast!"

Lilith glances at Seth, takes a deep breath and saunter's over to him, where Seth smiles at her and points out, "I was watching you. You went to one specific food tray three times."

"You know which one?"

"Moi à Merde?"

Knowing what that means, Lilith huffs a little laugh and says, "Oh, my god, the cheese in it!"

Seth notes, "I understand it's actually called, gick."

"Boxter told me that he and Piper discovered it in the Bayou. Wherever that is? He also told me that they deconstructed it and made it their own thing."

"I'm trying to remember what you said at Monique's."

"About?"

"Cheese!"

"Ah, verbatim...we don't have it where I come from, well, that is until you humans came. First time I had cheese I pow-down'd so much—the next day I though my ass was going to prolapse!"

Seth snorts a laugh, "Yea, that was it! It made me laugh and realize how...funny you are. Moderation now, right?"

"More like adaptation."

Seth wonders "Fiber?"

"Lots of it." Lilith then states, "You've been avoiding me."

"For good reason."

"Why talk now?"

"You've been getting impatient, and were about to lower your standards and...well, it was time anyway."

"So, this is an intervention?"

"You could say that."

"I've been waiting a long time."

"My best guess is seventy-four years."

"Nine months, five days and a handful of hours."

Seth smiles, "Eight hours, but who's counting?"

Lilith nods, "You know what I wanna know."

"Have you heard it said—all roads lead to Rome?"

Lilith squints at him, "How...exactly does this relate?"

Seth's eyes widen with, "As it relates to you, Lilith, all paths before you lead to the same outcome. Sure you want to hear this?"

She clears her throat, "Yea, I wanna hear this."

Seth laughs, "You only got four more years to wait?"

Lilith deadpans with, "Don't make me beat it out of you."

"Okay!" Seth nods and, "How 'bout I show you?"

Lilith wonders, "Hu? Come again?"

Seth closes his eyes and Lilith is hit with dozens of images from her future point of view with a human male, a masculine-chiseled Adonis, very much like a young Jacob Graves but with hair. The key

moments she sees are of them standing at the altar saying their vows, kissing, even walking in the rain on Sapphire. Then comes rapid fire snapshots of them in sexual congress, many times throughout the centuries to come, but this kaleidoscope of imagery ends by returning Lilith to their wedding night—on her back while clawing at his.

For Lilith this was like getting hit in the head with a brick...

At this point Seth releases her and the startled response Lilith has throws her off balance. The most shocking thing for her was that he was already standing there, knowing her reaction ahead of time and guiding her by hand towards the bench. Now sitting with wide eyed and open mouth astonishment, she doesn't know what to say but she manages to blurt out, "Holy fricken' Jesus, the guy is hot!"

"Oh, okay!" Seth sits beside her and, "Ya think so?"

Lilith puts her hands out and notices them shaking, "Can ya take me back to that last moment and let me finish? Pweeze!"

Seth smiles at that, "Let's not."

She protests, "I gotta wait four years!"

He blinks, asking, "Aaaah, you want that guy?"

Lilith almost shouts, saying, "Hell yea, I want that guy!"

With her looking at his face, the reality of who the beefcake was suddenly dawns on her, where she does a double-take and points at him while laughing, "You gotta be kidding me!"

Nodding, yes, Seth shrugs slightly, "Surprise!"

Lilith laughs, "My mental shit is flipping right now!"

"Yeeea, I guess it's a bit of a mind fuck, ain't it?"

Her eyes go wide, "You're a teenager!"

"Physiologically, chronographically, but...intellectually?"

Blinking repeatedly, she whispers, "Lightyears beyond that."

"You're gonna need considerable time to digest and reconcile this, so I suggest we meet every quarter over coffee...in public."

Seth stands and offers Lilith his hand, and as she takes it she also stands and looks up at him with, "I don't know what to think?"

"It's a lot to take in but I can tell you this. You already made your choice, yet right now you don't know how to accept it, let-alone express it." Seth then swirls his hand around over his face and chest, "I need time to grow into what I am going to become."

"Okay." Lilith breaths deep and, "That's the deal, okay."

Seth smiles, "I'd offer you a blow job to take the edge off but, as they say, good things come to those who wait, right?"

Lilith laughs in his face with, "You're an asshole!"

He smiles big, "We're gonna get along swimmingly."

"This is a lot to take in." She glances at the toy in her hand then suggests, "Coffee in...April?"

"Sounds great!"

There is a slight pause where Lilith reaches out to give Seth a little hug, and when she lifts her head up to give him a kiss, he puts a finger up between them, "Those who wait, remember?"

"Wow." Shaking her head in amazement, Lilith starts to step away towards the exit, where she turns back, "Who else knows?"

"Jessie."

"How long—"

Lilith couldn't get her question out before Seth responds with, "Until your tongue turns white." As she blinks and thinks about that he adds, "You don't realize it yet, but the Nefer Key can keep us humans alive indefinitely, but for you—"

"We have an expiration date." Lilith is already aware of the answer when she dares to ask, "I'm gonna die in your arms, aren't I?"

Seth doesn't want to respond to that, and mostly because he believes they should face some mysteries together, but what he says here and now is critical to vanquish all doubt and lock in their future, "Like Marcus and Prima."

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Michelle's a4 custom-mod of the HWG101 Razorback rolls up to the center of the courtyard. It slowly spins a 180 as it approaches, and is now backing up to the party while dropping its ramp to the deck. The livery colors are striking with the upper half in a rich-vibrant goldenrod, and the underside in a deep Maybelline red. Emerging from the ship is SS-Chief Sergeant Major and BDF expat, Alex Rzegocki, who is geared up in a JACC fighting suit from the Annex. A JACC is not necessary over an ACE suit to pilot a Razorback, but it does make the interface a whole lot simpler and seamless.

Rzegocki steps up beside Porter Macquarie, recently promoted to SS-Brigadier General, and he's standing next to SS-Commanding General, Maroochi Dan who is arm and arm with her long-term beau, Kacper Cyzk. Next to Cyzk is Francis Zamboni who is also in a JACC

and waiting to load up on the ship.

Rzegocki looks over to Zamboni and, "Ready, mate?"

Zamboni nods then asks, "Crew loaded up?"

"Aye, just waitin' for the veeps."

Boxter's protégée, SS-Colonel, Donna Lynn, has slithered up and bumps her hip against Zamboni's, "Hurry back me Frothy!"

Zamboni gives her a smile and a kiss, "It's only ten days."

This whole time, a lit Nigel Kiel staggers up behind them with Lucia Hererro in tow, who is giggling while adjusting her blouse and skirt, where he hangs an arm over Porter's shoulder while saying, "Take good care of your charges, Mister Porter!"

Porter likes Nigel, and smiles, "They're in good hands, sir!"

"That they are!" Nigel says as Porter offers him a BuzzKill capsule, where he bites into it when Porter drops it into his mouth. Nigel shakes his head wildly as half of the alcohol in his system is instantly neutralized and, now realizing what just happened, while pointing at Lucia he asks with some astonishment, "Did I just?"

"Pork the lass? That you did, sir!"

"Blimey!" Nigel then quietly asks, "Who be the kangy?"

"Lucia, sir."

"From?"

"She's Cuban."

"And a dandy specimen at that!"

Lucia has stepped up and grabs Nigel, then shakes her head while laughing, "*You joder como un monstruo!*"

With Lucia dragging him off, Nigel looks back at them with a shrug and a smile, so Porter calls out to him, "You're a hit, sir!"

Dan says to Porter, "Don't say anything to him."

Porter nods, "I ain't gonna spoil it for 'im, general, no siree! The ol' coot is havin' fun an' she thinks he's way younger than he is."

Dan snorts, "That old coot looks younger than you do!"

On the bandstand, right before the start of the very last set, Michelle is in white BDU pants and t-shirt, with Jacob next to her contrasting in his everyday black BDU pants and tees. With them are Brie, Diego and little Nigel in desert and green camo BDUs and tees. Then behind Michelle is Shest, Nikki-6, who is in black and Boxter standing beside Michelle in a cheerful gray pinstripe suit.

The conductor calls out, "Let's hear it for the newlyweds!"

To cheers and applause, he hands Michelle the mic where she says, "We're going to take off here, but I wanted to thank you all for coming today. With that said, I also wanted to let you know that everyone here today is invited back for a New Year's celebration here at the Star Castle!" With everyone there cheering big, Michelle adds, "We'll have a proper fireworks show and..."

Michelle holds the mic out to the conductor who informs them, "Me and me mates will be pumpin' out the oldies!"

When the grateful applause dies down, Michelle says to them, "We would also like to thank everybody for the generous donations to the New Brisbane Children's Conservatory for the Performing Arts and, for what was given out of the goodness of your hearts, as our show of appreciation for each fiver you contributed—it converts to a permanent revenue share in the Prypiat Sport Stadiums Project..."

The hushed silence from this news sweeps over the crowd as Michelle says, "The Kiel Estate will pony up the funds to replace our FIFA and Rugby stadiums, then build a Gridiron Football stadium and a Baseball stadium here in New Brisbane. The locations are not locked in but, as I speak, we are in negotiations for pro MLB and NFL expansion teams and, since there will be no note hanging over these facilities, if managed properly, with concessions we should see dividends by the second or third season so..." The explosive cheers and applause from that little tidbit of news makes it difficult for the crowd to hear Michelle add, "It will be a pleasure doing business with you all!"

Boxter nods and stealthily says to her, "Dosh and circuses, you are making stumpy points today, aren't you."

Michelle cuts the mic and looks him in the eye, "It will be the only revenue stream they'll get that they don't have to work for and, for what's coming, they're gonna need it."

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In Samantha's top floor apartment in Boxter's mansion, the one that overlooks the central atrium, right under the fern dome above the fourth floor, Samantha has traded her gown for a sheer robe after a shower an hour ago. Jessica blows in and flies out of the tuxedo and then throws herself into a much needed shower.

Stepping out of the bathroom while drying herself off, Jessica apologizes with, "Sorry, I was running late."

Sipping a glass of Shiraz, Samantha leers at her body with, "You looked great in that tux, today."

"Yeeea, I'm not one to be wearing that guy shit."

"Damned fucking hot, babe."

"I ain't butch."

"Still, it made me wet!" Having stepping up to Jessica, with a sly smile Samantha tosses her wine across Jessica's belly, chest and face while snickering, "Missed a spot!"

Jessica is not exactly keen on Samantha being aggressive like this, but sometimes it can be fun? There is no mistaking what she wants so, as Jessica wipes the wine off her face with the towel, she nonchalantly paths herself into Samantha's mind and gives it to her.

Samantha yelps as her back arches in a massive spasm, and at the same time her arms twist around and are hoisted up the middle of her back as if Jessica was twisting them by hand for real. Unable to move, Jessica pushes her back into a plush sofa followed by snapping her thigh with a twisted towel—making Samantha wince and yip.

Jessica crawls over her and pulls the robe apart while biting her neck, and as she starts to work her way down, Samantha cries out, "You are something special! You are something special!"

While she is kissing Samantha's chest, working her way down between her breasts, with a thought Jessica makes the pain even more pronounced as Samantha's back arches and twists. Now grimacing from the pain, Samantha catches her breath and shouts with glee, "Candybar! Candybar-candybar-candybar!"

Jessica cannot contain her laughter, and as she plops back into the sofa, she continues to laugh while saying, "That's a buzzkill! I'm not watching any more classic movies with you ever again!"

Samantha protests, "Come on, we're just getting started!"

"Fuck you."

"That's the idea!"

Jessica shrugs, "I don't get it? Why do you want it rough?"

Samantha is now free to move, so she pulls her arms around while thinking about it, "It's only once and awhile?"

"Still, the question stands."

"Ya really wanna know, love?"

Jessica's eyes glare at her, "I wouldn't be asking."

Samantha sits on her legs and throws her hands out, "Okay, best I can surmise, it's the—I want what I want forced on me thing!"

"Forced on you."

"Yea!"

Jessica shakes her head, "I'll never understand that shit."

"But you do it so damned well?" Samantha then points out, "And, good top is hard to find!"

"Maybe you should get someone else to smother your pillow?"

Samantha thinks about it and, "Well...gasping is not my kink but, for you, I'm game for anything!"

Jessica deadpans with, "Let's not."

Samantha shrugs, then, "I got an idea!"

Jessica huffs a laugh, "Yea, you and your ideas."

"No, seriously!"

"Okay, I'm listening."

Samantha stares at Jessica in the eyes, then, "Marry me."

Chuckling, Jessica asks, "Are you out of your mind?"

Samantha shrugs slightly, "No, I'm not."

"You are out of your mind, girl."

Then quietly, "No...I'm not."

Jessica protests, "I'm not a lesbo!"

Samantha shrugs big, "Well, neither am I."

Jessica then throws out, "I'm not giving up cock!"

Samantha slaps herself on the knee and, "Glad we're on the same frequency because I'm not either!"

"Then what's the point?"

Samantha thinks about it and, "I've been noodling over it for quite some time, but...what my father said today convinced me."

"You an' I are not the same, on any level."

"I know, isn't that cool!"

Jessica points to herself, "Edjimate me."

Samantha points out, "It's who you wake up to that matters."

While shaking her head, Jessica says, "This is moronic."

"Hear me out, okay? Right now we lead completely separate lives an' we see each other every week or two. We're not up each other's ass so, when you think about it, nothing changes?"

"We have nothing in common!"

"True, agreed, but admit it...it'd be cool!"

Jessica looks at her, "I don't fit in your world."

Samantha peers into her and reveals, "I live in a world of lies and deceit at every level. I'm trying to be like my father but I don't have a Piper! You...you keep me grounded. You keep me honest."

"I thought I was your piece of ass?"

"Ah, yea, my friends are jealous of me because...look at you!"

"Then I am your piece of ass!"

"Not hardly! How many air-to-air kills you chalk up, eight?"

"Let's not talk about that."

"Your...career sets you apart from everybody! Look, in my capacity, I can get all the casting couch coochie I could ever want—"

Jessica cuts her off, "But you're not Stewie!"

"You're right, I'm not." Samantha now points at her head, "It's what's in there that torques my crank. Fuck everything else!"

Jessica gnaws on this, "You're shit serious."

"If you were half the hotness I'd still throw down on you."

Jessica exhales big, then, "Okay, give me a second."

"Hu?" Samantha's head tilts, wondering what that meant, where her eyes slam shut and her head suddenly drops forward.

As Jessica pushes Samantha back into the sofa, Seth channels himself into her mind, <"Bout time you reached out to me.">

Jessica paths back, <"Where's Peanuts?">

<"Unconscious, between kicks, so I got a minute.">

<"Why didn't you say something to me?">

<"I did, I just didn't say who.">

<"Then let me ask—">

<"If she were bad for you I would have steered you clear of her long before anything started...and, you know that.">

<"Boxxy will want `er to pop out a critter.">

<"Well, all things considered, and my future with Lilith, I'll be happy to take a bullet for the team.">

Jessica recoils slightly, <"You think that one up?">

<"No, Boxter will, but now you won't be so shocked when he brings it up in conversation.">

<"When will that happen?">

<"Tomorrow. He already knows about Lilith.">

<"And he knows you guys won't be able to have children.">

<"You can't deny the logic.">

Jessica huffs big, <"No, I can't.">

<"It'll be a suggestion of his. Something to think about, and while I have you, something else came to my attention. You've got a fight comin' up an' you'll not be prepared for it.">

<"What kind of fight?">

<"Aaaaaaah, desperate?">

<"What do I need to know?">

<"Have fun with it! Ciao, big sis!">

With Seth gone, Jessica looks at Samantha, nods then brings her around. With Samantha trying to get her bearings, Jessica says to her, "I got three things that are not negotiable. First, you nor I are going to change our career paths or goals for the other."

Samantha is obviously delighted, realizing that what Jessica is saying means, yes, "That's a given, love!"

"Second, we don't announce for six months. It's too close to my father's wedding. Okay?"

"Done! Last item, while I'm getting on my father's calendar?"

Jessica shakes her head while saying, "None of those fucking goo-goo eyed staged pictures between us or I'll kill the photographer!"

Samantha is already drilling down the Security Services neuronet towards her father's calendar, when she snorts, "Agreed! Those are bloody stupid!"

"An' one last thing."

"What'll that be, love?"

Samantha starts howling with laughter when Jessica takes the open bottle of wine she had, sitting on the coffee table next to the sofa, and starts pouring it all over Samantha's head and body.

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