

Clear Skies
A Janus Descending Mini-Episode

by

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SCENE ONE

EXT. Landing Pad, Aphelion Industries - DAY

Birds wheel and cry out against a clear, bright sky. A short ways away, we can hear the low murmur of a small crowd, gathered at the edge of a platform stage in front of the landing pad.

AXEL stands "backstage," hovering relentlessly over one of the TECHNICIANS, while ANDREA struggles to get him ready to face the press.

ANDREA

Sir, you're on in five-

AXEL

(ignoring her) Anything?

TECHNICIAN

Nothing yet, sir.

ANDREA

Sir, if you would just-

AXEL

Try the extended scan again.

ANDREA

Axel, could you just-... (exasperated)
Hold still! Do you want to walk out
there with half a tie?!

AXEL

For FUCKS SAKE Andrea, will you forget
about the goddamn- (takes a deep
breath) ... Sorry. I-... That was-...
I'm sorry, Andrea.

ANDREA

(understanding) It's alright...
(quietly) Are you sure you want to do
this?

AXEL

I can't keep them waiting forever.

ANDREA

It's not too late. We could just call
off the-

AXEL

Absolutely not. I promised these people a televised event on landing day, and a televised event on landing day is what they're going to get.

ANDREA

Without a ship?

beat. The silence is heavy.

AXEL

(forcibly mild) A little rain delay isn't exactly unheard of.

(turning to the technician) But I wouldn't exactly mind an update. I know they're a bit... off schedule. Have been for weeks. That's... not unheard of. Building the future takes time. Space travel is a complicated and dangerous business. But we have to tell these people something.

... Have you run that scan, yet?

TECHNICIAN

Nothing on the radar yet, sir.

AXEL

What do you mean, "nothing?" There has to be something-

TECHNICIAN

Sir, their guidance and tracking systems haven't been responding since they dropped out of orbit...

AXEL

An issue you swore you had under control.

TECHNICIAN

It's an experimental system. We had no way of knowing where the bugs might turn up-

AXEL

I was under the impression that was your job. Your one very expensive job. To find the bugs and squash them when

they come crawling out of the pipes.
To keep my brother safe.

TECHNICIAN

There isn't much we can do without
being able to gain remote access to
the ship. Until then, your brother is
more than capable of handling-

AXEL

So. Where. Is. He?

TECHNICIAN

It could be any number of things.
Their systems could have been damaged.
It may be solar flare interference,
corporate sabotage. For all we know,
they might just have turned their
navigational relay off!

AXEL

So hail their comms relay. They're
within range, all we need is a signal-

TECHNICIAN

We've been sending out beacons and
monitoring all broadcast frequencies
for the past two months as... covertly
as we can-

AXEL

To hell with covert-

ANDREA

(half to herself) Oh, Buller and the
stockholders are going to love that...

Axel forces out an irritated sigh.

AXEL

Have you tried pinging the computer
systems directly?

TECHNICIAN

No response.

AXEL

What about the Shooting Stars?

TECHNICIAN

They're still outside of the range of

the network.

AXEL

(a little shaken) They can't be.
 (then, regaining control of himself)
 Even if they were drifting, they
 should have reached at least the outer
 edges of the system by now. The
 satellites should have picked them up-

TECHNICIAN

Mr. Crichton... We've been no contact
 with the Adamantine since they reached
 NCC-1701-Delta. No contact of any
 kind. I think it may be time we start
 considering the possibility they never
 even-

AXEL

(deadly warning) Don't.

The technician swallows his words. Even Andrea stops her
 fussing.

beat.

AXEL

(forced calm) I want a full scan of
 the Empire's airspace for any trace of
 the Adamantine. Everything you can
 pull in from the Shooting Stars.
 Branch them into the other networks if
 you have to. ALL of them. I want to
 see everything.

TECHNICIAN

But sir-

AXEL

I'll handle the legalities, you won't
 be held responsible. Just do it.

The technician hesitantly turns back to his screens and
 performs the scan.

A long, tense beat.

The computer lets out a sullen, negative blip. The technician
 slowly turns back to Axel.

TECHNICIAN

There-... There is no sign of the Adamantine within the known bounds of the Human Empire, sir. ... Skies are clear.

There is a crackle in Andrea's headset.

ANDREA

(hesitant) ... Sir? You're on...

beat.

AXEL

... Right. ... Okay. Okay.

He straightens his tie.

AXEL

Let's give the vultures what they came for.

He pushes past Andrea and the technician, and moves up onto the platform stage. When he hits the stage, it is as if a switch has been flipped -- Axel is On; a charmer, a conman, a showman at the peak of his game.

We hear flashbulbs popping. The wind howls, as the birds continue to wheel and cry. We become intensely aware of how painfully, fundamentally alone Axel is, standing there at the podium.

AXEL

Good morning! I'd say I was sorry to keep you all waiting, but on a beautiful day like this, I'm happy to be your excuse to get out of the office... and of course, to let you be mine...

Appreciative chuckles rise from the crowd.

AXEL

We might as well start with the elephant in the room. Or... the lack thereof. You've come from near and far, you're tuning in at home, or on the radio, to join us in celebrating our Landing Day. The triumphant return of our intrepid adventurers to the stars. We've got the audience... the

technicians... We've certainly got the space...

Another light chuckle moves through the assembly.

Unfortunately, our main spectacle -- our team on the Adamantine is running a fair bit behind schedule. And it doesn't look as though they'll be coming home as soon as we had hoped.

A murmur begins to ripple through the crowd, and uneasy swell of sound.

I want to emphasize first that there is nothing to worry about. We are, all of us, acutely aware just how precise the science of space exploration is. And how wildly unpredictable this big beautiful universe can be. This... technical delay, while disheartening, is just another adventure in the making.

Our technicians are closely monitoring the situation, and keeping us apprised as they do everything they can to assist our crew in their safe return to the Empire. For the rest of us... all we can do is what we all do best. Keep our minds on the stars, and keep scanning those clear skies.

As if drawn instinctively, Axel turns his eyes toward the skies. We hear the shifting of the crowd as they follow his gaze, peering up into the endless, open blue.

beat.

Birds call mournfully. A breeze plays with people's clothing and hair. In the far distance, we can hear the Atlantic Ocean breaking against the Manhattan shores.

A moment of pure, natural silence, full of private hope and worry.

AXEL

(almost to himself) What must they be seeing right now? A hundred billion stars sweeping their way across the arm of some lonely galaxy... That deep

and endless darkness, pierced through here and there by the faintest blue-flame flickerings of light... Every second. Every instant. Every fluttering breath is just... Stardust and possibilities.

... You know... I almost went with them? Almost. We've all felt it. You feel it now, I can see it in your eyes. That... pull. Like gravity's kiss tugging you into a black hole. Up there. That's where the world begins... Been carrying that sense with me... all my life. It's why I'm here. Why we built this. Why we reach... (laughs softly) What I wouldn't give...

He scans the skies. They are so empty. So blue. And he knows, suddenly, they always will be.

AXEL

... We chase it. On the wings of our muses, to the deepest corners of the universe, across those wild and shining spaces... Some of us... chase it. That pull. And the rest of us stay grounded... gathering stardust... All we can do is watch the skies... And wait for the others to come home...

A voice breaks in on Axel's reverie.

CHEL

Do you regret it?

AXEL

(disoriented) I-... What?

The world shifts. Something warps, and for a moment, the sounds of the crowd, the skies, everything seems muffled and dulled, as if Axel is standing underwater. His own breathing and his heartbeat around loud in his own ears, echoing strangely in this warped space.

And there she is. CHEL. Standing in the center of the crowd. Staring up at him.

But... that can't be right.

She's...

CHEL

Do you regret it? ... Axel? ... Do you regret it?

The world suddenly snaps back into focus. Axel takes a sharp breath, as if coming suddenly up for air. Someone is speaking. A journalist, DAMIEN WILDE, asks a question, his voice melding momentarily with Chel's, before Axel is able to refocus himself into the here and now.

WILDE

Do you regret it?

AXEL

(mouth suddenly dry, fighting to maintain composure) I-I'm... I'm sorry... Mr-...?

WILDE

Wilde. Empire Post. You said a moment ago you had the option to go with them. See the stars, explore those "wild and shining spaces." That's an enormous task for any one adventurer, let alone the CEO of a major multi-planetary corporation. I mean. Anything can happen. It's a big universe out there. And yet... pulled as you were... you chose to stay. ... Any regrets?

Axel hesitates, unable to answer. He turns his face back up to the sky. We hear the flash-pop of cameras. Wind ghosting across the platform. The sea crashes. The murmur of the crowd fades, and a lonely bird cries. Axel breathes.

FADE OUT.

END.