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here comes the tickle monster

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125pc from SOL)
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-20-THURSDAY
TIME: 13:35zulu (local 13:35act)

In the Salt Mine, the C3 complex carved out from solid rock, deep below the Nine Iron Smash here in Tareyton Greens, Cyzk has just watched the video feed from Eli Plunket as the CDF Major who was interrogating him, that is beating the crap out of him, puts a small 6mm breezeblock pistol up to his forehead and squeezes the trigger.

Eli's lights go out but the chip-audio stream continues with the Major's assistant saying, ["You shouldn't have done that, sir."]

["And why the bloody balls not, staff-sergeant?"]

["The locals will not take kindly to it."]

In the CIC, General Giáp kills the feed, while saying to Cyzk, "An' they didn't take kindly to it. See, Moidah, the Co-op's offer to the Five-Houses was making everyone not yet in this fight straddle the fence. The proposed profit sharing was brilliant, but this stream seems to have settled all the arguments."

Cyzk nods, "It looks like it lit a fire under them, but why Eli?"

Giáp shrugs, saying, "Everyone out there grew up with Eli! He was referee for every championship fight on Taiji for the last thirty years but, as a day job, he was archdeacon for the Anglican dioceses of Tareyton Keep."

As Vossler, in a JACC, and the ghost droid piloted by Maggie, step up to them, both covered in debris and smoldering ash, Vossler pulls his canopy off and says, "I 'eard everyone loved the old goat!"

Cyzk does a knuckle tap with Vossler, and, "Havin' fun, Voss?"

"A right ripper of a grand time!" Vossler thumbs towards a screen showing the live-feed outside the main clubhouse, right above

them, and asks, "Okay, Zipper, why ya be pulling me and Mags here? The fight topside was just starting to get good!"

Giáp shrugs, "You're out of the tussle, mate."

Vossler grumbles, "God-damned poofter, ya are!"

"If there's a need for recon after this you'll get your people back but, since they've all gone rogue sniper, Colonel Rand will take them off your hands and put 'em where she needs 'em!"

Sally Rand gives Vossler a little wave as she starts to walk away, "Thanks, Kung Fu! I needed the swinging dodgers, I did."

With Rand out of earshot, Cyzk and Maggie both snicker when Vossler mumbles, "Feel free to add my dick to that mix!"

Giáp smiles at that and says to Vossler, "How 'bout you go freshen up and come join me? I be puttin' on an early kettle!"

Vossler asks, "They gonna continue to get resupply drops?"

"Nope, ol' boy! No hope of that now."

Before he steps away, Vossler pats Cyzk on the shoulder and, "Then they've got three...maybe five hours fight left in 'im. Cheers!"

Giáp asks Maggie, "Lose any of your droids this morning?"

Maggie goes, "Not a one!"

"Good, you're attached to Cyzk. Protect 'im with your lives." Giáp then laughs at himself, "You know what I mean, hon!"

Maggie's holographic face grins, "Not a problem, sir."

He turns to Cyzk and points towards a huge planetary-wide tactical screen behind them, "Thanks to Eli, our thirty-eight reserve divisions hit Homer this morning and have pushed their troops out of all the C-BOOs in each of the five capital cities. We've captured all their supply depots and airfields, along with over eighty drop ships and a dozen or so fighters. Unfortunately, we had to blast all their armor. I would rather have captured that kit. As of now, the two-hundred fighters they have airborne have no place to land and rearm now that Graves' CAP and FCAP got 'em tied up. We've also got thousands of civis who are working the backcountry, sniping away, but they are acting civilized and focusing on creating cripples out of Homer. It's the fight above us that's getting murderously lolapalooza crazy..."

Giáp now points to the next display showing the central Anzac region. All of Tareyton Meadows, that spans from the equator into the Civil Twilight region, and south to the capital city of Tareyton Keep. The CDF forces are nine divisions spread out along a horseshoe arch that's 18 kilometers wide. The front itself, that is the entire length of

the arch, spreads them thin at over 40 kilometers. The formation has been moving north from the Keep, but the northwest shoulder is now stuck in a pitched battle over the golfing complex right above them, known as Tareyton Greens.

With the industrial salt mining tunnels also displayed, a spider web of tunnels between the Greens and the Keep, five exit points are marked with the general pointing to the northern most one, just southeast to the Greens, "Now, originally I didn't think we would be able to use this exit, but here we are! We need you to pop this cork in thirty minutes, when the entirety of the Sixtieth Armored has past."

"Think it'll be clear then?"

"We'll give you the go code when the coast is. Now, send your regiments in all directions and start chewing up their rearguard, but the focus is to the northwest and northeast. To the northwest your goal is to hit 'em in their arse in the direction of the main clubhouse." Giáp points up, saying, "That being, the one above us!"

Cyzk nods, "Shouldn't be that much of a problem to find."

"Then to the northeast we need you to split the line between their Sixtieth Armored Division and the Twentieth Of Foot."

"Let me guess, there's a buffer seat between them?"

"Exactly! The line is thin and they've got a half a klick wide gap between their flanking guards, an' it's only gonna get worse with them hanging up on the Greens! The Annex division that dropped this mornin' is moving towards that spot, and they'll hit it inside the hour. About that time you should be buggering 'em nice an' proper!"

Cyzk ponders this while the muffled explosions from above continue to echo through the solid rock walls of the C3 facility. After a big one goes off, making them look up, Cyzk shrugs and, "Not exactly what we originally had in mind but...yea, we got this."

Giáp adds, "Just so you know, Gudici and Nelson are coming in from the southwest and southeast. This horseshoe will close up and there will be no egress in that direction by the time you jump off. You will be walking into an encirclement in an encirclement." He turns to Cyzk to emphasize, "You know your exec, Fred Sargent, is leading the division from the northeast. Ya have to make that handshake because that'll be your only egress if this all goes arse up."

"You're saying, right now is my only chance to back out."

The general quietly confirms, "Aye. Now, for plan-b, we could have you bust out from the central exit and attack between Gudici and Nelson, but we're hearin' that court action in New Sydney may be putting the breaks to this a bit earlier than expected."

Cyzk nods his head, "We'll stick with plan-a, surprise the shit outta them." He looks at Maggie and asks, "We got this, Maggie?"

The ghost droid shrugs, with Maggie, saying, "We got this."

Cyzk and Giáp silently shake hands, and as he and Maggie start to walk out, Cyzk stops and looks back at Giáp, "If the cease fire doesn't come, the way it looks, they're not gonna last the day."

Giáp goes, "Could be, mate, but I think we're racing the clock on this one. We've precious little time to add to their hurt."

01000100-01001110-01000111-01010010-00100000-01011010-01001110

Above the tenth fairway, near the Nine Iron Smash, the carcass of a dead IR5 corkscrews overhead and splits into tumbling thirds only one-hundred meters above Peña's head. The debris from its wingman also flies past him—horizontally at eye level, with a huge chunk of its lifting body barely missing his ship as the thing cartwheels across the tenth green and then sticking it on the eighth tee.

As close calls go, for today, that's just par for the course.

Both IR5s were shot down by Kati Connors five-kilometers ago, and that happened only three hundred meters in altitude, but at the speed they were going it took that much distance for both of the dead Kali to finally drop from the sky.

Kati and her wingman, in the new bisE-a mods of the ASF47, replacing the Cerberus-Dips, streak past at only fifty meters in altitude. Flying underneath the spiraling junk they made of the first IR5, the last of the windows in the main clubhouse are blown out because the shock waves that are following them at Mach-6 kind of does that.

Anyone on the ground not in a JACC or an ACE fighting suit, sixty-three from the CDF to be exact, end up as combat ineffective by way of acoustical trauma. Specifically, bleeding ears and deafness, with only two of them dead from overpressure alone.

As the last possible supply drop for the CDFs 31st Armored Division, that's hung up at the clubhouse, it's not going well for them. The two IR5 did scatter all of the Annex's CAP leading up to the golfing complex, but here is Peña and two of his fellow CAS ground pounders now staring down the supply drop racing towards them from six clicks.

Jacob Graves and his flight of four ASF74s, flying the outer CAP, are chasing the two CDF drop ships and their four F51 fighter escorts, and they did launch centipedes after them, but the ships will make the drop way before those missiles can possibly connect, so Peña and his CAS pilots each snap-fire two centipedes at them.

Inside the four seconds it takes those missiles to reach the incoming ships, the F51 Djinn fighters scatter but the two drop ships are now dead meat. While climbing they manage to shoot all six of the SA centipedes out of the sky, yes, but of the three-dozen micropedes the missiles fling forward towards them—half connect and obliterates both ships and scatters their cargo across ten square kilometers.

One could say this drop was successful, but a “pallet burst” via micropede warheads makes it problematic to collect and distribute.

With Jacob and his fighters chasing after the four Djinn, Peña receives an alert on the command channel:

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ALERT*ALERT*ALERT
23190220:13:36:56ZULU FOLLOWS AS:
CKXMSN: M2, RAMIREZ, MARIA
ORDERS: ALL-MONOCROME*MONOCROME*MONOCROME.
ORDERS: TAIJI OP-DESTROY CDF CLOAKED ASSETS
M2NOTE: NO MORE DELAYS. TEAR IT UP...
END OF MESSAGE
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“About damned time!” Peña gruffs as he banks his Cerberus to the north while switching to the CAP frequency, “Buzzard Chow, we just got the orders for monochrome. Can you confirm, monochrome?”

Jacob comes on the channel, [“Monochrome is a go, Dog. Sorry, we’ve been puttin’ that off. Once you start in it won’t take them long to figure out what’s goin’ on.”]

“I’ll work fast, out.” Peña switches over to the SEAD coms and asks, “Gumball, you busy?”

[“I’m here, Dog. I see we finally got fuckin’ monochrome.”]

“Yep, long time comin’! Look, dude, I’ve got a Triple-A Mech hiding in the trees at the eighth tee. You want ‘im?”

[“Our hands are full, Dog, so if you got a bead on the thing then go ahead and take the shot.”]

“I gotta ask, can your people hold off on monochrome for a couple of minutes? I got the bulk of the Thirty-First Armored sitting cloaked on the eighth, seventh and sixth fairways.”

[“Yea, I can hold. Go put the fuck to ‘em!”]

Peña switches over to his CAS freq and, “Guys, you heard right, we got monochrome. Bam-Bam you take the sixth fairway. Grawlix, you take the seventh. I got the eighth. Let’s distract them with a couple of clusters then hit ‘em with the twenty-threes. We only get one free pass here, so we gotta make this run count.”

Bam-Bam responds with, ["It'll be nice not to play fucken' footsies with their shit cloaked anymore."]

Grawlix says, ["Yea, but our jobs just got a lot harder."]

Peña swings his ship wide and back around to the west with them following him in, "True that, but this'll be our one freebie!"

Now rolling in from the west, the three stagger out and launch their 20/20 missiles five kilometers out. Coming in behind the actual line, both their nose and dorsal guns knock out mini-missiles fired at them from the CDF troops below, as well as shooting at those who launched them. The 20/20 missiles pepper the fairways all to throw up debris as the three Cerberus fighters streak in.

Peña starts with his 30mm, and from three clicks out the four bombs he fires smashes into and shreds the Triple-A Mech. All three CAS pilots now fire their 23s against targets mapped out for them by a micro recon droid just a scant minute ago. The 90 rocket assisted bombs they launch reach out and then plummet down to destroy 18 Revenant and disable 3 of the Mancubus tanks that were targeted.

Instantly aware of what is going on, the CDF command has their units blast the recon droid from the sky. The next one that races in doesn't fare any better, but in the short 6-seconds it has over the fairways, scanning in grayscale and shifting the focus, the thing transmits the data before it too is blasted to smithereens.

Now forced to burn through their recon-droids, from the little snapshots of data they provide, Peña, Bam-Bam and Grawlix now snipe at the CDF armored units from a distance while still providing close air support for Giáp's Third Mobile Calvary who is stalled in a savage fight over the ninth hole by the clubhouse.

01001101-01010100-01000100-01010100

Jacob has been picking up new and promising pilots from the Iron Maiden as temporary wingmen all to give them the experience they need but, instead of leading them, he's been letting them take the lead to gain confidence. See, technical competence as a combat pilot is not at issue here, but self-confidence in combat is hard to come by. Getting past the butterflies in your stomach during your first few combat missions means the difference between dying or being able to fly future missions without said butterflies.

Today, Jacob's wingman, or gal that is, is PFC2 Yemi Kagame from Nigeria—who's actually a Tutsi originally born in Rwanda but nobody cares. Jacob is of the opinion that, since there is a war on, if he encourages his commanders to let their noob pilots get an early kill

or two then the statistical chances of their survival skyrocket.

This has proven to be true in practice so all Annex fighter commanders now forego the easy kills and defer them to their less experienced pilots with the results being, not more or less enemy kills being made, but fewer of the Annex pilots getting shot down.

Yes, it's the job of the ship's resident "ghost co-pilot" to coach the new pilots, but they kinda have to clam up when a fight on and the flight commanders are calling most of the shots.

Anyway, of the two Djinn that broke right, Jacob tells Yemi to, *go get 'em!* Yemi makes a snappy missile kill of the flight leader to start, but she is now letting their wingman put distance between them so that she can try for another easy missile shot, where Jacob gets on channel and says, ["He's by himself so get in with guns!"]

Yemi kicks it in gear as Jacob tells her, ["He's gonna turn so when he does, just like in the sims it's roll, cut power and skid for the lead, like you've done a thousand times!"]

Just then, as she was closing in at two clicks, the Djinn pulls up, then rolls left and pitches into a turn—at a right angle from his climb. The guy should have waited for her to get closer because Yemi pulls up ever so slightly then chops power while in a sideways skid, 90° along the axis of his turn, and lets loose with her cannon.

Problem is that she fires the 23 by mistake...

That shot should not have landed but she gave it so much extra lead that, even though most of the string fell behind, the first bomb rockets right into the top razor engine and explodes to the tune of 1,000 kilograms thus vaporizing the back half of the fighter.

With the fork of the F51 now tumbling away, that being the cockpit and MDDSH nacelles, Jacob is laughing his ass off on channel as Yemi cries out in stunned disbelief, ["Oh, *chei!*"]

Jacob chuckles, ["Yemi, wrong gun but...that was awesome!"]

01010100-01000010-01001100-01000110

As a matter of doctrine the Steel Annex does everything they can to avoid armor as the spearhead but, since they are squaring off with the CDF here on Taiji, and those guys subscribe and sacrifice to the alter of the armored spearhead, then the tip of the spear it is.

Unfortunately, for them, today they face the Pazuzu.

The Annex has been throwing the last of their Wolverine tanks into the fight and holding off on deploying the Pazuzu, what everyone in the field calls the StuG, but the SA is finally running out of their

older “Woolies” and are currently moving the StuGs up.

Now, when the Annex deploys a whole division they usually drop a mix of regiments and battalions from various platforms with one Deputy Field Marshal, including their exec and HQ-companies, as the designated mission command however, here on Taiji, DFM Cyzk is in command of all. Though Cyzk has eight divisions under him here, all but three have been split into free roaming regiments and battalions managed by General Giáp’s main CIC out of the Salt Mine tucked away under the Nine Iron Smash.

With the CIC’s intimate knowledge of the weather and terrain, Colonel Rand has been utilizing the SA units more like she would Australian Shepherds—hoodwinking and herding the CDF forces around to where Giáp’s units can engage. Only Guidci and Nelson’s regiments have straight up duked it out with the CDF troops over the last seven weeks, four and three times, respectively.

Fred Sargent, Cyzk’s exec from the Iron Maiden, was picked to lead the mixed division to breach the northeast shoulder of the line and make that handshake with Cyzk. They were dropped two hours ago and have been winding their way through the farmlands towards the fight with the lead scouting elements, that being three platoons of their Pazuzu tanks, spread out across four kilometers.

Both the Wolverine and Pazuzu are designed as human rated, but where the Wolverine tanks have a crew of three, the Pazuzu has a crew of only two. That said, the Annex forgoes living troops and now deploy all of their armor units as ghost droids—with the ghosts having gamified the tanks in the same manner they drive the robotic JACCs as well as flying the Cŵn Dawg models of the F308 fighters.

Angel Griego, platoon leader for Scout-Three, has five tanks in his group and, since it’s a scouting platoon, he has four other ghosts on his team. He and his teammates, Mahko Ozo, Sophia Martin, Butter Hewlett and Thomas Chase, each drive their own Pazuzu as well as two ghost droids, curled up and hanging on the back as infantry support, but instead of scouting they’ve been sitting still here for 20 minutes.

Fred Sargent comes on line to ask, [“Griego, this is Sargent. You still got that Mancubus in your sights, right?”]

[“Yea, Chief, he’s sitting there on the hill all majestic and shit. What do you want us to do with him?”]

[“How many others you got zeroed in?”]

[“We’ve got two maus and eight ravens parked in front of us, all cloaked. The recon-droid flagged over fifty more behind them.”]

[“We’re here way early. I got Bat-Five a click behind you.”]

["Shit, Chief, you are early!"] Suddenly, their micro recon droid they were flying over the maus is shot down, so Griego reports, ["Chief, they just skeet our micro from the sky. You still want us to disengage quiet like and hook up with Scout-One and Two, to the east like we planned?"]

["I got a little change of plans for ya. You're facing the point elements to the Sixtieth. Let's go ahead and you fire on the units you have direct eyes on, and *then* you can slither out of there for the rendezvous. Fifth Battalion will try to pull them towards the west to thin the gap with the Twentieth."]

["So, you want us to start this fight for Bat-Five!"]

["I didn't think you'd be opposed to that?"]

["Oh no, Chief! We'd be happy to do it!"]

["Hold one minute then git-r-done! Out."]

Griego asks on squad, ["Everyone got their battle buddy?"]

The others laugh with Hewlett saying, ["You don' got one!"]

["All ya'll are my battle buddies."] Giving them their assigned targets on the net, Griego adds, ["Each of you AP two Revs and book, I'm gonna double tap the Mausers."]

Chase wonders, ["Isn't it Maus plural as well as singular?"]

Sophia asks, ["Or, is it Meeces?"]

Griego goes, ["I don't speak Kraut? Okay, on my mark."]

Ozo comments, ["And the Maus dies to the StuG!"]

Griego adds, ["It's the circle of life, kids...an' here we go!"]

Within two seconds, Griego fires his main gun and, while launching four micropede missiles, his tank twists slightly to the right and he fires at the second Mancubus tank. On his first shot the other four each follow suit with only their main guns.

All of their arch penetrators look like they are fired high, and as they get to within fifty meters to their targets they arch over and dive for the top of their assigned Revenant tanks. Now, puncturing the armor of the tanks from above is bad enough, with superheated Uranium spraying the inside and killing the crew, but in the tail of the penetrators is the warhead from a 23mm round. The micronuke bomb has one-thousand kilograms of explosive force, and with these things going off inside or below the tank, the now dead machines either burst open or go spiraling through the air.

As for the two Mancubus tanks, Griego aimed for where he thought the turret rings would be, between the turret on top and the

chassis below. The first one punches right through and blows the turret thirty meters into the air. The second Maus was hit in the thick armor below the ring, and this flips the thing on its side.

The micropedes were not exactly necessary but each Maus is hit by two of them. The missiles for the first one were redundant, but for the second Maus, one missile smashes into the gun and the second breeches the underside of the hull thereby killing the crew.

The five Pazuzu tanks of Scout-Three are already high-tailing it out of there in reverse before the 1k-kg grenades, like mortars, start to rain from the sky, and while the others are laughing, Griego has barely cleared the barrage going, ["Nope! Nope-nope-nope!"]

01110000-01110010-01101111-01110000-01110011

Regiments 3608 and 3611 have had a hell of a time on Taiji over the last seven weeks, but in the minds of the Gurkha troops they've had a hell of a great time. After the third of January, where most of the SA units have stuck to the job at hand, spurring the CDF troops around for General Giáp's units to engage, the Gurkha's have managed to maneuver themselves into five impromptu skirmishes.

Gudici and Nelson have had to yank their chains hard over the last four weeks to keep them in line but, for today, they are now off the leash—to a point that is. The Gurkha's have rushed in and closed the wide gap between the ends of the horseshoe thereby forcing the CDF to deploy their one reserve division to help fill that gap.

With that reserve division slamming headlong into the Gurkha troops, who were waiting for them, the sounds of battle starts to build as Anthony Gudici steps up to Zach Nelson and shakes his hand.

With their command and support squads spreading out, taking up guard positions around their commanders and execs, Gudici asks, "Is it everything you thought it was gonna be?"

Nelson asks, "Commanding the Gurks?" With Gudici nodding yes, Nelson asks, "How many are you nominating to polish?"

Gudici eyebrows rise, thinking, "Twelve so far, I think?"

Gudici's exec, Ganju Thapa, trots up and barks at them as miniballs from the battle fly through the brush around them, "If you two are gonna shoot the shit then get in the fucking crater!"

Thapa pushes Gudici into the deep crater followed by Nelson voluntarily hopping into it, where Thapa squats beside it and tosses them a pack of smokes, and snarls, "Take a fuckin' break for once!"

Gudici throws his hands up, "Okay! ...Bring Gurung here."

While Gudici and Nelson remove their canopies, Thapa runs over to grab Nelson's exec who is with her support squad, crouched behind a Revenant tank they killed just three minutes ago.

"And for you?" Gudici asks as he hands a smoke to Nelson.

"Fourteen? I think ten of 'em are shoe-ins."

"The way this fight has been goin', that's about right."

With them lighting each other's cigarettes with lasers, Nelson takes a puff and asks, "So, what are these mystery plans for me you mentioned back in January?"

"They asked me about you, and I recommended you, but they wanted to see how you would do here first and...you made the cut."

Nelson shrugs, "Doin' what?"

"Hold that thought!" Gudici has puts a finger up, and then says on the command freq, "Thapa, Gurung, where are you?"

At that very moment, the two execs slide into the crater with Gurung asking, "What'll it be, SD?"

After a puff, Gudici says, "Nelson and I have been ordered off the line. I'll be taking immediate command of First of the Thirty-Sixth. Nelson is to report to Chief Stark on the Iron Maiden and become a Trung driver." Gudici looks at Nelson, "You're now a Command Chief!"

Thapa shakes his head, "You're shitting us! Now?"

"Oh, it gets worse! Ganju Thapa, you've been promoted to Senior Deputy Marshal in command of the Eighth of the Thirty-Sixth. Binsa Gurung, you've also been promoted to Senior Deputy Marshal in command of the Eleventh of the Thirty-Sixth." He takes a puff and drops the cigarette, "It's in effect now, any questions?"

This was unexpected, and with them shaking their heads, *no*, Nelson says, "I'm gonna be given a Trung? Seriously?"

Gudici laughs, "Yea, dumbass, ya just leaped over my head!"

Getting past the shock of the moment, Binsa puts her hand out to Nelson and, "It's been a pleasure, Chief!"

Nelson takes her hand and smiles, "Thank you for everything, Binsa, but you were a pain in my ass."

She almost laughs, "Like I said, it's been my pleasure."

Gudici shakes Thapa's hand, "Thank you, Ganju." He then smiles and rattles off in Italian, "*Sei stato un rompicoglioni.*"

Ganju has heard Gudici call him a pain in the ass in Italian before, "It has been my honor...Sir."

Gudici rolls his eyes at the playful insult, "Our ride is waiting." He then thumbs back towards the fight, "Don't you two have regiments to command? Let's hop to it!"

With another round of fist bumps between them, Thapa and Gurung jump out of the crater and head north with their squads. Nelson takes one last puff of his cigarette and flicks it away.

While they both slap the canopies of their JACCs back on, Gudici says to Nelson, "Our flight out of here is two clicks south, an' they need to leave asap, so let's rock, Chief."

From the crater floor, they leap into the air and head south.

While flying low to the ground, zigging and zagging between the trees, Nelson asks, "Wop, you really recommended me?"

Gudici laughs, "Fuck yea, how else was I gonna get rid of ya!"

01000111-01101111-0110001-01110100-01110011-01100101-00100001

With the CDF's reserve division out of the way, and their Sixtieth Armored division being pulled to the west, widening the gap between them and the Twentieth of Foot, Cyzk get's the go code.

Three SA divisions have filled six tunnels, and are being held back one-hundred meters from an underground juncture that is only twenty meters below the surface—in the middle of the encirclement near Tareyton Greens. Months ago, Giáp's people set demolition charges and excavated one-hundred and twenty meters of the two tunnels that ran just below this juncture. The deep hole there will now easily accommodate the debris, and not block their way, when the charges in the ceiling above the juncture are set off.

On the SA joint-division channel a battalion commander calls out, *thirty seconds*, while Cyzk opens a private channel to Sally Rand who has been waiting for him, ["Oi, Kacper, before you jump off, I just wanted to say thank'y for the lovely time we 'ad 'erel!"]

Cyzk shrugs, "All that planning, and none of it panned out."

["Under the bridge they say."] Rand snorts, ["We did get to smack a fair bit of tail! Feel free to stop by for a rematch, anytime!"]

Cyzk chuckles, "Haven't you had enough already?"

["Never, me love! An' who knows when I'll see you again?"]

"The way this fight is going, probably a whole lot sooner than you think. I give Homer maybe four hours at best."

["Well...ye be probably right about that. Focus on the breach for ol' Freddy Boy! Then make for the clubhouse."]

"That's the plan!"

Suddenly, the charges go off and a twelve-meter wide by ninety-meter long section of the ceiling, above the tunnel, drops into the hole made for it—nice and pretty and in one piece.

Rand snickers, ["Have a jolly good time of it! Out!"]

The recon fire-team that was waiting above, perform a quick inspection of the hole and radios out, ["Clear!"]

Six strings of troopers, ghost droids and PacMan drones, pour out from the long hole in the ground. They spread out in all directions, towards regimental marshalling points, and when each battalion is formed, they head out to locate their assigned CDF rearguard elements to basically ruin their day.

With the bulk of the troopers having moved on, and their armored units starting to extricate themselves from the tunnels, Cyzk and his command squad heads out towards the northeast.

Cyzk really wants to move onto the Greens, but breaching the line in the northeast is the priority here.

01010011-01110100-01110101-01000111

Griego and Scout-Three, consisting of five Pazuzu tanks, pull up behind a tree line facing the gap between the CDF divisions. Those being the Sixtieth Armored, to their right, and the Twentieth of Foot to their left. With a whole kilometer now between their flanking guards, the three scouting teams have formed up into a ragged delta to punch a hole for Chief Sargent's mixed division to follow.

Scout-Three is now the tip of the spear.

A handful of Hydrapede droids orbit their position and take flanking and anchor positions around them.

Nicknamed the Red Shell, the Hydrapede missile-droids were originally coated in the same red enamel the old Centipede missiles were covered in. Tube launched weapons have always been color coded to simplify sorting and loading so, when Jacob delivered them last October, they were still red.

The Hydrapedes on Taiji have all been hastily painted in the same soft powderpuff pink as the new droids and Centipede Mews are distributed in, but after two months of combat most of that paint has scrapped off—making them look worn and haggard now that they are mottled red and pink.

Funny thing is that at a distance they are still hard to see.

Now, we all know that Taiji is tidally locked, and that here in the Tareyton Greens it is always perpetual sunset, in what all the locals call the TOZ. Short for the Tee Off Zone, the region spans from the equator at 90° to the local terminator at 98° latitude, but the seventh and ninth week of their twelve week cycle it is brighter than normal. This is because the distant and bright star, Nyx, happens to be peeking around Sriracha Mu, and with both stars prominent in the sky the distance where you “stick figure” against the light from S’Mu gets cut down to less than a kilometer however...

Here on the fifth day into week nine, it is starting to rain.

On recon freq, Griego sighs, [“God-damn it... Cloaks off!”]

Sophia points out, [“We were hoping to still use that shit!”]

[“No shit! I don’t think they figured out how we did it yet.”]

Ozo says, [“The net shows Cyzk should be hitting ‘em soon.”]

At that very moment, over five kilometers away, thin streaks of white, green and red fly through the air like fireworks, with Chase saying, [“Ooooh! So many colorful tracers, it’s like Christmas!”]

Ozo suggests, [“*Ey vato*, maybe we should start moving up?”]

Griego grumbles, [“*Pinche* light rain is mofo shit for cover.”]

Hewlett laughs, [“This is gonna be a hell of a push, guys!”]

[“Okay kids, you had better hit the john before we leave! From here on out we’re only gonna stop for snacks and murder.”]

As everyone laughs at that, and the ghost droids dismount to take flanking positions around their assigned tanks, on the tacnet Griego notes Scout-One’s position to cover right flank and Scout-Two to cover their left. Working with the data from a high altitude micro drone, they see that tanks from the Sixtieth are starting to pour into the southern end of the gap in an effort to block Cyzk’s attack.

Griego asks, [“You-all seein’ what I’m seein’ here?”]

Sophia answers, [“Yeppers, we do, Angel Baby!”]

[“You’re right, Mahko! Let’s get to it.”]

Emerging from the trees, and with cloaks on both sides turned off because of the rain, they have to move faster than normal, so the old maxim *he who sees first shoots first* rings true. Hovering along at twenty-eight kph, now a whole kilometer into the gap, they spot tanks pulling out a half klick in front of them, and turn south.

Griego goes, [“My god, I don’t think they see us!!”]

Hewlett adds, [“Thank your lucky starts for pixelated camo!”]

Slowing down, Griego says, ["I'm goin' full-on sneaky-sneaky for this. Guys, get ready to avenge my death."] His tank now turns sideways by fifteen degrees to his right, while continuing south, ["When the shooting starts we're gonna hafta push hard."]

Griego is now a half-football field away from the last enemy tank in the line, so he quietly says on freq, ["Ssssh, just keep looking away. It'll all be over with soon."]

He fires first, punching the closest Revenant from behind with a normal sabot-penetrator, and with the other four from Scout-Three also firing, the five tanks they hit simply drop from their hover onto the ground with a small bounce. The standard penetrators don't have an attached bomblet, so there is some heat and smoke coming from the now dead tanks but they don't have much in terms of flammables on board, so that's about it. Griego kicks it into gear and leads the others headlong into the fight.

Hewlett, Ozo and Chase all call out, *nevermore*, on channel as Griego urges them to, ["Push-push-push!"] Coming around a cluster of trees, he runs into a Mancubus tank that spots him and tries to get its gun around for a shot, ["Oh, hello there!"]

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Many fighter pilots will say that they're strapping their fighter on, but when flying the F380 Cerberus this expression is quite literal.

While flying the Cerberus the pilot is sitting back, reclining feet forward, and they have no MDDSH nacelles protecting them from the sides, and no fuselage wrapping around them like when sitting in a normal cockpit such as the older model F308. Yes, most everything now has the bubble cockpit, and the one on the F380 is also on the ASF74 as well as the IR5, but when flying the Cerberus the primary mission happens to be Close Air Support, and flying balls-out as CAS means the bullets tend to come straight at your face.

These new bubble cockpits are quite heavy, and can take a lot of punishment, but here over the Nine Iron Smash Peña has a hard time seeing through the fuzzy crush impacts and crazed fractures on the top layers of the cockpit canopy.

Before him is the Mancubus tank he just emptied his 23mm cannon on a short minute ago. The tank is now grounded and out of the fight, with the micronuke bombs that hit it having rung the crew's bell and wrecked the auto-loader, so there is little else for that crew to do but jump and run.

Or, they could opt to fire on him with the heavy anti-air gun

mounted on top, but the problem here is that they decided to do both! Peña is not aware of that because when he makes one last pass to confirm the kill all he sees are 7.62 long legs splashing against his canopy, so how to respond is the immediate issue at hand.

Peña is pretty much out of everything except one cartridge of Micropedes, about five seconds on his Eighty-Eight, but he has almost a full drum of the 30mm, two-thousand kilogram yield bombs, which is fantastic for area denial and interdiction, but they tend to be overkill for the CAS mission—close being the key consideration.

He thinks they should add a variety of smaller yield bombs for the 23, like they do when they are fighting over an urban environment according to the ROEs. Sometimes the “close” in CAS needs to be surgically exacting, and using the 1k-kg sledgehammer all the time tends to be wearisome when a simple ball-peen in 500, 250 or even a 100 kg yield bomb would do the trick quite nicely!

Anyway, with Anthony Gudici having taken command of the First of the Thirty-Sixth, he splits his battalions to hit the flanks of the CDFs Thirty-First Armored Division, what’s left of it that is, thus taking the heat off Giáp’s Third Mobile Calvary.

This fight has become a total mess for the CDF because with all the Micropede attacks they can’t move any of their armored units up to deal with the pesky infantry...which is the bane of armor when they don’t have infantry to support them. With Giáp’s people using the SA supplied wontons, 1k-kg grenade launchers like mortars, endlessly, and one of their tanks getting picked off by every five minutes by Peña’s CAS pilots, the Thirty-First is being meticulously ground down little by little. Instead of sitting here on the eighth fairway waiting to die, and against orders, a lone Mancubus tank finally makes a move to charge the Nine Iron Smash in an attempt to break this stalemate.

Peña disabled this Mancubus with the last of his 23’s, and with Gudici’s troops putting the squeeze on the CDF, Peña decides to loop around behind the CDF lines all to make one last recon pass over the battle before he egresses from the fight to rearm and quick-swap his canopy out. Now, with the rain the CDF armored units have turned off their cloaks, but instead of firing on Peña as he passes overhead, they are all playing dead so as not to draw his attention. Well, all but the Maus he just knocked out that short minute ago.

“Bad plan, *mericon!*” Peña says as he pulls down on him.

With the bolts from that weapon splashing against his already mangled canopy, instead of dropping a 30mm bomb for just the one lone gun, Peña opts to snap-fire the Eighty-Eight. Now, the ship’s AI has already selected a standard TD-Cue, a simple vector frame that overlays the hostile target for the 8.80mm bolts to maneuver towards,

as is usual, but instead of one auto-targeting cue on the tacnet HUD in his visual cortex—four of them pop up.

With all the exploding bolts blocking his vision, Peña focuses on the one cue and fails to notice the other three as he squeezes the trigger. Half of the bolts take out the tank commander as well as the anti-air gun, but the rest have split up and are gimbaling between the other three targeting cues that are overlaying the three crewmembers in ACE suits who were trying to get away from their idiot commander.

On the instant review from an external camera, Peña watches as three CDF troopers stop to raise their hands a few seconds before he made the shot. The explosive bolts scrap all three—sending pieces of their fighting suits, body parts and gore up into the air.

Peña's heart sinks as he mutters, "*Soy un fundillo!*"

Bam-Bam calls out to him on channel, ["Oh shit! Those guys should have kept running! You gonna go put down now, Dog?"]

Peña just shakes his head, frustrated with himself, and as he races out of the AO with holes all over his ship, "I'm bingo on ammo. The field is yours 'til I get back."

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Griego laughs, ["Got your nose!"]

Angel Greigo fired his main rail gun at the Mancubus, and it smashes into its variable geometry gun, which falls away in spite of the shielding they've added since last October. The second follow on shot breaches the turret ring, which punches through and, with a huge jolt from the superheated Uranium, the turret slides off the lower hull.

Griego then fires his main gun at the Mancubus' behind him. Again, because of the short distances here, the sabot is still attached to the penetrator as it glances off the top deck glacis of the tank's lower chassis. The sabot is shattered and with the penetrator breaking free it then deflects off the side of its turret.

Having to reload the staging tray, used for quick triple-taps, Griego starts drifting his Pazuzu to the right, and around that Maus while spraying him over with his Eighty-Eight—all the while it's turret is rotating and trying to get a shot off at him. During this race Griego is laughing on the scout freq, ["Goochie, goochie! Goochie, goochie goo! Here comes the tickle monster!"]

With the tray loaded up, Griego snap fires an arch penetrator into the turret ring, between the turret and the chassis where, this time, the lower hull is slammed into the ground and the turret goes

flying straight up into the air as the trailing micronuke detonates inside and pops the turret off the tank like a champagne cork.

While this was going on his team breaks to his right, where Hewlett blows a penetrator through the side of a Revenant, laughing, ["Tag, Homer, you're it!"]

Ozo fires on another Revenant saying, ["Dirt nap for you!"]

On the other hand, Chase slams the front of his tank up against the side of a Revenant, pinning him against a stand of trees, while snarling, ["I say *no* to bullies!"]

The Revenant fired its main gun at Griego, but Chase t-boning the thing made the shot go wide, and with its anti-air gun now spraying all of them with 7.62 long legs, Chase asks as if he were a little kid talking to his father, ["Hey pop, can we keep him?"]

Griego points out, ["See how it's foaming at the mouth?"]

["Shouldn't we take him to the vet and have that looked at?"]

["No, son, we gotta put it down."]

["Just like Old Yeller!"] Sophia has pulled around and behind the Revenant tank Chase has pinned down, and while leveling her gun, ["Best look away, Thomas, or this'll give you bad dreams."]

Sophia fires and the penetrator punches through the tank, where the superheated uranium blows the hatches out, allowing spirals of heat, flame and molten debris to shoot up.

With the team turning to continue the push, Griego says, ["We'll find you a new Raven puppy at the pound."]

Hewlett adds, ["They screen for rabies there!"]

Chase asks with excitement, ["Can I pick 'em out?"]

Ozo goes, ["Sure, but one less frothy at the mouth!"]

Taking point, Chase cries out, ["Then I want ice cream!"]

Sophia wonders, ["You think we may be overindulging him?"]

Chase then Griego race past the tanks they just destroyed, followed by the others, and a kilometer past that they run into a dozen Revenants and Mancubus tanks moving towards them...backwards, firing on Cyzk's teams that are pushing hard against them.

Chase calls out, ["Danger close!"]

The infantry support around those CDF tanks notice them and dive for the dirt just as Chase, Griego and the rest of the Pazuzu's of the three scouting teams open up on them. While their ghost droids and anti-air guns in 8.80mm fire on their infantry, the Pazuzu main

guns start killing off the CDF armored units en masse.

With all the tracers from bolts and sabot penetrators, flying every which way, and CDF tanks caught out in the open, and dying, Griego laughs while saying, ["Need an adult here! We need an adult!"]

After a few seconds of this chaos, and callouts on the channel saying, *nevermore*, one Revenant manages to swing around and fire on Ozo before it's shot dead. Its penetrator comes in steep enough to kill an older Wooly, but here the dart simply ricochets away.

Surprised, Ozo shouts, ["*Dios mío!* I love this StuG!"]

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Far away from the ground action, four hundred kilometers to the northeast, a cluster bomb launched backwards by an F51c scatters its micronuke bomblets and takes out a Centipede-Mew that was fired by Yemi Kagame. Eight of the Mew's nine micropede missiles evade destruction and all eight of them make it to the Condor.

The F51 is obliterated, but the one thing that does survive this onslaught is the cockpit, and as it drops from the sky the chute fails to deploy. The pilot finally comes to and she ejects in the nick of time, at three hundred meters altitude, seconds before the cockpit smashes into the hardscrabble and caliche of the desert floor. Like the JACC, the ACE suit also flies, so the pilot lands beside the wreckage.

Jacob was following them at a distance, while Kagame worked the kill, so he comes on channel to ask, ["Coords?"]

Kagame snaps out of the shock and elation of making her fifth kill, and reports the latitude and longitude with the calmest voice she could muster, ["Eighty-five-fifty, and the IFF shows the pilot as TKO."]

["Best possible outcome! Post the confirmation on the tacnet and come be my wingman again."] Minutes later, as she pulls up beside Jacob, he says, ["Well, Yemi, ya did good!"]

When excited, Kagame reverts to Nigerian pidgin, ["FM, you be *don kolo* for making me an ace!"]

Jacob laughs, ["And in a day! Your first combat mission too!"]

Again, in pidgin, ["You do well, FM!"]

["You're welcome, but you did it yourself."]

["No, you made dat happen for me! I owe you."]

["Tell ya what, I'm gonna throw you back into the squad but, if you keep this up, when I'm looking for a permanent wingman, you'll be the first to know!"]

["You be crazy!"]

["Kid, you're a natural."]

["Like I say, you is crazy!"]

Jacob pulls up an alert on the tacnet of a CDF fourteen ship formation, with six drop ships, that got past the FCAP and is heading towards them, so he flags it for him and Kagame to ambush and says, ["Didn't you say you were interested in practical astronomy?"]

["Astronavigation, it'll be something useful in this career."]

Pouring on the coal to intercept, Jacob goes, ["Fuck it, I'm offering you the job as my permanent wingman now. You want it?"]

["Like I say again, you is *maga* crazy!"]

["You want the job or not?"]

Kagame thinks about it, and laughs to herself then answers, ["Okay FM, yes, but it be your funeral!"]

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Here in Department Twelve, high up on the top floor of the New Sydney District of the off-world Federated Court Building, we have Vince Stiller sitting by himself at the plaintiff's counsel table, across from the five attorneys representing the defendants.

The Judge, an aboriginal named Joyce Djerrkura-O'Ceallaigh, is scrutinizing the short 'memorandum of points and authorities' in support of the defendant's motion. She nods a bit while reading, then shakes her head and looks up at the Defendant's lead attorney standing at their table, "You want this ruling when, counsel?"

Evelyn Anderson, partner of the firm Anderson Cooper, takes a deep breath and says, "As soon as humanly possible, your honor."

The judge gives Anderson a stern look. She nods, glances back down at the pleading, then looks up to stare at Anderson with her nostrils flaring. Her eyes look over at Stiller, who is sitting there without a care in the world, and when she tracks them back over to Anderson, "Of the many-many cites you have here, the only one that has any real impact is, *Boo vs. Kiel*. You are aware of that?"

Anderson cringes slightly and, "Yes, your honor."

The judge takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes with the palms of her hands, then thumbs behind her saying, "You two, let's take this to my chambers."

Wide eyed, Stiller shrugs, "If you wish, mum!"

Stiller and Anderson follow, what everyone calls Judge Joyce, into her chambers. She pulls her robe off and tosses it in a far off side chair, and as she pulls her own chair out from behind her desk she leans out towards the two of them.

"Counselor Anderson, just so you know, my chambers is both first names only, and *everything* said here is off the record. Can you live with that...Evelyn?"

Anderson nervously says, "Yes...Joyce."

She looks at Stiller who says, "Joyce and I go way back."

Joyce asks Stiller, "How the hell are ya, Vince?"

Stiller shrugs, "Curious why you married that Mick? An' I was hoping to get my foot in the door before you fucked your life up!"

Judge Joyce snorts, holding her laughter back, then manages to say, "And the why is in evidence!"

Stiller looks over at Anderson and points towards his mouth, "The wagging tongue of mischief. Get's me in trouble all the time!"

Judge Joyce rolls her eyes and looks to Anderson, "So, off the record, I have to ask...what the fuck is going on here?" She puts a hand out to silence Anderson as she continues, "I came to New Sydney with orders to make sure I rule in your favor, within the rule of law, but Booboorowie vs Kiel kinda takes the piss out of your case!"

Anderson swallows hard and, "Things changed."

"No shit! Ya know, this isn't your everyday shootin' yourself in the foot! Oh no, this is throwing yourself in the woodchipper, feet first into the woodchipper I might add! Would you like to withdraw the motion? I mean I can throw it out, within the rule of law, it is within my purview because a Summary Judgement on Material Facts at this juncture is kinda premature...within the rule of law."

"I know you were supposed to stretch this case out."

"I could've given you five years on the docket, easy. That's what I was supposed to be doin' here. I even bought a house on the shore of the bay, with a dock, anticipating the long haul. Get me?"

Stiller interjects, "Joyce, if I may, we worked together on this motion. We kinda need the ruling like...now?"

Joyce spells it out, "Okay, in Boo, disputing the validity of the Recorders in New Brisbane, before incorporation, was over land rights however, off-world mining patents will fall into that rainbow of inclusivity on appeal! Validating the transfer of patent rights means your case is over, so before I do this I need to know the why."

Anderson looks to Stiller, "You want a go at this?"

Stiller says, "Joyce, the short of it is, there's a profit sharing option on the table that gives the five houses a massive return, but to do this they need to get out from under a currency "reserve in place" contract with the Bank of New Sydney to make that magic happen. Problem is, if the Co-op loses this fight, which they are close to losing as we speak, then the option is off the table forever. For the Co-op to issue the cease fire and save the day, we need your ruling."

Anderson goes, "Everybody wins if the cease fire is ordered."

Stiller adds, "They need to lose this case to give the order."

Joyce asks, "I'm curious, how much is in play here?"

"Reserves were set to fifty-percent of what they thought was underground, eighty years ago. Today the stated reserve in place is less than one-tenth of a percent of what is actually there, and that's just the gold. Since then they've found a shitload of copper, platinum, rhodium, palladium, silver and a bucket-load of extras!"

Joyce sighs, "You've got your ruling. Give me an hour."

Anderson hands Joyce a document, "Already drafted for you!"

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In the Salt Mine, deep below the infamous Nine Iron Smash, General Giáp stands in the midst of sixty staffers in the now deathly quiet CIC. With the sounds of battle above them, radiating through the rock ceiling, the staff just got word of what is being asked of them.

Colonel Sally Rand goes, "So...we have to make the request."

General Giáp nods, "Aye, first, we have to broadcast it."

A sergeant says, "We got 'em on the ropes, sir!"

Giáp snorts a laugh, "Actually mate, we got Homer down for the count, but if we don't do this the entire population will hate our bloody guts if we thumb our nose at them and break the CDF's back." He looks at his air defense coordinator, "Captain, how soon till Graves hits their drop that got past the FCAP?"

The Captain shrugs, "Ninety seconds?"

"Call it off."

"Sir, Buzzard Chow could get a couple of good belts in for us!"

Giáp sighs while saying, "That would be the *coup de grâce*. We need to wave him off. Wave 'im off now, son."

With the Captain racing back to his workstation, Rand asks the general, "Would you like me to tend to this, Sir?"

"By all means, please do."

Rand pulls a wire mic around, ties into the IFF and transmits live in her thick Rough-Nut lilt, "General Alcock, this is Colonel Rand speaking on the behalf of General, Ngô Văn Giáp, of the House of Perth. We were wondering if you would be up for a lil' cease fire, a ripper of a fine tradeoff for some quiet face to face time? We think everybody 'as 'ad enough of this. Love to hear from you!"

When she cuts the mic, everybody starts snickering, so Rand looks at Giáp and asks, "Was that a smidge too much, Sir?"

Vossler, who was standing on the sidelines of their meeting, shrugs with a huge smile, "Colonel, that was perfect!"

The cease-fire immediately broadcasts on the IFF, and with the sounds of battle quickly winding down to zero, Rand points out, "Well, I be gobsmacked! That didn't take long."

Giáp nods, "They be waiting for it."

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