

61

maus in the house

**LCTN:** 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)  
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Armored units have not faced off since Rikers but in forty-five minutes that's all gonna change.

The big sisters of the Pleiades were pretty much born of a litter, and 18 Tau was included in that mix. 18 Tauri A, known as Nyx, is a young, large and hot star that will not be around for long. Maybe a half a billion years if that? 18 Tauri B, its red dwarf companion which goes by Sriracha Mu, is old, kind of small, not so hot, and will be here for a trillion years at least.

Nyx somehow lost all of its orbital objects shortly after birth but over the millennia it has picked up a motley collection of rogue planets and brown dwarfs, something the Pleiades has in abundance. Only Sriracha Mu resides on the systems proper orbital plane where its planets should be if it had any.

This system has hit the G-Spot for pretty much the entire astrophysics community because nothing here makes sense. Between Nyx and Sriracha Mu, with an SMA that hovers around 60au, are three brown dwarfs and twelve rogue planets that are in fantastically crazy elliptical orbits whose respective perihelions range between 0.8au to as close as 0.0001au and aphelions that go from 1.2au to all of 46au. Then to top that off all of these have been substantially confirmed as captured objects because their orbital inclinations are 48° or greater above or below the axial plane.

What really curled the astronomer's toes was that originally there were four brown dwarfs and sixteen planets but over the years they got to watch three planets get flung out of the system, one careen into Nyx like a bullet, and a young brown dwarf slowly spiral into the hot blue star. That last one took decades and when the end

came it repeatedly bounced off the surface of the star like skipping a stone on a pond. Thusly shredded and frazzled, when the poor thing finally fell in it was at such a low energy state that many of the astronomers who were watching it take the final plunge would swear they heard the sucking 'schlorp' as it slipped under the photosphere.

If the orbital models are correct, and they're checking out as rock solid, they expect a chaotic mess in the future with more flings, more schlorps and at least one, more probable than not, head-on smashup between two gas giants.

That said, Sriracha Mu is far enough away from this craziness that it can watch all the action in relative peace. This dwarf has five planets with the one and only habitable planet, Taiji, tidally locked to this tiny star. Sporting an additional slow rotisserie spin, in line with the poles on the orbital plane, with the hot side always hot and the cool side cool, the people who first settled here long ago gave it the nickname of McDLT—and nobody today understands what that means?

On Taiji, the dead-center hot side desert region hovers at 85° Celsius, but the cold side has an ocean that fills an almost planet-wide impact basin that covers 32% of the planet's surface—the side that always faces away from Sriracha Mu. This ocean loops around an ice cap called The Mesa, and the cap, half the size of Antarctica, climbs to all of twelve kilometers above what would be considered planetary sea level—sea level being at least a kilometer above the rest of the planet's surface if that ice cap ever decides to melt.

Because of its extreme altitude the thin ambient air of the cold side Mesa varies from -80°C when facing away from Nyx and rises dramatically to -15°C with Nyx overhead, so when Taiji's ass end, The Mesa, is swept by Nyx the storms will rage over the Aureole Ocean for half of Taiji's twelve week orbital cycle around Sriracha Mu.

This fitful ocean averages two thousand kilometers between the Mesa and the coast, and on the edge of the impact basin, going inland, are tributaries that spider-web all along this circular shoreline.

The habitable region is a three-thousand kilometer wide band that runs from the ocean just into the red dwarf facing side, where the desert starts, with the narrow 'sleeve pleasant' ribbon called the veggie or lettuce belt that spans from the perpetual horizon into the civil twilight zone. With a never ending planet-wide rolling-convection that loops around with the cool air blowing in from The Mesa and hot air returning high above from the desert—clouds, drizzle and light rain persist in harassing the lettuce belt most of the time, and deluge it some of the time, keeping temperatures at even keel, and if ever there were a visitor from Seattle then they would feel right at home here.

A century ago, during the first war in the Hyades, Taiji was

the furthest locale that the fighting actually touched. Being the only readily habitable planet in the Pleiades it was stocked with transplants from the Hyades and back then all of them had strong ties to their original Cooperatives. The bitter fighting here did not stop at wars end and the savage 'Game of Thrones' backstabbing, jockeying of alliances, assassinations and murder sprees that followed came to an abrupt end when the newly formed SA put their foot down—or else.

The remaining five 'dynastic houses' that morphed out of this ungodly mess evolved into interdependent territorial states who are now represented in the FIS separately. The thing to note is that there are no hard feelings between them, they trade openly and get along swimmingly, and where most members of the FIS have deferred military matters and defense to the SA or PADF, here on Taiji...

Each of The Five Houses are armed to the teeth.

Now, back in 2311, with this war looming over the horizon, The Five Houses and the SA planned ahead by handing over apparent control of defense for Taiji to the PADF, but all this was in name only, and with Security Services now sweeping through the Pleiades the PADF had to make their stock chicken-shit show of it by pulling stumps and evacuating both air and armor assets. With spies everywhere they loaded it all up into transports but, instead of actually leaving the system, the ships dropped back down over the arctic region and the equipment was stuffed into caverns that were carved out deep under the ice cap and far away from prying eyes.

Having swept the Pleiades of an apparently weakened Annex, Security Services was spread too thin and, while waiting to consolidate their gains under the BDF and regroup, the CDF decided all on their own to step in and have a go of it. Five days ago they invaded Taiji, and a planet called Ngāti Whā, and right now Hartcourt is working to put the brakes on the CDF before they screw up his desired outcomes.

Jacob and Peña, having parked their fighters at the cavern entrance, hiked the two kilometers to a double wind-trap consisting of two barriers of plastic curtain strips leading into the massive storage area. All along the ice walls and ceiling are thermal spray-on coatings that absorb all infrared radiation, and with three hundred meters of glacial ice above them only the eyes of God can now peer inside.

Jacob and Peña approach General Giáp, who is pointing at the entrance and shouting at some workers while the last pallets from the Annex are carted in by freight handling bots, "Get those bloody thermal barriers and the man-trap back up! Hop to it ya wankers!" He stops and laughs at Jacob, "Oy, 'ellow, Buzz! 'Ow are ya?"

Jacob shakes his hand and bro-hugs him, "Gawd damn it, Zip! It's been fucken' forever!"

Giáp then shakes Peña's hand, "You're that jar-head, Peña!"

Peña laughs, "General Giáp, I've heard all about you, sir!"

Giáp nods, "Well, if those stories are coming from this bald bloke here, then they're all lies!" He turns to Jacob, "How's that chocolate filly of yours? What's 'er name, Cricket?"

Jacob, with a wide-eyed look, "I walked away from that one."

"You dickwit!" He leans in, "She available dare I ask?"

Jacob shakes his head, "Naw, Cowboy 'as been tappin' that, *and* they just had a baby!"

Giáp is surprised, "I didn't know that poofter 'ad it in him! Well, lucky motherfucker! Wish we had time to catch up, but we are in a bit of a crunch here." He then thumbs at the pallets, "So, what'd the lorries wheel in for me?"

"A gift, from Sandoval and Ramirez..." Jacob starts breaking the wrapping and opening the crates while saying, "You are launching in nine-weeks, on the twenty-fifth right?"

"Rightly'o, sixty-three days to go! Shit starts right after Christmas dinner at eighteen-hundred hours..." He turns to Peña and adds, "Zulu time that is. We're the only planet on zulu proper."

Jacob punches open the cover of one of the crates and asks, "Think your people will be able to hold off being pissed-off until then?"

"Today, when you're gone, my minions will simply go home, throw back a pint or ten, watch football, an' we won't lift a finger. The quarter-mil BR1's you supplied us we got stashed underground in lockers along the lettuce belt, so we don't care if those wankers take our old kit!" He then nods, "I want to thank you for all the Wolverines too! They'll come in right handy."

Jacob reminds him, "Those were for signing on to the PADF."

Giáp shrugs, "Those budgerigars...we have little regard."

"They are what we have to work with."

"Knee-highs in blue, not soldiers."

"They fill a niche."

"Like I said."

"Yea, well..." Jacob snorts a laugh, as he starts to reach into the crate, "How you gonna deal with the Mancubus tanks I wonder?"

Curious as to what's in the crate, the contents out of eyeshot, Giáp leans back, "Yes, we got Maus in the house, I read the sitrep."

"As indestructible as they're reported to be, they are actually way over engineered and easy to knock the fight out of 'em." Jacob has pulled a standard micropede missile from the crate and tosses it to him, "And these little numbers will do the trick!"

"You already gave us eighty-thousand of the little buggers. How do we replace them in the stashes?"

"We've smarted the lil' bastards up. It's a software update. Just get one of these within a hundred meters from a stash and they'll all update automatically. Takes just five minutes."

"Oh, how bloody convenient!"

"Now, for armored targets, these micros are geared to hit on top or tickle the soft underbelly. It'll bean 'em, gut 'em or flip 'em!"

Noticing two SA troopers also in JACCs stepping through the plastic strips, Giáp goes, "We still got to get in close to the Maus."

"No, this has to!" Jacob pulls the top two-meter long crate he opened and sets it on the ground in front of Giáp, "This is our new Hydrapede missile. The Hydra is actually a droid, not a missile at all. We've christen them, The Red Shell."

Giáp is curious, "We don't have the fighters to launch these?"

"It's an AG drive with a Xena AI brain. There is enough here for each of your tank platoons to have one of 'em. Just drop it in the basket in the back and the interface is the same as the PacMan drone. They carry eighteen micropedes. They're refillable and reusable."

Giáp is amazed, "Bloody hell! We'll take 'em!"

"Like the Gurkha Regiment, you can't use the Hydras 'till the third of January." With Anthony Gudici and Zach Nelson stepping up, their suits all scratched up and still smoldering, Jacob points to the micropede missile in Giáp's hand, "But you can use these little bastards before then. You just have to get two-kilometer creative." Jacob pats Gudici on the back, "Deputy Marshal Gudici and Chief Nelson, here, they'll get your people up to speed."

Nodding with satisfaction, Giáp snorts big as he looks towards Gudici and Nelson, "Pleased to meet you two again!" Then to Jacob, "I was hoping to tangle with the Squirrels, but...Homer will do."

Peña speaks up, "General, I think you're gonna get a little more excitement with Homer."

Giáp rears back with surprise, "The hell, you say?"

Jacob points out, "The SS and us, well, we've developed a pretty gawd-damned good working relationship this go 'round. They'd land, we'd trade a few punches then we bug out. They also have been

completely backing off the last twenty or so kilometers from our evac point going, *Oh nooooo! They're getting away!*"

Giáp wonders, "Why in bloody balls would they do that?"

"They finally looked at the numbers! Eighty percent of their casualties were always-consistently incurred when closing on us."

Giáp chuckles when Peña adds, "Our battles are as predictable as a shitty chorus line. Ya know, hurl chunks, two-three-kick! Here, ya got ol' Homer spoilin' for an honest fight."

Jacob adds, "The CDF was supposed to hold off 'till March and go the *other* way, into Orion. Sticking their dick in Security Services' buffet, especially here-now, they're seriously fucking themselves over 'cause they're facing you!" Jacob then points towards Giáp, "When this starts, you'll have ten-days with them controlling the air."

Giáp huffs a laugh, "What air? The storms will be raging!" Then he says to Peña, "Predictable, like a shite chorus line." Then to Gudici and Nelson, "So, me mateys, how's the fight goin'?"

Gudici nods as he brushes soot off of Nelson, "Not bad. It's just that I hate doing the command shuffle in the middle of one. They yank our battalion and toss us a Gurka regiment."

Nelson snorts, "Yea, gnarly little psychos."

Giáp smiles, "Boys, we should get ya cleaned up, pop a suds and let these two shove off 'ow 'bout? I think we're gonna have a bloody good time of it come Jan-three!"

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Flying in a high wind is not a big deal at altitude. If you go with the flow you'll make pretty good time, when going against it your ground speed will leave a lot to be desired, and in a crosswind you'll be flying with a sideways cant into the wind. The bottom line, high winds are not really that of a big deal—until you get near the ground that is. High winds on the deck are not exactly the intrinsically safe bet.

At low altitude these winds are affected by—everything.

Where there are a lot of terrain features the wind can get blustery, with sheers and eddies that can flip your shit in a split of a second, but here on the downward slope of the Mesa ice cap it's a nice and steady hundred-and-five kph. Now, Jacob and Peña's fighters may look like they're sitting peacefully on the escarpment like landing-pad, outside the cavern entrance, but the reality is that the AI is currently flying the ships while on the deck. Taiji's gravity is only 0.7 that of Earth's and their AG drive is actually pushing the ships into the surface

with about two-gravities of extra force to keep them pinned down, and you wouldn't really know this unless you took the time to notice the fins and air surfaces constantly trimming to keep the ships steady.

Though the back side of Taiji is considered the dark side it sees light from Nyx for about six of its twelve week orbital cycle, giving a dark-gray hue to the storm clouds overhead, and in spite of an arctic like albedo of 0.86 on the surface, with most energy reflected back out into space, just enough is absorbed to create these massive storms.

With their canopies sealed Jacob radios Peña while preparing his Thunderbolt to launch, "Ready to go blow shit up?"

Peña radio's back, ["When am I not ready for blowing shit up? I'm trailing here, want me to lift off first?"]

"Yeppers! Whenever you're ready, Dog. Go for it."

["Here...okay, here we go!"]

The AG units on Peña's Cerberus fighter switches directional flow from two-gravities down to two-gravities up, and with that the ship looks like it hops up into the air. The wind catches the wings and fins and after a few seconds of assent—Peña pulls the canards up and the ship does a backflip. As he rolls and drops towards the ocean, now going with the flow of air, Jacob duplicates the maneuver.

What's interesting to note is that most inhabited tidally locked planets happen to be moons that orbit much larger planetary bodies, like Pripyat or Second Hand, and these planets adopt the standard longitude and latitude orientation with poles matching those of their host planet. By contrast, tidally locked planets going around a dwarf star, such as Taiji, at times have this orientation turned 90° sideways with the Northern pole facing the host star. Conveniently placing the equator along the solar terminator, this arrangement is especially helpful if that planet also happens to be rotating on that polar axial. Point being, the vast majority of navigational products only retain the planetary mappings to systems under license. When one shows up to someplace new the nav-computer will automatically apply a snapshot of a planetary body to a basic longitude and latitude template and then reorient and remap when it's convenient. Pony up the fees and the nav-crew can simply plot and match key geodetic monuments to the planetary mapping—that is if they can procure said mapping and zero in on the monuments which requires some cooperation from the locals.

Something that the CDF has yet to do here.

Jacob and Peña drop below the storm clouds and are now flying over the ocean along this arctic latitude, with the Mesa ice cap to their right. Flying sideways to the wind, just under Mach 2, the violent buffeting and jolts kind of smooth out and makes it feel like they are

actually hitting small potholes in the pavement as they tear through the blustery gusts and downdrafts while over the ocean. Because they're using primarily the AG drive, with a minimal thrust for stability, the thick clouds above them effectively blot out any thermal signature to speak of so it's like they're not even there.

Jacob radios, "Holding at LSALT. One minute to waypoint."

["Roger."] Peña responds, and while mentally scratching his head he finally asks, ["Okay, first time here and I'm having a hard time with Taiji orientation so let me get this straight, we're traveling up but in reality we are moving towards the...east?"]

Jacob blurts a laugh, "Yea! North is towards Sriracha Mu."

["And they already know our breakout is to the south?"]

"Yup!"

["And I see on tactical they're building up forces west of the encirclement but they think it's south. That's actually west, right?"]

"You got it."

["Aaaaand they're falling for it?"]

"Yea, buddy. Like you, they've never been here before."

["You always say that for a ruse to work it doesn't need to be elaborate but, fucken' hell, this is some simple stupid shit."]

Jacob huffs a laugh, "I can guarantee that some nav-dweeb tried to tell 'em and command wouldn't listen. Okay, you lead. Bank north and go to best speed, climb and I'll pace myself with you."

Hitting the waypoint they turn due north, which is around the planet towards the desert side, the point closest to Sriracha Mu, and Peña switches off AG and kicks it up to Mach 4.8. The heat from full thrust would be something easy to spot from space but they have zagged so far from the cavern that it doesn't matter now.

As Peña initiates the zoom climb he realizes, ["This is only gonna work once, ya know."]

"It's a trump card I never thought I'd get to see played."

["From the looks of it, even if by some miracle they figured this out they couldn't move their asses and assets in time."]

"You're blocking those forces so, remember, we want to keep their casualties low but you can dish it out if they threaten to push."

At fifty kilometers altitude they crank it up to a blistering Mach 15. Their flight path would now be damned near impossible to ignore from any vantage point—but ignored they are.



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On today's bill-of-fare is an old school breakout.

Wehrmacht master of encirclement, Oskar Munzel, would be shocked to learn that almost nobody today consumes his writings on that very subject. It's only standing armies with dedicated armored divisions, like the United States and the Russian Republic, who sport commanders versed in these tactics. Then there's the oddball Munzel connoisseur like Jacob Graves and his many disciples. Where fighter pilots still shamelessly memorialize Dicta Boelcke as a doctrine of the gods from up on high—it has lost all relevance centuries ago, and where the works of Munzel have been forever viewed as the quaint zeitgeist for waging wars long past—in about twenty or so minutes his obscure teachings are going to be very relevant going forward.

All five Rapid Reaction teams have just descended from space and are depositing armored units around three Co-op divisions that are encircling an understrength SA division on a tree mottled grassland called Wycombe Pastures. In eyeshot of the city of Perth, in the House of Perth, one could not have picked a better tactical cluster-of-a-fuck to put Munzel's theories on breakouts to task. It also helps that the teams brought with them four-hundred Thunderbolts and Cerberus fighters, which makes the hundred and twenty Djinn that have been controlling the skies over Wycombe skedaddle for the now.

The Annex ditches armor when they can and Security Services does so in like. They both view armor as a platform with a support utility and avoid it as the spearhead. The SA troops here on Taiji were not expecting the CDF, which has an affinity for armor, and this planet, with its relatively smooth landscape and a bazillion hidden dips and defilades, is perfect for armored warfare. The CDF showed up with ten divisions loaded to the gills with their tried and true Revenant tanks, but mixed with them is an assortment of their newest monster tank, the Mancubus. Christened the Maus, which kind of looks like a floating Abrams without tracks, this thing was actually designed by a subsidiary of an Annex owned conglomerate—which built the beast with future SA countermeasures and armored units in mind.

The RRF teams dropping around the Co-op positions have the older Wolverines, which is best compared to the turretless S-Tank, except it also has no tracks and floats. The teams would rather have their new Pazuzu tanks, affectionately called the StuG, which can duke it out with a Maus, David and Goliath style, but that's an eventuality that's not going to happen until after January three. The Wolverines are just going to have to play it safe and keep shootin' an' scootin' and stay out of reach of the Maus.

For the now it's really up to infantry and air.

Kacper Cyzk, known as 'Moidah' by his fellow fighter pilots, almost never sees the inside of a Thunderbolt cockpit anymore. Two days ago he was commanding a regiment on the run out at Ngāti Whā when he got orders to extricate himself and assume command of Nicole Burke's division stuck out here on Taiji. The division's Delta-9, Fred Sargent, has been doing a bang up job while Burke has been gone half the time but now is not the most opportune of times for her to be out snipe-hunting for the elusive 'Big Bird of Peace' with Jackson, so Sargent finally pitched a bitch and Cyzk got called up.

Cyzk has been forever under the gun while working for Burke and her executive, Chief Sargent, and even though Sargent has lit into him and verbally flailed his ass raw more times than he could count, to find himself suddenly elevated to Division commander, with Sargent as his exec, for Cyzk is the oddest feeling in the world. Then to hear that the Chief demanded him over everyone else, and no one else, gave off Kacper the creepy crawlies from head to toe.

Cyzk's people were able to keep the sky clear by bustin' skeet on the Co-op micro recon droids, so with the Annex controlling the sky they did not need to clean that up too. Now, with Thunderbolts up high and the Cerberus' hugging the ground, the CDF suddenly realizes that the tables have been turned and they need to keep still and hold their fire or they'll get a bomb or two dropped on top of their heads by the Cerberus fighters. The fastest any of them can move under cloak is 5kph and above that the Thumpers, that is the Cerberus fighters, will spot them. Fact is they can spot them anyway! Quite by accident the Annex AI figured out that while scanning in monochrome if they simply pull focus out—a cloaked object will appear like a molehill from the side, or a dimple from above, and nobody had the heart to clue the CDF in just yet.

Noon, January third, is when all bets are off.

Cyzk gave the evac order a few minutes ago and the troops have been peeling off the perimeter and are at this moment charging in his direction—leaving the bulk of their droids and drones holding the line for now. They've practiced breakouts like this, but here is the first time in combat they'll be doing it for real and the timing is critical.

Cyzk radio's Jacob who is now pulling into an orbit high above the encirclement, "Hey, Buzzard Chow, you ready for this?"

Jacob radio's back, ["Question is, are you ready for this?"]

"As I'll ever be so, be advised, I'm gonna have a stampede tearin' through here in about a minute so that balloon had better burst on time or we'll have a pile up right where I'm standing."

Michelle Kiel calls out to him on this command frequency, ["No worries, Moidah! Twenty seconds and we'll pop that bubble!"]

Noticing the division's exec field company starting to ready themselves around him, Cyzk smiles, "Then let 'er rip, Guns."

Just then, Chief Sargent broadcasts to the entire division with, ["Delta-three-six, here we go! Get ready to pucker your butts."]

For a casual observer it's the sheer violence of a coordinated maneuver, like a Munsel inspired breakout, with today's loadout, that they would find chaotic and frighteningly disturbing. Starting this thing off are forty Warthogs on station over the encirclement, and at the appointed time three groups of ten split off and race towards the northeast, west and south—which to the CDF would be the northwest, south and east. (I know, it's confusing) Each Warthog pickles off over a hundred cluster bombs and in a handful of seconds they shred an eighty meter wide by three kilometer long swath of total destruction through the Co-op lines. Hundreds of Pacman drones pour into the western breach, the expected escape route, so hopefully that'll keep the CDF busy long enough for the division to slither out via the south.

This is one of those really rare occasions where hanging-ten on point is probably the safest place to be. Cyzk, backed up by his company, jets off and leads the division into the southern breach at high speed. Flying through the long gap, close to the ground at over 70kph, they face no resistance. Like dozens of textile rovings spun into a single strand, forty-five hundred troopers, with their dead and wounded intermingled with them, converge on the jumping off point and high-tail it into the breach after them without breaking stride.

Racing through this long gap is surreal to be sure. The CDF units close to them have pulled back because, as expected, the "Thumpers" are now making relentless 23mm cannon attacks parallel to the three runs. As they race through the southern gap Cyzk counted about twenty dead CDF troopers in ACE fighting suits, three destroyed Revenant tanks and one Maus that has been flipped over on its back like a tortoise.

Cyzk and his company exit the gap and instantly drop to the ground to secure an impromptu bridgehead. With that the troopers start to pour through and, spurred on by reaching open ground, they race off towards the evacuation site just twelve kilometers away.

Cyzk radios, "Biggest of Sixes, it looks like the planning and training paid off! I owe you that bottle."

Jacob responds, ["In a few minutes I'll hold you to that."]

Suddenly, the fighting to the west dies off so Cyzk ties into the tacnet and catches his heart with his teeth. The CDF units to the

west have started breaking contact and are initiating a charge towards the south, and while a Centipede-Azul streaks in and blows the ass off a Cerberus overhead that was banking for another attack run along their escape route, Cyzk looks out and notices that his troops, the ones with the Ma-Deuce rail guns in hand, have been getting some target practice in. While passing the flipped Maus they've all been punching eighty-eights into its soft underbelly—and since that crew is not dead they have apparently reported on the abuse.

With a double explosive vortex ripping past, Cyzk looks up and gives a quiet, "Oh shit."

Two IR5s just passed by at high speed and have dumped all their cluster bombs, weapons they use for defense, across the escape route. Cyzk watches as 16 bombs burst apart scattering 640 bomblets over the area with only two of them actually dropping into the run. The bomblets explode, each with the force of a one-thousand kilogram bomb, and the two that went off on the run knocks a handful of troops on their asses—who pick themselves up and keep going.

Over the radio, Jacob snorts, ["Well, that didn't last long."]

Cyzk simply nods, "And everything was going so well."

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With twelve IR5s streaking through the AO, at the last second they passed over the northeast and western runs without dropping on them and only bombed the southern breach—a dead giveaway they now know what was up. On the way in they launched over thirty of their Azul missiles to scatter the Thunderbolt and Cerberus fighters. The Centipede-Azul flies at such a high rate of speed they can't turn on fighters who are at a lower energy and higher maneuverability state. Going low and slow means that the SA pilots can easily get out of the way, but they have to get out of the way, so when a Cerberus got nailed in a lazy left bank that was unexpected.

Twelve seconds after the IR5 pass over the encirclement, six Dips blast through the area and are gaining on them.

Jacob's favorite wingman from back in the day, Kati Connors, was plucked from her "cushy" regimental exec job and pulled into his Mission Oversight group along with Oscar Peña, Michele Kiel and Dante Sergio. Where Peña was given control of CAS (close air support), and Kiel got AAO (air assault operations), she was quietly pissed to the n<sup>th</sup> degree that her best friend, Sergio, got FCAP (force combat air patrol) which is basically the coveted escort air dominance roll.

Connors was the better pilot so she got the Dips.

The Cerberus-Dip is a gorgeous ship, and mind-blowingly fast, but nobody wants to fly the thing—least of all Connors. It has one job and one job only, and that is to chase after the IR5.

If pilots were allowed to maybe also fly reconnaissance then they would be open to driving the Dip but, since their mission is so specialized, nobody will volunteer. In fact, Dip pilots resent the fact that the Grigori recon droids even exist, and they're also bitter that the droids have a slight edge on speed and are a smashing success.

What they really resent is having to play footsies with the IR5. Because the Strategic Planning group believes that if they spank it too hard the Co-op might abandon the IR5 replacement, which is currently approaching flight testing, the Dip pilots must self nerf, drop shots, fake overheating, and pretty much let most of them get away.

Even at this low altitude, in the thinner air of Taiji the IR5s are pushing Mach 7, and even though in seventy-five seconds Connors' Dips will be close enough to take a shot with their Centipede missiles, at this speed they have to be within a one-second lag behind them for the missiles to actually catch up and connect. If one could see her face they would see Connors snarling because if they were allowed to take the shot with eighty-eights, via their five-barrel cannons that is, they could hose them down at the three-second lag mark.

Unfortunately, the Dips are expected to play nice for now.

Jacob, with another eighteen Thunderbolts tagging along, are high above covering the Dips. The IR5 pilots know what they're doing and stick to the high speed run without deviation all to force the Dips behind them to cook their engines...which will be in about a minute or two according to their data on Cerberus performance.

With the three flights of four IR5s splitting up in twos a Dip now trails each pair covered by at least three Thunderbolts, who are ready to dive in at a second's notice, Connors is repeatedly chanting 'January third' like some jaded mantra when she is interrupted by Jacob coming over the radio saying, ["Orc-Kestrel, be the Picator!"]

Connors spits back, "Fuck you, Graves!"

He laughs and, ["I'm sorry, Kati. I'll make it up to you."]

"Make it up to me, my ass!"

["My hands are tied."]

"It's times like this your shit don't fly!"

He laughs, ["My shit never flies, you know that!"]

Just then, Peña cuts in, ["Buzz, we got a problem."]

Jacob sighs, ["Let's hear it, Dog."]

["The Raven and Maus units racing south are not stopping for anything! We're bombing the crap out of the ground in front of them with twenty-threes but the shit we're kicking up is giving 'em cover."]

["How soon till they reach Moidah?"]

["In a little more than two minutes the way they're going."]

["And our armor teams are flanking them when?"]

["They'll hit their flank in about ninety seconds."]

["And our people will vacate the encirclement when?"]

["About the time our Wolverine's t-bone their armor the run will be clear and Moidah will bug out with the last of his people."]

You can hear Jacob sigh, ["That's too close."]

["I would agree. There is no wiggle room here."]

Jacob then asks, ["Orc-Kestrel, how soon till you engage?"]

Connors says, "Sixty seconds! We're reeling 'em in but by then I'll have to pull off according to the cunt-licking chart."

Jacob grunts, ["God-damn it!"]

Connors laughs, "Okay, I'm calling bullshit on Ramirez and Strategic Planning's *ruse de guerre!* Right now is not the time for this motherfuckery and you know it!"

Jacob mumbles on the radio, ["Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckety fuck, fuck-it I'm done!"] He then downshifts with, ["Peña...stomp their shit. When our Wolves are about to hit their flank you rain shit on their parade—and don't let up. Kill everything heading south."]

There is a pause and Peña asks, ["Use the thirty's?"]

["By all means, you are weapons free. Release the thirties!"]

Peña cheers, ["Oh, halle-fucken-luiah! I'm out!"]

Connors wonders, "What about me, boss man?"

Jacob almost laughs, ["Connors, I like you, but it pains me to say that I can only let you cull their heard by half."]

Connors is surprised, "Fucken hell! No shit?"

["No shit! If they WEP past max then let 'em go, but I think it's time to let your people take a bite."]

"Eighty-eights?"

["I insist! It's a go for guns."]

Connors laughs, "You are sooo on my Christmas list!"

[“Happy hunting! Out.”]

Connors switches over to the Dip channel, “People, you’re not going to believe this but...fuck the nerf. You’ve each been given a tag to bag one Kali.” When the gleeful cheers subside, they cheer again when she adds, “You are also authorized to go for guns.”

Connors accesses the tactical overview map and follows with, “Okay, watch for them to drop a blue shell in about twenty seconds. You know what to do. Burn one and let the other WEP out.”

Flying the IR5 and the Dip only a couple of hundred meters off the ground at high Mach, around 7.21 and 7.23 respectively, would be considered an act of insanity by most pilots. Driving these ships like this requires a lot of cooperation and trust between the pilots and their AI who is constantly monitoring systems to prevent the pilot from spiking the ship into the ground or clipping obstacles. Sometimes it’s a tug of war between the two because pilots tend to take risks that the AI doesn’t find agreeable, but in combat it’s all about taking risks.

Now flying over the desert region, Connors drops her ship dangerously close to the deck. She can feel the vortices from the two IR5 in front of her wind around her ship like they’re conspiring to swat hers into the ground. At this speed she’ll need a hundred meter clearance to launch a Centipede and the IR5 pilots are watching for that, and as she approaches the five-second lag point, the distance between the IR5 and her that she could cover in five seconds, both IR5s eject a Centipede-Azul missile backwards.

That’s the beauty of the Thunderbolt missile launchers that the Co-op adopted for the IR5. Even though they have fewer moving parts than a normal trap-door launcher, they are complex, expensive and they can do crazy things like nonchalantly flick a one ton missile back at you. A tube missile launch is exactly like shooting a gun, and the recoil by ‘firing’ a missile backwards gives the IR5s a short lived half-second speed boost. On the tacnet Connors is made aware that all the IR5s did the same thing, and she has complete confidence in her pilots to neutralize the threat.

The idea is to throw a missile into a position to torpedo into you sideways, or chase after you, and to the Dip pilots this is only a speed bump of an annoyance. To the IR5 pilots this has always worked in the past to scatter the Dips, but the Dip pilots today have a new game plan.

On all SA fighters the Micropede defensive missile cartridges are slung on the underside of the ships but for the Dips, flying so low to the ground, this will not do. Since last summer they added fourteen cartridges along the spine of the Dip between the cockpit and the dorsal gun—which is their last ditch defense against missile threats so,

just like all the Dips, Connors pickles off eight Micropede missiles that flip back and split into two groups of four that spiral and wiggle their way for the Azul missiles that have just shot past and are now behind them. As the Azuls light up to attack the Micropedes smash into them.

Connors can focus on the shot at hand. Here the auto-sweep setting is not used because the Dip pilots must actually perform an affirmative-intentional action such as squeezing a trigger, and when hitting the three second lag she cuts loose a half a second burst from a Gatling style gun called the 88 originally from the Thunderbolt. The rounds spray out of the gun like a laser beam and because the Cerberus airframe is so light it imparts a slight bump of deceleration akin to tapping the breaks of a speeding automobile. It takes all of one and a quarter seconds for them to traverse the seven and a half kilometers to target and at this velocity, which boosts the already extreme atmospheric resistance, one would think that these 8.80mm rail gun rounds should sputter out half-way there but these bolts are stretched to 60mm with powerful rocket motors that will burn for a solid count of three seconds giving them 17,400 meters of extra unimpeded travel before the high-g slowing starts in earnest.

In air combat it's still called a "bullet convergence" but, since it's a single gun, it's technically a spread. The Dips AI preprograms the flight path of each eighty-eight as it enters the gun. Point being is that you can get some interesting and downright fancy-ass patterns at the receiving end, but for today the AI has selected a simple letterbox that covers the left engine nacelle and central fuselage.

Here it's the trailing IR5 that gets it.

The eighty-eights are tipped with a high-explosive warhead that either blows up on contact or, when designated as armor piercing, will hit and push through peek resistance/drop-off before detonation. It's all up to the AI to inform the rounds what they will be at the point where the target and their flightpaths intersect. The lethal spray of hyper-velocity bolts slams into the tail of the IR5 and, as if hosed down by a GAU-8 cannon from an ancient A-10, the left engine and central fuselage are shredded into spiraling tatters.

With the critical central trim fin blown away, this doomed IR5 suddenly rears its nose up, and as it starts to climb the WEP injection tank dumps its cryogenics into the undamaged engine—forcing the ship to violently corkscrew out of control. As the leading IR5 shoots away the cockpit detaches from the ship that's now flying apart.

Connors will find out later that this pilot died from the severe g-forces hammering the cockpit as it separated, a very common occurrence nowadays, but upon hearing the news relayed to her by General Giáp's people she will simply shrug with indifference.



As for right now she must let the other one get away so, through pursed lips, Connors quietly says to the IR5 making tracks downrange, “That’s just a taste of things to come, mutherfucker.”

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Weapons development for something like armored systems is all about choices and tradeoffs and the history of said development can be a fascinating one. *Id est*, in the twenty-first century the rail gun technology developed by the United States Navy ended up being an absolute waste of their time but, on the other hand, what they learned was quite useful for kicking things up a magical techno-notch or two in the twenty-second century for, let’s say, tanks since they’re topical!

By the time the twenty-third century came around they solved the quantum-particle power generation and flash capacitor problems, dramatically shrank the size of the guns and the ammunition, pushed the rate of fire back up to a useful six shots per minute or better, increased the accuracy and lethality of hyper-kinetic penetrators by at least three fold—and therein lies the problem! To compensate, armor had to get a lot better and from this started an arms race that dwarfed everything else before it. This was also the genesis of the small arms railgun revolution, but we’ll cover that elsewhere.

The measure for measure dick-fight that followed resulted in two tippy-top of the heap competitors, those being the Wolverine and the Revenant tanks, developed by the Russian Republic and the United States respectively, which are both radically different in design but were actually nuts-on evenly matched. Where the scales tilted in favor of the Annex was with their better cloaking tech and the just recently developed arc-penetrator, a smart sabot-dart who’s programmable on the fly trajectory can drop back down during its flight and easily defeat the Revenant’s extremely sloped armor.

In response, the CDF pushed back with the Mancubus.

In turn, the SA’s response to the Mancubus, or the Maus, was to license the small-fast and thick skinned Ben-Gal tank from IMI and make it their own by up-gunning it, improving on the arc-penetrator to breach the Maus, and if that wasn’t enough they’re also adding a micro-nuke, critical-density bomb plugin that adapts the same device used in their 23mm shells and Micropede missiles. The Co-op has no idea that any of this has happened except that they are expecting to face the SA’s new Pazuzu with a sense of confidence. What’s funny is that Security Services already know about the ‘StuG’ and they really don’t care because they rely on ground troops and airpower to deal with tanks—so when the SS comes up with something to whack the StuG they know the SA will respond accordingly, and so it goes...

Now, back to current events, the Maus is heavy enough that the CDF Revenant tanks, what the SA calls Ravens, have to slow down and not leave the Maus behind, and this gives the SA's RRF teams the time they need for their armored units to consolidate and position their Wolverine tanks for an impromptu flanking maneuver.

In combat the easiest thing to exploit is your opponent's aggression, especially when they smell blood or believe there are easy pickings to be had, and with the Maus and Ravens crashing through the tree lined windbreaks of the Wycombe Pastures, which is now blown to hell, the threat from the Cerberus fighters that are assembling above them has encouraged these units to push even harder. With the Cerberus fighters stacking up above and Warthog gunships orbiting low to suppress anti-air, and with the Wolverines racing in on the deck to hit the CDF's flank, in about fifteen seconds, Peña rolls his ship over to initiate the first attack run.

Peña calls out, "Okay, people, Disney Swish is for the Maus!"

There is a lot of commonality in weapon systems between the Co-op and the Annex, and the 23mm rocket assisted cannon shells, with the micronuke bomb inside, is pretty much their universal weapon extraordinaire. The damned thing was a shrunken knock off of the 30mm "nuklet" developed for the US Marine Corps Bulldog, but the Marines stuck to their standard 'Macer' explosive shells and never used the nuklets in combat. Where the implosion device for the 23mm shell is a nuclear spark-plug that produces an explosive yield compared to that of an old school Mk84 1,000kg bomb (about 2,000 lbs in yield) the 30mm shell has a greater than 2,000kg yield similar to the famed 'Disney Swish' bomb from WWII, so that name kind of stuck.

Peña fires his 23mm single-barreled cannon and nails three Ravens in quick succession, their armored hulls are cracked open by the explosions, and it was when he was about to pull up that a Maus draws his focus. For the first time ever a single 30mm nuklet exits its gun with a comical 'bloop' accompanying it. Its rocket lights up and Peña watches as the bomb loops over and then jackhammers straight down onto the nose of the Maus. The massive explosion punches the tank into the ground, and with mud and debris flying up in a cascading arc the Maus ploughs a deep furrow and comes to rest on what used to be a seventh fairway only five days ago.

The Maus is not dead, but it has been effectively knocked out of service for the now. Its main weapon is a variable geometry gun that is amazingly lethal, surprisingly versatile yet shockingly fragile, and with Peña banking his ship around he notices the shattered gun falling away from the turret.

With the next Cerberus waiting for clearance, the Wolverines

appear on cue and set to work. They leave the Maus tanks alone and focus on the Revenants, and what Peña finds actually bone-chilling to hear is that for every Raven that gets fatally skewered by a Wolverine penetrator, the tanks gunner calls out on the radio, "Nevermore."

*It must be a tanker thing*, thinks Peña, and as the division channel is flooded with that haunting three-syllable call, Peña switches over to the close air support channel, "Let's focus on the Maus, guys. They don't need our help scrapping the Revs. Jericho-One-Seven, on one-eight-zero south."

The next pilot in queue calls out, ["One-Seven standing by."]

"Jericho-One-Seven, you are cleared hot."

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Standing on a small rise, Cyzk has a straight line of sight to the battle raging sixteen kilometers away. The binocular scopes on his helmet masks out the glare of Sriracha Mu, that hangs for perpetuity three degrees high on the horizon, and this gives him a fantastic view of the fighting going on. He can clearly see Peña zipping around the AO directing other ships on their attack runs, and he can easily distinguish the flashes from the tank on tank fire-fight to the Cerberus fighters dropping 30mm nuklet after nuklet on the Maus below.

The strangest thing about the moment is that Cyzk can see the explosions but he can't really hear them. The evacuation point is in an acoustic dead zone which is a strange phenomenon where the sound will vault over an area and drop back down behind it. The residents of the city of Perth, twenty kilometers further to the south, can hear it as clear as day but can't see a thing. Cyzk is watching it but all he can hear is the almost imperceptible rumble of the 30mm bombs and that sound is actually coming up from the ground. From this distance it would take 46 seconds for the sound to get to you through the air but in the dense rock and soil of Taiji it's half that time.

Jacob, Michelle Kiel and Fred Sargent step up beside Cyzk to also watch the spectacle while, behind them, the division elements are scrambling to load up onto Kiel's drop ships as they touch down.

After a short pause, with ships full of troops taking off behind them, Jacob quietly comments, "Oh noooz! They're getting away!"

As the others smile and nod, Sargent speaks up, "Cyzk, you got 'em all out. I made the right call. You did good."

Cyzk just shakes his head slightly and looks at Sargent with, "Eighteen percent casualties...six percent dead." He looks back out towards the fight and, "Fuck doing good."

Sargent adds, "Heads up, these people already love the shit outta you. At this point they will do anything you ask of them."

"I have no idea why?" After a few seconds Cyzk looks to Jacob, "Burke is now listed as MIA, and so is Jackson, what gives?"

Jacob huffs, "Heated words I guess? They didn't make it."

"That was a diplomatic mission, right?"

"You'd think."

Suddenly, the Cerberus fighters flying over the distant AO scatter and with the four of them watching this, and wondering why, the filter in their canopies flash dark as a rapid succession of eight, one kiloton nuclear bombs go off—followed by an alert on the tacnet to them indicating that the attack wiped out all of the Wolverine tanks. They all know the Wolverines are now manned by ghost droids so they don't react as one would if actual lives were snuffed out.

They also knew the CDF would lash out if they got desperate, and when the Wolverines pushed Homer did not disappoint.

As the filters fade, and the mushroom clouds start to silently climb in the distance, Sargent says of the Maus, "Those gawd-damned things are going to be a pain."

Kiel then wonders out loud, "You know, we don't need three plasma nodes on the Warts. Do you think Sandavol would be opposed to swapping out the one on the underside for maybe the Pazuzu gun in a small turret? Think she'd go for it?"

The other three all look at each other with surprise and nod in big agreement as Jacob says, "Write it up. I'll endorse it."

Sargent gets an alert that the ships have evacuated all the troops except one so, as the shockwave from the nukes reverberates up from the ground he says, "Well, I'm on the last slick out and my chariot awaits. It's been fun! We should do this again soon."

Cyzk taps knuckles with Sargent and turns to Jacob with a scowl, "I still have a regiment on Ngāti Whā that belongs to this division and I want to get them out—now."

Jacob nods in agreement, "Funny you should mention that." He turns to Kiel, "Guns, what do we got available for our Deputy Field Marshal, here? We're gonna go get the last of his people."

Kiel smiles, "All taken care of. I got the equivalent of three mixed RRF teams I can scratch up. We'll regroup and drop in, in about an hour and fifteen...hour and twenty at the latest." She looks to Jacob and asks, "Can you get the gummy bears we talked about up and running by then? We'll need the diversion."

As the sound from the eight bombs pushes through the dead zone, more like a muffled burp instead of the huge blasts one would expect, Jacob agrees, "We'll have that done inside a half hour."

Cyzk asks, "What are gummy bears?"

Just then, Sargent stops walking away and calls out to them while pointing up to the sky, "Oh, their Claymore and two rapiers just shot out of the system and jumped. They seemed to be in a hurry."

Jacob wonders, "Which way did they go?"

"From the looks of it they made a beeline to Seventeen-Tau."

Jacob glances at Cyzk and Kiel and says back to Sargent, "Why the fuck would they go there?" Sargent shrugs, and as he walks away towards his drop ship Jacob looks to Cyzk, "Unless we hear from Ramirez, your regiment is priority one."

Cyzk insists, "Can we go now?"

"We go now." As Jacob motions for Cyzk to follow him to his Thunderbolt he says to Kiel, "See you at the party!"

Kiel laughs, "Ever so fashionably late!"

As they trudge down the hill to his fighter, Cyzk again asks, "What the fuck is a gummy bear anyway?"