

62

zombie mod

LCTN: NGĀTI-WHĀ (HIP 17401-4)
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 TIME: 11:05zulu (local 06:32mst)

Nemo resideo is a nice sentiment but it's not at all practical or intelligent if it means incurring further casualties over a comrade who is dead. Nobody, on either side, wants to leave anybody behind, it's just that if your buddy is a live casualty then, by all means, take the risk but if your buddy is dead, and your ass is in a sling, the standing policy is to motor on—and a desperate firefight while on the run just so happens to qualify as your ass-in-a-sling.

In spite of the improper syntax, *live and let leave* is today's in vogue sentiment yet people will say *relinquam vivet*, and even though everyone knows it's a crappy bot translation it stuck.

The underlining paradox in today's combat is that to exploit your own aggression you run the risk of facing their desperation. Offer no quarter and their "on the ropes rebound" may result in some bad mathematical outcomes, and between Taiji and Ngāti Whā the CDF will be crunching some eye-opening numbers before the end of the day.

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Ngāti Whā, pronounced Naughty Fah, is the name of the forth planet orbiting the star of the same name sans the Whā. It's no longer in the Pleiades Cluster, having just slipped outside a demarcation plane that's actually fluid, but most people will always accept it as one of the gang regardless of some meddlesome astronomical technicality.

Originally settled by New Zealanders who were determined to maintain their cultural identity, if you weren't a Kiwi back then you were not welcome to stay. The local naming conventions are mostly Maori and, like the vast majority of languages, Maori words have different meanings pursuant to context and intended use. Whā will

translate as both the number four as well as leaf, and in this instance its dual meaning is acceptable either way.

This ocean planet is far enough from Ngāti that it has a wide temperate zone that loops around the planet and is capped on top and bottom by arctic regions dominated by continent sized ice sheets. It has a large iron moon named Po that's half the size of Kirin, but also half the distance, with an eleven day orbit clawing at the fourteen hour rotation of Ngāti Whā. The planet is spinning so fast that it's not at all spherical, and being geologically active all along the equatorial basin hundreds of islands have pushed up from a buckling ocean floor.

Equally as young as Sapphire, but where Sapphire was sterile when humans showed up, this planet has somehow acquired life at an extremely early stage of development—which kind of vindicates the hotly contested transposition theory surrounding the planet Dedede. Most organisms here are a benign bacterial plant-life that has dumped ridiculous amounts of oxygen into the ocean and atmosphere, but several varieties of protozoa have evolved to eat the plants and compost and utilize that oxygen however, the second humans arrived and exposed this primordial/elementary biome to Earthly microscopic flora and fauna, the evolutionary rocket ship blasted off.

What torques the botanists crank is that the islands happen to be overgrown with lush foliage consisting mostly of grasses and ferns, but here the ferns, an alien botanical class of NW-Polypodiopsida, has gone absolutely haywire in diversity and stature with some growing to the size of trees in the 0.8 gravity of Ngāti Whā.

At face value the consensus is—these islands are gorgeous.

Because of the stable weather and rich soil agriculture is thriving with the top cash crops being tobacco, hemp and grapes, and where the wineries are the huge draw for the tourist dollar, surfing tops everything else. With mammoth lazy curls everywhere this place is a tube-rider's paradise, which works out well for the recreational component of the hemp market, yet the tides also have this weird harmonic where every third orbit of Po around Ngāti Whā brings a tsunami of massive rouge waves that crash into the islands from east to west—which is why all human habitats here are either on cliffs or high ground at least sixty meters above sea-level, or many kilometers away from the coast and that distance all depends on the terrain and the tidal flows.

The big island, Te Aka Kāi, is the principal agricultural center and is the size of Papua-New Guinea. The Co-op dropped six divisions of troops, split by regimentals and battalions landing on key islands, with half a division ending up here. The Annex had a mixed bag of four regiments from different battle groups but, instead of getting into

a fight, they were ordered to pull out so Cyzk volunteered his regiment to run interference while the others evacuated. When it was time for Regiment 3603 to boogie things went totally ass up for them when the CDF took exception to them leaving.

Two days ago, when Cyzk got called out to Taiji, his regiment was holding its own but they had to constantly move or get cornered. When he left there were fifty-three dead and they had to leave them all behind in the hemp fields and fern forests or die alongside them. Since he's been gone the Co-op has dropped another division and perfectly deployed its elements in strategic locations to lay ambushes and tighten the nose, but Regiment 3603, known as *Mook Maddness*, kept frustrating the CDF by slipping through their fingers.

They'd rather take the dead along with them but, considering the *Trophies Moratorium Agreement* between the SA and the Co-op, when bodies are left behind the losing side can come collect them 24 hours after a battle concludes. In spite of both the BDF and SS having agreed to honor this the CDF has quietly thumbed their nose at it, and even though 3603 has no choice but to leave their fallen behind or join them, they booby-trapped the dead's fighting suits just for giggles.

Mia Koenig, the exec for 3603 under Cyzk, has secured a drop zone in a grape vineyard five clicks behind the fighting. She and her control squad have just finished distributing the last of the ammo to the regiment. The SA drops it on pallets with each one holding dozens of man-sized bricks that, when burst, will rehydrate an entire platoon with ready to use, plug-and-play universal magazines loaded with the new 5.77mm and 4.16mm rail gun bolts, as well as 23mm grenade tubes and micropedes. As an afterthought the 8.80mm bolts for the Ma Deuce are distributed separately because they don't fit in the current brick layout. They are stacked and wrapped on top so you just have to remember to grab some of those too.

Koenig is standing by a row of their dead, still encased in their JACC fighting suits. Most of the troopers were parked here amongst the grapevines three days ago, that is before 3603 got pushed out, but yesterday they broke through the ragged CDF line and are now fighting the other way—covering the same ground back towards the fern forest and hemp fields along the east coast where this fight first started.

Kristi Venkatesh, the recently promoted commander of 3603, with her command squad in tow, drops down and lands by the row of bodies, and while they append the row with three more dead they pulled out of the fighting, she looks towards Koenig and informs her that, "Babe, they are now three clicks out."

Koenig grunts, "Fuck!" Then points at the last brick on the pallet, "I saved one for you guys."

As her squad breaks down the brick of ammo, Venkatesh grabs the lone pouch of eighty-eights, "How 'bout a hot meal, hu? Think for once they'd be able to drop one of those?"

Koenig rolls her eyes, "Or some sleep. maybe?"

Venkatesh is punchy, "A hot and a cot, yea buddy!"

Koenig thumbs back at the fern trees behind them, "What I wouldn't give for a glass of fresh water and some eye-lid time under those ferns. The jolt switch is losing its edge."

Venkatesh agrees, "The simple things."

Just then, the command frequency cracks with Cyzk's voice asking, ["Where's Amelung?"]

Venkatesh realizes her old Regimental commander is here and looks up into the sky, "Kacper, is that you?"

["I'm with Buzzard in the jump seat, where is Mike?"]

"While flanking yesterday he got hit by a wonton, and instead of letting us carry him, when I wasn't looking he ate my eighty-eight."

["God, mutherfucking damn it!"]

Noticing a spot of his blood on her rail gun, she scrapes it off while apologizing, "Sorry. I should have known better."

["No, I would have done what he did. How many dead?"]

Venkatesh huffs big, "Right now, four-hundred and twelve." The tacnet updates and her shoulders drop, "Make that four-fifteen."

["Okay, give me a sec."]

After a few seconds of silence Venkatesh and Koenig look at each other, with Koenig transmitting, "Hey, Moidah, what's the plan?"

["Stand by..."] Another few seconds pass then, ["Pull your people back eight clicks to the Kore Forest and make your way to the south end. It's the most defensible position on the island."]

Koenig offers, "Ah, the sea would be to our back?"

Venkatesh protests, "There's no way out of there!"

["Just do it! I'm firing up the gummy bear utility."]

Koenig asks, "Dude, what the fuck is a gummy bear?"

["You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Guns has three react teams dropping in about forty minutes, so you gotta move now!"]

Venkatesh nods big, "Okay...okay, we're on the move!"

Koenig asks her off channel, "Gummy bears?"

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Jacob and Cyzk exit their jump and have dropped under the Co-op spiders before they could react, and now breaking one hundred kilometers in altitude, Cyzk is in the back jump seat asking, "Venk, do you need another pallet drop of ammo?"

["Naw, we are doubled up on ammo, but if you want to kick one out loaded with hot brats and cold brew we would be thrilled!"]

Cyzk can see on the tacnet that the order to fall back to the forest has already been sent, and as a thousand troops extricate themselves and pull out the thing that he finds amazing is how his people can keep a sense of humor, "On my tab when this is over."

Venkatesh then says, ["I'm holding you to that. Out."]

Jacob informs Cyzk, "We'll have their spiders cleared out by our own spiders in about fifteen minutes, long before Guns drops in. Do you have the Regimental interface up yet?"

Cyzk says, "Linking up now." The Regimental window comes up in his view and he mentally clicks on the *Casualties* tab, "Okay, I got the *Casualty* window open and I already hit *Activate Orders*."

Jacob asks, "See the options field? Scroll down and select *Ghost Mode interface*, then check off the *ALL KIA* option."

"Okay, done. The count is four-fifteen."

"On the *Rendezvous Point* field you paste the orders as text and go down and check *Begin Emergency Recovery* then hit *Launch*."

Cyzk copies the text and pastes it into the field:

```
ALERT*ALERT*ALERT
23181023:10:30:56ZULU FOLLOWS AS:
BPXMSN: 36FM, SANDOVAL, SANDRA
REPORT: 3603 ON NGATI WHA NEAR CI STATE WITH
        RISING CASUALTY COUNT.
ORDERS: 36DFM-LAUNCH GMI-BER UTIL FOR RELIEF
        PENDING 3603 EXTRACT.
ORDERS: GMI BER-MAYHEM*MAYHEM*MAYHEM.
ORDERS: RRF ALL-EVAC 3603 POST TAIJI OP.
BPNOTE: GET THEM OUT...
END OF MESSAGE
```

Cyzk does this and as he hovers over the launch button he hesitates, "I can't believe we're doing this."

"Just do it."

With the orders broadcasting out over the tacnet to the local area of operation, Cyzk asks, "This ever been done before?"

"Forty-four Tau. We launched two squads of these things as kind of a test and the results were spectacular."

"So, that's what happened there, Jesus!" He then wonders, "But, why didn't Security Services protest us doing that?"

"They were impressed!" Jacob laughs, "They shut the fuck up because they adopted the protocol for themselves. It's a situational, niche option so, honestly, we know when to expect it."

"And the CDF is clueless."

"You got it!"

After a few seconds of silence, Cyzk reflects, "Back when I became a Battalion commander, Burke said she was going to beat the 'company man' out of me. We locked horns all the time but, to be fair, she did beat it the fuck out of me. How do you cope?"

"With the feels?" Jacob levels out the dive while evaluating their air power consisting of thirty Djinn orbiting the battle but steering clear because the hand held Ma Deuce with the 8.80mm bolts, with all of fifteen kilometers in reach, scare them just a tad, "Kacper, you have to put that shit out of your mind 'cause you have a job to do."

Cyzk nods while viewing the same display, then looks outside, "Maybe you should've picked someone who doesn't give a shit?"

"You don't get it, it's because you give a shit you were picked for upward mobility." He then looks outside along with Cyzk, "Truth be told, I feel for everyone who dies on my watch and dies by my hand. You know they're not numbers, but you carry on because it's the job."

Cyzk realizes, "The higher you go the worse it gets."

Jacob nods, "Ain't that the truth."

00110001-01010101-01010000

Venkatesh and Koenig, with their two squads, are holding the position while the last elements of the regiment rips past them and race for the forest eight kilometers back. Venkatesh and five others have a Ma Deuce rail gun up and ready, scanning the sky looking for any sign of a drone, droid or a sneaky Djinn in the distance. They have five Ghost Droids and thirty PacMan drones left and those are staged behind them, so when the last of their people pass, and they follow, these units will bring up the rear as anchor.

They know the CDF will not instantly race after them because

that is *verboden* according to their doctrine. They will, however, eat up the clock by methodically parsing the area of operation square kilometer by square kilometer and leave nothing to chance—which is the problem with the CDF today. They're green and don't know when it's the right time to roll the dice or not.

With the last platoon a kilometer out and coming at them at high speed, in a ragged string, Koenig hears some rustling and movement to their right. Venkatesh heard it too but with Koenig's squad raising their weapons to take on whatever this is, Venkatesh now pulls her Ma Deuce around.

Koenig spreads both her chain guns out wide and spins up her scorpion gun while saying, "Ready up! Let's do this!"

Suddenly they hear a male-Mexican voice go, "*No maches!* Venk! Mia! How the hell are ya! It's been forever!"

Venkatesh and Koenig look at each other and mouth the word 'Griego' and looking back out Venkatesh says, "Angel, is that you?"

All the dead are face down so that their boom mounted guns can fend off Co-op troops messing with them, and from that a hand raises up while he says, "*Orale! Mi lil' mortenaa* Venk gets the cigar!"

Suddenly a tacnet data frame is superimposed over each of the dead starting off with the header, GMi BER UTILITY, and below that is the name of a ghost that is now operating the suit, and as Griego pushes himself up and stands all their weapons now point at him so Griego puts his hands out, "Hey, chill pill me girls!"

In the canopy of the suit is the head of a female trooper that was detached from a bombing attack and is rolling around in the helmet with spots of blood and gore so, shaking the helmet, Griego laughs, "Aaah shit! This is not right, I know this *chica caliente!*"

With the final platoon flying past, Venkatesh puts her finger up and says, "Give me a minute." She then opens the command channel and asks, "Cyzk, what the fuck is going on here?"

On the radio, Cyzk urges, ["Get the fuck out of there!"]

As more of the bodies stand, Venkatesh shakes her head and transmits, "Are you serious! We need a diversion but this?"

Angela Simmons, in a JACC containing the remains of Mike Amelung, steps up to her and says, "Ain't no law against it, sugar."

Venkatesh looks at the JACC with Simmons piloting it and wonders out loud, "Angie?"

Simmons points at the dead face of her old buddy, Mike, and asks, "What happened to Mike? He cap himself?"

Over the channel Jacob steps in and says, ["Venk, you need a diversion so you're getting a diversion! Simmons, you got this?"]

Simmons nods, "Just like Forty-Four Tau. We got this!"

Jacob orders, ["Fuck 'em up and don't let up."]

"Scare the shit outta them?"

["Put the fear of god in them. Out."]

Simmons turns to the others and says, "You heard right!"

As the dead whoop and holler, Simmons points to Venkatesh's rail gun in hand and asks, "Can we have a couple of those?"

Venkatesh hands her Ma Deuce and ammo over, "Sure."

Koenig orders the command and control squads, "Give 'em a full loadout. They have priority."

As the squads hand over bandoleers of ammo, bombs, rockets and three more of the M2 guns, Angela says quietly to Venkatesh, "You know you and Mia are not supposed to be within one-hundred meters of each other."

Venkatesh snarls, "For once we don't give a shit."

Simmons nods, "I can understand." She then speaks up to all the living troops, "Thank you, everybody, but you should go now."

"You want the droids?"

"You need them, but we'll take a half of those PacMan if you can spare those?" With twenty of the PacMan drones taking guard positions around her newly respawned-dead troops, Angela says to Venkatesh and Koenig with a nod, "Yup, Kristi, Mia, gummy bears. What we got here is a genuine, honest to god, zombie mod!"

Maggie Prather steps up and, while flexing her arms and legs with loud-eerie pops emanating from the suit, she says, "Rigor set in." She then thumbs back to the crew and says, "We're ready, boss."

Simmons again looks to Venkatesh and Koenig, "This is such a beautiful island. Too bad we're gonna trash it."

As Simmons and the dead troops move out towards the Co-op positions it is obvious that Simmons is on the tacnet organizing and splitting them into teams based upon their available weapons.

Looking at the tactical display of the island, Koenig nudges Venkatesh and informs her that, "Hey, Kris, our KIA from all over the island are ambulatory and are now moving on Homer."

"Well, mind-fuck me runnin'..." Venkatesh shaking her head slowly, then nods behind them with, "Let's jet."

0011000-0011000-0011000-0011000-00101101-00110001-00110001

CDF Colonel, MacKenzie Corbyn, is standing up through the commander's cupola of her Revenant tank. The interior is so tight they can't wear the ACE suits like they could in the Mancubus tanks. Without the ACE they are guaranteed to end up as a crispy critter if one of those newfangled arc-penetrators hit and sprays the inside with superheated molten uranium. Hell, they're just as toasty dead if a regular uranium sabot penetrator punches through the Raven's armor.

One does stand a 75% chance of survival if a 23mm shell, grenade, cluster bomb or a micropede hits. Those weapons will, more likely than not, crack the armor and damage the loader, but at least there is nothing inside that will burn or blow up as a result. If one hits on the side it will knock the Revenant out, and landing on top may kill a crewmember, but blowing up underneath will kill everybody.

Which is why these things tend to hug the ground.

Originally, they used to have a crew of three but, like the SA Wolverines, it's only a functional crew of one or two depending on the mission. They leave the commander's station open for moments like this when their Big-6, *id est* Corbyn, is in the field.

Corbyn hates being in the damned thing and would rather be in an ACE fighting suit and humping it alongside the tank over sitting in this infernal machine dressed in simple field BDUs. The Revenant's are a micro-magnet and, without tanks, *Mook Maddness* has managed to wipe out eighteen of her thirty available Revenants while on the run. This is why she said 'to hell with doctrine' and pulled them back and let the infantry do their job because when on the line, no matter how much cover they had or defilades they raced from and too, the bombs always ended up finding them.

The regiment's Sergeant-Major has stepped up and Corbyn asks, "Sergeant-Major, it appears our quarry has made tracks, yes?"

He nods with a half a frown, "Yes mum, and I'd rather be hard on their tails than wasting our time beating brush like this."

"We understand, Sergeant-Major, and I have to agree! Yet, we lost contact and if we push on carelessly, and things go south, we'd be standing tall for it. I full well know this is not the time for being methodical, but I can only defy doctrine to a point." She smiles, "Make contact and we will, as the Yanks say, tear-ass after them."

"Five by five, mum!"

She reflects as she looks out, "I have to say I have no cause to break knuckles with these people, but here we are."

He looks up with, "We did train for the jungles of Saiph."

She nods, "And yet, here we are! So, off we go tally-ho at a bumbles gait. Again, sorry for being troublesome, Sergeant-Major." Her nose twitches and she asks, "By the way, do you smell that?"

He pops his canopy and takes a whiff, "Yup, dead Spooky."

"Did we miss tagging some bodies I reckon?"

"We just had a scuffle, mum."

"True, however they wouldn't be quite-ripe just yet." Corbyn then orders, "I want them found and flagged before we move forward to make more of them, and urge our people keep a respectful distance. We are adhering to the TMA even though command rejects it."

"Especially since they booby-trapped the bodies."

She smiles, "And therein lies our incentive."

As Corbyn pulls up a set of binoculars and starts to survey ahead the Sergeant-Major says, "Mum, we are downwind from the sent so I would consider scouting behind us first."

She nods in agreement, "I didn't see any coming this way but that would be a stellar idea. Let us be thorough then."

With shots in the far distance a dozen reports come up in the Co-op neuronet, so the Sergeant-Major says, "Colonel, we're getting alerts of contact on the periphery...as well as behind us even?"

Corbyn nods, "Well, if they decided to scatter and go guerrilla on us then that changes things doesn't it. Let's hold and secure our positions. Order the recall of all armor units and have my ACE suit and gear brought up." And then with a telltale smirk of glee, "This may have turned into a dirty fight!"

She pulls a squad level rail gun out of the tank and hops down, and when she cycles the weapon into battery in the distance they hear someone say an almost barely audible, "brains."

They look at each other and when they hear it again, Corbyn says with a nod as he slaps his canopy on, "Sappers, they're close!"

When she turns to move she takes two steps and bounces off the cloaked Griego who snatches the rail gun from her, and as she flies back and tumbles onto the ground he laughs, "*Estas bien buena güera*, baby! Where you goin'?"

The Sergeant-Major is gunned down. Bolts rip through his legs and as he spins around his boom mounted plasma cannon swings out to fire. Maggie grabs it from behind and rips it from his suit.

Dropping to the ground the Sergeant-Major shouts, "Shit!"

Maggie mockingly swats him over the helmet and canopy with it and scolds him, "You gotta be careful! You could hurt someone!"

Corbyn grunts, "Bloody hell!"

Firing erupts around them and in a few seconds all the CDF troops in close proximity have been traumatically wounded, and while they shout and moan more GMI BER troops appear around the tank.

Maggie pulls Corbyn's side arm from its holster and says, "Thank you, hot stuff!" She hops up and hammers on top of the Revenant while shouting, "Hey, gunner boy! Open up!"

Griego, standing over Corbyn, knocks the top of it as well, "Hey, homie! Now is not the time to catch the stupids! You best listen to her or ol' Maggie will frag your ass!"

The hatch opens and the soldier slowly stands so Maggie, in her suit with the dead face in the canopy, with ooze running out of it, laughs, "Ain't he a cutie pie!" She leans in and, "You know somethin' stud muffin, I'm gonna hate to do this to ya."

Without warning she shoots the young soldier five times in his crotch, groin and legs followed by, "Make sure you tell 'em how big it was and lie your ass off! All ya'll lie anyway!"

With the young man dropping back into the tank, crying out and cussing, Maggie admires the pistol while asking Corbyn, "This the ten millimeter Breezeblock, yea?"

Corbyn nods, "Yes, love, it is. You can keep it!"

"Naw, that's okay." Maggie flips it around, catches it by the muzzle and tosses it back to her, "Appreciate you letting me use it!"

"Anytime!"

With the shooting around them now far away, the suit with Mike Amelung's shattered face steps around the Revenant tank with Simmons' voice emitting from it, and quietly singing, "In this town we call home, everyone hails to the pumpkin song!"

As Simmons approaches going 'La la la la-la' Corbyn looks at her and with wide-eyed surprise, "Simmons? Angie, is that you?"

Simmons touches her chest and laughs, "Ding-ding-ding-ding! You got that on the first try! How's Porter?"

"I talk to him by and by. He's actually doing well in—"

Simmons finishes with, "Security Services, I know. I've been keeping tabs on him. He's done quiet well and climbed that ladder. You should have followed him there but you chose the command path, and now that you're a Colonel how's that working for you?"

Corbyn shrugs, "Until a minute or so ago quite well thank you! Oh, and how is your daughter?"

"Word is, I hear, she's can be a bit of a handful." Simmons nods introspectively as best you can in a fighting suit with a corpse inside it, "I wish we had time to chat but we've got work to do."

Corbyn blinks, "Oh, well, it's best we get this over with then."

"Oh no-no-no-no-no you misunderstand! Colonel, MacKenzie Corbyn, you are in luck because the word for the day is...mayhem!"

"Come again?"

In Simmon's left hand she has the M2 gun, but along her right forearm is a five barreled penta gun that spools and fires—chopping both of the Colonel's legs off above the knee.

Corbyn shouts, "Bollocks, woman! Bloody fucken' bollocks!"

"That's the spirit!" Simmons crouches down and, "Insist on the Glazewell splint, the transparent one, and before you grow the skin make sure you're doing range of motion religiously, twice daily."

Corbyn hisses, "Thanks for the advice, love!"

"Trust me, I've been there too many times. If you unbag 'em without doing that you'll hate yourself for being a lazy fucktard."

"Range of motion, yes!"

"Good girl!"

01000100-0110010-0110001-01110101-01100111-0110010

Real world cloaking technology is not at all what it's cracked up to be in movies and gaming. Like everything it's a mixed bag of tradeoffs between one useful thing for another. Take communications and real time data links for a comparison. In urban environments it's now a breeze to mask with encryption and scattering throughout the very busy civil microwave and radio bands. Your intel-AI will be pulling its virtual hair out trying to differentiate civil from military data packets and as for decryption, well, you can forget about it. Then in a rural setting one can bouncy ball across the spectrums in nanosecond timed pulses that makes it absolutely impossible to triangulate.

You know someone is there but you don't have a clue where?

Now, the very-very thin slice of the EM scale known as the visual spectrum is easy to disappear in but it puts severe limitations on you as it relates to movement because you got to go at it slow to stay out of sight. In counterpoint, a way to defeat it has been blundered into so in a few weeks the current generation of holo-cloak tech will be

rendered useless yet again until another photomechanic is developed. As for the skin of ships and fighting suits one can, like an octopus, change colors and patterns without any telltale emissions, which is really-really handy, but to this day the two things that hamstring the soldier and stumps the technologists are infrared and sonar.

With infrared you are always struggling with a constant heat output. At rest the average human body puts out 350kJ per hour, and if you add strenuous activity to that, like maybe combat, the output will skyrocket. The JACC and ACE suits deal with this problem by heatsinking it and performing periodic 'pulling the finger' heat dumps, or by ratcheting up the IR photons and releasing them throughout the broad EM spectrum. Both have good and bad points and neither are 100% in the best of conditions, but the one thing that holds true to this day about infrared and heat—you have to offload it.

Sonar, sound and echolocation, is a tough one to overcome at close range. It's that going at it slow thing again. Locomotion is the obvious problem but, even inside a JACC or an ACE suit, given ideal ambient conditions like here on Te Aka Kāi, a heartbeat can be sensed as far away as ninety meters and zeroed in on at thirty.

And, like the ghost droids, here is where the GMi BERs shine.

Butter Hewlett, one time SA-PFC who died at Riker's Island, hops out from behind a fern tree and shouts, "Ooooooga booga booga!"

Half the squad of startled CDF troopers scatter, half drop to the ground, and one opens up on her. The 4.54mm miniballs rip across her midsection as she thrashes about, all the while laughing.

When he stops firing Hewlett looks up, and with fluid and gore oozing out of the holes he made in her she goes, "Hey, that tickles!"

The trooper is astonished, "Bloody hell!"

"Here's back at'cha!" From behind her JACC a boom mounted flail gun swings around to fire and, with a sharp electrical screeching bump, a plasma pulse flashes and lights the place up.

For a hundred meters out flames roll up into the sky with the ferns and grasses now swirling ashes. The shooter, in an ACE suit, dove for the ground in her direction and did not get hit but the others didn't make out so well. Five of the squad that first dove for cover, and were in standard field kit, instantly burst into powdery embers and charred bones. The one in an ACE suit that was facing her, his head exploded in the canopy, but the three in suits facing away fared better with only the hair on their heads singed and smoldering.

Mahko Ozo steps out and laughingly scolds her, "Butter, baby, that's a little excessive! Let's not do that."

If a dead person in a fighting suit could physically cringe then Hewlett did just that with, "Sorry, Mahko! My bad."

Ozo squats down in front of the shooter, "We're supposed to put the hurt on `em, not kill `em!" He prods the shooter, "Hey, Homer, where do ya want it?"

The trooper says, "You didn't pop on the bloody sensors!"

"Yea, ain't that a kick!" Ozo shoots his arm and leg off with his chain gun, and stands, "Better than dyin', homie."

Hewlett is standing over the three who have pulled off their canopies from their ACE suits to put out their hair. They look up and what flips their lids is, not only the dead faces in the fighting suits, marbled and blotched with lividity, or the smell, but that they also hear in the distance several GMi BERs crying out "brains" followed by crazy and maniacal laughter. As railgun shots ring out from that direction, Ozo steps up to Hewlett and looks down at the CDF troopers.

"*Un putero mericone.*" Ozo nods and gestures towards them, "*Órale!* Butter, what are you waitin' for?"

"Miso sowwy!" Hewlett snarks and, with lightning precision, she shoots out all of their knees.

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At the south end of the Kore forest, with the sea to their backs, Venkatesh and Koenig are both sitting in the shade enjoying a CWR-RAT packet of spaghetti and meat sauce. They've been here for about a half an hour, and ten minutes ago two pallets of these things were dropped out of the ass end of a warthog as it ripped past overhead at low altitude—which is a fascinating thing to watch.

After a chute extracts the pallet a huge balloon-loop assembly inflates around it and, instead of bouncing, the balloons squash out and partially rupture, allowing the pallet to stick it without breaking apart on impact. Many times the pallets will end up laying sideways but that doesn't matter because their people will always burst the wrapping and grab the materials where they land.

The interesting thing to note is that the troopers of the Annex vocally resent having to eat these rations to help cycle the stock but, after today, of the 998 surviving members of 3603 none of them will ever bitch about eating them again.

Over the command channel, Cyzk radios, ["Sorry about the poor selection, but it was the best I could do on short notice."]

Koenig laughs, "They're all spaghetti!"

[“Like I said, Mia, I’m sorry ‘bout that.”]

Venkatesh snorts as she takes a bite, “Kacper, after five days of sucking on nutra-gel, this is a God-damned feast.” She smacks her lips and, “I used to hate this packet but now it’s my favorite.”

Koenig nods big, “That’s two of us.”

As a Jorge Montaña steps around the pallet of RATs and past the other troops, approaching Venkatesh directly, she asks Cyzk on channel, “So, when is this brass-tastic ass supposed to show?”

Cyzk says, [“He’s almost there. Three minutes maybe?”]

“You guys told ‘im to get bent or talk to me directly, right?”

Jacob comes on line, [“Venk, after what you all went through? This is your deal. Whatever you decide to do we’re all in and I’m not blowin’ smoke. Channel your inner Ramirez ‘cause we got your back. Cyzk and I are gonna watch on Koenig’s feed.”]

And as she pops another packet of spaghetti, “Righty’o! Out.”

Montaña is standing there holding out to Venkatesh his packet with a look—wordlessly asking her to pop it for him. She looks at his missing right arm then pulls the spork from her mouth, jabs it in the one she just opened and exchanges it for the one in his hand.

Mouthing the words, *thank you*, he sits on the rock next to her and asks, “Venk, you’re from here, what was that war cry shit they did for you before Homer dropped on Friday?”

Venkatesh points to the bindi mark on forehead and laughs, “I’m a push start. My husband is Maori, not me.”

Montaña slurps a bite of spaghetti and, “Yea, so, what was that crazy shit about? Been meaning to ask but now’s good!”

“Crazy shit is what I thought it was when I first came here but, when you get to know these people and what it’s about...it’s the most beautiful thing in the God-damned universe.”

He sucks in a strand of pasta then, “Yea, they be screaming maniacs, wagging their tongues out like *loco mofo!*”

Koenig says to him, “It’s a Haka, you dumb fuck.” Then to her she adds, “Beautiful, *U-e?*”

Venkatesh nods, “*Aue hī*, yes indeed.” She then looks at him and chuckles, “And, for being such a dumb ass you get First Battalion.”

His shoulders drop and he protests, “Awe, shit, come on! Let me keep my company!”

“It’s where I need ya, Jorge. So, fuck the buck up!”

With another mouthful he laughs, "Venk, I hate you."

Koenig huffs, "The love in the air, it's palpable."

He looks at her, "Hey, blonde lab-rat, eat shit."

Koenig smiles while holding up her CWR-RATS packet and, "I'm way ahead of ya."

He shakes his head and looks at Venkatesh while he gestures towards Koenig, "So I have to go through Knockout to get to you!"

Venkatesh smiles, "Yea, pretty much."

Montaña laughs, "I'm in trouble deep now."

Koenig snorts, "I'd say balls deep, my friend!"

Venkatesh notices three Co-op officers a hundred meters out being escorted by one of her people and heading their way, so she links up to Koenig and Montaña through the tacnet, <"So, lookie here, we get their Lieutenant General. We get their big gun.">

Koenig scowls, <"Looks like his tail is between his legs.">

Montaña agrees, <"Venk, if so I get this weird vibe we got 'em spooked, so if you choose to go back out and finish this fight then you can count me in. Right, KO?">

Koenig smiles, <"My grandpa always said to never start a fight, but you damned well had better finish it. I'm in.">

<"We got itchy trigger fingers, Venk.">

Venkatesh nods, <"Well, I may have to play that card.">

<"Just say the word and once more into the breach we go.">

Koenig agrees, <"Preach it, brother!"> She then looks at the Co-op general stepping up with a Colonel and Sergeant-Major hanging back by two steps, so she says with daggers in her eyes, "Hey, LG."

The SA escort's gesture is vague, not pointing to any one of the three so he looks to them and, "I'm Lieutenant-General Alcock. I'm here to make the acquaintance of your commander, Venkatesh."

Having just taken a bite of from her packet, she looks both ways to Koenig and Montaña, then nods her head and raises a finger, "That'd be me, LG."

Looking at her with a slight surprise in his eyes, a runway model beauty and just a tad frazzled after five days of fighting, so he nods, "Right, since you are the equivalent to a Brigadier we thought it would be fitting for us to chat directly."

Venkatesh huffs and leans towards Koenig, "I'm a Brigadier,

I'm a Brigadier! That makes you a Colonel."

Koenig chuckles, "I'm a Colonel! I'm a Colonel!"

Montaña, Marines up with a comical salute, "What does that make me, Brigadier General, Venk, Sir?"

Venkatesh gruffs, "The jury is out on your ass."

As Montaña nods big, Alcock realizes that these three are actually taking this way more seriously than they are letting on, "Right. To the heart of the matter, these things you let off the leash out there, we consider them a little unsportsman like."

"Unsportsman like? Unsportsman like!" Venkatesh, with a shake of her head, points towards Montaña and says, "Our Lieutenant Colonel equivalent, newly promoted Chief Deputy Marshal, Montaña, would have an interesting perspective on that. Share with us, please!"

Montaña licks his spork and, "See, LG, in an urban setting grenades are like a pillow fight so there we'd have you by the balls, but out here the ROEs are different. You had nine-to-one on us and a bunch of them noob-tubers be spamin' nades at two-hundred, five and a thousand KGE like crazy. See, LG, your green-ies tend to shoot and keep shootin' an that's a little spastic, sure, but your people saw my arm get blown off and that means I...am...down but, instead of following the ROEs, they followed it with a five wonton chaser."

Alcock nods, "Sorry 'bout that my good man."

"Let me illustrate, LG, boom...boom-boom...boom...boom! My face, ears, eyes, nose didn't stop bleeding till five hours ago so, my good man, next time how about, instead of squading up a bunch of skittish chicken-shits, how 'bout you try fielding soldiers?"

Alcock assures him, "I will look into this." He turns to Venkatesh and, "But, there is the matter of those...things. You are aware we will protest the use of Ghosts in combat droids."

Venkatesh nods, "Sure about that? First off it'd be hard to prove. Second, we like to program our droids with personality! Then again, third, we don't fall under the purview of the United Nations, the DPKO, nor do we fall under the Geneva...what is it now, Fourteen?"

"Fifteen."

"So, for the now, we're gonna enjoy the breeze, catch some rays, maybe a little shut-eye, one or two REMs, and get back to work." She wiggles her fingers at him, "Nice meetin' ya!"

Koenig rubs her hands, "Trigger time, yea buddy, and, LG, you should consider supplying your people better. They ran out of wontons about an hour ago." She then coyly says, "Ooopsy!"

Alcock stupidly shows his hand when he says, "Madame, we would like to propose that if you shut those things down we'll let you leave unaccosted. We see that you have a reaction team entering the system so that will make it easy for you to evacuate."

Venkatesh shrugs with a frown, like she's considering it, then, "I like your word usage...let." She nods, "Let, like you're gonna let us leave, like it's your choice." Then with big eyes she smiles, "Thank you for being so generous, but...bye-bye!"

Alcock is shocked by her abrupt response. He looks over his shoulder and, while on their neuronet communicating with his Colonel and the Sergeant-Major who are both shaking their heads, he nods.

He looks back and, "Please, Commander...please leave."

Scrutinizing Alcock, knowing that was very difficult for him, Venkatesh agrees, "Since you put it that way, sure!" She then stabs a finger up into the air, "But! We will send the order for them to stand down only after we leave." She then puts a hand out, "And that is not negotiable. I'll send you the order and freqs before we jump, and you transmit it yourself. We'll also be back tomorrow at thirteen-hundred hours zulu to collect our dead."

In shock the General replies, "Madame, that is unacceptable."

"Hey, Alcock, that is...not negotiable. I suggest your people circle the wagons until we bug out. Okie dokie!"

Put in his place, Alcock looks like he's going to blow a gasket but all he could do is quietly say, "okay."

From humbled to humiliated, Alcock stomps away, and as the three fade in the distance, Venkatesh starts to deflate by taking long steady breaths to smooth her hackles.

Montaña nods with, "Damn, Venk, even my balls jumped up in my throat with that level of badassery."

With wide eyes, Koenig agrees, "Amen."

Jacob radios her, ["Venk, you did good. Proud of ya."]

Powerful emotions sweep over Venkatesh to the point that her eyes water and her bottom lip quivers slightly—but with a deep breath and gritting her teeth she buries them, "Mook Madness...oorah."

In chorus, Koenig and Montaña go, "Oorah."

"Let's get outta here."