

85

let me sing to you the song of my people

LCTN: POLARIS-B4 (Ursae Minoris)
 CORD: SAO-308.0202 (133pc from SOL)
 TIME: 20:45zulu (local 35:52mst)

Javan, also known as Yawan, was the fourth son of Noah's son Japheth, or Yapet, or *Yápeṭ* if you want to get all crazy with the accents. Okay, Javan, pronounced "ha-vuhn" around these parts, is also the fourth planet orbiting the star Yapet—which is the most recent codename for the star otherwise known as Polaris-B.

Nobody here liked Noah as the codename for Polaris, that is Polaris-A when splitting hairs, but Yapet stuck for Polaris-B. Javan, in orbit around Yapet, is the only habitable world around here, which means that by the roll of the dice it could have been Gomer or Magog or Madai, Tubal, Meshech or even Tiras, but Javan it is!

The Rains, the push for Orion, has been pushed out to May.

The greater intel-community has been referring to Javan as the *Fondue Pot*, a random name pulled out of someone's ass when the two-letter prefix of Foxtrot-Papa was issued by the CDF back in 2313. This was far better than Village Inn, their old codename for Nu Ari, or Nu Ara depending whose map you're using, but that operation didn't stay Village Inn for long. With the intel sense of humor they started calling it things like Virtual Indigestion or Vacuous Infidel—anything so that they would never have to say 'Village' and 'Inn' together.

Oh-oh-oh! ...Verbose Idiots.

Anyway, when taking delivery the CDF did not know what the contractors here were talking about but since it was Boxter footing the bill, for what his people were calling *Tevat Noah* during the planning and construction phases, he thought the biblical references would have been obvious. All the meetings to establish a schema crosswalk were infuriating, but once in place it was simply a matter of a few weeks before PB and B4 were dropped for Yapet and Javan being adopted into CDF taxonomy. It goes without saying that *Tevat Noah* lost out to

Fondue Pot but, to Boxter's delight, The Rains stuck.

The CDF planners thought that it was just too catchy to nix.

As it is, calling Javan "habitable" is kind of a long stretch in anyone's textbook. It is hot around these parts, and not because of all the CO² in the air, which is 96% of the atmosphere—it's the water. As the most aggressive of the greenhouse gases, the air is saturated with water. At 100% humidity for most of its year, from pole to pole the whole planet is a scorched and steaming wetland. It's been said that it would be kind of okay if there were an overgrown jungle to go with it, a nice visual to match all the wet and hot and drizzle, but Javan is just way too new and is completely barren of any and all life.

As it is this system can't hold a candle to the Kirby/Dedede relationship, in orbit out at 37-Tau, but it's bad enough. Polaris-B is bigger than Sol, and even though Javan is 3.5au away it's still pretty toasty by comparison. Temperature can range from a low of 15-40°C between the night side and dayside but that's when Javan is on the far side away from Polaris-A. During its six-year orbit when Javan's night side is squarely facing *Stella Polaris* from 2,400au, like now, that side is illuminated more than the dayside and this cranks things up to a nasty 50-65°C range with a 5° variable and that all depends on the mood Polaris-A happens to be in.

If it wasn't for the clouds and daily rain it'd be a might hotter.

Polaris-A is big, hot, painfully bright and a Cepheid variable to boot, and it's this variable luminosity that accounts for the 5° range on the surface during that double-sunny time of year. In contrast the underground city of New Nippur maintains a balmy but tolerable 37°C, or 98.6 for the many Fahrenheit aficionados, which is breezy-easy to AC down to a pleasant 22°C in the habitable sections of the city.

As a planet, Javan has a surprisingly low gravity at 0.65g but is enveloped by a super thick primordial atmosphere ending up with a surface pressure of 1,110mb, and even though they have all the O² they could possibly want, extracting it from the ambient CO², we all know what O² can do at 16psi. Because of the obvious hazards they ship in liquid Nitrogen to release into the city and offset the O² down to a safe 20% and this is a surprisingly easy and cheap fix.

While setting up shop here, the Co-op did away with floaters and most gravity-repulsive technology because for more than half the year the civilian and industrial grade tech cannot take a load for shit with all the high temperatures. Between New Nippur, the centralized spaceport docks and the one-hundred and eighty-two storage facilities, excuse me...mining operations, spread out far and wide they use wheeled vehicles to get around, and because of the endless tracks of mud everywhere they had to build a network of elevated-paved

roadways to connect it all.

It was a subsidiary of Wallace-YanZhuGu Industires, the Fluor Corporation, who designed these facilities to look and function like an actual mining operation with an affiliate, Sundt Corporation, winning the excavation and roadbuilding contracts.

All this under the watchful gaze of the Steel Annex from afar.

As we know, the SA secretly owns the controlling shares to the Wallace conglomerate, as well as all their subsidiaries, so it was no toughie for them to know all there was to know, in bitter detail, about Tevat Noah during development, and as the Fondue Pot now that it is in operation. Point being, they got to lock in Simon Interplanetary Transportation Services, the grandmaster of the "round-robin" circuit, and witness them bouncing their roll-offs from Javan to Zemlya Dva, to Scorch then out to Prypiat and back to Javan.

It goes like this, Javan to Zemlya (GTB6) where they drop off the mining ingots and bullion and take on produce. They deliver that around the corner to their neighbor, Scorch (GTA5) where they pick up a load of "commercial goods" destined for Prypiat. At Prypiat they actually do a touch and go for Javan—that is with a thirty or so hour layover between the touch and the go! This last leg is reported to be a deadhead leg in the circuit but, truth be known, they simply swap the BIC-n-chip plates. Any idiot can see that these *empty containers* look pretty damned close to max-load or even over-max when offloaded by Simon on the docks and trucked by Sundt back out to the mines.

Now, because Security Services has been playing footsie with Blackstone all these years, Ndoza Khumalo knew since day one that it was Scott and Bill in the SA Planning group who were involved with the design phase of the anti-air defenses through their Blackstone proxies. Blackstone was handling this part of the project for Fluor and Boxter knew all of this because Khumalo kept Boxter apprised of what the Annex knew about the facility—but the Annex did not know that Boxter knew that they knew.

Got that? Okay...

Problem is, to be hidden in plain sight is a tough little nut to crack because, like out at Betelgeuse, nobody stops by just for giggles however, New Nippur has a quarter million residents, mostly family and support for the operation, so people do show up. Fly over any one of the 182 mining sites here and, with mountains of tailings and fill piled up outside they actually look like mines. The kick is that they are functioning mines producing product for shipment to Zemlya where the ingots of random metals like iron and zinc are tossed aside until prices go up but the bullion is divvied up between the drivers, excavators, foundry, road and dockworkers as payment for their quiet touch.

They are so well paid they know nothing about the two-million pallets of ration packs, medical supplies, uniforms, field kit, ACE suits, railguns and ammo and even more ammo! They know nothing about the 115,000 combat droids, 2,900 tanks, and the 11,000 mix of field lorries and floaters. They know nothing about the 275,000 Centipedes, 36,300 Centipede-Azul, 48,000 cluster bombs and over 565,000 spider missiles and most of those are in bundled-deployment nodes.

They know nothing about the fat division of CDF troops with rotating platoons for each mining site, nor do they know anything about the 556 assorted anti-air robotic gunnery-mechs and tracked mobile missile launching platforms.

It's 20:45zulu and there are 9,926 employees working this operation and none of them know shit. In about one minute that won't matter anymore.

01010100-01100101-01100101-01010100-01101001-010101-01100101

Where the HWG41 was one of the early SA creations, being both an assault ship and utility vehicle able to lift the bazillions of small Intermodal containers on the market, it fell out of favor for the HWG83 long before the last war because that focused on the assault mission. With the HWG99 both of these leftovers were unceremoniously tossed into the commercial market and were snatched up because they are way overpowered when compared to most of the industrial offerings.

Back then the 41 was named the Dragonfly^{LT} after the colossal Dragonfly^{GT} which is the top-tier shipping grip-transport that handles the gargantuan Type-30 interplanetary containers. These boxes are twenty-meters wide, thirty-high and vary from thirty to one-hundred meters in length. There are eighty 120-meter exception-containers and these are what Simon contracted out for the Fondue-Pot circuit.

Simon uses the high-end Dragonfly^{GT} that is both MDDSH and jump capable which is not uncommon but a pricy config nonetheless. There are a lot of single-box interplanetary transports out there but the Dragonfly^{GT} is the Volvo-White in this industry. Looking like a mutant Sikorsky Skycrane on steroids, it has so much room in the forward section that a deck has been configured for passengers much like the old USAF-MAC/AMC services.

Blackjack-1108 happens to be the top driver on Simon's rolls, originally flying their "freight-train" circuit, aka The Figure-Eight, but he is now one of three pilots on their lucrative Fondue-Pot circuit. He is also an SA retread-operative, like all the pilots working for Simon, and when he left Prypiat at 19:50zulu he raced down one of the many secondary shipping corridors out of the system, like he does every

Friday, where commercial ships are required to drop off before they jump anywhere from between 10-12au. For safety the pilots throw in a little English at the end of their dash, a little right angle flip out of the lane where they can begin to spool, but instead of a 0.05au spike, like most pilots, he always throws in a third of an astral-unit on the flip.

The Simon pilots have always done this same flip so nobody thinks twice about it, so when Blackjack blows into orbit around Javan, fifteen minutes behind schedule, the New Nippur controller didn't even think to ask why. Load-mass always determines spool time and with Simon this happens to be all over the place—for what's reported to be empty containers on this leg. He could already surmise that Blackjack was way overloaded for his jump here today, and this passing thought by the controller was right on the money.

It's exactly 20:45zulu when Blackjack finally pops into orbit around Javan at fifty-thousand kilometers altitude which is actually safe because Simon is the only traffic to speak of at this time of day, ["New Nippur, this is Blackjack One-One-Zero-Eight, you read?"]

With a Thunderbird and a Cerberus fighter, both starting to AG vector away from Blackjack's ship, the New Nippur Controller says, ["We read ya, Black, guess you're running lite today."]

["Yeeea, purdy much like every day."]

["We copy. You are number one on the approach."]

["Roger that. We'll be hittin' the pink line in ninety seconds."]

Blackjack switches frequency to a short-range freq, then calls out to Jacob and Peña, ["Looks like the coast is clear, guys."]

On the passive sensor arrays, Jacob and the others see that there are no Epée cruisers, no spiders nor any satellites in orbit other than the small navigational cubes that are the same around every frontier planet. At this distance, New Nippur's passive ground based sensors are a commercial standard and will not be able to distinguish Jacob and Pena's ships apart from Blackjack's until they put at least eighty or so kilometers between them. Because of the low traffic here, like most of the frontier outposts, New Nippur simply relies on their passive sensors, and the transponders of the incoming ships, and don't even bother with firing up the radar. By all appearances, there is no CDF presence here and this is what they expected to see.

With nothing to report all Jacob and Peña have to do now is to push away from Blackjack as quickly as possible, so Jacob transmits, ["As expected. Forty-seconds. Let's make some distance, Dog."]

As they speed away, Peña adds, ["Thanks for the lift, Black!"]

Blackjack says, ["My pleasure! We're spoolin' up."]

All the container ships Simon procures have been modified with additional QP-generators used on the HWG99, so spool time with a load is a tenth that of a standard Dragonfly^{GT} without a load, so as the ship finishes its spool for a jump, Jacob and Peña are already twenty kilometers away.

Breathing, now that they cut acceleration, Jacob transmits, ["An' away we go, Dog...twelve Mississippi, 'leven Mississippi—"]

Peña throws out, ["It's Piccadilly, *homie*, like eight, Piccadilly, seven Piccadilly—"]

["When'd you become a Brit-fag?"]

Peña laughs, ["*Pinche maricón*, let's go south of the border with three cerveza, two cerveza, one cerveza and...any second?"]

The mission clock has rolled past 20:46:00 and seven seconds later nineteen SA battle platforms, eighteen Mbande and one Trung, the Iron Maiden, blast into the area—making a dead stop right over New Nippur at two-hundred and twenty kilometers altitude.

With all of the ships starting their drop, Peña shouts with glee, ["*Mi chingón*, we got ourselves a rumble!"]

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Dante Sergio was originally slated to command the overhead FCAP for today, but that coveted job was handed over to Kati Connors when SEAD got tossed back into his lap at the last minute. Connors is the better pilot, yea, but this is Sergio's niche specialty.

At least on CAP she'll fly the T-Bird and not the hated Dip.

In air combat circles it is widely known that the Wild Weasel mission is definitely not playing it safe and, thanks to Sergio, all of the RRF pilots on the five stations are expert at baiting and killing anti-air defense systems, and the special on the menu today just so happens to be an all you can eat Triple-A buffet!

Now, the Weasels dropping in already know exactly where all 556 of their hidden anti-air units are located but, the thing is, they can't fire on any of them until they make themselves known. That is, the Weasels have to get swept with radar or painted with a ranging laser, get fired on by either guns or a missile launch, or they can opt to troll with 23mm bombs and try to push them out of their hidey-holes. Sergio's people have to make them flinch or force their hand, and to do this means that they have to get in real low and lure them out, wiggle like a craw-tailed jig in the mud or, in their face, they can twerk away all fat and sassy—double daring them to take a bite.

The AO is spread out over an area the size of Colorado, and of the 182 targeted underground storage facilities, each of the Mbande platforms has been assigned a cluster of nine. On the other hand the Iron Maiden itself has been assigned twenty sites, the ones closest to the docks by New Nippur, as well as the docks themselves.

The vestibule-habitation assembly and massive doorways into the mines are at a right angle to—and set back by at least a hundred meters from the access-way cut into the stone hill or mountain. With no direct shot you can lob 1kt bombs at these cuts all day long and get shit results, so the troopers of the Annex have to fight their way in and set charges by hand to collapse the roof over the vestibules.

For each target a company aboard a slick is coming down to set those charges, and with them is a Cerberus fighter for CAS to help them defeat the CDF platoon defending the mine they've been assigned but, first things first, to get them close are two Wild Weasel pilots from Jacob's RRF operations flying Thunderbolts. These guys have to defeat the hidden anti-air assets, and for each site this will consist of two walking mechs and a tracked mobile missile platform. Watching overhead as the 'clean-up batter' is a Warthog gunship to bring the hammer down if things go to hell. That is, if both Weasels get shot down they will automatically blast what's left of the robotic AAA, revealed or not, and let the assault company get on with it.

Sergio has assigned himself the docks, and with three other Weasels they are facing seven mechs and three missile bots. At least here they have no ground troops to scatter or vestibule to blow, so this should be a cinch to get the mechs to snap by shooting up the docks.

With the attack force clear, and the platforms having zoomed away, Sergio radios out, ["This is Split-S. Guys, you know what to do, so call out if things turn to shit for ya."] With hundreds of clicks on the channel, Sergio smiles and huffs a laugh, ["Y-G-B-S-M, motherfuckers! Rapid React is off the leash. Happy hunting!"]

Leaving a third of the FCAP forces above the atmosphere, to fight in MDDSH mode, the rest drop with the attacking force until about 15,000 meters where they break off and spread out to cover them. What would be weird for an outside observer is that there are virtually no voice-coms during the drop. Nobody is saying anything because everyone already knows what to do. At 10,000 meters the assault force and Weasels spread out to hit their nav-points outside the AO where they drop to the deck and race back in towards their targets.

It has been 35-minutes since the drop initiated, and with an additional two-hundred ASF47 and 74's swarming the low orbital tracks with Kati, Sergio's people are just now entering the AO to press their attack—and it's here when the Co-op finally makes a splash.

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High over Javan, little batches of Co-op Djinn and Condor fighters are just now swarming the space above Kati's people who are dominating the lowest orbital tracks around the planet. Coming in groups of eight, sixteen and thirty-two, they are probing for an easy way past the FCAP forces. Problem is, if they try to charge past them for the deck, Kati's people would have no problem running them down.

After twenty-minutes, over eight-hundred F51's have blown in for this impromptu cattle call, stage-right from the Hyades. Now at a numerical advantage, 816 against 360, they are pooling together, looking to Naruto-rush the CAP, and it is at this very moment another 400 Annex fighters blow into Javan's geostationary zone at 22,000 kilometers. Suddenly becoming the creamy center filling between the SA fighters' makes things for the F51's very complex indeed.

"An' here we go!" Says Kati to herself, then transmits on the command channel, ["Okay, CAP leaders, it's no more fuckin' around time. Mark priority targets and let's see what these things can do!"]

Jacob radios up to Kati, ["Go get 'em, Orc-Kestrel."]

With increased chatter on this frequency, she replies to Jacob, ["Sit tight, Buzzard! We're bound to push some your way."]

Kati knows Jacob wants to be up here with her, but where he is now, five-thousand meters over the docks in the middle of the AO, is where they have the last two-hundred kilometer wide *circle of wagons* ready to protect the Weasels and the assault force—who have been winding their way through the AO, like synchronized swimmers, and are just seconds from simultaneously hitting their assigned targets.

Jacob gruffs, ["Ya sure as shit had better share the fun!"]

With Kati's people starting to launch spider missiles towards the Co-op fighters above, intent on breaking them up, she thinks about it and radios, ["I have to say you were right again, dude!"]

["About what?"]

["We did catch 'em with their pants down."]

["They were expecting us at noon, not nine hours later. Homer thought we were gonna be a no-show."] Watching the spiders spread out on the tacnet, significantly below light speed, Jacob adds, ["Okay, Orc, get to work an' I'll just sit here whackin' my pud."]

With the Co-op fighters now scattering, and firing in return, Kati snorts, ["If we do our jobs right that's all you'll do today!"]

["KMA Orc, you can KMA."]

Kati chuckles, ["Ya gotta pay for the privilege! Out."]

For the longest time the spider missile had the smarts of a Tex Avery hound dog, a la Mel Blanc's, "Which way did he go, George, which way did he go?" Zipping along beyond light speed if they miss their target they have to stop, get their bearings, require and shoot off again! Their small mass is very effective against large-capital ships, but they have to be going close to or better than "c" to have the right affect when they connect or simply graze them with their displacement field which itself hits like a brick. In a fighter-vs-fighter engagement that tactic will not work. When facing small-nimble ships in MDDSH, at high speed their interception solutions will amount to dick when their targets are pulling coordinated twists and turns as if they were spitfires in the skies over London—maneuvers not possible with any propulsion system but it's a *can do* in a spacial displacement soap-bubble.

For the spiders, the perfect time to jump a fighter has always been that sweet spot between the lower orbital tracks and their own operational floor. That region where the fighters are forced to exit MDDSH...at that uneasy moment of weakness when transitioning back to the realm of relativistic space and atmospheric flight.

Before today the odds-out chances of any one spider bagging a fighter in a MDDSH displacement field was like rolling a solid eleven, a one in eighteen odds, and that depends on them not running away. If that pilot is situationally crippled, target fixated and gormlessly blind to everything else then those odds will narrow down to one in six, like when rolling a seven, which is still crappy odds.

Distances are too distant, speeds are way too fast and when that target is a fighter, which are way-way too fricken small to begin with, the magical accuracy depicted in scifi cannot be replicated in the real world. Yet today, in counterpoint to the Centipede-Mew being stupidly goat-roped on its first outing over Taiji, here in the sizzlingly bright mid-night skies over Javan the Spider has been reborn...

Saddled with an old Xena AI mod from a century ago, the SA spiders had to be convinced to work together like the Mew, to slow down and think *Pride* instead of *Cheetah*, and for the first time the Annex can finally put these new algorithms to the stress-test. Going after the Condors and Djinn, they are not stabbing at them at high speed like they have always done in the past. Here they are riding the breaks considerably, avoiding the overshoot, and are working together to coral their targets by twos and threes—and when one scores a kill the others race off like *Felis leo* for the next victim in line.

While in MDDSH, fighters on both sides are constantly jinking around by hundreds of meters along their flight path. This means that it is next to impossible for a spider to actually "hit" a tiny fighter, but

on the rare occasion they do—it is catastrophically fatal for the pilot. In counterpoint, if the spider missile and target come into close proximity, that is if their displacement-drive fields actually make contact, the weapon will pop its one-kiloton warhead.

Okay, we all know that a small nuke in the vacuum of space is nothing to write home about but when contained within a MDDSH field, for just a few short milliseconds that is, the blast will lens like a shaped charge through the point where their MDDSH bubbles touch. This jet of plasma and pressure has a *crunching* or sometimes a *cutting* effect on the fuselage that will knock that fighter out of the engagement. Through the IFF transponder such a newly “destroyed” ship will flash the equivalent of a “KO” alert to the local AO flagging them as combat ineffective and no longer a threat. *Id est*, no longer a target.

Here is where the pilot just sits it out and waits for a pick up.

This is what happened to Kati’s wingman and eighteen others when most of the 386 Co-op spiders that were shot at them failed to connect and pancaked on the Mesopause above New Nippur.

Hence that stabbing at small craft at hyper-velocities problem.

The SA fighters on the top CAP were forced to run off with only ten of their own getting “crunched” during the scatter but, in between them, the Djinn and Condors didn’t fare so well. After about two-minutes of running around with their heads cut off, and failing to make the spiders break lock, the Co-op fighters high-tail it out of the system—leaving 198 Condors and 48 Djinn destroyed and tumbling out of the AO in oddly chaotic parabolic trajectories, and those depended on how fast they were going in the direction they were going when crunched. The three Condors and two Djinn that were actually hit left five rapidly expanding debris fields high over the planet.

With Kati’s people here in the low orbital tracks picking up their buddies who lost their ships, and the top CAP returning to the fight, a dozen SA razorbacks enter the AO to recover the enemy pilots so Kati radios them by their call sign, [“Knights Templar, lets attend to their pilots who are at risk of reentry first. I’ll flag ‘em for ya.”]

After a couple of minutes on the tacnet doing that, Kati then takes stock in the progress Sergio and his Wild Weasels have made so far. The net shows they have already destroyed over twenty percent of the Triple-A throughout the AO. Sitting here, Kati realizes that this unexpected inactivity is a welcome respite after trading all those spider missiles with the Co-op, and everyone flying around like circus clowns evading them, and after twelve minutes with nobody in sight, she gets a report that the eight Epée cruisers around Taiji have just vanished.

While gnawing on this little tidbit of intel, the quiet is suddenly

shattered when, right in front of her, at a distance of thirty kilometers an Epée cruiser pops in out of nowhere—and with its nose oriented down towards the planet’s surface it fires it’s particle batteries and plasma nodes out at Kati and her people.

“Oh shit!” Laughs Kati as the FCAP channel comes alive with everyone making the same sighting. All four of the particle beams and two plasma nodes shot from the cruiser miss, and inside five seconds the thing streaks up and away—only to be replaced by another one a hundred kilometers to her left that repeats the process.

With the fifth Epee zipping in and out, with no results, Kati calmly transmits, [“Okay, guys, lets settle down! You’re doin’ good. Keep jinking an’ don’t give `em a chance to get a fix.”]

After another minute and a half of this stupidity, all the shots from the Epée missing and the SA spiders failing to get a lock on them, the cruisers simply stop coming, so after a good twenty seconds Kati radios to her people, [“Heads up, people! That can’t be the end of it.”]

In retrospect, Kati thinks she spoke too soon.

All of a sudden, right in front of her, over the docks by New Nippur an Epée pops into sight but, instead of wasting its shots at the FCAP forces it turns its attention, and particle batteries, downwards towards the Weasels far below. Here they can only manage one volley inside five seconds but these shots are connecting.

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Usagi Yamamoto, who goes by the call sign Wabbit, is the only five-time Ace Weasel flying for Sergio and the RRF, and even though Usagi is a PFC3, as is Sergio, she’s in command of the SEAD mission over the twenty sites assigned to SA36. For the Weasel pilots, terrain and weather is everything and MS-182, the site closest to the docks by eighteen clicks, is the most difficult target they have to deal with today. The entrance faces a wide-open plane, and where all the other targets have rock formations jutting out every which way, and mountains of tailings and gravel waste to help break AAA line of sight, here at 182 the soft fill from this mine has been washed away by the rains leaving three small mounds and an ocean of thick-sticky mud.

Difficult targets go to the best Weasels, and here it’s Wabbit.

On the deck it is local midnight, with broken water-logged stratocumulus clouds for as far as the eye can see, but with this side of Javan facing Polaris-A, from 2,400au, its intense light breaches the gaps and gives the underside of these huge cloud formations an eerie mammatus look to them. The Area of Operation is toasty at 62°C with

a slow but constant drizzle coming down, and a hot-translucent vapor rippling back up, yet these conditions work in the Weasels favor by trashing the electro-magnetic spectrum. Line-of-sight targeting, finely tuned in the visual, infrared as well as the microwave ranges, are critical for modern Triple-A. When tracking fast moving targets anti-air assets must rely on passive mechanisms or get a bomb dropped in their lap. At a distance, under these conditions, they can only resort to active radar for positive lock while on the run whereas human pilots can substitute all that for good old-fashion eyeballs.

None of that mattered over the docks because Sergio and his other three Weasels come in and start off by chunking 23mm bombs all over the facility from outside six kilometers. They blow the docks, the containers, tractors, forklifts and cranes all to hell, but the Triple-A mechs and launchers only react when they finally step inside six-klicks. What they did not expect was for them all to react at once.

Sergio transmits on the freq for his local team, ["Holy shit, guys, we hit a hornets nest! I got the left launcher!"]

With his team acknowledging the call, Sergio rolls and yaws into a skid and punches out an old run-of-the-mill red Centipede. The missile launchers are the priority targets because they have a long reach and have over nine-hundred missiles on hand. The Centipede in the anti-air mode, twists and spirals around the five missiles fired at it, and right at two kilometers it sprouts its six on-board micropede missiles. Even though a nearby gunnery mech was able to blow this weapon out of the sky, the micropedes got through with six-thousand kilograms of explosive force—leaving a massive jagged crater that quickly fills with water and a brown slurry of excavated fill.

The other two launchers fared no better.

Sergio turns his sites to that 70-ton Ryazan-Tottori robotic mech and wastes three more Centipedes trying to get close. For the average TBolt and TBird driver the 23mm cannon is kind of useless, but for the Weasels it's a must have. With the monster mech stomping through a meter thick layer of mud, slogging it at only 15kph, it takes a half-second string from Sergio's 23 that finally drops and guts it.

With the four of them bronco-bucking through the strings of fire from the six remaining gunnery mechs, they quickly slip out of the lethal range of the 7.62 "long-legs" and, once clear, Sergio tells his team, ["Baitin' the one on the right, you guys git 'im!"]

Sergio twists and turns his way towards that robotic mech, taking a few hits from the long-legs but evading most of it. With three Centipedes charging in behind him, Sergio pitches up and corkscrews away, and the short four seconds the mech is fixated, tracking him up and out makes the difference. It pulls down and shreds two of the

Centipedes but the third one hits the thing square in the midsection, right under the empty cockpit where humans used to drive it. The blast is a total of seven thousand kilograms of explosive force that blows this mech into three distinct segments. The lower one with the chassis and legs tumbles forward into mud. The two shoulder segments, with both guns and launchers, fly off and spiral away landing some hundred or so meters from where it was blown apart.

Sergio swings out wide in a climb, and he is already aware of the Epée cruisers hammering at Kati's people above, but he now gets an alert that they've changed tactics and are now firing down at them! Opening the prompt provided in the message he wonders if he can see a pattern forming. With the eighth point of attack showing up on the display, and two more of his people getting knocked out of the sky, he quietly grumbles to himself, "Well, this ain't good."

With over fifty percent of the Triple-A targets now destroyed, and seven of his Weasels already flagged as shot down by the Epée, he realizes there is nothing he can do so he clicks on the command freq, ["Hey, Buzzard? This is gonna be a costly little speed bump!"]

Jacob radios back, ["We got a fix, dude. Just hold tight!"]

It was then he hears from Usagi, ["Hey, Split, got a sec?"]

Where Sergio had no problem getting the Triple-A to jump right on in, for Usagi and her wingman it's been like pulling teeth. The Triple-A has not reacted to any of their normal baiting maneuvers so after five minutes of this nonsense, Usagi fires a pair of 20/20 cluster bombs. The weapons drop their warheads along the base of a rock formation where she already knows a mech is in hiding, and with her following those things in, at just below supersonic, that mech finally decides to take a crack at her.

Usagi is two-kilometers out when tracers of long-legs rip past her canopy by a hundred meters. The lead is too long so as the mech starts to walk the string back, Usagi's Hydrapede missile, the one she launched when they entered the zone for 182, streaks in silently along the ridgeline. Usagi rolls and skids her ship like Sergio did, which cuts her speed and pulls her ship out by another half-kilometer, and with the string of bolts again coming towards her she then hits the reverse vector on her Thunderbolt at full power. This is like hitting the breaks, and with the line of tracers again pulling far out ahead the Hydrapede makes the kill with three of its micropede missiles.

She kicks her bis-E Thunderbolt into high gear and starts to climb out, and as she breaches supersonic—Usagi feels a slight bump as everything drops off and goes dead like an electrical grid blackout. Now gliding powerless, the one working grape sized QP generator far out on her starboard wing instantly reroutes what little power it has to

her critical air-control surfaces.

Because the Thunderbolt is dead even her IFF unit is down so, with a glance to the right she notices a Co-op Centipede reaching out for her. Instinctively, Usagi pitches up and easily rolls over the missile, but this cuts her energy by half. Now heading back towards the mine, she dives and opens flaps and air-breaks to kill forward momentum. Pitching up to maintain lift, the fighter shudders to a stall and, with a sploosh, her ship noses over and drops into a sea of mud.

Usagi's TBolt may be down but her JACC is fully functional. She launches the tacnet and pulls up the overhead tactical display while compiling the links for today's com-frequencies.

"*Chikushou!*" Usagi grunts, watching the *Epée* attacks adding up on the tactical display, and annoyed that her CAS pilot is also down but alive. Now with her canopy half buried in the mud, and IFF not responding, she starts rerouting power to her stinger cannon as she links up to Sergio, ["Hey, Split, got a sec?"]

By sheer luck, at that very second, Usagi gets power restored to the cannon—just in the nick of time.

01001100-010100-010100-01010000

It's 3:30pm here in Kansas City and, with a gray overcast and a light-planar snow just starting to fall, Jessica's ASF74 silently touches down outside the north entrance to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

Securing the perimeter are two squads of ghost droids.

Everyone is outside to meet the ship when it lands. They all circle around Maria while she quickly strips down, then help hoist her above and into her JACC fighting suit. Now with it sealed, warming Maria up, Monique and her girls follow Angela, Diego, Brie, Paula and the clones as they stroll about looking up in awe and wonderment of the delicate icy crystals as they drift slowly from the sky.

Jessica, standing by Maria, nods towards them while saying, "I forgot that the girls have never seen snow before."

"Neither have I." Says Maria, and with Jessica giving her that look, Maria adds, "I went from Clover right into the Annex." She looks up and around saying, "It's also a first for me."

"Oh! Never would have guessed it."

"First time in a place like this too." Maria is thumbing behind them towards the museum and a sculpture of a gigantic shuttlecock, "You were right. We are comin' back."

Jessica smiles, "Told you it was somthin' right?"

"Yea." Maria nods slightly, "I gotta git going."

"Things to do?"

"Sure, people to see an' thangs to blow the crap out of."

"Remember, on the outside they'll be keepin' a straight face, but on the inside they'll be freakin' the fuck out of their minds."

Maria points out, "All but Boxter."

"Yup, he'll be havin' a blast with this."

"Did you or Seth ever tell 'im what *this* is?"

Jessica looks Maria in the eyes and, "I asked him if he wanted to know and, well, he told me he wanted to be surprised."

Maria is taken aback slightly with, "No way!"

"Ya! He wants his response to be natural so..." She bumps her hip against Maria's, "You go surprise the shit outta 'em."

01010000-00110100-01001110-00110001-01001011

When you fire a particle beam, you know...protons, orphaned subatomic particles with a positive charge, it's kind of like a nuclear bomb going off—all in one direction. These weapons tend to be huge, ungainly, power-hungry and since their use is primarily relegated to the vacuum of space, when fired it is invisible to the eye yet, if you can manipulate them by throwing them at a point of convergence, then the results they offer in return can be absolute.

The Co-op Epée cruisers have two cannons each and, like the problems experienced by the Annex with their Hammer turrets on the battle platforms, they are an infuriating bitch to aim.

Time is everything in a space battle and, when you're in close proximity to the targets, targets that can appear and disappear inside five or even four seconds, the three-seconds it may take to traverse and lock is three-seconds too long. This gives you around one-second to identify what an object is, and decide to maybe fire or not?

If you put your mind to it, that's not a lot of time.

What pisses off the Red-Leg fire teams is that spiders in M3 mode have a faster response time than they do!

Around Taiji the civilian traffic made a mess of things so the Epée could not engage there. Extreme distances means that it takes advanced AI systems at least five seconds to identify weather or not you can squeeze that trigger so they were forced to sit it out, but here over Javan their hands are not tied.

Anyway, the *Epée* are experiencing the same distortion in the infrared range of the spectrum as the Triple-A assets are challenged by on the surface. The trick up Red-Leg's sleeve is that they can opt to fire in a wide dispersion instead of a convergence—and they are.

The area of dispersion has a radii of five-hundred meters and, yea, Red-Leg would prefer to get that viscerally satisfying burst of feedback they so enjoy, like when watching a fighter explode but, when you think about it, killing Spooky's power and dropping their ships from the sky doesn't exactly provide that bawdy-orgasmic kick yet, admittedly, it does have a way more sinister vibe to it.

When the *Epée* arrived and started blasting away with particle beams and plasma nodes, Kati's people threw themselves into tight banks, twists and spirals all to slither out of their sight picture, which was a breeze, but the spiders they launched against them could not connect in turn. When the *Epée* started shooting down at the Weasels, Kati and her FCAP realized they had no hope of running them off.

After ninety-seconds and eighteen *Epée* attacks against an Area of Operation that covers over a quarter-million square kilometers, and with twenty-one Weasels and three CAS pilots down, and with no possible counter from FCAP, the cavalry finally shows up.

All eighteen of the SA Mbande battle platforms blow into the AO from house-left at 0.35 of a second before the next Co-op cruiser pops in to launch particle attack number nineteen.

Now, setting a convergence takes time, like a half-a-second, so the Mbande have preset that point out to one-hundred kilometers. Point being, this configuration is better than going at it smooth bore with no choke like convergence, so with the eighteen battle platforms scattered randomly about, each with twenty-four Hammer turrets that can alternate between particles and plasma, pointing in all directions, they can cut that traverse time down to less than a half-second.

Three particle beams hit this *Epée* amidships, shots layered one on top of another, and even though WECG cruisers have been shielded as well as can be expected, nothing the Co-op has in terms of armor can protect it from such an onslaught. The beams slice the *Epée* squarely in half. The Annex has never shot at a WECG cruiser with Hammer turrets before now, it just never came up, but what they see next teaches the SA a rather valuable lesson.

The *Epée* and Rapier WECG cruisers are long and slender needle-like spikes, and even though this ship is now cut in half and hemorrhaging atmosphere, with debris scattering every which way, it is the ship's rear six-hundred meters that has all the critical power generation, MDDSH engines and flight deck elements—so the thing shoots back up and out of the fight like it was just a scratch.

With it gone the Mbande instantly zig backwards by twenty kilometers, and right in time for the next *Epée* appearing on the far perimeter over MS-003. The cruiser gets two shots off, dropping only one Weasel, but it gets hit by one of the Mbande particle beams that punches a hole right through it. Even though it is critically damaged the thing also boogies it up and away without a problem.

The Mbande zag sideways by another thirty kilometers and wait, but they soon realize that the *Epée* have stopped coming.

Katie contacts the razorbacks that are picking up Co-op pilots, ["Knights, can we get one of you guys after that spike. Let's start rescuing any of their crew that abandons ship."]

While waiting for the next jump scare that's bound to come, they watch as the forward half of the bisected *Epée* starts to slowly fall from space—and picking up speed as it does. Since it never had an orbital momentum then falling towards Javan is about the only thing it can do at this point. The atmosphere below is thick and the gravity is low, and it will heat up as it goes down but it won't be anywhere near the heat from reentry.

Then, a minute later, it happened...

See, this was bound to happen. Sooner or later it was going to happen but nobody could conceive that this would transpire on the Mbande's first day out. All eight of the *Epée*, the two damaged ones included in this mix, pull off one hell of a maneuver by genie-blinking into a ring all at once over the docks by New Nippur. Oriented so that both particle cannons on each ship is facing out, they take a second to aim and fire all sixteen of them in one single volley in all directions at whatever Mbande is closest to them.

Snap firing over long distances means you're gonna miss most of your shots but the two platforms that were close, the Litvyak and the Gouyen, were hit by particle beams, and what happens next leaves the crews on the *Epée* in open-mouth shock...

Nothing happens.

One should also note that when they fired those weapons they also fired eight of their plasma cannons but only one of those nodes finds its mark. It also hits the Gouyen in the dome side over the stadium. Again, the crews in the *Epée* cruisers experience even more shock and awe as the thing simply splashes off the platform's hull like a lead bullet against a steel plate at the shooting range.

Tomorrow morning the maintenance crews out at Gore Point will inspect the Gouyen and Litvyak and where the particle beams hit they will see that maybe three millimeters was ablated off a composite armor that is over six-meters thick. As for the plasma node hitting the

Gouyen at 30kps, if you look hard, like really hard in the right light you may see a dimple in the hulls plating.

All those years on Dedede, and all those new technologies developed as a result, has finally paid off.

Right at five seconds the *Epée* zoom up and away, totally disengaging from this fight but—in their wake comes four hundred Condor and Djinn fighters making one last push.

0101101-0011010-0010101-0111011-0111100-00101001

It was a beautiful sunset when they landed in New Darwin some five hours ago. It is also an amazing sight from all the cliff-side casino's, restaurants and hotels in the adjoining city, but from the airfield at the Security Services base, on a stubby peninsula called the Polyp, it's more picturesque with the sand and breakers under foot.

Some of the best beaches on Scab surround this base.

The inspection tour of the SS base at the north end of Scab, on Sapphire, has become old hat for Boxter. He does this for all new Chancellor's when they first come on board. Noah Wanganui will be swearing in next month so the joy of being able to walk freely about in what is considered enemy territory is kinda bonkers.

It may be 21:40zulu, or 00:35 past local midnight here on Scab, but for Boxter and his guest they just got done with lunch.

They are still on New Brisbane time.

The city of New Darwin was built on a rugged hillside terrain over the bay across from the Polyp. Above the city is a mesa where the civil and private air traffic is served, and the one five-star hotel and casino here, one of many Boxter himself owns, is the *Sapphire*. The east entrance empties out to the airfield and sitting next to the hotel is Boxster's Trident Star Clipper.

Entering the ship from the forward ramp, he and Noah walk to the back where they hear General, Lionel Bristol, the commander of all Co-op CDF forces, going off in a tantrum, "I don't give a bloody wank! Ya smarmy git of a bellend! I demand that you take—"

And just like that, the general clams up when he sees Boxter emerge from the shadows and steps into the observation salon at the back of the ship, where he quietly asks, "General Bristol, entertain my curiosity, please. You demand what...exactly?"

Bristol blinks and looks over at Lieutenant-General, Alcock, who looks at him with a shrug so, both of them look back at Boxter where Bristol swallows hard and, "Nothing."

Boxter nods and turns to Porter Macquarie, who is standing there with a three-man fire team, and smiles, "Hello there, Colonel."

Porter nods, "It be a right ripper of an afternoon, Sir!"

"I must agree, and since we have our three guests I think maybe we should make haste for our rendezvous, yes?"

Porter says as he hurries forward, "We'll kick it in gear, sir!"

Bristol balls up and asks, "If I may speak freely, Sir?" Boxter gestures for him to do so, so Bristol breaths deep and, "I really do not take kindly to being abducted without knowing what this is about."

"What this is about...well, that'll be a mystery for both of us, General." Boxter motions for Nigel to take a seat, "Honestly, I've stumbled upon an invitation and thought—the more the merrier! I am so glad the two of you could join us on such...short notice."

01110010-01100101-01101011-01110100-00100001

The Stinger cannon at the tail end of Usagi's Thunderbolt is sticking up out of the mud so it has no problem destroying the missile shot at her from the Triple-A missile platform.

As her wingman fires back at the launcher, Usagi calls out to Sergio, ["Okay, Serg, I'm in the mud and... Holy shit!"]

Sergio calls back, ["What the fuck? What's your status!"]

After knocking a second missile out of the sky, she calmly says, ["I'm down! My IFF is out and that makes me a sitting duck! If you got anyone free, can you send them my way, maybe?"]

["I'm comin'!"]

["No, fuck no! Send someone else."]

["Hey, asshole! Deal with it! I'm next door so I'll be scootin' right on over."] Sergio switches over to the CAS command freq, ["Dog, we got one of your guys in the mud over at one-eighty-two. Got anyone available to cover that?"]

Peña calmly radios back, ["Already in route. One minute?"]

Jacob was monitoring and asks, ["Want me to jump in?"]

["No, if fighters get through you'll need to be there."]

Jacob is not happy, saying, ["Okie fuckin' dokie."]

Peña huffs a laugh, ["We got this, dude."]

["I'm here! I am right overhead."]

["And you stay right there."]

Jacob protests, ["I liked it when you did what I wanted."]

Peña laughs while quietly saying, ["Reap what you sow!"]

Jacob grumbles, ["Fucker."]

Peña points out to him, ["Just keep those skies clear."]

Jacob knows Peña is right, so he says, ["I'm on it."]

It takes Sergio a few long seconds to get to Usagi, and when he does he sees that her wingman has fired two Centipedes at the missile launcher that is struggling to make tracks in the thick mud. The pilot is also coming in behind them daring to make a risky 23mm cannon run. The launcher has fired two of its own missiles to intercept his missiles and right before they connect his Centipedes pickle off a combined total of twelve micropedes that instantly turn in and close on the launcher.

All the launcher can do at this point is to fire off as many of its missiles it can in the short three seconds it takes the micropedes to smash into it. With fourteen missiles going up, six left stuck in the tubes because of the residual heat, the weapons rotate in the air and, with two heading towards the wingman, the other twelve arc up and then nose down for Usagi.

["God-damn it!"] Shouts Sergio as he throws his Thunderbolt between the missiles and Usagi—whereby two of the missiles from the launcher blot him out of the sky.

Usagi has been trying to get the canopy open, but seeing the missiles launch, and watching Sergio get vaporized, and with ten more racing towards her face, there is nothing that Usagi can do but close her eyes and quietly say to herself, "*Kuso!*"

Seconds later Peña's ship is decelerating with a shudder as he enters the arena for MS-182. Noticing that two of the Triple-A units have been destroyed, Usagi's ship is now a rolling mushroom cloud, and the debris from Sergio is still raining from the sky, he realizes that one mech is still hiding, so he links up to the local freq.

["How ya'll doin' Gumball?"]

["Hey, Dog! Engines seven and eight are down. My top right rudder has been sheared off."]

Peña nods, ["That must'uv been close."]

["Yup! It was real close, but I'm still in this fight."]

Peña drops a Hydrapede from under his Cerberus and says, ["Okay, I'll bait for ya. If you don't get it, this Hydra will."]

Pena swings his Cerberus around wide and charges in low at six meters above the mud. As he passes through the smoke cloud that was once Usagi, the remaining mech jumps at this chance.

Slipping out from under the rock overhang, the mech is in a dead run and fires at Peña with its rotary cannons. Peña already had his ship in a partial corkscrew-loop that goes up and over the stream of long-legs as he slips over the short rocky hill. At the same time the wingman, Gumball, is racing in and starts hosing the thing down with his 88. A maelstrom of 8.80mm bolts shred its outer extremities, so the mech tries to swing one of its cannons around towards Gumball. At the exact moment it is pulling down on him, the Centipede already fired at it hits the thing dead center—obliterating the robotic monster with a combined total of seven-thousand kilograms of explosive force.

The two Razorbacks that have been lapping around MS-182 this whole time now turn in and lazily follow the ridge out of eye-shot from the access-way cut into the rocky hillside—with the slick dropping the assault company in two strings below the peaks.

Peña pulls alongside the wingman, ["You good?"]

["Yea, I'm good."]

["Okay, empty on the cut if I go down."]

["Roger that... Just don't go down, how 'bout?"]

Peña laughs at that as he banks his ship back up and around to prime CAS altitude, and when leveling out he ties into the IFF voice coms saying, ["*A mi la muerte me pela los dientes*, motherfuckers!"] Peña noses in, ["Now, let me sing to you the song of *my* people."]

From the cockpit of Peña's ship one can hear the rhythmic *chucka-chucka-chuck* from the 23mm cannon that sprays both hillsides by the access-way. This is followed by the comical *bloop-bloop-bloop* of the 30mm firing into that cut.

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