

117

pee towel

LCTN: 44-TAURUS (rho-Tauri)
CORD: SAO-76485.6A (63pc from SOL)
DATE: 2323ce-JULY-2-MONDAY
TIME: 07:07zulu (local 04:40mst)

At 92au the Annex has rendered the dump zone on a jump to a measly 3-kilometer radii from the point of aim—which is kind of like punching the eye out of a fly at ten-thousand statute miles with an old Red Ryder BB-gun. It took the compiled data-points from millions of jumps to hone the projection algorithms, as well as the now third-gen WormTrac in service, to accurize their navigational system to this level of incomprehensible scifi sorcery. Then again, based upon the anchor point on a Trung, that being the RFID chip in the kiosk on deck-18 in the stack, one could argue that the dump zone is in actuality around 300 meters in radii, or maybe even less, however there is no way one could actually peg that since both the point of aim and the exit point post jump always end up inside said Trung, so 3-klicks stand as is!

With the new CXi navigational repository, SANDi, being added to the universal Sagittarius-A Navigational Databank, the Annex may very well be able to tighten that target radii considerably.

And yet, never to publish those results.

Anyway, the point of aim on a jump in proximity to a celestial body always...*always*...dumps outside of or along its trailing edge, and where deep space transitional shift is an industry standard, 1,023kps towards the gravity corridor that lies beyond the Zone of Avoidance, when that point of aim is close to a star one should also account for Rotational Drift and the Lateral Rise off the galactic orbital plane. If the target is a planet or its moon then they also have to work in those orbital mechanics ta boot!

So, the sixth planet that is spinning around Vása, *id est* pTau, is the gas giant, Nazgûl, and our target for today is its habitable moon, Arda, and if you haven't guessed it by now—the naming convention for

this system is based upon the forever popular Lord of the Rings series of books from the mid Twentieth Century. Moreover, as a side note, this system is where the IAU gets their ass handed back to them for the most karmedic reasons ever!

Having forced the locals into flipping the longitude/latitude orientation of the star, planets and moons to a north=counterclockwise standard, pulling Mordor up into the northwestern zone of the map, right above the now Tropic of Udún, which pissed everyone here the fuck off, a century later the IAU came after the system's names...

Two-hundred years ago a Russian survey team blew through the ρTau system and hastily named the star Хранители, which is Cyrillic for the old Leningrad Television miniseries, Khraniteli, a Russki knock off of the Lord of the Rings with very rudimentary Soviet production values. For all of its schlocky, penny-pinching charm, the entirety of the LOTR fandom fell in love with the damned thing—but not enough to keep Khraniteli as the moniker for 44-Tauri. After the first settlers renamed everything in line with the IP, followed by the orientational flip, ninety years after the registration tsunami of 2201 the IAU sued, *quasi in rem*, to assume control of the names because another system registered those same names long after the 2201ce rush—where ρTau failed to lock them in decades before said rush.

Again, you guessed right, countersuits and venue challenges!

Notwithstanding dismissals over lack of standing, jurisdiction *and* authority, the last citing an all-fours caselaw where the IAU holds dominion only over signatories, during a lengthy appeals process they ultimately ended up losing all control—becoming simply the passive registrant-recorder of celestial names and not the licensor/arbitrer of said names. This ruling applies *de jure* within the TLYLT where beyond our free-rein-zone, henceforth the FRZ as in common parlance, naming and registration now falls under the *de facto* purview of the CXi.

Bitterly butt-sore, to recoup the legal fees the IAU offers the register to the CXi who turns their nose up to the sale. In counteroffer Peter Ribot suggests to the IAU a merger with their AU—that being the *Astronomie Union*. A group the IAU attached to the CXi that severed ties when the “initiative” started to gain traction as an institute.

Confused?

One impasse is in re names, contractions and abbreviations, and where Astronomy has long enshrined Sgr-A* the SAND nav-sys points to SagA (sāgā or sāgā), and to create cubes and crosswalks that are not Sol-centric, but locked onto the Sagittarius-A center of galaxy axial, it appears that the simplicity of SAND wins out! Point being, unable to remain solvent and losing all relevance if bound to the FRZ, aka The FRoZone, a long in tooth IAU begrudgingly queues the somber

music and bows to a reunification with the turncoat AU apostates.

This last item closed just last week and inside six days the old IAU crew came up with a naming scheme that is already scheduled for a Murder Board, but that's a story for another day!

Anyhoo, it's on to current events...

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Between pTau and the string of gravity anomalies that stretch far beyond the ZOA, we have a Security Services Epée staring down the fast approaching Arda from a distance of 92.0128au. Now, with our galaxy speeding towards the Vortex, a nebulous gravity corridor amidst all these anomalies, slightly up and 12.54° to the right of SagA, with Drift and Rise and the trailing orbits of Nazgûl and its moon factored in, the bearing for the cruiser is offset by 11.98° to the left of this corridor, a measly 0.56° port short of SagA, giving the Annex an unobstructed jump-n-dump target zone, above Arda, that is screaming in towards the spatially stationary Epée at a brisk 1,066kps.

The perfect set up for a first time leading edge attack-vector!

As a navigator or a pilot this approach and dump over Arda would be counterintuitive to the n'th degree or, as many of them have quietly fret, has an eerily suicidal vibe to it. If you happen to screw up your calculations by just a lil' smidge, say fifty years ago in a ship the size of a Titus station, you could very well end up slamming into the planet like Chicxulub. By the same token, just twenty years ago you might've been able to get away in the nick-of-time, but it would be damned close and you'd probably get your fat ass scorched by its upper atmosphere as it shot past. Granted, you sim'd jumps like this to death in gaming mode during MDDSH nav-training, but nobody in their right mind would dare to give this exercise a spin for real—that is until today's window between 07:37:00 and 07:38:30 zulu.

Suddenly, eight of the new SA/CXi Anchor Droids screech to an abrupt stop line abreast with the Epée. The cruiser is dead center in a string that spans just under eighty kilometers—where only 0.8 of a second later the six battle stations of the Annex pop in between those droids, with three on each side of the stiletto like cruiser.

So, to review anew, just one day short of four years and six months ago the CDF captures then reverse engineers the SA's latest Centipede-M3u missile, aka the Mew, specifically the one shot by Cyzk that smashed into a porta-potty on Taiji back in '19. From there it took just three-years for them to design and deploy the new Hornet, their revolutionary gravity-torque drive missile where, approximately eight weeks after that, the Annex extracts a Hornet that punched itself

into the ass-end of a Thunderbolt and failed to go off.

That said, in good turn, the SA reverse engineers that thing!

Quickly puking out two of their own hornets, those being the speedy "Green Hornet" interceptor, followed by the inter-cooperative and nimble "Yellow Jacket" that focuses on air CQB—when Maria asked for a miniaturized navigational droid that would function like a TAG satellite, about the size of a Hydrapede, Sandoval ends up lobbying this into Paleo's court because he had stupid amounts of time on his hands!

With the latest WormTrac Spider as its foundation, already imbued with the Mew's spirit of cooperation, he shortens it and flips the drive orientation, adds the maneuvering nodes of the Yellow Jacket while swapping out the generator components of the Green Hornet, shrinks the WormTrac array then crowbars in a science PBDi with three atomic-clocks the size of sugar cubes for TAG double-redundancy! Yea, sure, the CivX side of the CXi went absolutely bonkers over this "Swiss Army Knife" of a science droid, complete with virtually limitless data collection, self-directed reconnaissance and shadow-tracking, and all that on top of astro-navigational functionality—but the undisclosed reality is that this device can flip from Indiana Jones to Freddy Krueger with a simple pointer click! At the end of the day the thing is still a weapon that is smarter and far more capable than any of the Spiders, but these attributes and its SA/AI autonomy have been quietly swept under the carpet by Maria and friends...for now.

Obviously, this rig gives the SA a helluva long reach.

To the right of the *Epée*, outside-in, we have HPO2-Mata Hari, HPO3-Lizzie Bordon, and HPO4-Annie Oakley, where to the left of the cruiser we have HPO1-Carrie Nation, HPO5-May West, and in command of today's approach-n-drop we have Phoc Yu on HPO6-Bell Starr.

With the IFF making the obligatory handshakes, inside a tenth of a second, the *Epée* comes on channel with, ["Malus Six-One, if you happened to be Hippo-Six then ye be right on schedule!"]

CAPCOM for today, Lennard Jenkins, radios back, ["Hippo-Six, Malus Six-One, what's with all tha '*shed-yool'* Brit-fag shit?"]

Malus laughs, ["It's Oxford-proper, ya cunt bastard!"]

As these two parry back and forth, and the *Epée's* CIC starts to upload the intel they've collected over the last few weeks, we find Jacob sitting in Trixi at the tail end of a 24 ship CAP that is ready to launch from dish side HPO6. As the Anchor Droids start to realign into a seven-droid string for the final jump, 29 minutes from now, and the regimental commanders, ten of them remotely hosted by ghost droids, starting to pool together behind the center sticks for a last minute *shoot-the-shit*, Jacob ignores them as he gives the drop-configuration

for today a once over as he waits for his lil' tidbit of intel...

Two mixed divisions, twelve regiments, are split between the six stations with one regiment staged dish side and one mirrored above on the dome side flight decks. Each regiment is in a standard config with the three battalions parsed into three company sticks consisting of a Razorback 'slick' loaded with said company, a 'Warthog' stuffed full of tanks and supplies, and four b-mod Cerberus for CAS. Between the three battalions are two blocks of bisE, bisEa and 74a for SEAD, IR5-sweep, and overhead CAP. Then split between far distant HPO1 and HPO2 are 128 bisEb staged for FCAP.

And those guys are launching now.

The new thing for today, sitting on the deck behind Jacob, are two fingers of bisEa replacements. The experimental Tri-Tip engine for the F308 and F380 fighters is being tested here on the latest F308xd, and where the old IR5 cock-blocker, the Cerberus-Dip, was despised by the pilots of the Annex, and summarily traded out for the bisEa, by all appearances this new "Dip-deux" holds incredible promise since it can also Recon, CAP and maybe even CAS in a pinch. Like every F308 over the last decade these things are actually a Cerberus under the skin, but to get the Baby-P to work along the centerline they had to throw in the CivX cockpit—defaulting to a 308. As an added bonus the Tri-Tip engines can burn comparatively cold and dark while subsonic so, if all goes as far as fingers and toes can cross, they're only going to lazily zig-zag around Mordor as a ready jump-scare and not throw-in unless it hits the fan!

So, Mordor, the whole reason for today's risky approach and dump over the Tropic of Udún, the whole reason for the "last minute" addition of Jumping JACCs (from ten-weeks ago) to stealthfully slither on into Mordor itself, and the whole reason for all fourteen of the Romeo-6 silverbacks pooling together behind the First of the Eleventh, SA96, Jacob's Gurkha regiment from the Artemisia—staged here dish side of HPO6—and all secretly worrying if they maybe missed anything important?

As a Security Services audio com-link appears in his tacnet inbox, two images from the Epée's CIC pops up in the cockpit in front of Jacob's face, and like a neuronet holographic blink-comparator they start to flip between last December 23rd and one from 04:30 hours today as Jacob opens the link, "Colonel Lynn!"

Donna Lynn, Boxter's protégé from Security Services, laughs to herself while saying, ["It's B-G now, Field Marshal."]

"Crossed noods!" Jacob huffs, "How fast was that?"

["Al dente! Me be splitting the Twelfth Air with Smithers."]

"General Dan come up with that one?"

["Aye, if I want field command. That an' zoomin' about in the D-2, and I want to thank you shags for that amazing bit of kit!"]

"You're welcome, so..." Jacob, noticing a string of translucent rectangular blotches running though the second orbital image, asks, "What am I looking at here? The Núrn Valley?"

["Can't say, love, but what I can convey is that those squarish bits appear to 'ave the same thermal characteristics of Kapton film."]

"Space blankies? What are these fuckwits tryin' ta hide?"

["Again, mate, can't say. Me 'ands be tied, but I'll have you know that splash is from a corset tight one-ninety-five e-V."]

Jacob realizes, "So, that's where they went."

["Heaps a' piss, Boom-Baby!"]

He grins and asks, "Boom...baby?"

["Earned yourself a new alias, love!"]

Jacob shakes his head, "Not gonna ask."

["It is what you get for marrying Kielhaul."]

Jacob laughs, saying, "She *is* making big waves—"

["Tsunami rated, while looking out for the lil' peeps."]

"How's Eight doing? I hear she's making big waves too!"

Lynn snorts a little laugh, followed by, ["Oxy can lap-dog for Boxy Babe now! Hot lil' thang got me off that hook, she did!"]

"Does she have the Commission running scared yet?"

["No, Shest does, but Oxy has the MPs on edge!"]

"Kompromat? She taken a deep dive on them?"

["Aye, balls deep, to fortify his voting block!"]

"She's in her groove. Thanks for the heads up!"

["I-ah...wish we could share more."]

Jacob assures her, "No, these here pics made me crack a fat!" With Lynn again snorting a laugh at that one, Jacob adds, "Let's touch base and compare notes with Boaxter when this all blows over!"

["One a' many, be waitin' for the queue up!"]

With Lynn having cut the audio link, Jacob pops the canopy to open space, and as it tips forward he calls back to the droid in a fetal mount behind him, "What call sign did they give ya?"

The head of the ghost droid rises, "Come again, *mon minou?*"

"Wha'd they saddle ya with, Babs? I am curious."

"Knowing you, I believe you already got the memo."

Jacob huffs, "I liked Pepper Mill but this one is better!"

The droid shrugs with a sigh, "I am willing to live with it."

After ten-weeks wondering what Seth was hinting at, a hefty bite of this mystery comes into focus. Jacob inhales big while calling up all the instances of the Paleo ghost droid on the tacnet—finding one dish side of HPO6 attached to Mook, currently tasked with hosting the Romeo-6 for regiment 9404 who is buttoned up in a Razorback on the dome side of HP02, so as he unbuckles and hops out he text messages to that droid, [*stay put -- i'm coming to you*]

Landing on his feet beside his fighter, Jacob switches channels and orders her too, "Trixi, eject two Yellow Jackets."

As she acknowledges the command, and with two missiles dropping to the deck, Jacob pats the side of the fuselage and says, "Babs, how 'bout ya hop out! Grab these and follow me."

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Here behind First Battalion, Gurkha Regiment 9611, we have Field Marshal Cyzk giving the fourteen regimental commanders a quick update for today's target while having just flipped through a series of 76 weather satellite compilations, but instead of a little nighttime slice of Mordor, like on the two images Lynn gave Jacob, overhead we have football pitch sized scans at a 04:30hrs local transit, that span from the Girdle of Arda, *i.e.* the equator, all the way up to RED, that being the arctic circle region the locals christened, The Ring of Ephel Dúath.

Yea, the LOTR theme on Arda is both obsessive *and* annoying.

Anyway, from 92au the Epée offers only the jankiest of fuzzy snapshots, that being 6,400 square meters per pixel, that can provide solid data on the movements of battalion sized units, but the polar orbital weather images Cyzk just scrolled through for the regimental commanders are jaw dropping at nine pixels per square meter!

The images above are enhanced pre-dawn layered constructs of EM-datapoints that range from the low-end microwave bands up into mid-ultraviolet. Also overlaid are false-color thermal specks and smudges showing the layout and movements of the Co-op forces in the region. For the first seventy images they see a single Division split up with regiments, battalions and smaller units scattered all over the map yet far from the Morannon Gates that's just above the Tropic of Udún.

In counterpoint, the last six images reveal a lightning-fast buildup of three assault divisions in the Noman woods along the open fields of the Dagorlad—only twelve clicks south of the Tropic with point elements on the high grounds in sight of the Gates and Durthang Keep.

In perfect position to storm Mordor at the drop of a hat...

With all their long faces gnawing on this tidbit of gristle, realizing their planned 2-1 advantage over the Co-op is now an upside down 2-4 reverse-flip opposite three of their most aggressive combat divisions, Jacob steps up to Cyzk and, noticing these thermal blotches all around Dagorlad, he asks, "So, Moidah, *paisano*, waddya got?"

Cyzk nods up with, "Seventeenth Cav, Third Armored flanking with the Three-Thirty-Second Mechanized bringing it up the ass."

Scott and Maria are standing there as 3D projections, without JACCs, by way of a pair of PBDi units put there by Cyzk, with Scott saying, "IF you ask me, I'd say these guyz ar' ready to launch here..."

Cyzk huffs and quietly says to himself, "obviously."

Where Scott asks Maria, "What did Box say to ya again?"

Maria shrugs, "Last month he said that the Commission finally realized they needed to grab up Mordor when this all came to a head."

Peña mumbles aloud, "Sounded like a heads up."

Phoc Yu throws out, "We always knew that!"

Maria nods with wide-eyes, "Yea, but they didn't." She turns to Jacob and asks, "Did Guns say anything to ya?"

Jacob shrugs, "Mushroom Curtain?"

Maria says to everyone, "Voluntarily she's out of the loop." Then to Jacob, "An' from the looks of it that's comin' to an end soon."

Cyzk snorts, "We've been no-show for nine years, an' this is karma shittin' on us." Then towards Maria, "Tell me it ain't so!"

With Maria tight-lipped and giving a non-responsive shrug to Cyzk, Montaña speaks up while pointing out the obvious to everyone, "These guyz got here waaay too fuckin' fast."

Scott nods, saying, "I'm surprised none-ya anticipated this!"

Maria looks to Scott with a grin, "Gotta ask yourself, Scooter, under what pretense would they roll these dice on this hot potato?"

"Gotta have somethin' sticky, like *casus fortuitus* sticky?"

Cyzk goes, "Doesn't matter now, no matter how ya spin it."

Phoc grumbles, "They couldn't have known we were coming."

Peña points out, "There is no way they could have known! You guys planned this with the shutist-of-fuck-up possible."

Maria nods big, "No one could 'ave leaked it."

"The way they're staged?" Cyzk points up towards the image, "They *didn't* know we were coming."

Scott leans towards Cyzk and quietly says, "obviously."

Jacob knowingly asks, "Sooo...what'll be their alibi?"

Scott turns to Jacob, "What'd the Colonel have to say?"

Jacob goes, "Chucky Girl is a Brig-Gen now."

Scott laughs, "About fuckin' time!"

Maria looks to Jacob, "Tell me, what did Child's Play give ya?"

Jacob gestures to Cyzk, asking for the virtual display controls, where Cyzk hands them over while saying, "I am curious."

Jacob takes them and inside a few seconds he applies a layer over the above image and, while watching him narrow the EM scale to around 635nm, the infrared images from Lynn's earlier picture pop into focus along the central corridor of the Núrn Valley—deep in Mordor.

Maria looks at the setting and, "Hu, that's where they went!"

With a shoulder drop and eye roll from Scott, Cyzk, Phoc and Peña, the exec for regiment 3601, Raven, that being one Elsa Renée, she turns to her commander with a laugh, "Pay up, bitch!"

Anna Gayle, SDM for 3601, snorts, "Okay-okay, you'll get it!"

Elsa pokes her arm, "I want my fin when we get back!"

Maria asks her pointedly, "What do you know?"

Coyly, Elsa suggests, "Hidden Fortress?"

Maria snarls, "Tell me, what black-n-blue, spunk-gargling uvula has been flapping their fuckin' jaws 'bout that? M'kinda curious!"

Anna asks with an underlining worry, "Spit it out?"

"No, ya swallow, bitch!" Maria laughs, "But today, spit it out!"

"SS flapping jaws! Groundhog Debutante?"

Cyzk's division and mission exec, Mia Koenig, pipes up, "Almost everyone on Scab 'as heard 'bout Groundhog by now."

Maria prods, "This shit didn't come from Stone Garden?"

Anna says, "The Security Services pipeline, not the Garden!"

Elsa points out, "Nobody in the Garden was talkin' about it,

but they couldn't deny shit when confirmations were comin' in about the Squirrels banging-on openly about their pet project getting yanked out from under 'em by the BDF high-brass."

Maria snarls, "Who made the connection to Hidden Fortress?"

Montaña's exec, Satnam Singh, in a blue Paag turban, laughs, "Tiger, ya only need simple `rithmetic ta make that connection."

Maria's holo-image flashes into gray and in chunks back into color while she quietly grumbles, "Yea, ya got me there, Five-K."

Montaña nods with, "At this point the Squirrels don't give a rats-fuck about keeping quiet when it comes to Co-op shit anymore."

Cyzk, looking up at the thermal squares and splash in the Núrn valley, points at it and, "This layout is significantly better than an alibi, they're gittin' a genuine invite here!"

Peña laughs, "Yea like, please, bomb our shit!"

With Maria rolling her eyes at this, we have ghost droid Babs stepping up next to Jacob, and with the Yellow Jacket missiles in hand she quietly asks, "*Monsieur Vautour*, whereto where?"

The ten droids channeling the regimental commanders on the other five stations all turn towards Babs and, doing a *bian lian* style flip to their own digital faces, all cheer loudly, "Slinky!"

Unable to curtsy, Babs gives a slight bow as Maria swallows her anger and goes, "Madame Dubois, glad you could join us."

"No..." Babs gestures back towards herself, "Sheatz!"

This got her a big laugh, where Jacob says to Cyzk while thumbing at Montaña, "We'll be jumpin' in with Mook but..." Jacob points towards Paleo, hosting the Regimental commander for 9404, "You're taking Trixi into the fight, dude! Flyin' the Harad CAP."

Paleo's face flashes into focus, "You're shitting me!"

"Fly `er hard but I want my girl back in one piece!"

Excited, Paleo points into the air, "Not a scratch!"

Montaña snorts a laugh and turns to Jacob, "I could use the company, sure, but did you think this through enough?"

"Enough." And as Jacob notices the first production build of the 101-b1 Babyback, slipping in between the dish and dome side of HPO6, and dropping towards the deck, he turns to Cyzk and asks him, "Since we can't flip a bitch at this point, waddya thinkin' Moidah?"

Cyzk shrugs, "I'm asking myself what would *you* do?"

"It's yur gig! Tell me how *you'd* crash the party."

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The events before the air battle over Kai Pai proved that most of Jessica's activities over the last few years were actually espionage activities this whole time, and even though open contracts on the SA have been rolled back long ago, Jessica is not registered as part of the Annex so the BDF took a contract out on her! Now, in the Co-op hits are part of a voucher portfolio with the Corporations Commission and a petition to quash was filed in Prypiat, by Vince Stiller of all people, and the temporary injunction pending a hearing on "scope and conditions" for said hit continued to allow Jessica complete freedom of movement between Earth, Sapphire, Second Hand and Prypiat—which was like a total and complete middle finger to both General Alcock and the BDF who are sponsoring said contract.

So, to preemptively circumvent all the annoying modifications they will face from a hearing re scope, Alcock decides to take a stab at her anyway—and since the ROEs don't legally apply in this situation they opt to do it in Los Angeles of all places!

June 13, on a sunny Wednesday morning, Jessica steps out of One Klick and on the ramp over 5th and Flower she runs into a dapper young man who seamlessly joins her for elevenses.

After 45 minutes of KCstrip and shrimp, Jessie walks out onto the high deck below the towers of the hotel and flies away in her TBird, where he exits the Japanese Steak-House and, from four-stories up in the Galleria, swan dives and belly flops into 18-inches of water in the concrete pools below. He'll live, and it'll take weeks for him to recover, and admittedly that was pretty crazy but this was even spookier...

The next morning, *id est* late afternoon here on Prypiat, at the offices of the Corporations Commission in the city of New Brisbane, we have Kiel, Bristol, Alcock, and Wanganui at an emergency meeting in Boxter's office where Jessica, after having slithered past all security check-points without challenge, casually wanders in unannounced.

The candidly honest Q-n-A with Jessica that followed was like a staccato of backslaps to the faces of both Alcock and Wanganui, and where Boxter and Bristol quietly suppressed their amusement in all this (making you the reader suddenly wonder what Bristol is all about) Michelle Kiel didn't hold back one bit when her little chirp of a laugh became punctuation marks to Jessica's playfully delivered yet scathing jabs that quickly evolve into transitive knuckle sandwiches.

After a half-hour humiliating Alcock and Wanganui, Bristol has the contract on Jessica permanently revoked on the condition that she register as part of the SA, and on her way out comes the Looney Toons

anvil to their skulls when she informs them that during her 19-week hiatus from missions for the Annex, she-herself has been training the Nefer Key staff members to the FIS, CXi and Diplomatic Corps on the use of their custom built one-size-fits-all JACC, and their Babyback transports that are now priority builds in the queue on the Mata Hari.

The gut-punch here—her Nefer Key trainees all want combat!

Yup, you guessed it, this is the worst possible Pandora's Box for Maria, Scott and Luc however, after two-centuries of building their military forces with two million standing troops, and over thirty-eight million active reserves...they have absolutely zero combat experience amongst the lot of them. With these aliens taking up residence on the Church Key, followed by them blowing off live ordinance on the Black Stump as Jessica's trainees, they have an epiphany that this war may be the only way they could gain any warfighting experience—and with it quickly winding down the 'get in on it' window is closing fast!

With a gun to his head, Scott picks the Mordor drop because it's supposed to end up as a simple stand-off. Jessica focuses their training on the M2 all to keep them back *behind the line* if for some miracle a fight actually breaks out. On top of it all, the Nefer Key are attached to Mook and Raven because those guys are to be positioned *in reserve* as a contingent "hold in place" in case, by whatever loss of marbles, the Co-op decides to make a hot-run up the Núrn Valley.

For the "best outcome" Seth hand-picks which of them are going but they make it look like a random lottery draw. From the sixty-three trainees he chooses only two from each group and keeps all of his reasons to himself—and when pressed by Maria and Luc as to *why them* he simply says, "For best results...ask thee fuck not."

Dark foreshadowing aside, Jessica is their taxi out to ρTau...

The replacement to the one and only HWG101b, the ship that Jessica flew like a boss over Kai Pai, was swapped out by the advanced and stylishly appointed b1 model, aka *the Bone*, and where her old ship was referred to as the Millennium Falcon by everyone, this ship instantly became "Planet Express" to all the fighter jocks of the Annex. The *carpet didn't match the drapes* inside joke from a recently released live action remake of an animated IP had a character revealed as being Irish this whole time, an illegal alien from Limerick of all places, so the Planet Express *nom de guerre* has stuck like glue! That said, the one guy who did call her Leela in passing, well, Jessica had him punch himself in the face, breaking his own nose, so that has been revealed to be a nasty little fine-line nobody else will dare cross going forward.

In the exec-coach of Jessica's "Bone" we have her and Maria as chaperones to six Nefer Key geared up in their JACC fighting suits that, on the surface, look and work exactly like the JACCs made for

humans. Each of the six have the M2 rail gun in hand, and where they also have bandoleers stuffed with magazines and micropede missiles strapped to their webgear, Jessica and Maria's JACCs are configured as 'slick' with no loadout or extra weapons in hand.

Jace Verdugo, Jessica's now permanent sidekick, is flying and when they pop from the jump straight into MDDSH drive he rolls and gently pitches it in a graceful 180° turn to curve back around to HPO6, while calling out, "Belle Starr, dish side in three minutes."

Nobody is talking...by now everything that could possibly be said about the Nefer Key going into battle has been beaten to death, and with nothing left to say they hop out of the couches and step into the landing where Jessica seals it to evacuate the atmosphere.

The Nefer Key crew is split into two fireteams deployed for anti-air work. With Mook is: Alexi de la Kush, call sign Blossom, she is the head of the City of London Consulate and an ex NKDF General. With her are Mink DeVos, Bubbles, from the CXi Science Alliance she is a former NKDF Brigadier General. Then we have Ottilie "Otter" du Aat, Buttercup, an FIS Associate and ex Master Sergeant for the NKDF.

With the Powerpuff Girls behind us, here we have the three Teen Titans attached to Raven: Zora du Laret, call sign Raven, who is the senior CXi Ambassador from the Spike and long retired NKDF Lieutenant General. With her is Portia Xios, Starfire, from the City of New Sydney Embassy and ex NKDF Colonel. Last on the list is the oldest Nefer Key on the Church Key, at 4,773 earth/FIS years being Ratchet et Clank, call sign Backfire, aka Lombax, as an FIS Associate here she is Lilith's go to gal Friday—exactly like when she was her Command Sergeant Major for the longest time back on Sashi.

Even though all six have been high-ranking members of the Nefer Key Defense Forces here they are all PFC4, or PFC5 for the team leads, and as they double check their webgear, Maria looks over at Alexi and dares to ask about Yvette, "I have one question?"

Alexi smirks, "What would I do for a Klondike Bar?"

With the other five chuckling, Maria blinks, "What?"

Ratchet smiles and goes, "You're lookin' at it, kid!"

Maria turns to Jessica who shrugs big, then back towards Alexi asking, "Did Yvette have a shit-hemorrhage over this?"

Zora smiles, "We're not here for state, we're here on holiday."

Otter snorts, "Our all-powerful Princeps Censor don' got shit to say about what we do today!" With that, Mink high-fives her.

Alexi huffs, "Only Luc could 'ave put a stop to this."

Maria wonders, "Luc said Yvette's hands were tied?"

Alexi laughs, "ZipTied!" Then points to Zora, "Tell her."

Zora lays it out, "Yvette, she was wondering why we were being so fucking formal about her approving our time, but to undo it, and this is so granularly stupid, with us *in absentia* she has to appeal to the Choir to reverse it, and to do that she has to submit a writ with the Senior Chair, who'll then call a quorum and then, an' *only then* can she supplicate herself to the will of the Choir."

Maria throws back, "But then she'll get her vote!"

Alexi illuminates, "Yea, easy-peazy, but it'll take a week to get there, and by then we'll already be back in the office!"

Maria stresses, "Or maybe you'll get dead?"

Alexi nods, "Ya, well, them's the breaks!"

Mink sighs, "But for the first time in my life I'll actually live."

Portia huffs and reiterates, "Babe, to risk sound like a broken record, you've accomplished more in your seventy-one years than we have in our twelve-thousand years combined! Drop it already."

Jessica blinks and turns towards Maria to quietly remind her, "On that point you're supposed to fuck off, remember?"

Maria grumbles, "You're not helping."

"Yea, I am..." Jessica gestures toward the aliens, "Them!"

Maria gives up on it, and with the ninety-seconds of silence that follows, the ship rolls and descends towards the deck of HPO6, and as they touchdown and start to trundle towards the meeting point, Jace finally calls out, "Ramp drop, one minute."

This is the queue for Alexi to asks Jessica, "The Alter told me you'd have something for us so, lets hear it, Jess!"

Maria wonders, "They know who the Alter is?"

Jessica shrugs and, "Ya, every one of 'em knows."

With Maria rolling her eyes, Jessica inhales and, "Guys, when the ramp drops behind the First of the Eleventh, they're gonna try to pull you back in with the Gurkha regiments right before the jump."

Zora points out, "That's what we wanted in the first place!"

"Yea, but now a real fight is brewing and thinking that the Gurks will be the safe option—will be thermo-mega not safe. Get me?"

Alexi asks, "An' if we hang tight with Mook and Raven?"

"When the fighting starts you'll have to fend for yourselves."

As the other five nod to each other with approval, Alexi states what she already knows, "And you're not gonna elaborate on that."

Jessica shakes her head, *no*, then, "You know the rules."

Maria dares to asks Jessica, "Is there a better option?"

"Little fucker won't say..." Jessica then stresses to the aliens, "What he wanted me to convey to you guys is that...in the balance between risk and outcome, this will give you the trigger time you're looking for and, as he says, the best outcome for the outlay."

Ratchet thinks, "Outlay? Sounds kinda sobering."

Maria comically suggests, "You know, ya'll don't hav'ta drop!"

Alexi counters, "We'll be takin' our chances."

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Jacob is shaking his head, "It's kinda odd how we think alike!"

The original LZs were twenty-plus kilometers out from their actual targets, utility detachments scattered all over the Fangorn forest and Rohan agricultural regions, and where the bulk of the SCC-44FD has always been stationed at the Wold base, south of the City of Wellinghall, and comfortably far from the Tropic, the few actual combat units they have spend most of their time training between the Moria and Eregion regions near the Girdle. On the overhead image one can see that Cyzk is keeping the nav-points as-is on the drop, but instead of the final turn in towards their planned targets—they will instead run all the battalions north along both the east and west flanks and drop off five-hundred kilometers above the original landing zones.

Cyzk ends with, "We're leavin' the Forty-Forth Field Division alone and we'll block them from heading north. Here that'll be simple, but for the Seventeenth, the Third, and the Three-Thirty-Second, well, I hate to say it but, obviously, these guys are going to launch before we reach the surface so we're gonna hav'ta play it by ear."

Scott states flatly, "You plan to tighten the corridor."

"You know it, tight as an angel's twat!" As everyone starts to snicker at that, Cyzk points out, "The longer we can string 'em along an uncontested path of ingress—the narrower we can make it!"

Phoc asks, "For a pincer, where?"

"Ideally between the Seventeenth and the Third, and they'll expect just that but here we'd never be able to get into position to launch so we'll...have to settle for a split between the Third and the Thirty-Second where a gap, more likely than not, will naturally form."

"Moidah's right!" With Gurkhas from 9611 now loading Jacob and Babs up with bandoleers of ammo, micropedes, plus a couple of M2s, Jacob fleshes out his thoughts, "If we're nipping at their flanks, mechanized infantry will struggle to keep up. Nobody will admit it but that's common on a fast drive, and lead elements always fucking drag their feet when pivoting to fill gaps."

Cyzk snorts a laugh, "We get the timing right, an' this pinch will be a cinch, people! Then when we fill that widening cleave with the Eighth and Eleventh Gurks, now hot on the ass of Third Armored, well, those guys will probably, more likely than not, say *fuck it*, abandon the Thirty-Second and stick to the push!"

Maria asks, "Okay, how 'bout the Seventeenth and the Third?"

Cyzk blinks, "That's that *playing it by ear* shit I was talkin' about, and that depends on what you can get on the deck to trip 'em up. We won't be able to envelop or block with what we got!"

Scott sighs, "I'll try to cancel the drops on Yhi and Theta-2."

Cyzk points out, "They are already in play!"

Phoc goes, "The diversions yes, the assault drops are...maybe an hour away? We gotta get back and sort shit out."

Scott says, "T-2, yea, those guys 'll be easy to stop but, Yhi, they'll be at the starting line by the time we get back."

Phoc adds, "You'll be cutting' it close, Vader."

Real Maria, Jessica and the six Nefer Key have already piled out of the Bone and have been listening in on channel while stepping up behind Scott—and now slipping in between him and digital Maria, real Maria says, "Jessie and I will go straight there when we leave."

With Scott turning to her, Phoc says, "Still cuttin' it close!"

Jessica mumbles on channel, "Better close than not at all."

Peña throws out, "Guys, let me see what I can scratch up."

Cyzk shakes his head, "Your crews are spread too thin."

Peña throws his hands up, "Everybody is spread thin!"

Maria asks Scott, "May I?" Scott gestures for her to run with it, so she says to Peña, "These three divisions were supposed to be held back for rebuilding *after* the war. Why the fuck they're here now, well, it matters not! We warned Planning this was possible—"

Jacob nods big, "Yea, you an' I did! Kacper, Scott an' Oscar warned 'em too! These are not Security Services who were part of the in-joke before Polaris, and they're not run-of-the-mill Homer banking on the mayhem protocol saving their dumb asses when they stick their

dicks out too far. No, for these people..."

Real Maria painfully realizes, "The gloves come off."

"Exactly!" Jacob nods big, and as everybody gets real quiet he drives it home, "We've been playing footsies with the Co-op for way too god-damned long! And I know why we've been doing it, an' it made perfect sense to NERF our shit—even though I never agree with it but, today, playtime is over with. Mayhem these guys in the ass all you want, but the second they reach the Nürnen Sea..." Jacob points in Maria's general direction, "Like she said, the gloves come off."

Dead quiet follows, where Maria perks up with a happy step in her voice, "Okay! Oscar, Scott, Jess, we gotta find that fix an' fast!" She turns to Jacob, "How much time, thirty-two hours...thirty-six?"

"No, thirty-two. Twenty-eight ta thirty-two."

"That's not a lot of wiggle room."

Jacob stresses, "If they reach the sea, our kill chain goes wide open, and their shit response to Mook and Raven throwing-in is gonna escalate big-bloody fuckin' fast!"

Peña asks, "Mega-nukes?"

Cyzk snorts, "Waddya think?"

Jacob points out, "Hundred-K's to start and, as a heads up, whatever is nipping at their anchor units is gonna get it hard."

Binsa Gurung snorts-n-chuckles, "There's a happy thought!"

Jacob squints at her and Thapa, "At the end of the valley you and Ganju had better be right on top of 'em—or be backing the fuck off, but knowing you two you'll probably climb right up their ass!"

Maria nods towards them, "Ya better be laying eggs!"

Gangu Thapa laughs, "Yea, Tiger, you know it!"

Cyzk goes, "We gotta cut this short and saddle up, people!" And as everyone starts to nod-shrug, bump fists and shoulder bro-hug as the meeting breaks up, Cyzk is staring at the image above while slowly shaking his head and, almost in tears he wonders to himself, "Fuck me...what the hell happened to easy week?"

Jacob assuredly pats him on the shoulder, "They'll be coming at me, dude. Do what ya can to narrow that advance."

The uncertainty on Cyzk's face is telling because both know that the Seventeenth and the Third have to be blind to Mook and Raven hiding up north—and they can't risk being reinforced piecemeal, "The cavalry may not make it and I...I can't stop these guys."

Jacob smiles, "No, you're right, but *I can* stop 'em."

Cyzk says with quiet dread, "Can't hold you to that."

"What'd they used to say back in the day?" Jacob palm-slaps his shoulder with a grin while stepping away, "Hold my beer?"

Cyzk laughs out-loud, and with Gangu Thapa flying straight up to his regiment on the dome side of the station, Jacob approaches the Nefer Key, Jessica, and the two Maria's, while calling out to Alexi, "You guys gonna hang with Monty an' me?"

Alexi huffs, "Yea, we'll be hangin' with ya."

Digital Maria says, "It's not safe with the Gurks."

Jacob nods and looks to Alexi and Zora, "When they storm Pazghar I need you two working from Nâfarat, the southern forks that are poking into the Harad above the town. Yea, it's six clicks away but when the shooting starts anyone that's standin' around the Harad with their ass hanging out is gonna die." Jacob points to their M2 railguns, "These have a long-long loong-ass reach so let that work for you! CAP is gonna deal with the air so..." Jacob fist-bumps their chests, "You guys are sniping for Monty and Copper. That's your new job!"

Zora laughs, "Groove-an'-move! Yes, Field Marshal."

Jacob nods, then says the obvious, "You little gray assholes being here is a god-damned headache for us. I can't throw ya back so you'd better do what ya can *and* keep your heads down! Any of you fuckers still alive after this...I'll buy ya'll a shot."

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With Maria snatching up the PBDi units that were projecting the digital constructs of Scott and herself, she and Jessica race up the ladder to *Planet Express*, and from the WSO seat across from Jace, Jessie takes control and rips the ship out from between the dish and dome side flight decks of HPO6 with ten minutes to spare.

In the span of time that follows, indi-reporters Daniel Opie, SA call sign Bayou, and Yumi Oshiro, call sign Yoshi, or Yummy behind her back, are pulled from the Razorbacks for Gurkha regiments 3608 and 9611 and are quickly staged to jump with Mook and Raven.

Tagging along with each of the battalions are two of their advanced/interactive "face time" octodroid camera robots, and where Daniel and Yumi both have two following them, they each have a spare in tow. The two reporters originally trained for this jump before they were transferred to the Gurkhas, but when Anna Gayle pulled them aside for a quick rundown regarding their current situation, they were

grateful for being yanked back to run their operation out of Pazghar.

It's just that nobody can know that anybody *is* in Pazghar!

They already have an allied reporter, Miguel Ortega, stationed above the Gates, in Durthang Keep, and with him reporting live from that notorious tourist trap, the assault divisions will be forced to be on their best behavior while passing through that region.

With Jessica's ship gone, the troopers of the battalions have 585 seconds to countdown—leading up to today's leading-edge drop, and while the time ticking away on the tacnet is like an old-timey rocket launch the interesting thing of note is the mission prefix being *Whiskey Foxtrot*, and the codename *Waltz of the Flowers*. The fun fact in planning for this mission is that Phoc Yu referenced a 3.5 century old animated movie called *Fantasia*. Point being is that with his memory sort of cloudy he clearly didn't realize *Dance of the Hours* was the tract that actually accompanied the frolicking hippopotami on screen.

That said, they were stuck with *Waltz of the Flowers*.

Anyway, to risk sounding like annoying dicks, something the Annex excels at, the sexy-raspy voice of Beth Sandoval announces, "Coming up, from the second act of *The Nutcracker*, Tchaikovsky, 1892, we have the *Waltz of the Flowers* for your listening pleasure! Queuing up, *Whiskey Foxtrot* shall we dance..."

Now, everyone in the two divisions were tied into the mission coms, and they all thought this was a scream because on the net they can see that it was also being broadcasted around Arda on the military IFF voice coms as well as the civil/commercial CTAF channels—so when the music started after Beth's announcement it probably was confusing the living shit out of everyone flying into and around Arda.

The countdown clock and music queue were synched close enough so that at 1:11 the seven anchor droids genie-blink in along a 63 kilometer string where at exactly 1:12, or 7:37:06zulu, right as the melody starts—all six battle stations pop in between the droids!

The stations appear in an east to west string over the Nindalf swamplands at 150 kilometers in altitude. Already set at a shallow 60° tilt, pointing towards the Tropic of Udún, when the stations conduct an instantaneous MDDSH pulse in unison, towards the Tropic, it gives the impression that the ships had come from that direction.

Having accelerated to 1,800 meters-per-second, equivalent to Mach-5, they pop the MDDSH fields, and after eight seconds of the Razorbacks and fighters quickly launching off the flight decks, all six stations conduct a simultaneous and continuous three-gravity pull to yank the dish side decks out from under Mook and Raven who are struggling to get clear of the three Augustus stations—and the very

second the regiments reach the 1.2 kilometer clearance, all six stations kick in their MDDSH drives and race away at light-speed backwards from Arda.

With the HPOs now gone, and the assault teams rotating their ships and diving towards their first nav-points, absolutely nobody from the Co-op have noticed 2,900 JACCs, troopers from Mook and Raven, making a stealthy bee-line decent towards the Harad Region above the city of Pazghar. Tracking the hundreds of Razorbacks and just over a thousand fighters of the main assault has pulled all of their focus and undivided attention.

Shortly after exiting pTau the six stations converge on U-Turn to access the damage from the three-gravity pull. The battle stations had months to plan so cleanup was minimal for them however, for the CCAA rings (Commercial-Civil-Academic-Assemblies) mounted around the hubs of the three Titus stations, well, five hours was not even close to being enough time to prepare.

CCAA cleanup will take thousands of man-hours, and this was not unexpected, but the massive internal structural damage because of contractor shortcuts was. The documented standard for equipment mounts in the rings is six-gravities, but the anchors the contractors opted for was just three-gravities. These mostly did okay however, the anchors used for crew support appliances (i.e. vending machines) by the elevator landings did not hold up for shit. With mounts rated at 1.5 gravities all of the vending machines had ripped out of the walls and went smashing about the curved hallways of the rings, but what surprised everyone was that nobody was killed.

On the post mission brief, the one thing the people and troops around Arda could agree on was that the stations popping in above the planet the way they did was jaw dropping to say the least! Then realizing that it was an impossible leading-edge drop they also agreed that it was universally shocking—because it was all coming at them. It was also noted that the audio feed on the IFF and CTAF channels was confusing at first, but it became eerie as hell when battle stations appeared overhead in perfect time with the music! Oh yea...

Lest we forget, Phoc Yu straight up nailed this at 16-seconds.

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