

TIME: 07:54zulu (local 05:27mst)

With the CDF completely blind to Mook and Raven following a laser-straight decent towards the Harad, here at nine-kilometers above the Nürnen Sea they've just dropped below supersonic. At the same time thirty-six battalions, flying at treetop level, are fast approaching their second to last nav-points, and forty-eight seconds away from the break towards the north—Seventeenth Calvary *finally* starts to roll out for the Tropic and the Morannon Gates.

Always operating on zulu time, the CDF divisions have already synched up to pTau local time, and with their attack set for 6:45mst they were treating their people to a steak and eggs buffet! The bombs were supposed to start falling at 6:20 sharp, followed by a twenty-five minute delay until roll out, just to make things look responsive, but the "dove pan" conjuring of six SA stations has shit all over their plans...

The troopers dropped the trays and scrambled for their tanks!

Cyzk thought that if they were ready to go it would still take anywhere from six to ten minutes to push off, but their troops were scattered so it took seventeen to get it in gear! Problem is, the enemy droids haven't launched any missiles or mortars yet?

Hidden Fortress was the Steel Annex's effort to get their ghost droids captured by Co-op Security Services and this was pretty easy once the SS understood that some massive shock or trauma could paralyze the upper brain function of these droids. This left a robotic simpleton that would comply to most tasks, but the damned things would knee-jerk respond to anyone stupid enough to appear in an SCC uniform, dress or field BDUs, ACE fighting suit, or if fired upon.

Try anything über stupid and the mayhem protocol kicks in!

Groundhog Debutante was the Security Services side of that equation where they had to learn the hard way that if they refrain from trying to poke around inside a droid—the monster won't self destruct!

On the surface this was a tough lesson for most everyone involved, but it was the technicians from the BDF that took the brunt of these failed attempts all because Boxter Hartcourt arranged for just that outcome.

From the onset, Boxter played this as if it were a cost cutting measure, awarding key engineering efforts to the BDF, and when the SS handed off the robotic debris they've collected after many battles with the SA droids, their techs were able to reconstruct enough of one to realize that its higher programming was part of a Trojan ATRi payload (Autonomous Tactical Robotic interface) where, as a security measure, RAM and cache is wiped clean when severely shot up or purposefully reboots when a bomb pops off too close in proximity.

Which was, well, all bullshit because the fact of the matter is the higher neurological-functions of the ghost droid (dead guy or gal) personality constructs are identical to Annex fighters and Razorbacks. Ghosts happen to be woven into the carbon fiber components of the fuselage, exactly like how Bud and Trixi are both part of the structural framework of ASF74a tail number 31415—making the vehicle itself a mega-core AI chipset in its own right. An interface that can be actively written to, and updated, and absolutely impossible to spot even if you know what to look for in the first place!

The point is, for years both Boxter and Maria were trying to figure out what to do with these damned things in Security Services while being examined by the BDF. Intel was the prime focus, trying to figure out what they could glean from the arm's length examinations and testing by the BDF engineering group. The SA learned a lot, and the Co-op learned a thing or two too, but with the end in sight the CDF ultimately figure out a practical use for them on pTau! With amazing spatial relation and ranging matrices, instead of being retasked to bag groceries, or maybe even rake a Zen garden, 415 droids get yinked out from under Boxter's people and sent to Arda to launch captured Yellow Jacket missiles at satellite outposts of the 44th Field Division as justification for entering the "off limits" region of Mordor.

However, with a massive attack by the Annex dropping in and completely discombobulating their meticulously mapped out timeline, at 5:23mst, right as the light from a distant Vása starts to bathe the rocky cliffs and grasslands that surround the Gates, Red-Leg for the 332nd is ordered to initiate the bombing sequence way out of sequence where, as a changeup, the *special-needs* droids decide on their own, all on their own, to counterfire in earnest by launching Yellow Jackets in "Predator Mode" back at the 332nd Mechanized—right as 3rd Armored is working their way through the Morannon Gates.

Miguel Ortega, flanked by octodroids and clusters of tourists whose numbers are increasing by each passing second, is straining against the retaining wall along the cliffs of Durthang Keep all the while

reporting on the activity far below. With an odd mix of APCs and tanks from the 17th Calvary spreading out towards the Gorgoroth Depression, a lush grassland between the Gorgoroth Plateau and a distant outcrop of cliffs called the Ithilien Cross, units of the 3rd Armored are trying to not bunch up as it starts to squeeze through the Udún Gap at the Gates, with the Tropic running parallel just seventy meters south.

Octodroids have eight camera booms that can independently shoot in any direction, and stream in real time, and with everybody fixated on 3rd Armored units passing through the shot trap of the Gap, four of the cameras on one of the droids suddenly twists around, stage-right, just in time to pick up on thirteen Yellow Jacket missiles racing in from the north, but instead of the high altitude ballistic trajectory the CDF was originally banking on—these skinny little things are slithering their way south, below treetop level, as they drop into the wide expanse of the Depression...at tepid Mach 2.

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CDF Major General, MacKenzie Corbyn, is standing up through the commander's cupola of the latest Revenant tank mod. This custom command and control build is far roomier since it doesn't have the main gun, mechanical loader or ammo carousel in the way. What it does have, on top of the twelve added centimeters of armor the BDF derived from a bramble twig out at Dedede, is a long-legs anti-air turret that really can't do shit against SEAD and CAS fighters when they're buzzing around just out of reach, which is way too often, but it does work miracles against light armor and ground force infantry when they're in range...which she thinks will be in an hour or three?

What is startlingly effective here are the latest plasma-caster guns mounted up on the corners of the hull, a direct knock off of the Annex's plasma/pulse Flail Gun, whose useful range is out to at least 150 meters, fading to the power of a desk-lamp by 300, but what these things reach out and do touch inside a football pitch an' a half radii is wiped from the sky!

Yet, to wipe it you need to see it *before* you can zero in on it.

Corbyn instantly reacts to the chime that sounds off in the helmet of her ACE suit—where she pulls her arms close and drops into the tank. As the hatch snaps shut the thirteen Yellow Jacket missiles rip past the narrows of the Gate, then past her tank as they jink wildly while heading south for the artillery fire teams and Red-Leg targeting coordinators who are trailing at the ass end of the 332nd Mechanized. Everybody did shoot at them as they streaked past their formations, but none of the damned things were hit simply because of the extreme lead needed to hit. That is, they didn't tuck-n-turn for an attack.

At this very moment they were basically zipping by however, the twenty-six Micropede missiles these Yellow Jackets released about four-kilometers ago were clearly tucking nose-in for an attack run.

Just so you know, in modern combat it is so much easier to hit something that is coming directly at your face, and half of the SA Micropedes were plasma-blasted from the sky. The other half hit with thirteen armored units and their crews (i.e. eight tanks and five APCs) getting blown to hell. Of the thirteen tiny missiles 'stopped cold' at the last millisecond or two, the one going after the general's tank got popped about thirty-meters short, and the force from this bomb going off bounces her armored craft off the ground like a basketball.

With the tank settling back down the dust kicked up from the blast, and from under her vehicle, starts to spiral around and flow back up into a mushroom stalk attached to the fireball equivalent of 1k-kgs of explosive force, and from such an itty-bitty little warhead, where the hatch snaps open and the Major General emerges from the cupola.

As she survey's the destruction a Command Sergeant Major, her assistant with the call sign *Druid*, steps through the swirling debris towards her position, "Ma'am, this is a cock-up if I ever saw one."

Corbyn shakes her head, a little more miffed than she would normally let on, "Yes, Sergeant-Major, it appears those ghosty-bots were not the pillocks Senior Command were convinced they were!"

He asks, "So, now, we're to scrap 'em where we find 'em?"

She nods, "We're convinced that robot confetti is in order!"

He nods in like, "Going forward, I wholly agree, Madam."

And with a wry smile, "Please see to it, my good man!"

He pulls up and transmits an order he had already prepared for this moment, and as the order hits the local net he grins big while saying, "Tis always a joy to thumb our noses at C-n-C."

"We just lost a baker's dozen over wishful thinking!"

He frowns, "As you always say, therein lies the incentive."

She huffs big, "Quoting me again? That's not a good sign." The IFF flashes up with a command channel request, "Oh, bloody hell!" She opens it and asks, "Who do we have the pleasure speaking too?"

A familiar voice goes, ["S.A. Field Marshal, Cyzk."]

Corbyn blinks, then snorts, "Kacper?"

["Mackie? I thought you were desk bound for the duration?"]

"I was pitchin' a bloody-bitch for field command, so they gave me this lil' errand 'cause it was supposed to be a Monday soodle!"

Cyzk starts laughing on channel, ["We were coming to block the forty-forth? We heard the Commission was asking `em to make a last minute run to secure the Harad before the sixth."]

Corbyn nods big, "True, an' they were not exactly quiet about it, and that's why they sent us! In case you caught wind of it, but we were convinced you're people would be too busy to show."

Not exactly lies, this thing has been planned for months, but later they'll hear that Boxter leaked at the last minute—all to pull these CDF divisions into the fight with only Maria learning as to why.

["Well, Mac, I'll have ya know that all you're drops have made us one-legged, ass-kicking busy!"] Cyzk then urges her to, ["But, I'm thinkin' you'd better get some'a your air assets in overhead asap!"]

"Do tell, how much time we got to cross `round the quarter?"

["Ya'd better square it away before FCAP digs their heels in!"]

"Half `an hour, you think?"

["About right. After that you'll be stuck with the civilian traffic comin' in an' out along the one-ten flip past the edge on the far side."]

"That turnaround time will be bothersome..."

["Sorry `bout that."]

She then dares to ask, "Pincer?"

Cyzk snorts, ["Love to share, but how `bout we surprise ya?"]

"Fair `nough!" Corbyn nods, "Waylay away, good sir!"

["Tell ya what, Glitchtrap..."] Cyzk then huffs a short laugh, ["And I do love that call sign! We're gonna null-set your track on our tacnet so stay in the thing if you wanna make it through this."]

"I've heard that's a courtesy now. Thanks for the Passover!"

It is far and widely known that in the Co-op the highest ranks are partisan or political appointments, not on merit or competence, so the Annex has made it a point to let top CDF commanders continue to command while targeting/incapacitating their regimental and battalion commanders under them to sow chaos and, boy howdy, it has!

["Considering our history, it's the least I can do."]

"It is much appreciated, Moidah!" She then openly wonders, "I'm curious if Graves is in this punch-up?"

["Can't say where."]

Corbyn quietly realizes, "That means he's on the ground..." Before Cyzk can respond to that she goes, "Let's touch base after we

conclude these proceedings, aye? Give Maroochy me love!"

Cyzk finds it astronomically frustrating how smart Corbyn is as a commander, so he goes, "Will do! See ya up on the Harad."

"Lookin' forward to it!" Corbyn purses her lips in amusement, "We should schedule a play date for our sprogs when this blows over."

Cyzk smiles at that, ["We'll have Peter Ribot man the grill!"]

"Nordi and their ankle-biter are bewitchingly purdy. Toodles!"

The Sergeant-Major was listening in, and with Cyzk signing off Corbyn taps the hull of her tank, "Druid, best stay near me floaty."

He nods then asks, "You think Buzzard Chow is on the deck?"

She nods in return, "The beast goes where needed, and both sides are spread way too thin here near the finish line." Giving it some thought the General adds, "This is not gonna end well."

She shrugs when he asks, "For who?"

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On that final turn towards the north, Cyzk has appended the navigation strings for all thirty-six battalions and these guys are now making tracks along a random 15-point, zig-zag stop-n-go pattern. Since each new nav-p through the Núrn Valley has a 40-second loiter the CDF is clueless as to which of them are actually landing zones...

Last night, General Corbyn's intel crew had quietly deployed over 300 ground combat droids from the 332nd where, now floating above Mordor like stealthy mutant ceiling fans, with guns, as invisible as they are the very second they start to transmit tracking intel on the Razorbacks zipping 'round below—via encoded microwave packets that mimic civilian coms—they are now not so invisible. What would have been imperceptible at ground level stands out like a neon sign here at 30,000 feet, and as the Annex fighters on CAP pinpoint their positions, call dibs, target and lazily flutter about to one-shot these evil things out of the sky with their 88s, all the SEAD Quad-A teams under Colion Marceau, aka Gumball, turn their full and undivided attention towards Corbyn's three divisions who have moved north beyond the gates and into the rolling grasslands of the Depression.

After a handful of the CDF droids get plastered, the other 298 decide make a break for the deck, and as the CAP fighters now have to put some effort out in running 'em down the SEAD teams, with the help from their spy droids in low orbit, target all 210 of the Triple-A mechs and the 36 mobile missile launcher pods imbedded with the armored units of the three CDF divisions now spreading out and

pushing north. Yea, they'll have to tighten their formations when they reach the Núrn Valley, but that'll be about four hours or more.

As with speed, on open ground elbowroom also means life!

Marceau, having mapped and assigned the target distribution on the tacnet for 24 fingers of Wild Weasels, consisting of a new block of bisE orbiting the Depression at 12k feet, opens the SEAD channel, "How are my Weasels doin' this fine morning?"

With whoops and shouts of 'Gumball!' on freq, because the CDF divisions are on the move the tacnet resets the Wild Weasel mission code from WW to RC, so Marceau announces, "We have a prefix change. Our mission for today's festivities is Rodeo Clowns!"

Of the 24, four-ship flights, 22 of them start to descend and orbit the divisions at a much lower altitude, jockeying into position for their assigned targets on the tacnet, all the while Marceau goes on to point out, "There are enough Triple-A mechs down there for each of us to bag two, so I want ya to spread the load, people!" With hundreds of clicks on channel he adds, "Let's hand the missile pods over to the newbies! I know those things are fun an' all but give that challenge to the new kids! We need 'em to build up XP before this is over."

With more clicks, Marceau goes on to say, "One more thing, with the Express as rare in the A-O as a fucking Jackalope, half of the bizE-a orbiting top are gonna team up with us soon so, if you think about it, as a consolation prize I want you flight leads to offer a mech or two to a couple of 'em to take a bite..." With only a paltry dozen reluctant clicks on channel, Marceau adds, "Truth is, Perun has a really shit job, with too many players and nothing to shoot at, so today let's share the love while we can!" And with all 24 of the SEAD flights now splitting into teams of two he closes out with, "That said, ya know your job so go get your flex on... Rodeo Clowns, Talley ho!"

Almost all of the weasels are on the far periphery, orbiting the Depression to work from low altitude, outside—in, which is normal, but Marceau, his wingman, and three other teams are called "Matadors" for a reason. From 12k they slow down and are now kiting high above the center of the partition between the 17th and 3rd divisions.

As it is, the Triple-A mechs have been floating along with the armored units they are here to protect, but with the Weasels obviously making a play for them they slow and extend their legs. Now jogging alongside those tanks, ready to run-n-gun, and seeing Gumball himself overhead...one of the mechs launches a Centipede-Azul at him.

It is somewhat insulting how casually Marceau flicks a little Micropede missile at it and, at the point of intercept, the mini-missiles that deploy from the enemy Centipede, before it gets vaporized, do not

have the range to reach him and all six sputter out a kilometer short.

Marceau rolls his fighter and pitches his ship into a slow dive towards that mech which now holds its cannon fire to make sure that the bisE is committed to the attack run—where Marceau launches two of the advanced Centipede-Mew backwards to hang ten behind him for a few short seconds.

With the mech pointing his guns up, waiting for the weasel to come into range, Marceau fires his 88 for one full second, where the bolts rain down on the mech—blinding him and throwing its targeting off at a critical moment. When the 88 stops the 23-3 spins and fires a quick half-second burst where, at the exact same time the two Mews fire their primary rocket motors only one second apart. The missiles maneuver around Marceau and shoot down vertically for the kill...

Yea, this is a lot of ordinance to expend on just one robot, a machine designed to survive most everything you can throw at it, but to breach their recently enhanced armored shells now requires a lot of explosive force or a really lucky hit, and here the 23mm bombs fall all around to further mess up targeting—with two of these warheads bouncing off its armor plating, yet again from Dedede, and where the mech manages to blast the first Centipede-Mew from the sky, which ejects its nine Micropede missiles before it is hit, the second Mew blows through that debris cloud and hits the top of the Triple-A robotic.

The warheads of a Mew and its Micropedes, when they pop off together, have a total combined explosive force of 10,000 kgs, and the reinforced top mantel of this machine cracks where a chasm yawns wide open—just as the Micros from the first Mew streak in. The nine secondary explosions end up quartering this 85-ton Ryazan-Tottori monster and sends its legs spiraling high into the sky.

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Jace Verdugo's navigational skills are so next-level that the 201.93 light year jump from 44-Tau to 17-Tau was spot-on with the BOne exiting on the dump just five-klicks above the Von Karman line and dead center over the 165-Longitude of Sapphire. This gave Jace a plumb bob level vector to the Church Key on the far horizon.

It's a straight shot to the Spike, which he can actually see on the display, and coming in from the west at Mach8, halfway there he throttles down where the ship drops below Mach5 right as they enter the west side of Bludger Bay only 45-kilometers away. Now actively breaking, at Mach1 he flat spins the ship around and hits full thrust and WEP as they pass on the southern side of the Spike right at floor level 210 between it and the Kilosphere and, yea, it's kinda loud!

By stupid happenstance it is currently 02:10mst local, in the middle of the night, but for the 73-SA CIC/CnC crew, the 36-CXi exec wing staffers, and 200+ mixed employees from the Spike who are all working and living on Zulu time and are on 210 to grab a coffee and breakfast burrito, the sight of Jessica's b1-Babyback rippin' past the windows at eye level—backwards—with Mach-diamonds and plumes of thrust as long as the ship itself, well, that kinda gets your attention?

From one-kilometer altitude the BOne starts to drop and cuts power as it loops back around, without turning back around, and now slow-crawling towards the ground floor entrance to the Spike the ships ladder drops-an'-locks sixty-meters above the flight line. Jessica and Maria step down the stairs and fly out in their JACCs. Jessica whips around for her fighter, which is sitting there for her, where Maria twists and turns into the main entrance. Entering the lobby she hangs-ten in a reverse break, then shoots straight up the open atrium!

Now racing vertically, she rips past Trixi with the floors of the atrium becoming a blur as she climbs for the food court on floor 210. Realizing that she's going way too fast, her body flips around upside down as she hits the breaks again at floor 180. Slowing dramatically, she is still going up as she wheels about and, entering the food court she rolls for the windowed west wall and bumps into the ceiling as she pirouettes over the tables by the atrium.

Scott, while on zulu time and nobody is climbing up his ass, follows a daily *de rigueur* that begins with the omelet and hash brown special here in the food court and...it has been the same window, the same table, and the exact same routine ever since he got pulled into Strategic Planning. When zulu and local time synch up maybe Jessica, Little Angela, Seth or Nancy will join him but, mostly, this is his down time with his datapad to scroll through the current sports scores. Now, this time of year it's baseball, which is not his game but it'll have to do, and with Diego now playing shortstop for the Dodgers he finds himself actually warming up to it.

Maria touches down, and while still walking towards Scott, at fifteen feet she tosses him his PBDi from pTau. He easily catches it with one hand then puts up a finger which tells her to give him a minute with it.

As his eyes roll back in his head and flutter slightly, Maria pops her canopy and tosses it in the chair across from him. She turns back towards the breakfast bar where, by the register, she grabs one from the pile of steak and egg burritos and asks for, "Black."

"I got this." Says the barista as he hands her the coffee, where she steps back over to the table and plops down across from Scott as he finishes pathing what happened out at pTau staging.

"So, waddya thinkin'?" Asks Maria.

Scott opens his eyes, flips the PDBi on the table and buries his face in his hands, snarling, 'fuck!" He looks up, "Jessie is heading to the Ninty-Six then Darwin?" Maria nods, "Neato is off to U-Ey, and you turned Yhi around?" She nods again, "An' Peña is out tryin' ta salvage what he can from Theta-2?" Again, nods, "Gotta find more bodies."

Maria bursts out a short laugh, "That's a no shit, babe!"

Scott wonders, "What's Boxter's play here because I thought they wanted those three divs held back for rebuilding?"

Maria takes a bite, "Superficially, yea, but the Commission really wanted 'em there to control shit in case riots break out however, Boxter finagled 'em off world so that the people can tear the place up." She sips her coffee then adds, "He'll have Security Services out holding the line along the Banes, but he has every intention of letting the little guy blow off some steam in the worst possible way."

"What gains they make today, what they can squeeze out of Mordor before they lose in court...48 to 60 months, won't amount to—"

Maria interjects, "Shit, yea, one way of lookin' at it, an' given time Mordor *could* save their dumb asses but there's a lil' problem!"

"I'm curious, what card does Boxter have left to play?"

"He's carrying all the notes now. Even the Mountain Trolls..." Scott blinks with understanding where Maria gives a slightly wicked smile, then, "An' he's calling it all in by fiscal year end."

"October? Then let 'em take Mordor! What are we doin'?"

"Your grandson wants us to cut the CDF off from the Harad."

"fuck me!" Scott quietly swears to himself, then asks, "Why?"

Maria shakes her head, "He's not talkin' and I'm not askin'."

"For that it'll require us to drop five...maybe six regiments."

"To contain the Seventeenth and the Third. Sucks hu?"

Scott has lost his appetite, "Yea, well fuck this week."

"Ya got that right, and just so you know, when it's over..." One can see Maria has been fighting back tears, but she transmogrifies it into a bitter laugh, "This'll all get swept under the rug."