

49

bonus round

LCTN: 53-TAURUS-AB6B (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76548-00302 (83pc from SOL)
DATE: 2314ce-JUNE-21-SUNDAY
TIME: 09:15zulu (local 01:20mst)

Loki, SA-31, dropped into orbit over Led Myach, the icy moon circling the blue semi-giant, Sapfir Shest, the sixth planet that orbits the luminescent mercury-manganese rich binary pair of 53-Tau at over 4au distance. They're here to pick up a recon platoon that's been training in the treacherous arctic conditions on the surface. The names of the planet and moon were Russian to start but a follow on Aussie team used a shitty translator so the phonetic spelling stuck. Just recently the origin and meaning of the names were finally realized but the residents have since become fast accustomed to them.

This system is over twenty parsecs, 65 light years, away from the current field or zone of battle, just outside the Hyades cluster, that it was believed being so far from the fight their war-footing SOP could be done away with on this pick up. It is not unusual for either the Annex or Co-op to loosen things up on low risk operations like this because for the other side to be able to do something about it they would either need the omniscient foresight of god, or security would have to be lax or significantly compromised.

That said, the dime was dropped on Monday, the 1st of June.

Both Chief Stark and Sergeant Nelson have been feeding the Co-op intel on a regular basis but rarely does it all match up so that they can exploit it and not expose the source. The Co-op was aware of this recovery mission but to actually act on this information would require a third corroborating scrap of data—and that came by way of a conversation overheard between two *Corps Diplomatique* types from the FIS over drinks and a losing streak at the Blackjack tables in the Khufu Pyramid and Casino.

The intel reports offered up by Blackstone Services are always

in some digested abstract and details about their sources are redacted but, since their intel is consistently 100% spot on, nobody has ever thought to challenge their output. Point being, that conversation in the casino over drinks and cards never did happen. The dealer doubles as an agent for the Co-op through Blackstone on behalf of the SA so, as it is, the Annex controls the narrative whether it's real or not.

This scrap was nothing concrete but enough to tip the scales.

Led Myach, is sort of habitable after a fashion. Its low gravity and 380 millibar atmosphere of mostly nitrogen with 20% carbon dioxide is not exactly breathable but you can walk around in it without a pressure suit, and even though harvesting O2 under the icepack is easy money around these parts the toxic levels of CO2 on the surface is a pain in the ass to deal with just the same.

Wollongong is the main city on this planet-moon but close by is Mount Pleasant, where the nice weather is, which has a stable year round -40° Celsius or Fahrenheit, take your pick. The banquet held for the SA platoon the night before was both pleasant and poignant for all because the Annex may never return. This is the last training mission till things settle and, even though the residents here love the Annex, with the war on they would rather minimize any exposure.

After saying their last goodbyes, then twelve hours and sixty kilometers later, the platoon reported it was ready to evacuate.

Normally they pick up outside of Wollongong, on a sea of ice called the Rolling Hills Golf Course but, with a suggestion by Maria to Bill, eventually drilling down to the platoon leader, was for them to secure a more defensible pick up zone as part of the training. Not wanting to be sucker bait, the platoon leader has her group haul it back up to their primary obstacle course near the North magnetic pole called the Fairy Meadows, and never was there a place in heaven or earth, or anywhere else for that matter, so misnamed as this.

It's been referred to as a shiv-scape and for good reason.

Think of the New York City skyline but instead of buildings you have an interconnected web of fragile spires and shards and blades of ice. Thirty-five square kilometers, half the size of Manhattan, a chilly winter wonderland of obsidian-sharp half-step it and die.

On the Rolling Hills the platoon could go from sitting ducks to fourteen, three-man fire-teams in full on stealthy Predator mode inside just a few quick seconds. Scatter and blend in and the fight is on, but if spotted clumped together they'd be easy peazy pickings.

Up at Fairy Meadows the platoon leader deployed her drones in the middle of the tallest ice structures. She has the droids use infrared line of sight lasers to mimic trooper coms which is common

yet surprisingly easy to spot on the ice.

Here one actually uses a dolphin like high-frequency digital acoustic signal and can chat with impunity. In the thin air and with the constant winds the signal is washed away after a few kilometers. If an enemy approaches one would obviously revert back to a good old fashioned rolling low-freq short-range VHF. In an urban setting one opts for a microwave carrier to blend in with civil traffic, but in the ice having the droids use infrared is an obvious lure to anyone who knows what they are doing. A place that anybody with half a brain wouldn't dare to attack because this hostile cryogenic-ice environment requires a whole lot of knowledge and experience not to end up dead.

With her squads neatly tucked away in the heavy rock cliffs high above the Fairy Meadows glacial ice flow, the platoon leader made the pick up call with the Loki showing up minutes later.

Eleven seconds, it was eleven seconds between when the Loki popped out of the jump at low level, some one-hundred kilometers above the planet, and when the spiders hit.

Three days before a short-haul cargo ship limped in claiming damage by a random impact. An impact is a rare occurrence but it does happen. It was trailing a whole string of debris into orbit and mixed with that was thirty Co-op spider missiles in stealth mode. In retrospect the suspicious thing about this was that the freighter came in at the exact speed to achieve a sloppy orbit for it and the trailing debris without correction. After a few hours of reported tinkering with the hull breach, the ship scooted off—leaving the debris behind.

With the Loki suddenly showing up, as expected, the one AI control spider IDs the Loki, transmits the attack command and they all lunge at it specifically along the plane of inertia—so as not to miss and plough into and make a mess of Led Myach. The command missile hits first, with three follow on missiles impacting on its fireball making a series of huge explosions looking like radiant soap bubbles popping in space. The residual plume of debris, now mostly granular and particulate, will continue to fly out and return to reenter the atmosphere sometime in the next month. What the Co-op planners failed to do was to have the command AI missile hold back till it was the 'last man standing' because the twenty-six remaining spiders were clueless as to what to do at that point. They just gormlessly floated along until their setting was overridden and changed ten minutes later.

After today all Co-op spiders will be 'first dibs' autonomous.

With the ambush sprung and the Loki blown to smithereens, the recon platoon transmits an 'oh shit' emergency-alert status while, overhead, the fireballs dissipate and they watch the hot plume of debris from Loki billow out into space.

Within a minute Security Service cruisers start popping in and out overhead, six in all. They confirm the missile kill of the Loki and, half expecting the platoon to be on the Rolling Hills, they immediately launch an air assault as part of their SOP. Not that they could actually hold Led Myach this deep in SA controlled space, and they'd rather opt for a particle beam barrage which is out of the question being so close to a collateral damage no-no, that being Wollongong, but the attack is the only way to try their luck at bagging a spook or two. On the way down a quick survey of the planet surface from orbit revealed some very faint tell-tail infrared laser flashes up at the Fairy Meadows.

So, the attack was rerouted to the glacial flows.

A whole platoon localized in the ice structures, even if dug in, would be an irresistible target for air interdiction fighters which makes up the bulk of the air assault team.

Where those earlier spiders could have had an impact was when five minutes later the Rapid Reaction Forces from the Mae West and Annie Oakley dashed in and slipped under the altitude ceiling for spider missiles. There was probably an eight second window where they could have made some difference but, as it was, two massive battalion sized waves of pissed-off came screaming in from the north and west. Consisting of 32 drop ships, half of those being warthog gun ships, and 160 fighters total.

It was three minutes after the Reaction Teams descended on Led Myach that the Iron Maiden showed up. SA-36 exited its jump behind Sapfir Shest and zipped around to get a picture of what was going on and what surprised them was that nobody noticed.

To keep the SA response "organic" only Sandoval, the new Field Marshal of the Iron Maiden, knew the whole story, and while in the CIC, Sandoval was on line with Maria, "I have no idea why the platoon is up in the meadows! They should be in the damned hills!"

Breaking in and out from wormhole to wormhole, Maria is surprised, ["What! They're all the way up in the Meadows? You are shitting me! Are they taking fire?"]

"No! They're just sitting there in the cliffs watching the show! The Co-op, I guess it's Security Services, they're blowin' the shit out of the place! The Ice Castle, the Washington Monument, the Sphinx, the baby Khalifa, all those structures are now gone! They nailed the Loki and went straight to the bonus round!"

Maria suddenly realizes the stupid choice she made earlier, ["Why the meadows? That doesn't make any sense?"]

Sandoval is pissed, "I'm gonna have words when I find out who or what or why that platoon is up north!"

["That was me, Sandy! That was my bad."]

"You did what?"

["I got something from Delphi at the last minute. I expected them to hold up in the rocks or high ground near the hills..."]

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Maria is curled up on the couch of her New Sydney home with the hologram tactical display of Led Myach turned sideways in GEV mode. While she's been talking to Sandoval, Jessica has meandered her way in and is standing in the display and using her arms to zoom it in towards the Fairy Meadows.

"...Not hump it all the way back up to the Meadows."

Sandoval is the one who's voice is breaking, ["What you don't know is that the only defensible spot on this entire booby-trap infested shit hole is right where they're at, right now...Holy shit!"]

"I see it."

On the display, with the React Teams just a minute out, the Co-op's attack is withdrawing and the cruisers start firing particle beams into the glacier from orbit.

"Do they see you, yet?"

On the display the Iron Maiden opens up on all six cruisers.

["They do now! We just hit them all with hammers. All but two are high-tailing it out and we just now hit those two with plasma nodes! They're trashed!"] Maria can feel the relief in Sandoval's voice as the Iron Maiden initiates a random-walk of evasive short and quick, stop and start MDDSH runs, ["I'm so God-damned glad Chief Stark knows what the fuck he's doing!"]

"He's the best, Sandy!"

["You should have tactical now, right?"]

"Yes." Maria notices the alert that Cricket's battalion is ready to launch and warns her, "Don't let Cricket launch!"

["At this point there's no need. They have an order to hold."]

"Sorry 'bout movin' the platoon."

["No, that's okay. The thing that kills me is that, at this point, there is really nothing for me to do."]

"The hardest thing about that job, Sandy, is letting your people do their job..."

Jessica has zoomed the display back out to show Wollongong with the Rolling Hills and the Meadows, and zoomed it back further so they can now watch the Iron Maiden random walk while firing on the cruisers trying to defend the two damaged ones. Just then the Xerxes, SA-20, appears and jumps into the fight.

Maria finishes with, "...Looks like you got your hands full. Alert me when you evacuate the platoon."

["Will do, out."]

Watching Jessica watching the Iron Maiden and Xerxes scoot and shoot, Maria says, "You're up early."

Jessica doesn't look back, "Yep."

"So, it did go a little south...and you knew it would."

While continuing to survey the display, Jessica nods, "Taking stock, *in arguendo*, Maria speak, this also wasn't supposed to happen this way, but the ice structures were destined to collapse...eventually." Jessica turns towards Maria and smiles, "Just think, the Gongers will be thrilled, happy campers with these results."

The residents of Led Myach have wanted to drop satchel charges on the Fairy Meadows for decades but environmentalist groups have blocked them at every turn. Today settled that dispute.

"Yea, but have to admit, they were beautiful."

"That they were." Jessica turns back towards the display and points things out as she chats, "You know the platoon was untouchable on the hills in plain sight. Originally, they were supposed to be running around the hills till tomorrow. And tactically your suggestion, from this God's eye view, would have been sound if it wasn't for the fact that the high ground outside of Wollongong is treacherous as hell."

"I didn't know, that's why the platoon is in the Meadows."

Jessica points to a spot in the hills, "That's where Cricket was going to order the Platoon, and Sandy would have not countered it because from up here that would look like the right thing to do. The platoon leader's protests would have fallen on deaf ears and, honestly, there was no real hot-fired rush to pick them up."

"The React Team would let the platoon make their own call."

"Yes, scattering was the right move." Jessica then comes to sit next to Maria so they can both look at the display, "With the platoon getting spotted on that high ground Cricket would have urge her attack force to head straight in and those missiles that are now harassing our ships would have blasted them. The handful of forces that got through would die with the platoon."

Maria nods, humbled, "I lucked out."

"It's actually turning out way different than it should have. Just so you'll know we'll bag four of those cruisers, and one could argue that these are better results but who am I to say?"

"I stuck my dick in something I shouldn't have. Next time we might not be so lucky." Maria glances over at Jessica, "That's why you let me make that call."

Tears have formed in Jessica's crystal blue eyes, "Knowing shit is dangerous as fuck." She looks away, "And I wish I didn't."

Noticing her distress, Maria asks, "Something I should know?"

"No." Collecting herself as they watch the battle turn against the Co-op, Jessica is very careful not to mention Seth's name directly, "The Alter does not choose what it sees—only in re those close to it. How 'bout, from here on out I use feathers to fix stupid shit and report to you after the fact, okay? When I need a brick thrown at someone or something I'll come to you then. Deal?"

Just then Diego steps in while rubbing her eyes, "It's Sunday morning, six in the morning! What are you two doing?"

Maria almost laughs, "Bonding! We're bonding, okay?"

Jessica snorts, and, "I'm taking you and your mom to breakfast. That new diner opened up and I hear their omelets and muffins are the tits."

Diego asks, "Jose and Caps too?"

"Hell yea! Roust 'em both up and get dressed!"

"Okay!" Diego turns and walks down the hall.

Jessica asks, "Cap sleeps over a lot?"

Maria shrugs, "Yep, lots."

"You know, Jose is in love with Sian."

"Kinda, sorta, maybe obvious, don'cha think?" And while watching a third cruiser hemorrhaged by a plasma node, Maria agrees, "If you're the feather and I'm the brick...it's a deal."