

77

slay ride

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
TIME: 19:23zulu (local 19:23act)

Here on Taiji things are simple because there was no klaxon, no alert or alarm, nor was there some stealthy Secret Sam go-code to watch for. Everybody here knows how to tell the time and when time came, they quietly gave their loved one's a kiss goodbye and made tracks for where they needed to be with just the clothes on their back.

And jumping-off at 18:00 they wouldn't even need those.

The citizen soldiers for the five houses didn't lift a finger when the forces of the Co-op landed last October. They sat it out, they let the Annex fend for themselves, which surprised a lot of people but the field commanders for the five houses said it was because they had a bitter case-of-the-ass for being sold-out to the PADF.

That was what they said, and it is believable considering we are talking about Taiji, but off-world some believe it was because the Annex had turned tail in the face of superior forces so why bother dying for a lost cause? Then again, knowing all the players here, that second explanation was not as believable as the first, but now there is a small faction who are gut-positive that the apparent apathy from the locals was simply a devious ruse.

Before the CDF could concoct and execute a plan to pursue options to counter that third possibility, by way of targeted arrests, interrogations and raids, because that's how they rock, they get tossed a cooked grenade!

The ghost droids and PacMan drones the Annex dropped off five weeks ago has been more than a one-off speed bump in the CDF's plans, but as it turned out it was still just a speed bump—one that brought everything to a crawl and that was the idea. The problem here for the CDF is that the population on Taiji is armed to the teeth so how does one go about pulling their military grade teeth and maybe a

few of the non-issued weapons without being obvious about it?

The best way to describe the people of Taiji is to take the twenty-first century United States, specifically the hyper nationalistic late-century US and not the pussified millennial roll-over US, throw it in a bowl, toss in ancient Sparta and mix well. Add to that about thirty firearms per household, then to top it all off you liberally spritz the zest of a metric fuck-ton of ammo and you get Taiji.

With a population of over twenty-seven million the people of Taiji to a man, woman and children included, are polite, decent, civil, morally upstanding, kind, humble to a fricken fault—and yet always up for an honest fight. If an honest fight is not to be had then they'll settle for a dirty one in its stead. So how does one go about pacifying people like these? *Id est*, how do you go about disarming them?

You don't, you can't, but maybe you can try politely?

The five houses, that being Anzac, Kyiv, Prague, Maple and Perth, have excellent recordkeeping so they knew what PADF rail-tech was issued to who, and from which house, but what surprised the CDF was that, when asked, these weapons were turned in to them without a peep or a care in the world. Not one of the quarter million railguns were held back and this threw a wrench in the Co-op's original action plan to kick in doors. See, the issued weapons are the proverbial drop in the bucket when compared to what the citizens hold privately, and there are absolutely no records of any kind for those.

Now, on the bright side for the CDF, all of those weapons are firearms, some of them centuries old, not railgun tech, so the urgency to "pacify" the citizens kind of got pushed to the back burner while their troops took care of the SA droids and PacMan drones that got dropped in their lap. What they didn't realize while chasing after the bots was that almost all of the citizens owns a fifty-cal or two so, with that in mind, who here needs a railgun exactly?

The people of Taiji happen to be the "packinist" people of the frontier but, with the CDF patrolling their streets the people stopped carrying side arms altogether. What they gave these invading troops were genuine smiles and cheerful waves—not the slightest provocation or justification to start bustin' down doors.

Today, Christmas Day of all days, at 18:00zulu that didn't matter anymore when a text went to all of the Co-op commanders, and the press, with an attachment listing the declared ROEs by the liberty loving people of Taiji. Scratching their heads by the audacity of this, the CDF did not know what to make of it, nor did they know how to respond until shortly after 19:19zulu.

Five CDF companies were mowed down while on patrol.

With Nyx starting to sweep across the Aureole Ocean, ringing in the next four weeks of massive storms, like clockwork, for some reason the CDF thought it would be a stellar idea to start running regular patrols outside of the five capital cities of the five houses where they believe they have control. Okay, so the patrols were supposed to be a show of force, or maybe they were sightseeing just for giggles? Who the hell knows but, whatever the reason, thanks to Mother Nature and terrible visibility it was a breeze for Giáp's people to get around unseen and coordinate their attacks.

See, the CDF, like many military organizations, have very predictable behaviors based upon doctrine imposed on their troops and command structure that borders on micromanagement mutherfuckery. Giáp, like the Steel Annex, have adopted the United States' view of military doctrine thinking that it's probably a good idea to establish a doctrine, detailed and complete, but their unwritten rule is to bend, flex and adapt inasmuch that in the real world—doctrine has a half-life of about 15 minutes in the field after your plans start to unravel or when the bullets start to fly. Whichever comes first!

The cookie-cutter company level mech-lite patrol, fifty-klicks outside of the City of Most, here in the House of Prague, was dead meat the second they rolled out of Most to take in the sites. They have an APC leading five open top lorries loaded with troops in combat field kit, miserable from the wind and the rain, with only one Revenant tank following as anchor. According to doctrine they have only one squad of troops in ACE suits lazily buzzing around their train.

Oh yea, it is those guys who catch the bullets first...

From an L-shaped ambush position, trigger time was only ten seconds. The fifties open up on the troops in ACE suits first and drop all nine of them within a second of opening fire. A micronuke grenade with a 500kg yield splits the APC open like a box of cheerios gutted by a chain saw. The Raven, the Revenant tank that is, takes one of the newly updated micropede missiles. The little thing arcs up and slams down on top of it, cracking the tank wide open with a 1,000kg blast. It bounces off the deck, spirals into the air, and lands upside down where a 500kg grenade hits the soft underbelly for good measure.

The troops in the lorries tried to jump down but they were shredded by railgun fire from the BR1 armed guerrillas. Most of the fire went low, as Giáp asked of them, but some of the strings of bolts went high, into their faces, which made a mess of things.

Seventy of the troops from the lorries were still alive so half of Giáp's people set about treating them all with trauma compound, tourniquets and pressure bandages while the rest start snatching up the free StG-810 railguns and bandoliers of ammo.

As General Giáp strolls through the killing zone with his exec and a ghost droid, surrounded by a squad of guards, he is a little annoyed because the mess he sees splattered before him is exactly the same mess reported at the other four skirmishes, so he says with a shake of the head, "Well, this is a cock up for sure."

The droid is being operated by Maggie Prather, who asks him, "Why, Sir? Looks textbook to me."

"Damned blue-balls! Too many head shots." He turns to his exec, "Colonel, please remind all our people that, right now, we need to pull our fire to the lower thorax or the extremities. We want the count of traumatic injuries to tally up, not the dead."

The exec says, "Yes, sir."

"Be assured the wanton killing will come soon enough." He then turns and smiles at the droid, "And that'll be about the time you people join us. Sound about right, Mr. Gudici?"

Anthony Gudici is linked up with the droid from the Ice Mesa, so through crackling static he asks, ["Think it will go south that fast?"]

"Ooooh, most assuredly, me matey!"

Maggie asks, "That your gut speekin', Sir?"

"Well, Maggie, since we last chat each other up, we now know they want to move on Orion and think they may have mistakenly committed too much to the Pleiades. They only `ave sixteen divisions planet-side, so the short of it is—that won't make due." Giáp grins big, "I think we may `ave bit `em in the arse at the right-proper time!"

Gudici says, ["I'm inclined to agree, General."]

Looking at the gutted APC he grimly thinks to himself, "Sad to say, before this ends, most these knotty cunts won't be making it to Rissolle for Two-Up." With Maggie in her ghost droid nodding in agreement, Giáp turns to her, "Mr. Gudici, before we're off to the next tussle would you be kind enough to relay a message to Mr. Graves when you get a quiet minute aside?"

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It's nearly 11:30pst and Cricket and Bill are running late. With Scott and Monique in the foyer, Jacob, Bill and du Conde are outside loading their glider into a HWG99 so they can get to Chicago inside the next half an hour, and shave off the extra hour it would take at over Mach 1.5 in the glider.

Scott, with Jade yawning in his arms, looks at her and says with one of his rare smiles, "Gawd, this never gets old."

Monique motions for Scott to give Jade up, "I do apologize, Scott, but I must get my...fix before they're off."

Scott hands her over with a snort of a laugh, "Had I a choice, I'd 'ave stayed with Adele and learn you some manners."

"*Père trop tard!*" Monique smiles to Scott, then suggests, "Just say the word and Adele will be here for New Year's Eve!"

"You do look like her."

"Many more than I can count think we are sisters, and she is still considered a desirable woman for a hundred and twelve."

"For me, no, but..." Scott is visibly torn then says, "You know, if she's still fun like she was, I think she and Angela would hit it off."

Monique blinks with surprise and says, "*Oui!* I will see to it."

Scott adds, "Yea, and it would be nice to see her."

From the Main Hall steps in Maria, Jessica, Cricket and Glados with Cricket saying to Monique, "Thank you for having us, Monique."

Monique smiles, "*Madame*, thank you for being had!"

du Conde has stepped in from the outside and hugs Cricket saying, "Your chariot awaits, *Grande dame*."

Cricket whispers to him, "It's Cricket."

He whispers back, "Need I remind you of your station?"

Cricket taunts, "Need I remind you who you work for, Abel?"

du Conde thinks with pursed lips, then chuckles, "I think you have me painted into a corner...Cricket!"

With a smile she gives du Conde a little kiss as Bill walks in saying to her, "We 'as gots ta go, hon!"

"So sad." Monique gives a little frown as she hands Jade to Cricket, then adds, "You three must come again soon. I insist!"

With everyone giving their goodbyes, Jacob comes in from outside while he has Gudici, from Taiji, linked into him through the tacnet saying through the static, ["Yea, FM, that is a no-shit!"]

Jacob gives a little laugh, "Seriously, send them to me! How are the Gurkha's doing?"

["Sitting around like it were just another day."]

Jacob shakes his head, "Well, that is to be expected."

["CDM, Thapa, asked Giáp to save some Homer for them."]

"The Sergeant-Major, he has the pulse of your people."

["And they are the nicest, most polite little people."]

"Yea, with their killer rep it's hard to believe."

["Okay, FM, I'll report in, in a few hours with the latest."]

Jacob nods, "Okay, out." He turns to everybody who is now looking at him waiting for what he has to say. He looks at Monique and, realizing it wouldn't matter, says openly, "That was Gudici on the line. I take it you wanna know what's goin' on, on Taiji?"

Bill nods, "Aaah, yea. Love to hear before we go!"

Monique asks, "Would you like me to step away?"

Jacob shakes his head, "Naw, stay put. You'll hear it soon enough. First off, Missile Tow is on schedule. All five of the Co-op patrols got whacked, one-hundred percent casualties with KIA hovering at sixty percent. They've already blown up forty-five CDF support facilities outside the five capital cities, and they are running from OP to OP in the field and are blowing them all to hell. So far they've trashed eighty of 'em and they have about another two-hundred to go."

Scott asks, "How's the weather?"

"Like they expected, it's shit! The clouds are socked in from about a hundred to a hundred and thirty meters. Visibility on the deck is down to a kilometer then drops to as low as eighty meters when it's raining or foggy...which it is when it's not raining! What we were bankin' on, their air power being grounded, it looks like that panned out and they are keeping it on the ground. The reports from the five houses say the CDF is preppin' their armor to roll out."

Maria shakes her head, "Idiots."

Curiously, Monique asks, "Would they not enjoy the same cover of terrible weather?"

Maria shrugs, "Ya'd think so, but no. The houses train in it, but the people there also party, golf and fuck in their shit climate, and it's four out of every twelve weeks. Where the Co-op has to navigate by braille the locals know every hill, dale, rock and tree stump by rote memory."

Scott nods, yes, "Also, on Taiji, infrared goes into the shitter."

Jacob points out, "Yea, but Giáp will use thermal for bait."

Bill asks, "How'er the micropedes working for 'em?"

Jacob nods, "One shot, as advertised."

Maria laughs, "I got a C-note sayin' they'll start off by using armor as the spearhead. Any takers?"

Bill laughs, "That's a sucker bet, there boss."

Scott throws out, "Gimme two to one an' I'll take it!"

Maria nods, "Okay, two C's it is."

Scott looks to Monique, "It would be smart for them to stay put and hunker down the best they can until the weather improves, but then Giáp would bring the fight to them."

Maria sighs, "The CDF will not want to start a fight from their fallback position. They'll be forced to come out and expand their perimeter but without air..." She laughs, "Damn!"

Scott nods, "But Giáp will let 'em come out to play."

Bill laughs, "And everybody gets the micropede!"

Jacob points to Bill, "Two things before you go. They are asking for an extra bot drop over the Kraj in Prague, Oblast in Kyiv, and in Anzac they want double that outside of Tareyton Meadows."

Bills says, "No prob, but we'll go ahead and prep two more drops of 'em just in case. For the third, right?"

"Noon, sharp."

Maria asks, "He still thinks it's gonna be Tareyton?"

Jacob laughs, "As he told Nelson, if he can't get them to come with a lure, he'll send 'im an invite by snail mail. As it is, the weather from the Mesa is shit so his armor is now three days out, but he was gonna keep it hid till after the first anyway." Looking at Monique he says, "We have a regiment dug in there waiting for the third, and we have eight more set aside in first reserve."

Maria nods, "All Gurkas...they wanted this fight, and being smaller than us that holds a huge advantage on that terrain."

Bill thinks quietly to himself, "What I'd give to be Gudici right now, especially leading those little fuckers. Planning sucks toads."

Maria apologizes with a shrug, "Sorry, dude."

Jacob points up into the air for a second, "Oh, the second item, Giáp's people, from target to target, are singing *sleigh ride*, but instead of a sleigh you ride..." he makes a slashing motion across his throat, "It's slay ride as in s-l-a-y!"

With everybody laughing, Cricket says, "As only Taiji can."

Jacob says, "He's sending me the lyrics for everybody."

Monique wonders, "I've heard stories of mythical proportions about the people of Taiji, are any of them true?"

Maria fields this one, "They're like anybody else. Pound for pound they are just like us, just as good, but they got this strange penchant for fighting. *Exempli gratia*, their greatest, most celebrated cage-fighter ever, he never won an A-string bout. Try as he might, training his ass off, he was just a smidge too slow for the cage. Jake and I were at his thirtieth and last fight and everybody wanted him to win, even the guy he was gonna fight wanted him to win, but..." Her eyes start to tear up, "He held his own at first but we ended up watching him get stomped into the ground."

Jacob, feeling Maria fighting back her emotions, picks up the story for her, "What followed next was absolutely amazing because the people..." Now with the exact same visceral memories, Jacob takes a second to compose himself, "The people scraped his broken and bloody body off the mat, and they hoisted him up on their shoulders as their champion. See, for Taiji it's not winning that matters it's, as they say, givin' it a bloody good go and not shyin' away from a blue."

Maria sniffs and gives a little laugh, "Kevin Vossler, from the House of Kyiv, the boy can't go anywhere on Taiji without people buying him drinks or asking to have a pic with him. Used to be our battalion exec but now he's a retread working for us in the Spike..." She laughs again, "And I get to put up with his shit every day!"

"Yep, and we love 'im for it." Jacob thumbs towards Maria, "Giving her shit, that is."

Maria says to Bill and Cricket, "You need to get it on the hump, guys! They're waitin' for ya."