

LCTN: 18-TAURUS-B1 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76137.0202 (125.4pc from SOL)
TIME: 12:00zulu (local 12:00act)

Here on Taiji the last ten days have been non-stop chaos for the troopers of the CDF. With the conditions perfect for a hit-and-run guerrilla campaign, Giáp's people have been running roughshod over their armored patrols, and with twelve-noon-zulu fast approaching the CDF knows that it's only going to get worse when the Annex shows up to add to the madness. What they're bringing to this fight is unknown, but the Co-op planners think they are ready.

The problem here is that the Co-op finds itself blind in a world enveloped by heavy storm clouds and shit visibility. They are battling an invisible enemy that commands the field, who picks and chooses when and where they want to fight—so this would not be considered a winning formula in anyone's playbook!

Still, prepared they have...

Over a thousand spider missiles are lying in wait in low orbit, and if anybody is stupid enough to pop in and hover to drop above 180 kilometers, which is the spider's operational floor around Taiji, it will not turn out well for them if they loiter past six seconds. Below that is a count of 352 Djinn fighters buzzing around in a constant CAP above the storm clouds. Then to top it all off, in a geo-equatorial orbit, which looks like a polar solar-synchronous orbit around here, are eight Epée cruisers hanging-ten above Taiji at 32,000 kilometers. On top of the six-second lag to confirm an enemy ship, they can't shoot accurately at this distance nor can they shoot down using the planet as a backstop because of civilians meandering on the surface. From here they can zip in and snap fire their cannons when a fight actually starts and the commercial traffic clears.

For a defensive posture this ain't exactly half bad but defense, in and of itself, is almost universally considered a losing proposition.

Even though defense here is pound for pound the same as on Scorch, *id est* GTA5, to better accommodate the Taiji Air and Space Control the CDF agreed to bunch their spider missiles up into twelve clusters to keep the busy low altitude approaches and tracks clear for commercial and civilian traffic. It goes without saying that this little favor made it stupidly convenient for the SA when at 12:00:01zulu a whole butt-load of their monstrous Valkyrie missiles streak in—completely ignoring the Epée cruisers above for the Co-op spiders below.

Seventy-two, fifty-megaton Valkyrie missiles blossom into a dozen “bouquets” of multi-million degree superheated-plasma fireballs that wipe out the spiders in their entirety.

At 12:00:12 over two thousand SA spiders race in with half of those spreading out over the lowest orbital tracks to snap-fire along the elliptical in case any of the Epée cruisers opt to drop down to play. The other half scatter along higher tracks poised to fill in any gaps.

At 12:00:25 nine Annex battle platforms, what the Co-op and greater intel community believes to be the last of the SA capital ships, streak in and come to a squealing dead-stop 160 kilometers altitude above *Rakija Oblast*, in the House of Kyiv. Just like at Tura-Tau-4, but here each platform drops an Annex battalion in three slicks along with three Warthog gunships hauling in a total of twelve of their new Pazuzu tanks crammed in their holds. Each platform also catapults eight Thunderbolt fighters who race ahead to run interference.

All fifty-four Razorbacks and seventy-two Thunderbolts drop straight down towards the storm clouds far below and the second they are clear, inside five seconds, the nine platforms rip away only to stop ten kilometers out to do it again—delivering a whole division to Taiji.

It is at this second drop that the Iron Maiden, since it has sixteen of the catapult launchers, also punches out seven of the new Thunderbird fighters to escort an HWG101 who, like the 99, is just flat enough to be shot out of the catapults with the fighters.

Now, with 109 Razorbacks plummeting straight down, and an escort of 151 fighters racing out ahead, between them and the storm clouds are sixteen of the wickedly maneuverable Djinn fighters who are only 120 kilometers away.

The F51d Gryphon-Djinn flying CAP have been split up into 22 flights to patrol the storm clouds over the Lettuce Belt that encircles the entire planet along the equator. So, with only one squadron of the Djinn between the SA shit-rain coming down and the clouds just seconds below them, the Co-op flight leader instantly realizes that his only sustainable option is to shoot and run—and he has do that long before the minute it will take for the Annex to reach them is up.

With the ships from the Annex hitting the thirty-second mark the Djinn pull their noses up, pickle off three centipede missiles each, then pull a tight one-eighty to dive for the clouds. Yes, the SA fighters all have the new Hydrapede missile/droids now in their quivers but for a high-speed chase like this the thirty-two closest Thunderbolts each launch a single centipede missile after them.

Unfortunately, in hindsight, these are their new Centipedes...

Weapons development is one of those quirky-like incremental processes where divergent paths can scissor back and forth, and the venerated Centipede family of missiles is a primo example.

After sixty-years of frontline use, the Centipede was originally steered by a gimbaled-nozzle attached to a single-stage motor. Over the second half of its operational life it had two-stages and was steered by a Gravity-Rotor flywheel like gimbal in the nose. With massive improvements in solid chemical motors this latest SA Centipede is now a three-stage design with a new Gravity-Torque drive replacing the old rotary gimbal. The original missile had a twenty-eight second burn, the two-stage had a combined forty-four second burn, but this one has a total of sixty-six seconds of thrust between the three motors.

Problem is that when the old two-stage red Centipedes were updated with the navigational utility for Taiji—the powdered satin-pink Centipede-M3u block of missiles, called the *Mew*, because after three centuries there are still Pokémon fans fricken everywhere, and boosted with a count of nine secondary Micropede missiles, were neglected to be added to that navigational upload queue.

This little 'oopsie of an oversight' was compounded by the fact that Taiji, with two axes of rotation, has a magnetic field that is problematic for navigation. Its dual core has a dynamo Barycenter that tortured and twisted these fields into two observable southern poles and three competing northern poles, and one of those is emanating dead center over Rakija Oblast! So, when these Centipede wipe out the forty-eight Co-op Centipede with Micropedes and fly into the storm clouds after the Djinn their not so little brains lose both the thermal signature of those targets as well as their up/down orientation. Now, the *Mew* actually talk to each other so they decide to hold off on the second stage burn until they can reacquire their targets, or maybe figure out where they are, and it's when this *murder* of missiles burst through the clouds all but one lawn-dart into a grape vineyard below.

That trailing Centipede, fired by Kacper Cyzk, pulls out of the dive just enough to clip the edge of a lateral irrigation ditch—only to cartwheel across rows of grape trellis for a whole kilometer, and where the other 31 missiles opt to self-destruct on contact with the ground, to the tune of 31,000 kilograms of explosive force, this AI brain gets

cold-cocked out of whack when it smashes into a portable toilet and fails to go off in hari-kari mode. When the techno geeks from the CDF recover what is left of this mangled Centipede missile what details they gleam from it re the Gravity-Torque drive will come back to bite the Annex in the ass, but that's a story for another day...

01001010-01110101-01101110-01100101-01100010-01110101-01100111

Kacper Cyzk has not been in the cockpit of an ASF47 on an actual mission for quite some time, the last being over five-years ago right before he lost his company but now, as division commander, he realizes this job comes with some gnarly perks. He is so high up on the totem pole now that if he chose to fly into harm's way in an old Sopwith Camel biplane then who's gonna stop him? His favorite N2 gaming aircraft, the Camel was more of a hazard for the pilots than its intended victims, but if one were to master the instabilities caused by weight distribution and its rotary engine then it was lethal as hell.

In Cyzk's mind the ASF47 is as much of an anachronism, and even though the bisE mod is now considered the second place meanest son-of-a-bitch in the valley, he is pushing back on the 74. Cyzk thinks as warmly of the Thunderbolt as he does the canvas covered Camel, but where the Camel tries to kill the pilot, in his mind the 47 is way too forgiving. At least the 47 beats the 74 on loadout by a mile.

Cyzk and his flight of Thunderbolts break through the thick clouds south of Rakija Oblast, along the coast of the Aureole Ocean. The four fighters land on a flat spot by the rocky cliffs where the rivers start to cut deep into the jagged rocks on their way to the coastline which is over six kilometers out and a kilometer down in altitude. The light from Nyx makes the thick clouds above them glow slightly giving the area a nice romantic nautical twilight feel to it.

A sergeant in an ACE suit, motions for Cyzk to follow him into a small domed hut that is surrounded by randomly placed trees and covered with camouflage-netting and brush.

Entering the hut, Cyzk is amazed that below him is a hundred meter wide spherical underground complex. Looking through the grated decks, he sees over a dozen screens for a CIC where Giáp's people are tracking their teams and the CDF in the field. The sergeant picks up an old style phone receiver and hands it to Cyzk, and while hitting a button to open the line, "It's General Giáp, Sir."

On the phone Cyzk can hear the shots and explosions in the back ground while saying, "Well, ain't this primitive as fuck!"

["Hey ho, Matey! Glad you could make it to the party!"]

"I see you're at Novyy Rylsk?"

["A lovely day 'ere for a dust up!"]

"I hear your regiment is surrounded by two divisions."

["Yea, we finally got 'em right where we want 'em!"]

Cyzk huffs a laugh, "I bet you do!"

["Just so you know, Gudici is coming up from the southeast and half of your battalions are dropping to encircle Homer from behind. In 'bout twenty or so it's gonna get right nasty for 'um."]

"I take it you want me to sit it out at Tareyton."

["Yeppers! Wait for me to yomp 'em over to the Meadows for ya! It'll take six weeks maybe? By then you'll have the order of battle and yur peeps all prep'd and ready for the fun!"]

Cyzk nods, "Bee the anvil."

["That's the spirit, mate!"]

"I got one question...why me?"

["Well, you are both the moral and the morale choice! If I go down you got the reins, and after Wycombe my people will follow you anywhere."]

"To win I'll probably make a lot of your people dead."

["To win my people will expect no less."]

"Just so you know, if I go down Graves will replace me."

["Yea, I figured...problem is ol' Buzzard will win this too fast. Our goal here is to punish them."]

"I'm behind ya on that one."

["And that, fine sir, is why we asked for you!"]

"By the way, do we have anyone up by Rakija Oblast?"

Giap starts howling-laughing over the phone, ["You wiped out a bloody winery just outside of town! That was great shootin', mate! My favorite label too!"]

"Can we scout the place for a wrecked Centipede?"

["In the words of Cowboy, no can do buckeroo!"]

"Kinda wanna keep it out of their hands."

["*That's* the problem with improving on shit! Tell ya what, I'll toss it in Vossler's court. See what he can do, that work for ya?"]

"It will definitely shut me up!"

["Well then, me mate, fuck the shut up! We got this!"]

"Thanks, General."

["Voss is dropping on in now so I best get back to work. The Sergeant will get you to the ops in Tareyton so you and your people need to skedaddle. The site you're standing in was compromised the second you landed so I expect an air strike inside a half-hour."]

Cyzk is taken back slightly because the hundred or so people below him do not look like they are making any effort to evacuate, "What! Why aren't your people getting the fuck outta here?"

["We dropped that dime and must make a good show if it! Gotta make 'em believe they got both you an' me."]

"You gonna tell your people, right?"

["They volunteered, mate. It's time for you to shove off!"]

Cyzk notices the sergeant is looking at him and pointing at his wrist, "We got to get out of here, Sir."

"Okay, General, we are outty."

Cyzk hangs up the phone and suddenly realizes that all of the staff down below is well over seventy years of age, and with a Colonel stepping up to them the sergeant snaps a salute, "Sir."

The Colonel returns it with a warm smile, "It's been my honor working with you, Sergeant. You two need to go, they'll be here a smidge less than twenty-five minutes." With the Sergeant nodding, he turns to Cyzk, "Marshal, can you leave one or two of your fighters top side for their target practice? It'll be a might more convincing."

Cyzk is amazed he agrees to it and says, "They can identify mine by the tail number. That's what you want, right?"

The Colonel smiles, "That would be perfect, my good man! We'll make doubly sure it gets blown to hell."

01101111-01101101-01101111-01101100-01100110-01100110-01100110-01100110

Kevin Vossler and a squad of six ghost droids, joined by thirty PacMan drones, jump from the HWG101 Fastback at twenty-eight kilometers above Novyy Rylsk. Diving out of the back of the ship Vossler and each of the droids are carrying two of their stupidly lethal M2 railguns along with eight bandoliers of ammo however, the PacMan drones are overloaded with twelve bandoliers each.

With the PacMan struggling to keep the speed of their drop below 180kph, Vossler and the droids race ahead at 250kph straight down. Admittedly this would be a lot more exciting if one could see

where they were going, that is watching the ground racing up as if they were skydiving, but here on Taiji everything is pea-soup thick. To get around in the clouds the navigational utility designed for Taiji simply shows a wireframe construct of the planet surface approaching with an altitude counter spooling down on the tacnet display.

In other words, meh...

On the other hand the first half of this trip, riding down in the Fastback, was all kinds of exciting because they were way out ahead of the slicks and warts. Point being, when the pink Centipede Mew flicked a few Micropede out to destroy the baby-blue Co-op Centipedes, those missiles fired their mini-missiles and one of them barely had the range to reach the Fastback where it slammed into its fuselage.

Way up here in the thin air, and with the impenetrable armor of the Razorback drop ships, the warhead felt like a dull thud when it went off on the hull. To Vossler this was all kinds of eerie because when he was a kid the armor of their older HWG83 drop ships would have buckled under a 1,000kg blast but that was then!

The Fastback and the seven Thunderbirds decelerate and pull up before hitting the clouds, and where all the slicks and warts dive into them and scatter, mostly towards the west at low altitude with half moving out around Novyy Rylsk and half swinging out wide for Tareyton, the Fastback high tails it for Novyy Rylsk.

One would think that to stay out of sight while flying around in the clouds one should keep things in the subsonic range, but at low altitude, with layer upon layer of broken storm clouds above you, you are just as invisible while flying at low Mach speeds—which is what the slicks and Warthogs are doing. The Fastback is making it look like they're racing out for Most, on the far opposite side of the planet from Rakija Oblast, but this route takes them right over Novyy Rylsk.

At Mach 3, while skipping over the tops of the clouds, this is where Vossler and the droids dive out the back of the ship and into the slipstream. Mercifully falling out behind the dual Mach waves, it only takes a few quick minutes for them to slow down, accelerate, then slow down again to land. A minute-twenty after them stepping away from sticking the landing, half of the drones smack into the mud at low velocity with the others stopping to hover just short of it.

With a light drizzle, and the snap, crackle and pop of distant battle all around, General Giáp steps up to Vossler with an Ortho-boot on his foot, and puts out a hand with a smile, "Any good fights lately?"

Vossler takes his hand and almost laughs, "Fuck you."

Giáp snorts with a grin, "Hated doin' that to ya, me cobber, but they didn't call ya'll the Kung Fu Koala for nothin'!"

Vossler smiles and nods, "I got a few licks in."

"That ya did, babe." Nodding back, Giáp's eyes then go big remembering, "Blimey, you hit like a Mantis Shrimp!"

"You were a wiry little fucker." Vossler hands him one of the M2 guns, "Anyway, I've finally come for me pint!"

Giáp blinks while admiring the M2, "Been waitin' to pay up."

Vossler hands him four bandoliers and shrugs, "Kinda hard to enjoy your suds with a mouth full of blood."

"True that, mate." Giáp takes the ammo looks up and smiles, "Well, pints and sheilas when this is over!" He nods over his shoulder at a ghost droid standing next to him, "Maggie 'ere will get you to your command squad."

Vossler looks at the ghost droid operated by Maggie Prather and asks, "Are they at the Sriracha Mu terminator?"

She nods, "Straight north from here."

He shakes his head, "Get them out of there!" Vossler jabs a finger at her. "No more coming into the shit from the sun, got that?"

She delays and nods again, "Okay?"

"Have them meet us at Zmeya Rapids. That's southwest of here. There's an old nuke crater on top of a hill called the Punchbowl. That's five clicks east of the dam."

"I'll send the orders."

Vossler looks at Giáp, "The tunnels are still there, right?"

Giáp smiles, "Waitin' for ya an' stocked to the gills!"

"Perfect! That is now Recon's base of ops."

Giáp gives an approving nod and nudges Maggie's droid in the arm, saying, "Recon is in good hands, love!" There is suddenly the sounds of a massive firefight coming from the southeast so Giáp gives a surprised look, "Well, that'd be Gudici and the Eighth-Reg, an' right on time! We got these rat-bags caught in a mosh now."

01000001-01100001-01111001-01101111-00101110-00101110-00101110

For Anthony Gudici and Zach Nelson the last ten weeks in the ice caverns, on the edge of the Mesa ice cap, have been as boring as all get-out. It was doubly so for their regiment of Gurkhas, and even though the Nepalese are always an insufferably polite and cheerful people, they were getting antsy so the waiting was taking its toll on them. Thank God their old Sergeant Major kept a lid on it.

Because of this fight, Ganju Thapa has gone from a Battalion commander, a Chief Deputy Marshal, up one-step to a Senior Chief Master Sergeant slot becoming a co-silverback exec to Gudici. Point being, he was next in line to take command of the regiment but this arrangement frees Nelson up to take a front line command of troops for today's festivities. Yes, this is somewhat unorthodox but they are fighting under the auspices of General, Ngô Văn Giáp. Now, very few realize that Giáp happens to be the General's given name and not his family/clan name. It's kind of like calling someone General Bill, but it stuck and he thinks it's funny and has never corrected anybody.

Anyway, this encirclement parameter is three kilometers deep with field platoons patrolling the rear desperately looking for any sign of spooky, but what happens here is that two of the battalions from Gurkha Regiment 3608 slither in high overhead, and from the clouds they drop in a string three kilometers long—bisecting the encirclement from the southeast in a spectacularly bloody one-sided fire barrage.

From one-thousand meters altitude, and dropping fast, each Gurkha empties a tube of five 2,000kg yield grenades. That's a total of 8.76 million kilograms of explosive force spread out over an area three by two kilometers—wiping out almost three whole battalions of CDF troops. They land in a ragged line and split into two groups with one rolling up the encirclement towards the north, and one rolling out to the west, and blasting everything that moves to hell as they do.

Guidici and Nelson with their command squads, and Thapa with his control squad, land in the middle of the destruction and bodies lying askew, and as their troopers are spreading out, many shouting and laughing "Aayo Gorkhali" or "Aayo Gorkhe" as they do, Gudici looks at Nelson and asks, "Well, you ready for this, Hedge?"

Gudici and Nelson have never really liked each other but they have always supported one another one-hundred-and-plus percent. The reasons for the hate have faded over the years but sometimes animosity can go hand in hand and co-exist with admiration.

Now with Third Battalion dropping around them, held back in reserve, Nelson smiles, "As I'll ever be, Wopper!" He looks at Thapa, "Hate to say it but your hands are gonna be full, dude."

"It's my job!" Thapa shrugs, then thumbs behind him going, "I got five Battalions of Gurks landing here in just a few minutes. I'll get them split between you two in short order."

Nelson nods, "I want to thank you for everything, Ganju."

"You can say that with a pitcher of suds after this is over."

Gudici stresses to Thapa, "Make sure those pallet drops don't stop and we'll keep the ball rollin'."

"Aye-aye, Marshal." Thapa smiles as he notices the reserve troops moving from dead body to body, "And, just so you know, it may be bad form for our people to leave death-cards, but they do sprinkle those they kill with poppy flower seeds now."

Gudici and Nelson start laughing, with Gudici saying, "That's so SAS!" He then looks at Nelson, "Okay, we're kinda useless until shit starts to bog down. Let your people do their job. You'll know when you're needed, and..." He then points up in the air, "Sandy wanted me to let you know that, at this very moment, you are now an SDM for Gurkha Regiment three-six-one-one! With these new troops droppin' in you've got yourself your own command."

Nelson is surprised, "Shit serious?"

"It'll go to Ganju here, after this fight, they have other plans for you so, have fun with it while you got it! And..." With him and then Thapa shaking Nelson's hand, Gudici follows with a slightly guilty look on his face, "In spite of us locking horns all these years, looking back it *has* been my privilege working with you."

Thapa smirks, "You're in your own time now, son."

Nelson nods, "Got'cha five by five, don't fuck this monkey!"

He and Thapa openly laugh when Gudici shrugs and goes, "Well, yea, it's mine to fuck!"

01 100011-01 10111-01 110110-01 100110-01 100101-01 100110-01 100101

Under strict radio silence, with all EM emissions muted, it took an hour for the Sergeant to fly Cyzk, his wingman and five others out to a place called the Salt Mine here in Tareyton Meadows. The trip in a suborbital 'zoomie' coach started at supersonic speeds, but the last twenty minutes dragged along at subsonic.

Mining salt, being one of Taiji's top mineral exports, resulted in a thousand kilometers of massive excavation tunnels in and around the Tareyton region, but the one secret C3 facility that does the actual command and control ops for General Giáp, code named Salt Mine, is here smack dab in the middle of the famous, Tareyton Greens.

Nine courses, one-hundred and sixty-two holes, if there were ever to be a Mecca for the sport of golf then Tareyton Greens nails it.

Known worlds over, this place has an 18th at *Whistling Straits* vibe to it. Now, most holes have just a smidge of difficulty, but every course here has a handful of fairways that are claw your eyes out, wrist-slashingly Dye-abolical. Golf on Taiji runs east and west, for obvious reasons, but the ninth hole on the ninth course, dead center in

the middle of this complex, by the main clubhouse, has been coined Nine-Iron Smash and not without good reason. It's over five-hundred meters of a par-six, one-eighty switchback, chipping-fest!

If there be a doorway into a "vortex of rage" in golf, then the tee-up at Nine-Iron Smash is the doorknob—so when not playing best ball, your short game and loft had better be nuts-on.

Landing three kilometers away from the Nine-Iron Smash, in the cloudy dark and drizzle, all eight of them pile out and slip into a service tunnel that's just one in a labyrinth of over ninety tunnels that crisscross and weave under the entire golfing complex. As they run into employees and passersby, nobody acknowledges them. Not one person waves, smiles or even looks up—it's like they're not even there.

So, for the box marked discipline...check!

Entering a maintenance bay, they take stairs down to a lower level complex of tunnels, but these have been carved out of solid rock. At a ramp they descend into a third level of storm drains and pumping stations and entering a lift at a bank of elevators, below the main clubhouse, they drop two-hundred meters to an industrial bilge sump.

They enter into a spherical C3 complex that is exactly like the one they just left, but here they gain access from below via the sump, and when they reach the main CIC level the watch commander, a Colonel, Sally Rand, throws her hand out to Cyzk, "Oi'ello, Marshal!"

Cyzk does not react to how ridiculously cute this petite-blonde officer is, in contrast to her thick Rough-Nut accent, and while shaking her hand, "Colonel Rand. I'm curious, did anybody make it out?"

She cringes slightly, "Sorry, mate. Nobody made it."

"Did they find the tail-no?"

"Rudders and toes, they say!" Rand starts to nod and smiles, "They found your tail number a naut-mile down in the rocks."

Cyzk wonders, "Toes?"

She shrugs, "The big toe! It'd be one of the few body parts that consistently survives a bombing or a buildings collapse. An' that is why the General gave 'is up."

Cyzk looks surprised and throws out, "You're kidding me!"

Rand nods with, "Gob honest, mate! He 'ad it cut off an hour before you blew into the system. You can say that the General will yomp the extra klick. They found a few and already matched 'is up!" She then grins big, "So, luv, me little chunk-a-hunk, the Co-op bastards now think the two of you be goners!"

"They think we're dead, already?"

"Pushin' up posies, right and tidy!"

"That was fast."

"Surprised all us as well! That's the kind of turn 'round one would expect from the Squirrels, not 'omer." She points to him and his wingman, "Okay, you two, we 'ave no direct COMs from 'ere! Ya copy? Everything is 'ard lined into optical that run out to the three local cities where signals packets are untraceable. Yea, real time connects are gonna be muddy as poo, but that's the price we pay for invisibility."

Cyzk blinks and, "We're good with that."

Rand adds, "You got another divvy droppin' in throughout the day and we got a 'ome for 'em! The salt mines south of 'ere. The lower levels and entrances are all flooded, but the upper levels are bone dry an' stocked up for a ten divvies cave romp!"

Cyzk nods with approval then asks, "Fast egress?"

Rand shrugs, thinking, "Blow the ceilings and... 'bout thirty seconds they're out an' in it for the win!"

"Cool! I really want to get to work on the order of battle and the tactical layout for Tareyton."

She shrugs, "We a'ready got 'eaps of OO-Bees an' tac-maps to choose from. That'll keep us busy for 'bout a week...if that."

Cyzk asks, "What do we do on down time?"

Rand leans in, and waggles her eyebrows big while saying, "Well, luv, popular 'round 'ere is strip-Gleek an' suds!"

01001101-01100001-01110001-01110101-01101001-01110001

Leaving the ghost droids and drones behind, Maggie delivers Vossler with his M2, to the tunnels below the Punchbowl inside a half an hour. To his frustration it took both the command and control teams coming in from the North almost two hours to get there, but this gave him time to catch up on status from both General Giáp and Cyzk, review the battle at Novvy Rylsk that's winding down, and collect detailed reports on Co-op unit movement at all the five houses.

Maggie brought the command and control squads down then went back into the field to continue shadowing General Giáp.

With twelve SA troopers before Vossler, intermixed with six ghost droids, one of Giáp's guerilla fighters stationed there on the mend, with a bandaged face and forearm, asks Vossler as he gestures to an open crate holding twenty-four of the Security Services StG-880 railguns, "Want me to tell 'em 'bout this, Voss?"

Vossler nods, "Yea, Eli, you tell 'em."

Eli nods, then says to everybody, "For those who didn't 'ear, 'cause we're keepin' this on the down-an'-low, they, whoever *they* are, landed a Dragonfly topside last week. The pilot hopped on a Djinn that came in with 'im and they tore out of 'ere like a scalded ass ape! They didn't even shut the Dragy down, they just left it in the bowl whirring on idle." Eli points to the paper in Vossler's hand, "That was pinned on the crates when we opened it. As I breath, mate, that's Deuteronomy twenty-eight : fifty-three, UK New International."

"How would you know that?"

"My day job I'm clergy, an Archdeacon."

Vossler looks at the paper and reads, "Eli, Because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb...so, let's not do that! We're even, Deacon." Vossler looks up and, "This mark, I take it you know who this is."

"Aye, mate, an' we don't talk 'bout it. I take it you know?"

"Yea, mate, and we won't talk about it, but I do have one question, how in the hell do you know him?"

"He sought me out back when for a consult, an' I 'ave to say tha' Tall Poppy sure knows 'is scripture! UK New International fell out of favor centuries ago. Problem I see 'ere is that payback for a squiz over *the word* would maybe be a sixer of Four-Ex, if that. Fifty crates of these, with ample feed, that be a godsend."

"How many four-fifty-eight shorts he send with 'em?"

"Three-mill, an' tha' Dragy was draggin' it's keel comin' in."

Vossler looks up at every one and announces, "So, story is this shit came from the black market! We all on the same page?"

With everyone nodding, yes, Vossler says to Eli, "Thanks, Eli, but I gotta talk with these guys for a minute before they shove off." With Eli stepping out, Vossler goes, "Okay, I know of Jones and he was a good guy, but what was it that sent him to a dirt nap?" Everybody looks at each other but nobody answers, so Vossler almost shouts, "THAT was not a rhetorical motherfuckin' question! Someone had better puke up an answer before I beat it out of you all!"

A PFC4 makes an obvious statement, "He was spotted."

"He came in from the fucking sun!" Vossler shakes his head, "I wrote a report on how to do recon here on Taiji over fifty years ago, and nothing has changed! I just posted it on the unit net so pull it down and learn something for once! Nothing has changed! The new way of doin' shit is out the fucking window because old school is the

only school that'll work here on mutherfuckin' Taiji!"

One of his platoon leaders asks, "Highlights, boss?"

Vossler almost laughs, then, "Okay, cliffs notes, stay out of the sun, which means stay the fuck out of the sun! Stay out of eye level! Get low, get in the shadows or, better yet, get your ass high!" Vossler points up, "It's Tuesday's soup of the day everyday up there! Bacon-lobster cream bisque for as far as the eye can see, but here it's forty or thirty meters up—*not* five hundred! Here you had better be getting your camo right and floatin' along with the soup doin' flybys or they will spot you! What happens then?"

"I'll wanna work with our people when they come in."

"Recon here is a battalion sized company so that means *all* hands on deck." Vossler thinks about it then breaks the 'need to know' silence to let them know, "Look, another thing nobody is telling you, cloaking is done for! The photo-mechanics are going to be kaput in a few weeks. We're lettin' the cat out of the bag when armor tangles here at Tareyton so it's better to say goodbye to it now." Vossler then points to the JACC he is wearing and smiles big, "We tend to forget that in these things we used to be chameleons out there! That's old school shit people forgot and...it's an art we're gonna bring back."

His staff sergeant speaks up, "I don't know how you did it back then but I have to agree, we have no choice here."

"We don't." Vossler shrugs big, "Worse yet, all ya'll have to learn the old way of doing this shit on the clock."

A corporal points out, "We're fast studies, chief."

Vossler nods, "We have six weeks to spread the love."