

## Chapter 13

At a moment when Darth Cloran should have been excited and celebrating her victory over the Jedi Master, she was not. Never before had she reported to her superiors that she had failed a mission. But there was no denying it, she had failed... and her Sith Masters were not pleased. Their criticism and condemnation was uncomfortable and painful, but it was nothing when compared to the mental punishment she was giving herself.

Darth Cloran was embarrassed, humiliated, and she hated the feeling of failure. These emotions fueled her hatred toward the Republic. More specifically, that hatred was directed toward the small commando team that had successfully infiltrated her defenses and destroyed her one sole responsibility on this planet, the Mobile Relay Unit.

When Darth Cloran took the time to honestly reflected upon the events that had transpired, she had to admit that this elite Republic unit had scored a resounding and indisputable victory against her own soldiers and the Sith empire. Beyond just defeating her, the Republic soldiers had also left no trace behind. Initially her scouts had been able to follow the trail of the attacking force, but after about a kilometer the trail had become difficult to follow and their progress slowed. Then another kilometer after that the trail was completely lost and no sign could be found of this elusive enemy.

The fact that Darth Cloran was still alive and still in command of her forces was a testament that her report to her Masters had actually gone fairly well. At least as well as could be expected. The Sith did not tolerate failure well,

even from gifted commanders. Darth Cloran knew that this would be a black spot on her resume for years to come and the failure would follow her career wherever she went. But that reality was not what was bothering her, at least not as much as it probably would have under normal circumstances.

As Darth Cloran exited the communications tent where she had reported to her commanders via the portable holo-terminal, the communication specialists all rapidly moved back inside. They were weary not to make eye contact with the Sith Lord as she stormed away. It was obvious to the various soldiers that she was in no mood to discuss what plans or orders she would issue next and they all thought it was best to avoid, as much as possible, any contact with their Sith commander.

Instead, each of the Sith soldiers did whatever they could to look busy and prayed they would not be singled out by their leader. It was widely known in the Sith Army that the statistics of the frequency of negligent death by lightsaber at the hands of a Sith Lord made a significant jump higher immediately following a failed mission.

Even with all of these troublesome items of concern on her mind, Darth Cloran could not get her mind off of one very troubling fact. If it had not been for her youth and pure athleticism, she would have been defeated by a Jedi in an even one-on-one battle. She recognized that she had defeated and eventually killed the old Jedi Master, but she had nearly lost that battle. She had the sore and tender scar on her side to prove it, along with several other bruises and scabs.

Darth Cloran recognized that she had fought many

Jedi and Sith blade masters in the past, but they all had proven to be of little real challenge when confronted in one on one combat. They had all fallen relatively quickly and while they were so called masters, none of them had provided nearly the trouble she had when fighting this latest foe. To add insult to injury, this Jedi seemed to her to be feeble and should not have had nearly the success against her that he did.

She had already spent a considerable amount of time evaluating every little detail of the fight in her mind but she could not discover any obvious reason for her near failure. Because her personal self evaluation of the fight did not turn up any mistakes or extenuating circumstance that would had lead to an advantage for the Jedi, she then concluded that the near failure pointed to a flaw in her combat tactics.

The younger Padawan she faced at the end of the conflict had displayed similar tactics and fighting style and had also proved elusive and difficult to defeat, though it was obvious he was not at the same level of mastery as the older Jedi. Then again, she grunted to herself, she had failed to defeat him as well. Though she was certain she could in fact defeat him when they met again on the field of battle. She had little doubt in her mind that they would indeed meet again.

As she continued to ponder and evaluate the fight, she was discovering that there was just something about the fighting style of both of the Jedi that was troubling her. She knew she would not be able to put it out of her mind until she was able to discover what it was. She also knew that brooding over the problem would not help resolve it, so

Darth Cloran proceeded back toward her own living quarters and began to prepare for an intense training session.

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Ocal had manual control of the spacecraft as they neared the orbit of K-31. With the efficiency and grace of a pilot and commander who had done this a million times before, Ocal brought his craft into the proper approach vector for an atmospheric entry to K-31.

Their approach to the planet had been on the opposite side from where the Sith battlecruiser had stationed itself in a fixed planetary orbit. The Sith cruiser was orbiting along the equator of the planet and was providing support for the Sith army that was planetside.

Luckily for Ocal and his crew, there was only a single Sith cruiser present. By using the planet itself as a shield to hide behind, combined with some sophisticated electronic countermeasures that Ocal would not divulge the origins of, they were able to enter the atmosphere of the planet undetected. That was the first, and easy, part of their plan. If that proved successful, none of them really were sure what they would do to locate and retrieve the soldiers of SCU-11.

There was some moderate buffeting as Ocal's ship hit the outer limits of the atmosphere. Ocal did a quick adjustment of the atmospheric stabilizers and the buffeting quickly died down to just a mild rumble that was heard more than felt throughout the ship.

As the ship passed down through the upper atmosphere and then through some high elevation clouds, the green and brown landscape appeared through the pilots

viewport. Ocal turned his head toward Emi-gon and commented dryly.

“Well Jedi, where to now?”

Emi-gon continued to look out the viewport and calmly replied.

“That is a good question. I do not feel the presence of the Padawan. But SCU Jedi are trained to hide their emotions and feelings quite well, which would explain why I don’t sense him.”

When Emi-gon had broke the news of the death of Master Jarek to the others, there had been a brief discussion about whether to continue the rescue mission or not. In the end, the death of Master Jarek did not change the reasoning or logic behind Emi-gon’s overall objective with the mission. Emi-gon had then decided to press forward with the rescue effort even after the death of Master Jarek. Ocal was more than happy to comply as he was still eager to get the promised credits.

Emi-gon continued.

“According to the briefings from Master Jarek, the SCU raid on the MRU was planned near sector 4331 and is where logically we should begin our search...”

Ocal continued her train of thought for her.

“... but that would also take us right into the area where the Sith army is located. As good as you might be with your little lighted jedi weapon, it ain’t gonna do you any good against 40 anti-spacecraft batteries.”

“Yes Captain, I will not argue with you there.”

“Well then Master Jedi, what is your brilliant plan?”

Emi-gon contemplated for a moment before answering in a serious tone.

“There is no need to rush quiet yet. Let’s approach their last known attack point and find us a spot to sit this ship down quietly and plan what we need to do from there.

“I suggest we stay at least 25 kilometers west of the MRU location, and I suggest you keep this thing low to the ground to mask our approach from the Sith detection arrays. That is, if you can handle it.” Emi-gon tilted her head toward Ocal and gave him a sly smile.

“Don’t challenge me Jedi, you may not like it.”

Ocal dove the ship directly toward the ground accelerating to just below the local speed of sound and then pulled up just meters before colliding with the trees. The ship leveled off in a valley that ran roughly in the same direction they were heading toward. Ocal kept the ship below the hills on either side to mask it from visual and electronic detection.

Emi-gon had a thought cross her mind that she realized had never occurred to her before. So she asked.

“Captain, what is the name of your ship?”

A smile slowly spread across both Ocal’s face and his co-pilot Quinto’s. Ocal waited a moment before he replied.

“The Twilight Nova.”

A confused look came over Emi-gon’s face as she did not comprehend the meaning, which in turn only made the smiles on the faces of her companions grow wider.

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For the past three hours Darth Cloran had been kneeling and meditating. She had taken the first opportunity she could to distance herself from the daily grind of combat

leadership and had found a secluded clearing in the forest away from any noise and other distractions.

The Sith did not meditate like the Jedi did, at least Darth Cloran did not. She was not meditating per se, but rather she had been going over every second of the previous melee between her and the two Jedi, examining each parry and thrust in excruciating detail. She had gone over the details several times earlier in the day, but there was a nagging feeling that she had to solve the riddle of their abnormal fighting style before she would allow herself to move on to other tasks that she knew she would eventually need to accomplish. For now, she was solely focused on how she had nearly been defeated and how she was going to prevent that in the future.

As she concentrated on the later part of her battle with the Jedi Master, Darth Cloran continued to be drawn back to the moment where she had thought she sensed victory and when the Jedi had calmly withstood her blows. It was as if the more complex and greater the number of attacks being launched at him, the more calm he was. Almost as if he needed the chaos around him in order to fight effectively.

Darth Cloran spent the next 20 minutes going over that fateful strike that left her scarred and what had happened leading up to that moment. It was then that she was able to discover the weakness and flaw in her Djem So fighting style. She discovered the same opening when performing the switch in her overhead strikes that the Master Jedi had exploited. With the flaw identified, she then spent the next 30 minutes rehearsing the overhead strikes. She discovered and devised the method to prevent that

weakness in her defense from happening again. She made a mental note to insure that she correctly executed the fix in her daily training routine.

Even then, Darth Cloran knew it was not the opening in her defense that was the real problem, but rather it was the fighting style of these particular Jedi that was the quandary to be solved.

Then it dawned on her.

One of the blademasters at the Sith combat training facility had given a lecture on all of the basic forms of lightsaber combat that were currently used throughout the galaxy and she vaguely recalled the mention of one particular form, the third in the series of seven, called Seresu.

What she recalled most about the form was that the instructor, she did not remember his name, had regarded Seresu as an antiquated form that was not relevant in lightsaber vs. lightsaber combat in the modern galaxy. He had proclaimed that it was only really useful for deflecting blaster bolts from rifles. She herself had been taught the basics of the form, but only enough to help with that very task of defending against distant attacks from a blaster rifle.

Contrary to the old Sith Master, it was clear that based on her most recent encounter with the Jedi, there was indeed relevance to the old lightsaber form. The more she thought about it, the more the pieces fell into place. She was able to breakdown and identify that the basics of the Master Jedi's form was indeed the simple strokes of the Seresu lightsaber form. She had never seen it used to such mastery and in such odd combinations, especially when fighting another lightsaber equipped foe.

With the mystery finally solved, Darth Cloran was able to focus on the next part of her quest with the same fervor as a Minok attacks the exposed sensors of a space cruiser.

Darth Cloran did not sleep that night but rather, she evaluated, studied, trained and devoted herself to mastering the counter attacks, perrys and other stratagems to easily defeat Seresu masters. In the process, she developed her own techniques and attacks to defeat that specific form.

Initially Darth Cloran was frustrated with herself about not being able to more easily handle and counter such a basic and simple form as Seresu, but in the end, she ended up forgetting about the frustration and devoted herself to the training and vowed to not let the same thing happen again in the future. After all, she had been able to defeat the Jedi without having known what she was fighting against, the next time, it would be much easier and more decisive.