

Chapter 20

The movement through the night had been grueling on the members of SCU-11. The vegetation had become significantly more dense with all types of unique vegetation interfering with movement. There were only small game trails zig zagged through the forest. They were created by the wildlife and allowed SCU-11 to ease the burden of travel slightly when they were able to use them. The worst of the vegetation were the thick bushes at the base of the trees that had light yellow leaves with a sticky substance that Larun assumed was used to trap unsuspecting flying insects. But that same sticky substance caused the leaves and branches to also stick to the uniforms of the SCU members.

After about an hour of fighting the sticky leaves, Larun had the team change course to try and move out of the nagging undergrowth. It took another 20 minutes of walking before they were clear of the yellow bushes, though they still were not clear of the difficult terrain. The terrain had become more rugged and uneven with loose rock that would easily give way under the weight of a soldier.

As the early morning hours approached, SCU-11 was finally able to break free of the rough terrain and entered into some more easily passable terrain. Unfortunately they had to slow up their pace in order to insure that they remained concealed as best as they possibly could.

All through the night the SCU members could hear the distant roar and hum of reconnaissance aircraft patrolling the area around them, but as far as they could tell,

they were just random patrols and none of the aircraft appeared to be following their movement. This rationale did nothing to diminish the elevated stress levels affecting all of the SCU members.

With the first sun just thirty minutes away from rising above the horizon, the team came to a halt near the top of a ridge line. Larun established their defensive perimeter and set up an observation post on the opposite side of the ridge to insure nothing surprised them unexpectedly while they were halted for the day. As a continued safety precaution, they had continued to maintain their routine of moving only in the dark and then staying concealed during the daytime hours. It was slower to move that way, but it was more safe and secure.

Once the watch and defensive rotations were established for the remainder of the daylight hours, the SCU-11 members finally began to get settled down for the day. They then began to rotate their sleep and guard duty shifts as previously arranged.

Larun made a final visit to each of the men as they were getting settled. He then made his way back to where Mosok was studying the electronic map that was being displayed on the small datapad. His hand was placed on his chin while he intently studied the map. As Larun approached the Jedi, Mosok turned his head and gave him a quick nod and turned back to the map.

“Master Jedi, you look as if you are trying to crack a Bothan cypher code.”

Mosok lightly laughed as he allowed his hand to drop from his chin and some of the tension to be relaxed from his shoulders.

“No Sergeant, I am not nearly powerful enough to crack the famous Bothan spy codes, and I am certainly not powerful enough to be considered a *Master Jedi!*”

Larun expected just such a reply but it did not phase him as he pressed the conversation.

“Very well, in that case, what has captured your attention so fully?”

Mosok glanced back at the map as he answered

“Well, not much really. I was just reviewing the path that you and your men lead us on to get us here through the night and frankly, I am amazed. Without hesitation or deviation you selected the most secure route, and while it was difficult, it was the correct path and avoided even more difficulties. I am just bewildered at how consistently you are able to make those decisions so quickly and without err.”

Larun was taken back for just a moment at the honest and unrestrained conversation. Normally a leader, including Jedi commanders, does not like to admit when an enlisted man under their command knows more than they do. Yet here was Mosok, standing before him commenting and praising him without hesitation or regard to his own reputation or pride.

“Look Mast... umm, Jedi Mosok, this stuff has been ingrained in my head for years and years, and not just my head. But Vistom, Herek, and all the other guys as well. We live and breath this stuff.”

Mosok began to protest a little but Larun continued.

“We all know the Jedi are special in their own sphere. You train to use the Force, to feel it, to command it. Well, we are the same. Many of us have been doing these same things since we were barely able to walk. We may not

have been out running infantry maneuvers on our home planets, but most of us grew up living out in the elements. It could have been in the woods, or plains, or deserts, or oceans. Anywhere but inside the walls of a structure. When you have lived and breathed this stuff, much like a Jedi and the Force, we begin to see things differently. These are the traits we look for when we select the members of any of the SCU.s”

Mosok was nodding and looking at Larun intently while he gave his explanation and he was now contemplating what was said. His face seemed to indicate that he had accepted the logic, and then he replied.

“Well, whatever the case or cause, your tactical judgement is superb and I hope someday to reach the same level of comfort with the Force that you have found with small unit tactics.”

Larun decided to pry a little and see what he could find out about this Jedi. “So tell me Mosok, what are your plans after this war?”

“Who, me? Oh, I suspect when we return, the Jedi council will either assign me a new Master to continue my training or, more likely, they will end my training and assign me to the archival department or something similar.”

A quizzical look came over Larun’s face as Mosok spoke. “Why would they do that?”

“I am not what the Jedi Council would consider a ‘star pupil’. Or even for that matter, a pupil worth expending any additional effort on. If it wasn’t for Master Jarek’s dedication to see me trained as a Jedi Knight, I would have never been accepted by the Jedi Order for training. My testing scores were not high enough to warrant a spot at the

academy. If it wasn't for this war I doubt that even Master Jarek would have been successful in convincing them I was worth the effort to continue my training."

Now it was Larun's turn to protest

"But surely they would reconsider after our report from this mission."

"Well, the council would certainly take your report under advisement, of which I would be forever grateful if you did in fact submit such a report. But in the end, they would likely run me through the Jedi trials to determine my fate. The problem is, Master Jarek has run me through the trials on his own to prepare me for them and I am nowhere near capable of passing them. Sure I can hold my own in a few areas, but my kinetic Force control is weak at best. Not to mention there are several other areas where I struggle as well."

Larun was surprised at the candid and honest responses from Mosok so he decided to keep asking questions. This was, after all, his current commander and the more he and his men knew about him, the better.

"Well, I am not sure how the Jedi Council does it, but in SCU, performance in combat and under pressure accounts for a lot more than performance on some structured exam. Why was Jarek so set on seeing you trained as a Jedi?"

A faint smile crossed the lips of Mosok as he thought of the question and of his former master.

"That, Sergeant, is an excellent question. He revealed to me just a few days ago some of his thoughts on the matter. There was mention of a premonition and of things in the future, but he provided very little details. Now

that he is no longer with us, I'm not sure I will ever know for sure why I was so important to him."

Larun could see the pain in the Jedi's eyes when he talked of his former Master, so he decided it was time to change tactics with the conversation.

"His devotion to you was obvious, and honestly, some of us wondered why he bothered as well. But it is also obvious that it was not a complete waste. You have gotten us this far." That comment caused Mosok's smile to grow just a bit more pronounced as Larun finished the conversation "now commander, you go find a spot and get some rest. I'll take the first watch."

Mosok gave a slight nod, settled down below a tree, pulled his Jedi cloak around him, and quickly nodded off into a fitful sleep.

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Sendu watched as the latest reconnaissance aircraft touched down on the landing pad after it returned from its patrol. The two privates immediately ran out to the craft and plugged in their data pads to the sensor equipment in the cargo compartment and began the data transfer. This was the fifth data download from the patrolling aircraft and if it was anything like the previous four, things were looking very good.

It only took a minute for his men to complete the download. Sendu enjoyed the thought of having his own men under his command, and he watched as they ran the data cards back to him. Sendu thanked the two privates and

then walked briskly back to his “lab” as he now called his shelter where all of his equipment was setup.

Sendu had modified the equipment to optimize the data transfer from the sensors and had also modified the algorithms to more quickly be able to process the huge amounts of data. There was no way to make the radical changes required to allow real time detection from the aircraft itself, but he had modified it about as much as he could to speed up the process once the data was retrieved from the patrols and brought to his lab.

Some additional time was needed to append this new set of data to the previous four results, but once completed, the movement line of the enemy was extended and added to the previous path. The path was still not a straight line, but their direction of movement was clear and obvious to all those that examined it.

“I trust things are proceeding well?”

The voice of Darth Cloran from behind Sendu startled him and caused his heart to skip a beat as he quickly turned to look at the Sith Lord. She was standing only a meter behind him and he wasn't sure how long she had been there. After thinking about it, he figured he really didn't want to know.

“Yes my Lord. The sensors are working flawlessly. Additionally, since I made some changes to the software after the second flight, you can see that the dropped signals have been all but eliminated and their path is clear.”

Sendu stepped off to the side to allow Darth Cloran to move closer to the display and examine the route of the enemy unit in relation to the terrain features around them.

She studied the map closely for a few minutes and then reached a decision.

“Well Lieutenant, once again you have impressed me. This data is fantastic and it is clear where they are now heading. If you look over here...” she pointed to an area on the map a ways in front of the enemy plot line, “... this depression makes a natural barrier and is an ideal location for a pickup point. It is protected all around and it is plenty large enough to land a planetary insertion craft. I’m certain that is where they are heading.”

Sendu could only nod as he was not an expert on military tactics, and he really didn’t see the logic in the location, but was not about to show his ignorance to a Sith Lord.

“Yes my Lord, that seems to be a logical tactical destination.”

Darth Cloran laughed “Lieutenant, you do not need to lie to me to try and placate me. I like you because you deliver results and you are honest. Don’t change that now.”

The brutal honesty caught Sendu off guard, but he liked what he heard and recovered quickly.

“Yes my Lord, it won’t happen again.”

“I suspect it will not. Now, I have an ambush to conduct. The enemy will make it to their destination late tonight based on their current rate of speed and I plan to be there waiting for them.”

Sendu could sense that his work of tracking the enemy was coming to an end and quickly asked

“Would you care for a technical advisor to come along?”

Darth Cloran thought for a moment and decided that it might be a good idea.

“Sure Lieutenant, that sounds like a wise idea. Grab your gear and let’s get moving.”

Sendu moved over to the corner of his “lab” where his personal gear was stored but then stopped as a thought came to his mind. Instead, he turned to a pile of equipment that was neatly stacked on the other side of the shelter and picked up two closed hard cases.

Darth Cloran had already walked out of the doorway but Sendu did not think that her permission was required for bringing the additional gear along. He made sure he had his own gear stored inside of his personal carrier and then brought along the other two cases as well.

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One hour later, Darth Cloran’s transport was leading the formation of larger troop carriers toward the suspected enemy pickup point. They did not need the speed and mobility of the reconnaissance aircraft for this mission and she had elected to move all two hundred of the infantry soldiers remaining under her command to the designated insertion point. There was no need for holding any of her forces back as there was nothing left for them to guard. Her mission on the planet had changed from guardian to hunter, and the final battle was rapidly approaching.

While the destruction of the MRU had been a failure on her part, she still had the satisfaction of having killed yet another Jedi. She also felt confident another notch would be added to her already formidable kill tally in just a short time.

She knew that the destruction of the enemy unit would not completely make up for the failure of her primary mission, but it sure would help!

Her superiors had questioned her decision to bring an entire battalion, at least what remained of it, to handle such a small unit. But the elusive enemy had already proved difficult to destroy and even more difficult to locate. Even with Sendu Farns' ingenious tracking system, they were still always playing catchup. But this time, she knew their destination and were finally a step ahead of the enemy. The will of the Dark Side of the Force was clear, as was the tactical logic. She figured this was the end game, the final confrontation, and the more allies she had on her side, the better the odds would be for success. On top of that, she needed as many eyes as were possible to try and locate the elusive "Shadow Walkers", another nickname her troops had come up with for the enemy.

"My Lord, we are three minutes out", the pilot reported over the intercom crackling in her ear.

"Very well", was her reply.

Thirty minutes later the transports had deposited all of the soldiers and had shut down and the crews had secured their ships. They had approached the secluded landing zone from the opposite direction as the approaching enemy force and had remained very low to the ground and had done everything they could to mask their approach and landing at the site from the approaching enemy. For the ambush to work it had to be a complete surprise.

The natural terrain features of the spot did a great job to help keep them hidden and now Darth Cloran had informed the pilots of the landing craft to stay put and shut

their aircraft down to avoid any further risk of detection. Having the ships nearby also provided additional combat benefits as well.

Darth Cloran was now inspecting the available approach routes and was trying to make a guess as to which one would be the most likely to be used by the approaching enemy. There were several good options available and she was listening to input from her officers as well as inspecting the area herself. After several minutes of discussion, Sendu decided to approach and listen in just as Darth Cloran was finishing up an observation.

“... yes, I agree that the ridge to the south would provide the best vantage point for us. Let us setup the main ambush line there.”

“My Lord,” it was one of her long time company commanders, “with our soldiers up on the ridge like that, we run the risk of the enemy slipping right by us with their blending suits and if they get inside our line, they will certainly discover our landing craft and bug out.”

Darth Cloran nodded. “Yes, I know. I have been troubling over that myself. Furthermore, It seems that based on our experience with them, they have also been trained in mind masking techniques to where it is quite difficult for even my Force powers to detect them.”

The group of officers became quiet as they were each contemplating the dilemma and how to counter it.

Sendu had an idea and decided to speak up, “My Lord, how certain are you that they will approach from this route?”

All of the eyes in the group turned toward the intruder but Darth Cloran was quick to answer as she had learned to trust the brilliant technician.

“We cannot pinpoint the exact location, but the odds are very high that they will pass through this pass. Anywhere from 100-300 meters in that direction.” She turned and pointed across the small valley. “There are other routes into this landing zone, but each of them has their downsides. Except for maybe one that is 3 kilometers across the way. But that one is too tight and restricted, not to mention far out of the way, for an experienced team to compromise themselves.”

Sendu thought for a moment, sensing all of the eyes boring holes into him, waiting for him to continue with his train of thought.

“The thing to remember about their stealth suits is that they alter their visual representation. I would assume they have microscopic diodes that project the scene from one side of the suit to the other side of the suit. We have similar technology but it is not nearly advanced enough to be man portable as of yet.”

“Okay Lieutenant, what are you getting at?” Darth Cloran urged him on.

Sendu was mystified again as to why everyone was not as intrigued with science as he was, but decided to save that discussion for another time.

“Well, the suits only alter the visual, and they also mask against sensors, but they cannot make them not occupy space. I suggest that we remove some of the vapor generators from the speeders to lay down an ever-so-slight mist of fog through the valley. Not enough to raise alarm or

awareness to the enemy, but enough to give a visual indicator that something has passed through it. Our night vision equipment should be sensitive enough to pick up the unsettled fog in the dark as they pass through it.”

The other officers were nodding their heads, understanding the plan, but one of them was not convinced.

“Seeing some moving fog isn’t going to be enough for our soldiers to target them and take them out.”

“And that is why I brought these.” Sendu opened up one of the cases he brought along with him and began passing around cylinder shaped canisters to all the officers gathered around.

“Let me explain what they are....”