

Chapter 21

Laying on her belly and peering through the bushes, Emi-gon could scarcely believe what she was seeing. The sensors in Ocal's space freighter had picked up the incoming approach of the multiple Sith landing craft and she had rushed outside to watch in the distance as they approached and landed in the spot known as Bravo-3. This was the same protected clearing of the pre-arranged exfiltration point for SCU-11.

When Emi-gon had examined the evidence after watching the Sith troops move in, it all pointed to the same conclusion. Somehow the Sith forces had either discovered the extraction point where SCU-11 was heading to; or the Sith had guessed it. Either way, based off of the number of landing craft that had flown in, the Sith were more than likely setting up an ambush for the arrival of SCU-11.

As soon as Emi-gon discovered what was happening she immediately left the ship and began working her way toward the crater. It was not until she was halfway to the overlook where she was now position that a third possibility came to her mind. There was the chance that SCU-11 had been captured and the extraction point was discovered from one of the team members via interrogation. That would mean that the Sith were now awaiting the arrival of the actual CIV ship to capture or destroy it. This thought was the worst of all possible scenarios and Emi-gon had to force herself to remove it from her mind, at least until she could gather further information to determine what exactly was happening. There was no sense in dwelling on things that were not yet a reality.

The remainder of the movement up the side of the surrounding hills to where she was now, took an additional 30 minutes at her accelerated pace. She had arrived winded, but ready to mentally deal with what she found. She had cautiously approached the rim of the crater to overlook the clearing and as she crept forward she was able to slowly make out what was happening down in the landing zone.

Now that she was here and seeing it in the present, she could hardly believe their misfortune. All of the large Sith landing craft appeared to be powered down and prepared for an extended stay. As the light was beginning to fade away with the setting of the suns, she had to study the terrain intently for several minutes before she started to make out the presence of enemy soldiers setup in positions around the various landing craft. Finally, Emi-gon thought, there was a bit of good news as she took this information to be a good sign. Based off of what she was seeing with the soldiers based around the landing craft, Emi-gon determined the behavior of the soldiers were not indicative of those preparing to ambush a planet side insertion spacecraft. Hopefully that meant SCU-11 was still at large and making their way toward this point. Unfortunately, it meant the lives of SCU-11 were all in peril and they were completely unaware of what lay in store for them..

Before leaving Ocal and Quinto, Emi-gon had provided specific instructions and communication protocols as well as what they should do in the event they were discovered or attacked. With those protocols in place, Emi-gon was comfortable with staying where she was until she could determine what the plan was for the Sith and how she was going to handle it.

She remained in the same hiding place up on the ridge until the suns had been down below the horizon for 30 minutes, at which point the light was all but gone. She removed the night vision binoculars from her belt pouch and began to survey the surrounding areas to see what she might be able to detect. After ten minutes of painstaking searching she had found nothing.

It was then that she decided she needed to take a different approach.

“Think Emma... think”, she whispered to herself.

It then struck her as quite obvious! She did indeed need to think, but not as a Jedi would think, but instead, as a soldier would think.

“If I were leading a band of infantry to this point, how would I approach?”

She raised the bino’s to her eyes again and scanned the surrounding hills around the landing zone and then picked out what appeared to her to be the most secure route to enter into the natural bowl. Once she identified that spot, she began to look more closely and within a matter of minutes had located several enemy soldiers moving below the top of the ridge. Furthermore, the soldiers appeared to be setup in a manner that indicated it was an ambush point.

Emi-gon examined the route she would have to take to skirt around the rim of the bowl to make her way to that same ambush point. She was immediately disheartened as she determined it would take too long! She quickly crawled backward and began making her way there as quickly as she could. It was obvious that SCU-11 was in grave danger, and she didn’t need the sinking feeling from the Force to determine that.

. . .

The suns were down and the team was on the move again. Mosok and Larun had done the calculations and determined they wanted to get to the location in the dead of night when it was darkest and most secure. They estimated that route of travel would take about two hours to cover, so they delayed their demarcation until after it was completely dark, and then they had moved out.

The path had been selected as the most secure route into the designated exfiltration point. They were all determined that they were not going to let down their guard so close to the end of their journey. All of SCU-11 fully understood that their hopes laid in getting into this location undetected and then setting up a secure and hidden patrol base from which they could hunker down and wait until their CIV returned to orbit. Once that happened they knew the CIV would come down and exfiltrate them as soon as possible.

Moving was the most vulnerable time of any operation and was when they were the most likely to be detected by enemy forces. Even with their Stealth Generator suits active, they were vulnerable. They also knew that running their SGs full time, as they had been doing over the past several days, was hard on the electronics. The diodes and flexible projection displays had a limited life and already there had been a high number of malfunctions around certain high stress spots on the individual suits. This in turn reduced the effectiveness of the suits as a whole.

Larun knew that once they made it to their final destination they could disable the SGs and use conventional methods of camouflage. This would not hamper their effectiveness much as they were all experts in conventional forms of camouflage as well. Knowing that they were so close caused all of the remaining members of the SCU team to elevate their caution and awareness even more than it had been up to this point in their operations.

It took them an hour of slow and deliberate movement before they arrived at the bottom of their desired hill. A quick time check informed Larun that they were right on time. The valley that they would use to gain access to the protected landing zone was visible from below the hill and Larun had all of the operators rest and observe the area for several minutes before they began their movement toward the entrance of the shallow valley.

Of course, green team was leading the way with Vistom operating as the point man. When it came to choosing the person to run point, Larun perhaps trusted Vistom more than any other member of any of the SCU units in the Republic military. They had worked together for years and Larun knew that Vistom had a sixth sense about danger. Some of other SCU operators had even suggested having Vistom tested for Force sensitivity, but any time it was brought up, Vistom flat out refused to be tested. His life was the SCU, and specifically SCU-11, and that is all he wanted to do.

Vistom slowly lead green team up toward the hill. His head was slowly and deliberately scanning back and forth, side to side. It was as if his head were mounted on a swivel, as he looked for any sign that something was out of place.

As he moved up the hill and toward the crest, the walls of the canyon became more defined and steeper. The valley was gradual and still fairly wide and open, but there was a change in vegetation and there was a marked increase in the amount of moisture in the middle of the valley. Vistom assumed that there was probably a seasonal stream of water that would flow in the springtime down this valley. He also attributed the very thin vapor, or fog, on the valley floor to this increase of moisture in the low ground. To this point Vistom had noticed nothing that was out of the ordinary and he continued to make his way toward the top of the valley. At the crest they would cross the saddle which would provide the opening toward their destination inside of the natural bowl.

The going was necessarily slow, though none of the SCU members complained about the methodical pace that Vistom was taking. Harek was the second in line behind Vistom and he made sure that he was also scanning the surrounding valley walls and trees. He would do his best to be scanning a location that Vistom was not, this was an effort to increase the likelihood of detecting any threats from any direction.

About half way up the valley, Vistom brought the formation to a halt and gave the hand signal for everyone to take a knee. Vistom was feeling just a bit uneasy about the route, and he brought his blaster rifle up to his eye and turned the magnification of his weapon sight up to its highest setting. He used his rifle to scan the ravine walls on both sides looking for any sign that might indicate the enemy was there. Once he was satisfied that everything was safe he once again reduced the magnification on his scope to its

lowest setting and stood up and began to move forward again.

In nearly complete silence, the movement of the formation began again.

Vistom noticed that the higher they got within the canyon, the thicker the misty fog was becoming on the valley floor. Initially, in Vistom's mind this was working in their favor, it was providing additional concealment for them to stealthily move over the ridge and down into where they wanted to be. But as they continued to move up the valley, something began to not feel right about the surroundings. Though he could not place a finger on what it might be.

Slowing down their movement even further, Vistom carefully selected each step, insuring his feet were in the correct place each time he placed a foot down. Instinctively, Vistom brought his rifle up to his shoulder in the ready position as he continued to slowly move up the valley.

As Vistom was preparing to lift his foot to take another step, he thought he heard something to his right. He froze for a moment, being careful not to give his position away by performing a sudden movement. Feeling the tension rise, he slowly pivoted to the right at his waist, with his right eye peering through the combat optics mounted atop his blaster rifle. He again scanned the surrounding terrain, focusing primarily on the valley wall. But it was his left eye that sent the warning to his brain.

As his rifle tracked through the mist, he noticed that the mist itself moved and swirled as his blaster moved through it, and then it struck him! The mist was not here naturally but was placed here intentionally as a warning device to detect their movement!

“AMBUSH!!!!” he yelled as loud as he could.

As Vistom yelled the warning, he dropped immediately to the ground just as multiple plasma bolts whizzed overhead right where he had just been standing.

Vistom began to roll to his right to try and get behind a nearby rock and then he heard a series of ‘pops’ all along the valley wall to the right of their formation. The closest pop was about ten meters to his front and Vistom watched as a small canister launched into the air from its concealed location in the ground. When it reached two meters in the air it exploded into bright blue-white flash of an extreme ion pulse that spread and engulfed him as he lay behind the rock.

All along the SCU formation, there were pops followed by the detonation of the ion explosives. The explosions could be heard above the large amounts of blaster fire that was now engulfing the valley floor. Within a matter of seconds, all of the stealth generators were turned into fried circuit boards. The close proximity and the sheer power and number of the bouncing ion mines was more than even the ion shielding and fault protection circuitry could protect the Stealth Generators from. Now all the members of SCU-11 were on an even playing field with the enemy; they were visible to the naked eye.

Beyond the destruction of their SGs, SCU-11 was also pinned down in an ambush zone of which they were occupying the low ground, which was the least desirable position. Every member of SCU-11 now knew they were in deep trouble.

The raw ion blasts from Sendu’s bouncing ion mines not only wiped out the electronics of the stealth generators,

but it also destroyed most of the other electronic devices that SCU-11 used as well, which included their night vision helmets. About the only positive thing that Larun, who was himself now pinned down behind cover, could come up with was that it had also likely taken out the same equipment for the Sith ambushing force. Larun knew they were in trouble, but at least the enemy was having to fight in the dark as well... and that is when the illuminating orbs began to appear over head and lit up the entire valley they were in. Larun grimaced, now it was really bad. There was a constant stream of orbs being deployed that lit the battleground up as if it were noon day.

Yelling at the top of his lungs, Larun began to try and figure out what their current situation was.

“GIVE ME A SITREP... NOW!!”

It was all he could do to be heard over the blaster fire that was mainly incoming from the Sith up on the valley wall. There was not much outgoing from SCU-11, and that is what Larun determined he needed to change first. They needed to get some fire outgoing, though he wasn't sure how anyone was going to be able to do that. Then the reports started to come in, yelled from the various team leaders up and down their formation.

“BLACK HAS TWO UP!”

“GREEN IS ALL UP!”

“Good”, Larun thought, at least he has one full team up.

“BLUE, ONE UP! THE REST ARE DOWN”

That was not good news. Larun recognized the voice as Stone Stall, the heavy weapons man from Blue team. The rest of the Blue Team were down and out of the fight.

Larun peered around the tree he was laying behind and was able to make out Stone who was in a slight depression in the ground keeping his head down. Larun also noticed the three bodies that were lying motionless near Stone's position. Blue team must have taken the brunt of the initial ambush.

“STONE! Prepare to move!”

“Roger that!” was the reply.

Larun was able to see some blaster fire originating toward Stone's position from up higher on the side of the valley and he quickly sent several shots from his rifle directly toward that position. Larun ducked quickly back behind his large tree just as several blaster bolts impacted all around him. But his ploy had the desired effect, it drew an immense amount of fire toward him and gave Stone a break from the incoming fire.

That brief moment was enough for Stone to roll to his left and bound back toward a more secure spot 10 meters behind his position. He barely made it to the safety of the new position with dirt and debris flying all around him from the incoming blaster fire. Larun saw that Stone was safe and now had a better position behind a larger mound of earth that had rocks and other protection. The spot looked good and appeared like it could support and secure the entirety of SCU-11, or what was left of them. Seeing the suitability of Stone's new location provided a good first objective and this is where Larun decided he needed to try to rally their forces and make their stand. There, SCU-11 could hold out longer and hopefully figure a way out of this predicament.

Just then Isaul, the lone remaining member of white team, and Mosok both appeared from behind some trees

and dove behind the same cover that Stone had made his way to. "Good", Larun thought, the others had determined the same thing that he did.

KABOOM!!!!!!

Larun could not help but flinch as the large explosion from multiple thermal detonators went off at the front of the new strong point where the remaining members of SCU-11 had begun to gather. Thankfully, the Sith soldiers that threw the thermal detonators did not have enough strength to get them all the way to the new strong point. The explosions made more noise than they did actual damage. But the explosion was enough of a diversion that Vistom and F'lark, the sniper from Green team, were able to break contact. With some additional covering fire from Harek, both Vistom and F'lark made it to the same strong point as the rest of the SCU-11.

Larun was just realizing that that left him and Harek as the only remaining SCU members outside of their new defensive position. He quickly determined that he needed to change that in a hurry before it became impossible for him to make it there himself!

"COVER ME WHILE I MOVE!" was what he yelled.

It was as if the commandos were waiting for that very command and on cue, all of the SCU members that were behind their new earthen barrier, exposed themselves just enough to lay down covering fire from their weapons as both Larun and Harek made a break for the security of their new position.

The problem was that there were easily 10 enemy Sith troopers to every one of the remaining SCU members and while the covering fire helped, it wasn't enough.

Harek was able to scramble to the safety of the covered area with just a few singe marks around his legs. Unfortunately, within a few meters of Larun getting up, the enemy had a bead on him and shots started to bear down closer and closer to his frantically running body. He was within 10 meters of the shelter when the first plasma bolt struck him square in the back, between his shoulder blades. The bolt was mostly absorbed by the advanced fiber-mesh armor Larun was wearing, but the armor was only good for a single direct hit. The second plasma bolt struck near the first, and this one penetrated his flesh and punctured his right side lung. Luckily, it just barely missed his heart.

The energy from the multiple blasts caused Larun to crash down to the ground. When he tried to get up Larun discovered he was unable to move his right arm and he fell back to the earth in a heap.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Mosok watched it all as if it were in slow motion. He could not contain his horror as he saw his new friend and mentor laying face down in the dirt, still struggling to get up with his one arm that still functioned.

Igniting his lightsaber Mosok sprinted from behind their cover and rushed toward Larun as he continued to try and move. Larun knew that if he stayed where he was, he would die. So he kept fighting, straining against the weight of his own body, willing himself to move, and slowly, he began to make progress. It was just a few inches at first, but it was progress.

Mosok deflected a few incoming blaster bolts as he made it to Larun and was reaching down to grab him. Suddenly he was knocked from his feet and thrown 30

meters away from both the injured Larun and the remainder of SCU-11.

Mosok reacted instinctively and rolled in mid-air and reached out with the Force to try and cushion his impact with the ground. Without noticing what he was doing, he positioned his feet under him and landed with only a moderate thud, sliding back along the ground and immediately rolling and coming to his feet with his lightsaber at the ready. A split second later Darth Cloran landed on the ground, apparently from a massive jump, just 15 meters to his front.

The Sith Lord in front of him was the immediate and more pressing threat and a danger, but Mosok was looking past her. He was taking notice of the scene in the distance as he watched Vistom and Stone retrieve the injured Larun and had drag him back behind their makeshift cover and the relative safety it provided.

With a feeling of relief that Larun had at least made it to temporary safety and that he would have a chance at survival, Mosok turned his attention back to the Sith Lord before him. He mentally began to prepared for what he knew was coming.