

Korroth
Jedi Ranger
Disciples of Baas
House Satele Shan
Clan Odan-Urr
#8488

About 2899 words

[Hoth v Satele Shan] The Invasion of Daleem Light Up the Day

Thirteen circles of light danced over the walls of the tunnel. Twelve Tanduran and Dac Unified Commandos and a Jedi marched single-file on a narrow ledge halfway up the side of the shaft. Their flashlights were the only light source in the cavernous hollow, and the only sound their footsteps. There was little space on the ledge; the soldiers made their way with their right shoulders brushing the rock wall. Fortunately they were not carrying bulky equipment—all they needed were some E-11 blasters, a lightsaber and a sure foot. Traversing the underground passageways was slow and steady work, but once they emerged behind the advancing Hoth lines they had to be ready for a quick hit-and-run attack. That was the TDUC's speciality, at least by reputation.

"You were telling me, Sergeant," the Pau'an at the front of the line spoke softly. "That you're not all from First Platoon?"

"Yes sir." The female Mon Calamari also spoke in a low voice, as if they were in a sacred place of worship. It felt like the appropriate form of respect for whatever ancient people excavated these impressive tunnel networks. "The Ducks are barely at two platoons nowadays. Florum and... even before, they depleted all our ranks. We've got guys from all over now. Second Platoon, Fourth, some Rainbringers. Corporal Tock over there was a Bushfighter."

"And how are you managing, Sergeant?" Korroth asked, looking ahead to where the tunnel began to curve slowly to the right. "Are you working well together, unit cohesion and all that?"

"No chance sir," one of the Privates at the back spoke up. "Private Hopper here never washes, and Golfree snores like an eopie with sinusitis—"

"Shut it Private!" The Sergeant grunted. "Corporal, take that man's name. I'm gonna beat some cohesion into you lot, if it's the last thing I do!" Turning back to Korroth, she continued. "Frankly, sir, it was all the waiting around that was doing us in. This is what they

need—a day out in the field and an enemy they can scope down their sights. An enemy they know how to skin and gut.”

“Hoth are not the enemy, Sergeant,” the Pau’an rebuked. “I get what you are saying, but keep in mind that this is just an exercise.”

“Yes, sir. But the men need to get their hands dirty. Ever since...”

“Shhh!”

“Sir, if I spoke out of order...”

“No, be quiet!” Korroth raised his hand and the whole squad halted. “Do you hear that?” He whispered after a moment of silence.

The Sergeant shook her head, but Korroth was sure there was something just a moment ago. Standing perfectly still, he could only hear the regular dripping of water leaking from the ceiling, and perhaps a rivulet gurgling at the bottom of the tunnel. But there it was again—a faint rumbling sound, definitely coming from the surface above. It sounded like distant explosions. Or perhaps not so distant now.

The Sergeant placed a hand on the rock wall. “I can feel it now, sir.” Just then the ground shook, and a soldier down the line gave out a yelp. The Pau’an saw stones falling off the ledge, then a Mon Calamari. Two of his comrades managed to grab him by the arms, and he lay dangling off the lip of the cliff.

“You two, use your ascension ropes,” the Sergeant exclaimed. “Or you’ll be tumbling down after him.”

Now anchored to the rock face, the two soldiers hauled their comrade back onto the ledge, though not without a grunt of effort.

“How are you doing down there, soldier?” The Pau’an craned his neck above the other commandos.

“Nothing but a few scratches and a bruised ego, sir,” came the reply of the Mon Calamari. “Good to go.”

As the squad resumed their march, everyone seemed to hug the wall even closer. The thirty metres-or-so to the shadowy bed of the tunnel appeared all the more beckoning after the previous incident.

“What I heard,” the Jedi spoke back to the Sergeant. “Were definitely detonations from the surface. What do you think could be going on up there?”

“My locator says we’re almost exactly below the Northern Chineem Mountain Pass. It could be that our artillery is shelling the feature to obstruct it—deny passage to the enemy.”

“Don’t they know we’re down here?”

“Comm silence, sir. They can only estimate our location. Plus, our tunnel complex maps become very approximate this far out.”

“Looks like we’ll have to play it by ear, then.”

The subterranean passage fell silent again, but for the soldiers’ steady footsteps. The best way to predict another tremor was to listen for those surface bombardments. Not that they could do much about it, on that precarious stone ledge. Occasionally the surface of the tunnel was marked with alcoves, hollows, entire edifices dug into the raw rock. But, for as far as the Jedi could see now, the circular shaft was as smooth as an exogorth’s gullet. It continued to bow gently to the East, making any observations only accurate for about one kilometre.

Suddenly the Pau’an raised his hand again, and the squad stopped in their tracks. “Here it comes again, Sergeant.” The thudding, grumbling sound started off in the distance, but drew closer by the second. Soon it could be felt in the shaking of the ground.

“Deploy ascension cables!” The Sergeant exclaimed. One after the other cable anchors clunked into the raw rock, securing the soldiers to the wall.

“Kark! It’s jammed!” A soldier down the line was grappling with his carbine’s cable deployer. The soldiers to either side of him, one hand clutching their own carbine, were trying to hold on to their comrade, but the earth was quaking and rocks rolled down the side of the tunnel. Grunting expletives, the Sergeant unhooked her cable.

“No, stay put Sergeant!” Korroth made to grab her, but the Mon Calamari was already clambering her way down the line, grabbing onto the shoulders of her soldiers. The Pau’an saw a boulder flake off from the tunnel wall. “Watch out!” But it was too late. The massive sliver of rock crashed through the squad and carried off the two unsecured commandos.

Those still on the ledge flattened themselves against the wall, as more rocks, dust and stone shards rained down on them. In a matter of seconds the rumbling disappeared, and all that remained was the clattering of stones down the cliff.

“Corporal Tock,” the Jedi called out. “Can you see them?” The soldiers shined their flashlights down, but all they could see were the shadows of a landslide, a jumble of sharp rocks and boulders. The Corporal shook his head. “All-right,” Korroth gave a sharp tug to his anchor to test its hold. “Make sure you are all secured. We are descending to the tunnel bed to make a search.”

The commandos pushed themselves off the ledge. Their cables unfurled with a high whirring sound as they scrambled down the face of the cliff. As soon as their boots hit the ground they scattered in all directions, sweeping left and right with their flashlights.

“Over here, sir!” One of the Privates was helping up the Sergeant. Her jacket was torn and bloodied at the right shoulder, and she held her arm tucked close to her body as she rose out of the rubble. Before the Jedi Consular could even get to her, she was pulling at a huge rock, under which the second fallen commando lay.

“Help me with this, Ranger,” she spoke through gritted teeth. “I think Gahin’s out cold.”

Korroth brushed past the Sergeant and knelt beside the insensate soldier, who was a young Mon Calamari. He looked back to the squad and made a beckoning gesture. “Private Golfree, you have a medpac? Take care of the Sergeant. Corporal Tock, make her sit down.” He turned to Gahin and ignored the vigorous protestations of the Sergeant.

The Private was unconscious but breathing. It was difficult to tell in the bluish shine of his flashlight, but the Mon Calamari also looked extremely pale, and his hands were quite cold. His legs were trapped under the large boulder, and Korroth could only assume massive blood loss. He extracted tourniquets from his own medpac and tightened them around both of the Mon Cal’s legs. That would stem the haemorrhage, hopefully, but it was only a temporary measure. He needed to get to a medlab as soon as possible.

By this time the squad had gathered around the large boulder. Some had wedged their rifle butts under it, while others were preparing to push it up with their hands and shoulders. Korroth got up to put his weight behind them as well, but something caught his ear.

“Wait!” The Pau’an turned to face the Northern tunnel. “Sergeant. Do Hoth have access to the tunnel system?”

“It’s possible,” she said, grimacing. Private Golfree was adjusting a sling on her bandaged right arm. “HQ said we’d get out near the space elevator, so I don’t see why *they* couldn’t get in, provided they found that entrance.”

Korroth could hear faint footsteps and subdued voices, though in the echoing depths of the tunnel it was difficult to judge the distance. “I think they found it.”

“No lights,” the Sergeant hissed to her squad. “No sounds!” The tunnel went pitch black, and the soldiers stopped moving.

The Pau’an knelt down to speak with the Sergeant. “What are you doing?” He whispered. “We need aid for you and Gahin right now!”

“Out of the question sir, our orders are for comm silence.”

“No, no...” The Pau’an shook his head. “Whoever’s coming towards us—”

“They’re coming from the North,” remarked the Mon Calamari, pointing with her left hand. “They’re going to be Hoth.”

“That makes no difference!”

“They could outnumber us, they could stun us all on the spot!”

The Jedi suppressed an urge to shake the commando by the shoulders. “Private Gahin needs to get to a medical station. He *needs* retrieval!”

“If we fail this mission, troop morale is going to—”

“Sergeant.” Korroth dropped his voice. “If we don’t get Gahin out of here... I don’t want to have to tell you what’ll happen to troop morale if he doesn’t get help.”

The Sergeant looked over at the injured soldier, then lowered her head.

“Private Hopper,” she said, turning to the squad. “Go on ahead and establish contact with the incoming team.”

The soldier made his careful way North through the rubble, then he blinked his flashlight intermittently in that direction. A corresponding light flashed from the tunnel floor. Hopper cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed. “Besh Squadron First Platoon T-ducks, requesting aid and assistance!”

“Stay put,” came the reply, much closer than Korroth had expected. “And keep your lights off.”

A single figure advanced on the squad, then a spotlight shone on their location. The lone soldier evidently communicated to the rest of his team, who made their way to the site of the rockfall.

Their commander approached Korroth and the Sergeant and saluted. “Grek Section, Second Armoured Regiment, Kota’s Fist.” The Hoth soldiers were evidently scouts—lightly armed and equipped with night-vision helmets, which explained why they had approached heard but not seen. “How may we assist?”

“That’s it, use the pivot point,” the Sergeant incited. “Roll it, roll it! Don’t scrape it.”

The huge boulder slowly lifted, amid the grunts and huffs of the gathered soldiers. On one side the commandos used their rifles as makeshift levers, while the scouts pulled with ropes and cables from the other side. Korroth and the scouts’ field medic knelt beside the unconscious Gahin. As soon as they saw a sufficient gap beneath the rock, they pulled the Mon Cal out.

“Clear!” The Jedi shouted. The soldiers let go, and the boulder crashed back down with a groundshaking thump. This was followed by the hum of repulsorlifts—the medical transport had arrived. A LAVr QH-7 chariot hovered into view and the squad carefully loaded their injured comrade onto it.

“Copious hydration is essential,” Korroth instructed the scout medic, who would be following the casualty onto the transport. “And start monitoring his renal function.”

“Yes sir.”

“How long before you get to a medical station, do you think?”

“The chariot got here in twenty minutes,” the medic replied. “Once we’re surface-side, medical transports have priority clearance on the battlefield. We’ll be at the Satele base in no time.”

“Then don’t remove the right tourniquet until our medical team has had a look at him. There’s a chance they might want to amputate.”

As the chariot’s spotlights faded into the darkness of the tunnel, Korroth turned to the scout commander. “We’re very grateful, Lieutenant. You may well have saved that boy’s life.”

“Glad we could be of assistance”

“However, this does put us in a rather awkward position now, doesn’t it?” The soldiers by now had gathered in their respective units, the scouts on one side and the commandos on the other.

“I don’t see why, sir,” the Lieutenant responded. “If you give up your weapons, we can escort you to Hoth forward command and you can await the end of the exercise.”

“Hmm,” Korroth said, tapping his chin. “No, I don’t think that will do.”

“Now, let’s not do anything foolish, sir. We outnumber you, even if you hadn’t suffered casualties already.”

Suddenly a blue light flashed in the gloom, and one of the scouts fell limp to the ground. For a moment the scout commander stood there with his mouth slightly agape.

“There,” pronounced the Duck Sergeant, a blaster in her left hand. “Made it less awkward.”

The Lieutenant roared “Fire at will!” And both sides squeezed off wild shots as they scrambled for cover on either side of the rockfall. At the Southern end, the commandos put their backs to several large rocks and boulders. The darkness of the tunnel gave way to a light-show of azure stun bolts criss-crossing across the landslide.

“Private Hopper,” Korroth said, tapping the soldier beside him on the shoulder. “Three o’clock, get ready.”

The Jedi extended his consciousness through the Force and met the presence of the scout he had seen popping his head up from behind a rock. Korroth let the Force flow through the scout’s muscles and, when he rose up again, the Jedi tightened his grip. The scout’s muscles seized, and Korroth could feel the man’s surprise as he willed his body to move but the same body responded with debilitating lethargy.

“Now!” The Jedi shouted. Hopper sprang up and fired a single precise stun shot. Korroth felt the scout go slack, and the Jedi’s hold on his muscles naturally receded. Though still present, the scout no longer made ripples in the fabric of the Force.

Korroth looked up and down the Duck line. Only six commandos were still firing. A couple of inert bodies lay beside the rocks, while a few more must have fallen in the middle of the firing range.

“Sergeant!” Korroth called over to the squad commander. “We either retreat or we’ll all sleep here for the duration!”

The Mon Cal nodded. “I’ve signalled command. If we backtrack to cross-junction X-23, the Rainbringers can ambush whoever’s behind us.”

The Sergeant put her blaster down and gestured to her Corporal. First she lowered her left hand over her eyes, then she made it into a fist and snapped it open, as if imitating an explosion. The gestures were passed down the squad line, and the commandos unclipped cylindrical grenades from their belts. At the same time they lowered opaque blast shields over their eyes.

“Cease fire!” The Sergeant hissed. After a few seconds, the shots from the scout team abated as well. Minutes passed in complete silence, the squad waiting and ready for the Sergeant’s orders. Korroth heard boots crunching over pebbles and rocks, and the scouts’ presence drew steadily nearer in the Force.

The Sergeant swept her arm in a wide arc towards the oncoming scouts. The commandos followed her gesture, and six cylinders spun through the air. Korroth cradled his face in the nook of his elbow, and only a faint image of the flash explosion reached him. Some of the scouts yelled out, others tumbled over the rocks, all were certainly blinded. As soon as the flash had dissipated, the Duck squad leaped to their feet and raced South.

“Are they following us, Ranger?” The Sergeant ran cradling her injured shoulder. As the tunnel continued to curve they lost sight of the rockfall and the scouts.

“Some of them are,” replied the Jedi, slightly puffing. “I expect the rest are calling for reinforcements. Whoever’s coming, there’s going to be quite a party at the crossroads, eh?”

The Mon Cal shook her head. “I was obsessed with the mission,” she spoke after a while. “I should have looked after my men. And now Private Dahin...”

“It wasn’t your fault, Sergeant. And in the end we made the best of the situation. Besides, you know how kids are these days. He’ll wake up with a spanking new cyberleg and he’ll be over the kriffing satellite.

“Look on the bright side,” Korroth continued after a few panting breaths “We’re going to lead the Red Devils and whatever reinforcements they bring into a snug little trap. That’s gotta light up anyone’s day!” That, at last, brought a lopsided smile to the Sergeant.