

Survival Skills Can Come In Many Forms

Rummaging through the pockets of two dead naval officers should have probably elicited a minor feeling of guilt but Jedi Knight Justinios Drake's concern for his own safety easily overrode any other emotions. Only a few minutes had passed since the escape pod, formerly of the Corellian Gunship *Audacity*, had crash landed on the Collective stronghold world of Nancora. The other three occupants of the capsule, the ship's former captain, his sensor officer secret girlfriend and Justinios' own droid, all had fared a bit worse in the crash than the Jedi. Much to Justinios' displeasure he was unable to power his *KX*-series droid back on after the crash. On the other hand he was a bit of a relieved that the two humans seemed to also have issues bringing themselves back online. The Jedi didn't necessarily wish death on them but their current state meant an end to their annoying kissy faces and baby talk.

Having gathered up what little supplies the escape pod contained into a small pile, Justinios took stock out loud. "We have a datapad of some sort, a single container of potable water, a pack of nutrition bars, a flare gun, a single flare for the aforementioned gun, my Inquisitorius comlink and matching scanner, a chronometer, and a handful of computer spikes." For a moment the blue-skinned Jedi just looked at the haphazard pile of stuff without saying another word as the corpses of Captain Wiju Morg and Comm Officer Justane Ippik looked on.

"There isn't much there to eat, unless your digestive system can process computer parts." The words came from Justinios' mouth but in a high pitched and almost annoyingly energetic voice mimicking that of Ippik's when she still drew breath. "I'd wager you wouldn't last longer than one rotation in the Badlands with those supplies."

An onlooker, had there been a living soul anywhere near the crash site, would have thought Justinios had already gone absolutely insane. Most sentient species have a strong propensity to anthropomorphize animals, plants and inanimate objects, even corpses, after long periods of deprivation. Justinios had only been truly alone for about ten to twenty standard minutes at that point which would have been a record time to completely lose one's grip on reality. Using the voices of the deceased naval officers was a mechanism for Justinios to segment these thoughts, one he found worked better than simply talking to himself as Justinios and Other Justinios. Instead the conversation would be between Justinios, Not Morg and Not Ippik which would also allow the Aleena to have a bit of fun at the expense of two beings whom, in life, he really didn't care much for.

"One rotation? Two? It doesn't really matter if he has no idea of his current location let alone where and what his destination is." This time it was a deeper voice coming from Justinios, as if a child was mocking a scolding father when the parent wasn't around to hear it. "Even a once-in-a-Universe level genius like Justinios shouldn't go walking off in a random direction without knowing what he is, or isn't, walking towards."

Acquiring a better understanding of the current situation, including discovering his location in relation to possible population centers, did seem like as good of a next step as any to Justinios. The Aleena's first minor victory came when the device not only powered on but happened to be a device loaded with

global positioning capabilities. As the map of Nancora booted up the exuberance melted away as severity of his predicament came into sharper focus. The closest point to the crashed capsule that could provide food and shelter was a train station between Nancora's two main cities and that was over 200 kilometers away. Justinios then picked up the scanning device he had acquired from his source in the Inquisitorious and plugged it into the datapad in order to get a better view of the results. Justinios set the device to search for all life form that were his size or larger. After a brief moment, the scanner returned very concerning results.

"Wow, sparsely populated would be a bit of an understatement. The few livings things out there are likely either highly aggressive predators or extremely territorial prey. Not that it matters, it will take a lot longer to hike to that train station than a single rotation." Justinios assessed the situation in his Not Morg baritone. He knew both lines of thought were correct, his legs would only carry him so far and he would likely outpace his supplies in short order.

"Your assessment is logically sound Captain," Justinios then looked towards the female corpse as he continued, "As do you Lieutenant. I think it is safe to say that traipsing across the Badlands will likely result in my death by the following, in order of descending probability: dehydration, exposure, asphyxiation, starvation, piercing and blunt trauma caused by native species and blaster fire." Tapping one of his hands on the side of the datapad, which still was showing a map of the local area, Justinios began considering his other options.

Not Ippik's upbeat voice offered up the first alternative, "Why don't you try to meditate to get the attention from someone in orbit? They could send down a rescue party, if not immediately, long before you'd join us as future fertilizer."

If there was ever a time Justinios regretted having formed few interpersonal connections it was now. Communicating with another being through the Force was a lot easier if there was already an emotional bond between the two. The reptilian Jedi had no such connections with anyone in his own Clan, let alone the Dark Jedi Brotherhood as a whole. Commander Rhylance was a regular intellectual rival for the former professor and while their relationship was contentious it was at least a connection. Attempting to contact the leader of Taldryan through the Force was unfortunately futile because Rhylance was as Force Sensitive as a hubba gourd. With the battle for Nancora in full effect chances were incredibly remote that another random Force sensitive picked up on Justinios' thoughts and come to his rescue.

"Good thinking Lieutenant but I'm afraid I'd just waste time broadcasting a signal nobody would be listening for." Justinios knew that time was a major constricting factor to any successful plan. "Think, think, think."

"Why not broadcast a signal that someone would be listening for?" The deep tone of Not Morg asked.

Justinios liked this line of thinking and encouraged it to continue. "Go on."

“You’ve got that fancy comlink from the Inquisition, right? De-activate the encryption and set it to broadcast until the power runs out. Someone will be able to triangulate the signal easily with such little interference out this far.” Justinios was nodding as he spoke aloud the words in his mimicked voice of the dead Captain.

If in life the two officers were disgustingly connected, in death they proved to be excellent foils for one another. “Yes but WHO is going to show up?” Not Ippik asked rhetorically. “I am certain our crash did not go unnoticed and I somehow doubt that within the last standard hour the clans have somehow taken control of the entire planet surface.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Justinios stated firmly in his own, natural voice. “Assuming friendly forces have even begun to land planet side the supplies here are likely not enough to survive off until they could spare anyone to come out all this way. As was already established, attempting to cross the Badlands with what little supplies I have has a very high probability in ending in death. The best case scenario is I make it to the rail station and then am immediately captured. We can force that outcome and avoid dangerous travel.”

“You assume the enemy will take you alive,” Not Morg offered as a counterpoint.

“I assume nothing. There are three possible outcomes from an engagement with enemy forces. They capture me alive, I kill them or they kill me. My death, while undesirable, is possible in all solutions available to me at the moment so that is not enough to immediately disqualify this one. Both of the other two possible outcomes remove me from the Badlands and likely put me in a situation where my skills are much more likely to be useful in renewing my membership in the Still Breathing Club.” Justinios knew he was in an odd situation when provoking a fight gave him the best chances for survival but he felt his analysis was flawless. “Besides, I can likely rely on the Collective wanting to extract intel from me before putting a hole in my skull. I can probably milk that for at least a few days if I keep a slow drip of useful information flowing.”

Having convinced himself that coercing anyone, even members of the Collective, to visit him at the crash site was his the best chance for survival, Justinios began the process of unhooking the datapad from the scanner and into his comlink unit. Using the added processing power of the datapad Justinios ensured that the encoding of the highly encrypted unit was completely disabled, even if the Collective possessed the ability to crack the encoding he didn’t want them wasting time doing so. Content with his work up to that point, the Jedi began to record his message.

“This is Jedi Knight Justinios Drake of Clan Taldryan requesting immediate evac. I have crash landed on the surface of Nancora with little supplies. My location is being transmitted along with this message. Repeat.” Using the added interface options provided by the datapad Justinios was able to save a copy of recording and set it to repeat. He then also activated the locator feature on the comlink to make sure he was as easy to find as possible. The range of the device was limited but if his theory was correct then the transmitting power should be enough for whatever search party the Collective sent out to wander into its range.

The waiting game became the hardest part. As a scientist by trade, Justinios was used to carefully defining every details of an experiment. In his current situation there were so many undefined variables and he couldn't stop thinking about them all. The largest of these concerns was that the Collective had many different types of combatants in their arsenal. Identifying the type of warrior they'd likely send out to find him was of utmost importance so Justinios could prepare his defense and possible intentional capture. To help alleviate that problem, and also to help pass the time, Justinios turned to what little bit of enemy intelligence he recalled studying before entering battle. Before the Taldryan fleet jump to Nancora space his droid Kilo wanted him to focus on learning proper military procedure. Luckily Justinios had ignored the nervous droid's suggestion and had instead focused on the information Inquisitorius had provided him.

"It was too bad that overly anxious droid can't be powered on for just long enough to tell him how right you were." Captain Morg, in life, didn't have very positive interactions with the droid nicknamed Kilo and the caricature Justinios created of him in death wasn't a big fan either. "But as annoying as he is you'll just have to be sure whomever captures you takes his metal frame along for the ride so you can try to get him up and running again later."

"That is a great point poopsykins but it shouldn't be too big of a sale to make. If intel is what they are after a powered down *KX*-unit is easy pickings." Not Justane was correct, Kilo was an asset for all the same reasons that Justinios was but instead requiring less torture and more slicing. If anything Justinios knew it was possible he was killed and they took the technology instead.

Justinios took a few moments away from studying the tiny screen on his scanner for life signatures to drag the large black form of K1-L0 out of the wreckage so he was more easily visible. He couldn't take any chances that his captors would abscond with him without a thorough search of the entire site. Drawing heavily on the Force to enhance his meager physical abilities, Justinios was able to tug the lifeless droid out onto the unforgiving dirt of the Badlands. The Aleena then returned to his original task, attempting to predict what form his would be captors would take so he could attempt to formulate a plan that didn't end in his death.

The disembodied and mimicked voices of the two Taldryan naval officers once again proved to be useful in assisting Justinios with his thought process. It was Not Morg that spoke up first, "I think the best chance of making a good prediction is to simply think through what we know about the enemy forces and decided who we'd send out to find us in these inhospitable lands."

Content where this line of thought was taking him, Justinios began to recite aloud what information he could recall about the different forces at the Collective's disposal. "I remember a group referred to as 'Zealots'. They have been whipped up into one heck of a tizzy it seems, shaved heads, branded, etc. All of the normal crazy cult stuff."

"If they show up here, I don't think they are taking prisoners," Not Justane remarked.

The thought was likely correct but Justinios continued with his recitation of the intelligence briefs before making a final analysis. "Capital Enterprises has a ring of agents and spies. Nothing too special, mostly subterfuge and psychological manipulation types."

Not Morg offered some commentary, "Those types would be much more easily convinced that capturing you alive offered a great opportunity but I doubt they'd survive much longer out here than you would."

"The head ginger in charge has a personal guard just like most self-important, self-righteous psychopaths do." Justinios opined, all but ignoring Not Morg's evaluation. "These are commando types, armored and armed to the teeth."

"Very dangerous in a fight but most leaders don't pick rank and file brainless grunts to be their personal guard. They at least might ask questions before shooting." The assessment offered by Not Morg was likely very true. Soldiers higher up the command structure usually could see a little bit more of the big picture than a "point-and-shoot" soldier. "Any other groups?"

"Two more I can recall," Justinios responded in his own voice. "Both are part of the Tehcnocratic Guild and are heavily enhanced with cybernetics. The rank line soldier is almost more machine than organic if the reports are true. On top of their enhancements they are armored up and carry an assortment of weapons."

"And the others?" The treble filled voice of Justane asked.

"Apparently a bunch of Kiffar females they call Huntresses." Justinios vividly remembered their entry because at the time he felt that if the Technocrat scientists had gone too far with enhancements on their frontline soldiers, they had struck a much better balance with their work on the Huntresses. "Much more subdued with their cybernetic enhancements but they make up for it with significant physical training. They wear lighter armor than a frontline soldier and prefer quieter weapons like energy bows and poison darts."

"That's them!" Not Morg's voice exclaimed. "The Huntresses are who they will send after us."

"Explain," Justinios demanded.

Not Morg was happy to do just that. "No self-respecting leader is going to weaken his own personal guard to fetch a downed escape pod in the middle of a pitched battle, few of these types are going to consider anything more important than themselves. Those robo-cyborg freaks might be great on the frontlines but I wouldn't send those freaks out into this dustbowl unless I had some oil cans to send along with them. The brainwashed zealots would be useful for missions where you don't mind if they and everyone anywhere near the objective was brutally killed but they'd probably get distracted by the lack of things to maim on a run of the mill search mission in about 15 standard minutes. As far as the Capital Enterprises agents go, I'd only send my sliver-tongued talkers out here as a punishment because those types are more used to blending into much more populated areas..."

“Which leaves the Huntresses as the best option,” Justinios interrupted himself. “Their weapons are all very quiet which means they know the value of sneaking up on a target. They also likely have tracking skills and for all we know were going to be able to find us without our little broadcast, not that it hurts to help them out a bit.”

“Guess you won’t be sleeping much then, they seem like the types to murder you in your sleep.” Although not a comforting thought, Not Justane’s concern was valid. “However I suspect that these Huntress’ will be intelligent enough to see your value as a live captive if you can survive their initial attack.”

Justinios took a moment to process all of his audible thoughts more internally before responding aloud once more. “There is also the chance that they have been tasked specifically with bringing me in alive but if not offering myself up without a fight might raise suspicions. I’ll have to put up a fight for show and make them earn their victory.”

With all of his analysis complete, with the help of some very forced dialogue, Justinios began to formulate the plan that he hoped would end in his relatively safe arrival somewhere within the walls of a Collective stronghold.

Night fell quickly upon the Badlands of Nancora and along with it came freezing cold temperatures. Justinios’ Inquisitor armor and the wreckage of the escape pod provided some protection from the freezing air but the Aleena was still uncomfortable. A much more irrational side of him wanted to burn the ration bars for heat but the logical side prevailed with the observation that being without food was a much bigger problem than being a little chilly. The Jedi had crawled into the mostly intact escape pod, lying face down with his head away from the hatch that would no longer close. He had hoped that it would seem to an onlooker that he was sleeping in the makeshift shelter when in truth he was still awake carefully watching the screen on his scanner. For the last 20 standard minutes he watched as eight red dots approached him from north, south, east and west in complete synchronicity. These were no doubt the Huntresses he expected.

Being armed only with a lightsaber meant that Justinios’ plan to put up any kind of a fight relied on him pulling his predators in as close as possible. Seasoned hunters such as these wouldn’t overcommit by sending all of their number up to the escape pod but if he could engage even one or two of them in close combat he knew that was the most ideal way to start. Very slowly the red dots crept ever closer on the scanner’s display. At about 20 meters out, the indicators representing Justinios’ stalkers all stopped. A few moments later, the duo that had approached from the east began to advance once more on his position.

Content that he could rely on the Force to track the Huntress’ as they finalized their approach, Justinios quickly switched off his scanner to further sell the ruse that he was asleep. Before laying his head down

he took a brief moment to look up at the corpses of both Captain Morg and Lieutenant Justane and thought of a quippy remark his version of Captain might say about sleeping on the job before suppressing it so as not to be found talking to himself. Head down and eyes closed Justinios reached out to let the Force paint a semi-formed picture of the approaching Kiffar warriors.

Their forms weren't complete, more like shifting blobs of plasma floating through a black backdrop that represented the lifeless wasteland that was the Badlands. The blobs move carefully up towards the crashed capsule from the rear, away from the broken hatch. Justinios maintained his focus on the presences as they split to round the wreckage from both sides and broke his trance right before they re-converged. He didn't need the Force to tell him that the two Huntresses were now standing right behind him but it was a nice warning when he felt the sudden urge to snap up from his feigned sleep.

In one fluid motion the Aleena Jedi was up off of the cramped floor of the wreck escape pod and launching himself head first at the lead Huntress. Justinios tiny blue form flew through the air like a dart, which was appropriate because the warrior he was currently hurtling towards seemed to have her armed raised to fire something off of her wrist mounted launcher. The diminutive reptilian didn't just let himself ram into the Huntress full force and instead used his momentum to land spread eagle on the face of the first attacker. It wasn't long until she was clawing and pulling at his armor in an attempt to remove the tenacious little Jedi from the front of her head. Not wanting to expose his vulnerable backside to the other Huntress for too long, Justinios reversed his position so that he was now sitting behind first Huntress directly on her shoulders and clawing at her eyes from behind.

The second Huntress reacted quickly to the abrupt change that occurred when their prey had gone from quickly peacefully asleep to miniature blue whirlwind. The prickle of electricity that coursed through Justinios' body told him that she was armed with a stun baton and she had hit a piece of his armor instead of one of the more vulnerable unarmored seams. He back flipped off the first Huntress' back and returned to having two feet planted firmly on the gritty soil of Nancora. With some space now between himself and the two Kiffar females he took a moment to get a closer look at the device on each of their wrists. Justinios thought they definitely looked like a launcher of some sort and with how close they had gotten to the escape pod it was more likely to be a dark launcher than a rocket launcher. That revelation, along with the use of a stun baton over a much more lethal weapon, bolstered hope within Justinios that his plan to be captured alive was in fact going to work.

If there were six more of these Kiffar beasts out in the darkness there was little chance of defeating them all. Capture was likely the best outcome so Justinios figured it was time to make the predators think they had earned their prey. Snatching his right-sized lightsaber off of his belt he flipped the activator switch. In the pitch black darkness of Nancora's brutal night the blue blade was almost blinding as it hummed to life. To their credit the two enhanced warriors in front of him didn't even so much as flinch. But taking a moment to reach out with the Force Justinios could feel the rest of the pack closing in on his location.

Justinios acrobatically danced back towards the awaiting Huntresses. They responded by backtracking in turn, keeping distance between them and the whirling Jedi as they pulled their energy bows from their

backs and began plinking off shots. Justinios was no fool, he knew these were intended to slow him down and not kill. None of the shots were accurate enough to be deadly but close enough that required Justinios to pay enough attention to deflecting the arrows just in case someone changed their mind. More arrows began to rain down around him as he continued to pursue the two Huntresses in their elegant dance. It wasn't long until the other warriors came into view under the blue glow of the lightsaber as the eight of them formed a circle around the now pinned in Jedi.

To Justinios' surprise one of the eight being standing around him was not one of the identical Kiffar females but instead a blue skinned female Chiss. This was the one that spoke first, "Put down your lightsaber Jedi, if you want to survive this night."

"That is so funny, I was about to just say that I will gladly accept your unconditional surrender now." Justinios offered up the quip not only to keep up the ruse of his resistance but also because there was never not a good time to have a bit a fun at someone else's expense. "Lay down your weapons and I promise our technicians that can get all of those crazy devices out of you with only moderate amounts of pain."

"I don't have times for games Jedi. Surrender now and I can at least promise that you will be kept alive for as long as you are in my possession and behave yourself." As the taller blue alien spoke Justinios began to contemplate his final options. Since live capture had been stated as an objective by the Chiss leader, Justinios considered that attempting to fight was now a logical option. Even with a low chance of success it was worth attempting a full escape because his only risk now was an accidental death.

Mustering all of the strength he had within him Justinios used the Force to launch his blue, scaly body at the unnamed Chiss. As he sailed through the air again a string of thoughts entered his mind.

Take out the leader first.

Then the one closest to her.

Quickly move to the escape pod for cover.

Wait, why isn't anyone shooting at me?

Is she going to defend herself with a stun baton?

Arrgh!

The short flight, as well as the thoughts coursing through the Aleena's neurons, swiftly ended as the limp form of Justinios Drake landed like a ragdoll onto the unforgiving terrain of Nancora's Badlands. Laughing, two of the Kiffar Huntresses picked up tiny, limp form of the Aleena and began carrying him back to their makeshift camp as four more carried the midnight black form of Kilo.

“Did you see that?” the first one asked but she didn’t wait for a response from the second before continuing. “The little guy didn’t even see it coming, you could see it in his eyes. You could say he was... shocked.”

Smirking the second huntress responded, “Yup I bet it was pretty... stunning.”

It was almost a standard hour after this exchange that Justinios Drake awoke inside a transport of some kind that he could not identify. Groggy, sore and restrained the only thing he could really tell about the vehicle was that it was in motion. He didn’t know how long he had been unconscious but he did know would take the rest of the local evening for the entire party to arrive at the closest populated landmark, Axio Transit Station Cresh. Now back in the waking world, the Jedi took a moment to congratulate himself for escaping the Badlands even if it was in the custody of ten dangerous warriors. Now all he had to do was figure out how to escape once he reached some semblance of civilization.