

Chapter 5

Two steps back

36/12/2436 (*Hakon Military Calendar*)

Thirty-six weeks later ...

Automatic rifle fire rang out from the far end of the forest, followed by a rapid shuffle, then a loud thud; a cry of orders would engulf the air soon after, and weapons fire would quickly follow. It was the final day of the weeklong optional junior non-commissioned officer course that selected trainees with markedly successful prior service careers and demonstrated leadership qualities during CBMT and MOS school. For the course, I'd been promoted to platoon commander (PLC) and assigned along with my fellow JNCO applicants to blue force, or BLUFOR for short; it was the Field Training Exercise, or FTX, immediately before we were to be assigned to the fleet. Our objective was to neutralise the Opposing Force, known as OPFOR, based in the Ang Var Valley. We were given broad latitudes as to our method of destruction on the singular condition—General Order One—that prohibits actions that exceed the realm of plausible deniability, in turn violating *Silentio Super Tumultum*. It was a simple clearance op; nothing we hadn't done a thousand times before. What we hadn't counted on was the presence of a battalion strength unit, and uncharacteristically for my platoon, the plan fell apart from the moment we dropped in. In our eagerness to get the job done, the approach was almost immediately compromised by a pair of man-portable laser interferometer gravitational-wave detectors.

With a positive ID on our dropship's magnetic resistors, we'd been subsequently caught between a pair of man-portable air-defence systems and forced to land in an ambush where we experienced complete equipment failure. We'd been on the run for the last forty minutes. A large military force was now in pursuit.

'Ma'am, rear guards report our pursuers have broken off,' said Elenskis.

'Thank the gods. Tremblej, what's our status?' I questioned.

'Not good, ma'am: SPS is down, environmental receptors are offline, wireless communication's a no-go, even our suits' memory crystals been *b̄rafiksjoti* fried!' Ela howled in anger as she listed off the problems. I grabbed her by the shoulders.

'Refocus, marine,' I instructed. She sighed.

'Sorry, ma'am.' She took a deep breath. 'Our KPMs are down, the static couplings for our hydrostatic gel have been fried, photoreactive panellin's been disabled, our force amplification actuators have fused, and our power packs have been fried, anything else?'

Down to Dark Age ballistics, then, I thought to myself as I inspected my M32.

'What's the situation with our comms?'

'I can get local comms back online in the next five mikes but long-range capability ain't gonna happen,' she answered bluntly.

'Okay, set it up and transmit the RV point,' I instructed nodding.

'Uh, which one, ma'am?'

'Rally point Zulu,' I elaborated. Ela looked at her physical map in confusion.

'I don't—' Ela began to respond.

'It isn't on the map because OPFOR's been issued our rally points. If you find a walled building that we didn't note in our mission plan, transmit it by courier to the rest of platoon until you get local comms back and augmented by a new security format,' I instructed.

'Aye, aye,' Ela replied as she knelt to inspect the map, a marker in one hand and her suits comms gear in the other.

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A multitasker as ever, I thought to myself as I began to patrol the perimeter of our defensive line.

‘Heads on a swivel, people! Those Delta Bravos could be anywhere!’ exclaimed Elenskis, my 2IC. Our marines shifted their gear and quickly refocused.

‘TEAMCOMM is live!’ Ela exclaimed moments later as marine couriers rushed back and forth from her to their team leaders, coordinates in hand. I turned to Ela.

‘Tremblej, you got that new encryption online?’

‘Negative, don’t broadcast anything risqué just yet,’ she replied, still buried deep in her comm gear. I nodded before tapping my comm piece on my helmet. A spark of electricity pulsed through my ears; my eyes snapping shut in pain before reaching for the handset from Ela’s suit’s wireless gear.

‘Kanji One Actual to all elements. Sound off and execute your orders, wireless silence protocols are in effect. Only mission-critical information will be transmitted. Actual Out,’ I instructed.

The platoon quickly reported in and then dispersed, disappearing into the woods, headed for the rally point. With our momentary regroup complete, our pursuers had also completed theirs and resumed the hunt. When Kanji arrived at the RV point, we quickly began to dig in. Ela had found an old, abandoned town built by the artificial pocket universe’s local inhabitants—or as local as you can get for an accident of natural selection—the Kisai. Surrounding the town was a six-metre stone perimeter wall, lined with small crenels to offer clear line of sight when firing.

‘We don’t have the combat effectiveness to beat them back, ma’am, and from the looks of it, they’ve procured combat armour as well, which’ll mean they have the offensive advantage,’ Elenskis reported into my thoughts. I simply nodded.

‘What’s our ordnance situation?’ I asked, turning to her as she prowled up beside me.

Elenskis just scoffed. ‘Tango Uniform: we’ve got two satchels of C13 explosives, two shots for the 40 mike-mike, seven siphon

charges, and a pair of gravity mines. Don't know why the *břafiksjet*, but apparently Casi has some weird fetish with gravity mines or something; I don't know,' Elenskis reported with a noticeable bark to her voice. I nodded in response.

'Okay, so what's our SITREP?' I asked.

'All squads have reported in, ma'am. We've dug a fifteen-metre perimeter trench around the town,' Elenskis explained. 'Against the cliff behind us,' she added.

'Tremblej?' I inquired turning to Ela as she stood behind me, still fiddling with her comm equipment.

'Gear-wise, we're still *Brafiki*. Fourth squad apparently have a couple turrets that aren't completely *brafiki*, I've jerry-rigged a short-wave local comm net and a substitute wireless encryption that's made our comm situation a little more stable. I've also been able to reroute most of my gear's fried static couplings, and I'm confident I'll be able to replicate that in the other suits,' Ela explained.

'Still no LRC?' I queried, hoping for long-range communications.

'Still just TEAMCOMM, ma'am,' Ela solemnly replied.

I sighed. 'What is wrong with our BDUs?'

'From the looks of it, Makos' BDU was compromised by a trojan horse. The virus was processed by her BDU as a priority communique and was automatically opened. The trojan then pretty much hijacked her security firmware and piggybacked to our gear through our wireless transmitters,' Ela explained.

'So, our core firmware is just locked down then?'

'Yut, quarantined,' she acknowledged.

I frowned. 'So, wait, why'd our actuators fuse?'

'Our suits' nitrogen distribution system prematurely shutdown before the actuator shutdown cycle.'

'And the components fused themselves together ...' I finished, trying to hold myself together, but I couldn't; I began to panic, my heart raced, my hands jittered. My platoon had never failed me—but in our last exercise, I was going to freeze, and I was going to choke our defeat.

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‘Orders, ma’am?’ called Elenskis.

‘Ela, switch all elements to SQUADCOMM!’ I called out, trying to strangle the fear that crept into my heart.

‘Yut!’ she exclaimed. She gave me a thumbs up when it was live. I picked up the handset, due to my fried comm piece.

‘All elements ...’ I began, my voice quickly trailing off as I looked around the town. ‘All—’ I muttered over the comm line, momentarily clicking off the handset.

I smirked; a pinch of pain flickered up the side of my face as I looked on. ‘All elements,’ I said with renewed resolve, my voice strengthening with every syllable, ‘Kanji One Actual. Bury defensive ordnance twenty-five metres outside our perimeter and consolidate our defences to our ten, twelve, and one. Take up defensive positions within the town!’

‘Rah!’ replied the platoon. I clicked off the handset, smiling at the use of the marine corps creole’s absurd word for a question, an exclamation, and ‘yes’ as I turned to look at Ela.

‘Tremblej, synchronise every BDU in the platoon. Sync them to your CPU and start them on that lockout.’

‘Yut!’ she replied with contained excitement as she realised the plan. I clicked the handset on again.

‘All elements *do not* engage the enemy under any circumstances. Hold your ground. Only move to engage the enemy if they are within one metre of the perimeter. Be advised supplies will be low. Check your shots and count your wishes. Out,’ I finished. Acknowledgement lights winked on from the squad leaders, and the wait began.

Chapter 6

Hunted and hunter

Ela turned to me, she snapped her free hand to the brim of her helmet before following with the numbers 2 and 5. The platoon had identified movement 25 metres from our position. Nodding, I raised my free hand palm-out and snapped it down to my side, ordering the platoon to open fire. Ela nodded and repeated the gesture. An explosion engulfed the forest in a sea of red and orange. Ela paused, checking her CPI's display before turning to me and signing to me with hand signals and Imperial Sign Language. *Seventy-five percent ion lithium charge.*

I nodded before waving my horizontal palm in an arc at my waist, Ela quickly relayed the command, and Elenskis and another marine nodded in reply before quickly firing two rounds from the platoon's pair of M406 underslung grenade launchers over the town's perimeter wall. The raw fire was soaked up by OPFOR like a sponge. They continued to advance towards us, unable to fire upon us through the dense perimeter wall. Moments later, a cluster of grenades came tumbling over the wall before they were quickly reflected back by something akin to the hand of gods. I smirked. *Gravity mine fetishes*, I thought to myself amused as the modified mines hung above the perimeter wall.

'Now!' I barked. Ela hit a tile on her CPI with a smile, her helmet held high to announce the emotion. Moments later, an echo, like a sonic grenade, reverberated through the forest and the crunch of footsteps ceased. A weary smile returned to me. *Finally, some good luck*, I thought to myself.

‘Contacts secure,’ Ela reported.

‘Everyone, ten-metre defensive positions; police those troops and weapons—we need what they have: magazines, power packs, anything. And we’ve got sixty seconds before their buddies figure out what’s happened. Rah?’

‘Rah!’ cried the unit in reply.

‘Someone want to tell me what *did* just happen?’ muttered Tomas as he rose from his fox hole.

‘We overclocked their suits and I hacked their force amplification safeties,’ explained Ela, her cheery tone almost out of place.

With that, the platoon spread out. Half of the marines covered the frozen members of OPFOR, stripping them of weapons and equipment while the rest screened the area for further contacts.

‘Tremblej, SITREP!’ I cried.

‘I’ve bypassed the quarantine and I’ve got LRC but it’s spotty thanks to a rogue EM field passing through the system,’ she replied.

‘Rogue, my arse,’ I remarked in an attempt to break the uneasiness. Ela continued to look concerned. ‘Patch me through,’ I instructed.

‘Yut,’ Ela replied as I picked up the handset.

‘Kanji One Actual. Godfather Actual. How copy? Over,’ called Davidson over the comm line, his voice smothered in static and barely readable.

‘Godfather Actual. Kanji One Actual. Reading three by three, connection unstable. Over,’ I replied, attempting to speed things up.

‘Roger, be advised friendly craft moving in to facilitate extraction. ETA one mike. Over,’ he replied.

‘Negative, Godfather Actual. Requesting triple-R procedures. Over.’ A sigh came over the mic as I looked back to Ela; she just gave me the ‘it’s royally *Brafiki*’ gesture.

‘Wilco Actual, initiating triple-R procedures. Out,’ he replied, disbelief settling into his voice. Moments later, our armour pinged, informing us of a freshly received program. Attached was an automated text:

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BE ADVISED. ORBITAL REPAIR, RESUPPLY AND SYSTEM RECOVERY UNAVAILABLE. AIRDROP OF TRIPLE-R MATERIEL TO BE DELIVERED AT GRID REFERENCE FS245-223. END.

A quiet ‘rah’ rang through the platoon. Ela frowned.

‘We’ve got contacts! Twelve o’clock! Thirty-three foot mobiles closing fast! ETA five mikes!’ relayed Elenskis.

‘Looks like they were tipped off by our resupply!’ Elenskis added.

‘*Brafik!*’ I hissed, pulling up my satellite positioning system. ‘Okay, the valley is south-east of here. We’ve got forces moving west and reinforcements moving out from Ang Var. We need to disappear,’ I turned back to Elenskis.

‘Then we’re moving in one. Have the platoon move out to the mouth of this cave system directly west of us. We’ll drop down into the cave system below, find a position with a lot of physical noise, and wait for OPFOR to roll right over us,’ I instructed. ‘From here we can move onto Ang Var.’

‘What if they’re equipped with imaging gear?’

‘Then it’s a gamble we lose,’ I said in sharp reply.

‘Rah,’ Elenskis replied. She turned to the platoon. ‘We are Oscar Mike! Follow me!’ she exclaimed.

The constant thunder of OPFOR’s manoeuvres was louder than before. They were right on our tails this time, and we had no other choice. I reached the mouth of the cave system. It was a two hundred-metre drop into an underwater pool that fed the entire region. *How were we going to get down again?* I asked myself. I flicked up my visor and gazed through the waterfall that cascaded into the cave system. The wall was jagged. A pain in the arse, but structurally stable. As the platoon neared my position, I gestured to the rock wall.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me!’ Tomas hissed as he threw himself against the rock wall. With that, I stowed my rifle and

leapt into the current of water; my hands felt the shock, and I immediately recoiled, gravity catching up, but I refocused and slammed my right hand into a piece of stable rock. I settled in. The platoon followed suit.

‘We wouldn’t happen to have some stealth systems still?’ I inquired, the patter of footsteps hanging ever ominously overhead. Ela simply shook her head. *The iron ball paint, the water, and the angles are gonna have to do*, I thought as the heavy patter of full battle rattle echoed through only moments later. The sound ceased; the click of rifles rang through the cave system. Two riflemen, both armed, had broken off to investigate the cave system.

‘You see anything?’ one of them asked.

‘Negative, you think they went down?’ the other replied.

‘Kanji must have some serious balls if they dropped down there.’

‘Well, may as well be thorough. Drop a hunter down there,’ the second rifleman instructed.

‘Roger that,’ the first replied. He holstered his weapon and unclipped two charges. He flicked on the arming switches and reached through the wall of water, his hands mere metres away from my back, before releasing the charges, gravity dragging them down towards the pools below, their manoeuvring thrusters activating just before they hit the water. They made an initial sweep, their search pulse tracing across the area before vanishing into the labyrinthine cave system. As the riflemen moved to rejoin the main group, I let out a deep breath.

‘Gods,’ I cursed.

‘Ma’am, we’ve got another issue,’ Ela reported.

‘Explain when we’re safer, marine.’

‘Agreed. Down we go,’ she said with hollow enthusiasm. ‘By the way, how’re we dealing with those hunter mines, ma’am?’ Ela added.

‘Well, you’ve got two hundred metres to figure it out,’ I jokingly replied as we began to descend into the cave system. We got about a hundred metres into the descent when Ela began to speak.

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‘PLC, I’ve got an idea.’

I smirked. *Of course, you do*, I thought to myself. ‘Let’s hear it,’ I replied.

‘So, we piggyback the mine’s wireless signal and transmit a falsified termination signal,’ she replied with glee in her voice.

‘And that does what?’

‘Firstly, it gives us an alibi. The termination signal is released if the on-board computer knows it can—with reasonable certainty—kill a target, which means that if we do have to destroy it, we can keep our platoon capabilities a secret, and second—’ Ela began.

‘Of course there is,’ I replied before nodding for her to proceed.

‘We can re-program them,’ she explained. ‘I’ve dismantled a few HMs in the last twelve weeks out of boredom; anyway, their hardware isn’t EMP-hardened like most pieces of Taskforce gear. Once I’ve piggybacked its feed to OPFOR, I just need to get within a range of five metres and I can overload one of my BDUs SM triple-Cs; that should do the trick,’ she elaborated.

‘You only have six cooling cells that aren’t burnt out, so explain to me where you’re going to get the required triple-Cs?’

‘I only need two to maintain crystalline integrity. I can lose a couple,’ she explained.

‘Now, explain to me how a triple-C is going to work as a jerry-rigged EMP?’ I continued, sceptical.

‘Triple-Cs store a small quantity of liquid nitrogen within an electrical field housing. Now, the cell, in lay terms, carries a temperature probe that detects the heat levels of the SMC; when the crystalline structure reaches temperatures of sixteen twenty degrees Celsius, the cell’s electrical field collapses and liquid nitrogen is poured into the micro superconducting memory crystal. The triple-C is then ejected into the wilderness before another triple-C is “chambered”,’ she explained. I ran my thumb in a semicircular arc across my helmet’s head, indicating I was rolling my eyes.

‘I did qualify to use my BDU, you know?’ I replied sarcastically. Ela simply ignored the comment.

‘So, if I overload the triple-C’s EFH and connect it to the mine, the two objects will overload each other,’ she explained.

‘So how do we go about that?’ I inquired, even more sceptical now than I had been.

‘Distraction, obviously. Once I’ve isolated them from the wireless grid, I’ll need two volunteers to bait the mines into striking range. There I’ll be able to throw the triple-Cs onto the mines and nabbing us two hunter mines,’ Ela explained, madness most certainly in her eyes.

‘Fine, but if we lose, you’re buying all of us a round,’ I instructed. She gave me a thumbs-up as we continued down. ‘XO, what did we recover from OPFOR?’

Elenskis simply shook her head below me.

‘Jack *shajst*, really. In our panic, we missed a lot. We got a couple satchels of triple-Cs. A few technical kits and a couple M42 Mod 9 MVR grenades. But that’s it,’ Elenskis reported.

‘*Brafiksjot*,’ I cursed. ‘And what happened to the resupply?’ addressing both of them.

‘LOGCOM dropped it north-east of our current position,’ Ela hissed. ‘It’s almost like we’re meant to fail,’ she muttered to no one in particular. Most of the platoon was now just above the water before we quickly dropped into the pool below. As soon as we hit the water, the weight of our gear began to drag us down at an alarming rate. I began to swim as hard as I could to the edge and propped myself up onto the rock wall with difficulty. My skin burned as I sat on the edge, my rifle nestled on my knee as the last few marines fell in.

‘You know they’ve heard our splash, right? They’re gonna be after us,’ Ela interjected into my solemn thoughts.

‘Agreed. Prenalta, Baua—you’re with Tremblej! Everyone else, make yourselves scarce!’ I barked. We all quickly scattered into the various corners of the cave system as the bait formed up on Ela.