

Chapter 13 - Death Lessons

Rathu led his troops through the woods. Traya trailed him slightly. Behind them, were the two Psadan that had wrapped Dha'ndi's body. Between them, in a large cot of woven branches they carried Dha'ndi'.

As they walked, Traya began to play games to occupy herself. She closed her eyes and began to reach out in the Force. She noted the Psadan nearby, Rathu in front, the two carrying the body behind her; the body dead to the Force.

It was remarkable how although she could sense the bulky Psadan in the Force, her ears could barely make them out. They barely made a sound as their large feet shifted across the forest floor.

She kept track of Rathu, as to stay on the path, and then began to reach out further in the Force. She noticed the Psadan overhead leaping from tree branch to tree branch, the snipers carefully staying hidden from view.

She then noticed one of the scouts drop down from his tree and whisper instructions to one of the soldiers on the ground.

As they walked, Traya whispered to Rathu, "We should avoid the northeast."

Rathu gave Traya a confused glance before the soldier that Traya had just sensed talking to the Scout ran out of the underbrush to talk to Rathu. "Sir news from our Northern scout."

Rathu looked at the Psadan, then back at Traya, who was lightly avoiding eye contact, looking up at the trees, and then back to the Psadan. "Yes?"

"There is a Leviathan to the Northeast. Our best bet right now is to-"

"Avoid it?"

"Yes sir."

Rathu looked at Traya again, who was now completely avoiding eye contact, staring at the ground as they walked.

"Thank you, Sha'te, you can go back to your post."

"Ooh Ah," the soldier said, pounding a fist to his chest and then darting back into the forest.

Traya then felt a humming sensation from Rathu.

Mmmmm hmmmm mmmmm.

She couldn't tell if she was hearing it with her ears or in the Force. And then she realized it was neither, she was feeling the vibrations in her chest.

Then, as though on command, the entire company began to shift in a different direction from their initial path.

Mmmmm hmmmm mmmmm.

She realized it wasn't the first time she had felt this sensation, but it was such a low frequency she hadn't noticed it before now.

Yet, as she noticed it now, it suddenly became so apparent that once she had sensed it, she couldn't stop feeling it.

Mmmmmmm hmmmm mmmmmmm.

Traya opened her eyes and began to hum it to herself, "mmmmmm hmmmm mmmmm, mmmmm hmmmm mmmm..."

"Not quite, young one," Rathu said, breaking her trance.

Traya looked over at Rathu. "What?"

"The sound, it's sort of like a-" Rathu rubbed his chin and chuckled. "All these years it's come so naturally to us Psadan, I don't think I've ever described it to Ana'a'ai much less to a human. It's sort of like a song."

"A song?"

"A humming song." Traya thought on this for a few moments. Rathu continued, "it's not from the voice. It's from the chest."

"The chest?"

Traya ran forward to catch up with Rathu. The Psadan began to make a low gurgling, growling sound from deep within, *wahhhhhhhh*.

The sound vibrated throughout Traya's body.

Traya attempted the sound again, "Wahhhhhhh."

Rathu chuckled. "It is better, but not quite there. The hum comes less from the throat. It's almost a growl."

Traya tried again, "wahhhhh." It still wasn't quite right.

She then turned to Rathu, "I've heard stories of other armies that sing as they march."

"It keeps the mind occupied." Rathu replied.

"Wahhhhhh..."

Rathu laughed again, "we will make a Psadan out of you soon enough, young Traya."

Traya smiled and continued to practice as the war party trekked along.

After a while Rathu asked what Traya feared he might, "how did you know about the Leviathan? Did you sense it?"

Traya kicked a stone on the ground as she responded, "I heard your scout."

Rathu stopped and looked at her in disbelief. "They are stationed at least 100 meters away from us."

Traya looked at the ground as she spoke, "I can hear things really far away... sometimes even when I don't want to."

Rathu decided to leave it at this and the two continued walking.

The sun had gone down a distance when Traya asked, "hey Rathu?"

"Yes, young one?"

"I have a question."

"What do you wish to know?"

"Why did you accept Anga da'a Hee when you knew you might die?"

Rathu tilted his head slightly, "what do you mean? I had to accept."

Traya thought about her words for a moment. "But you didn't."

At this Rathu simply looked back confused.

"If you had wanted to, you could have just killed Dha'ndi' without all the ceremony, told your men to kill him in his sleep or something. They are your troops. You can use them for whatever you want."

"Against my own kin?" Rathu looked at Traya, a look of mixed horror and disappointment on his face. Traya suddenly felt an immense sense of shame welling up inside her.

Rathu continued walking, but then said to Traya, "let me ask you a question."

Traya perked up at this.

"Why do you think my soldiers follow me?"

"Cause you're the strongest."

Rathu smirked and then yelled over his shoulder, "Da'shak, who is the strongest fighter in our party?"

"Calderan."

"Inja', who is the strongest warrior in our party?"

"Calderan."

"Who is Calderan?" Traya asked.

"He is my youngest brother." Rathu said and then pointed upward into the canopy. "I make sure he is above me at all times."

"He is not large in size, but his strength and agility is unrivaled amongst my kin. I am glad it was Dha'ndi' who challenged me and not Calderan."

Traya thought about this for a moment, "ohhhh, so if Calderan challenged you then you wouldn't fight?"

"I most certainly would have fought him."

"Even though you knew you would lose?"

"I never said I would lose."

Traya only grew more confused by the Psadan's argument.

"But he is stronger than you," Traya insisted.

"Right. Which is even more the reason to fight him."

Traya was completely dumbfounded. The Psadan wasn't making any sense.

"But then you would lose."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because he's stronger!" Traya was trying to keep a level tone, but the Psadan was being insufferable.

"Anga da'a Hee is not just a fight, it is a battle to quench the wit of the mind. Strength is important, yes, but one cannot win on strength alone. One needs wits, tactics, strategy- the traits of a true leader."

Traya sat on this for a number of minutes walking through the woods. "I guess it still just sounds like a silly tradition."

"What is wrong with a tradition?"

"It's not tradition in general. This one just seems... stupid."

Rathu gave out a bellowing laugh. "Traditions are forged in the history of a culture. We do not get to decide which we follow and which we ignore. This has served our ancestors for centuries, perhaps millenia, who are we to question their wisdom?"

Traya pondered the question, "couldn't your ancestors be wrong?"

Rathu smiled, "you are right to not follow blindly, there is a time to have faith and a time to question. We must have the wisdom to know when to choose each."

Traya found this answer unsatisfying, but was beginning to realize that she probably wasn't going to change Rathu's mind.

"The way you fought with those sticks was amazing!" She blurted out.

"Ahhh, you liked the Daats'i Ateen?"

"The dotsy what?"

"The Daats'i Ateen. It's what we call the sticks."

"Oh yeah those were so much fun!" Traya ran in front of Rathu, playfully reenacting some of the moves Rathu and Dha'ndi' had used during the battle. "Do you think you could teach me how to use them?"

Rathu was beaming, "yes, most certainly, Traya."

"Maybe you could teach me after dinner?"

"Yes, that would be nice."

"Yeah the footwork was so cool!"

Traya continued her reenactment as they walked. Rathu chuckled watching her.

"Yeah, the way that Rathu broke your arm-" she paused, looking to Rathu that it was okay to continue.

He waved her on with his hand, "it's fine."

"How he locked your arm and almost broke it like slam!" Traya reenacted the lock and swing as best she could. "You know I could fix it?"

Rathu looked somewhat disturbed by this comment, but Traya continued before he had time to ask her more.

"And you took it like it was nothing. And then your attack, that final blow-" she went to reenact the swing upward, and then stopped. She realized now that she had already gone too far. She looked at Rathu who now looked deeply saddened. She stopped her playing and settled back into her spot walking beside him.

After a minute or two of walking in silence, Traya mumbled, "I'm sorry about your brother."

Rathu was silent for a while, "Dha'ndi' and I had been butting heads for a while. I think the Anga da'a Hee was inevitable."

"What else did you fight about?"

Rathu was silent again, as if pondering his words. "The Psadan are a proud people. Yet, since our people were relegated to the Deadlands we have lost our way. We have become desperate... weak. Me and Dha'ndi' both agreed that our people were in a state of crisis, but we disagreed on how our people could once again find our way."

"What do you mean? Why can't your people leave the Deadlands?"

"Why can't we leave?" There was a hint of anger in his voice now, "because of the Myneyrshi of course! They kill us whenever we dare leave these horrid woods! And with the support of the Ja'dee. They have massacred more of my people than I can count--"

Rathu stopped talking and turned around, realizing that Traya had stopped walking. He raised a hand and let out a low hum. The entire group of soldiers around him stopped moving. He walked back over to Traya. "Little one, what is wrong?"

"Until a few days ago, I didn't even know that the Psadan existed. Cade's been on Ossus for years, even decades, but I'm not even sure he knew about the Psadan."

Rathu thought for a moment. "Perhaps, you two didn't know, but the Myneyrshi? They know. They have always known. And, as for all Ja'dee, I have seen at least one Ja'dee, a Myneyrshi, and he slayed more of my friends than I can count. I doubt a single one of the Myneyrshi would hesitate at the chance to slay any one of my brethren."

"The Myneyrshi are my friends." Traya protested. "Some are like family. Are you sure that they could- I mean I can't imagine Em harming any one. I mean maybe in self defense."

"Self-defense? My people starve, while the Myneyrshi live in abundance. They share nothing while we scrounge and claw for the crumbs that fall off their tables. They hunt us

down and have forced us to the outskirts of our own homeworld. I guarantee your friend would gut me alive if he had the chance."

"No. Em would never do something like that!" Traya protested, her arms folded in front of her.

Rathu realized, staring at Traya, arms folded like a child, that he was still only talking to a girl.

"Very well." He turned around and raised a hand. "We cannot stop, we are wasting time. We must keep moving."

He then lowered his hand and let out another low hum, which was echoed by various other Psadan warriors around them. He continued marching, and, like a unit, the rest of the Psadan moved with him.

Traya stood still, not moving. He yelled back at her. "Traya, at the front. With me!"

Traya shook her head and ran to catch up with him. She was still extremely hungry.

They walked in silence for a while, until they were near a large clearing in the woods, surrounded by wooden gates. Traya figured it must be the camp. As they were a hundred meters from the main gate, Traya whispered. "I'm sorry about your son."

Rathu continued marching, eyes planted forwards, towards the gate.

"He seemed like a strong warrior." Rathu still gave no response. "He had conviction. And much love for you.

"I would love to have had a brother like him."

Rathu still did not say anything, but as they marched the last few meters to the gate, Traya saw the General quickly wipe his face with his forearm. Traya couldn't be sure, but she swore she saw him wipe away a tear.
