<https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/items/69526-special-missions-company>

* Are you afraid of the dark?
* Cheated death, died anyway.

Strike team Skywalker landed on the top of the mines, shuttles flaring light into the darkness in triplicate as the two trooper transports landed. Each disgorged six of Arcona’s special force operatives, drawn directly from the Eldar Rangers. Ten soldiers, standard light blasters replaced with heavy rifles designed for larger targets. Two tech specialists to help them clear their way into the mines.

The third shuttle sat menacingly in the midnight black, only visible due to the gap in the star field above them. The doors did not open, but they all felt the presence inside.

Force user. Sith. Equite. Arcona had sent one of their own pet dark siders to oversee this operation. Aurora found that chaffed as she adjusted her belt of thermal detonators and technician’s kit. Eldar Rangers hardly needed the help of some bloody over jumped Ewok with a glowstick fetish, but here they were on the side of the rocky planet with barely any breathable atmosphere. They all were wearing breather mask integrated with their helmets to compensate, though the air was survivable without one if you wanted to just sit around doing nothing all day.

“Kriffing worms…” Austin said, stepping in next to her. He was a human, like most of the strike team. Her Sephi features hardly made her hard to distinguish from the rest once her helmet was off. The only other non-human was the Sith Ewok in the transport and the Twi’lek solider in the second squad. She found them amusing, so short lived. Well into her twelfth decade of life, these soldiers were like children compared to her. Still, their brute strength and determination made them valuable assets. “I hope you’re not afraid of the dark, Aurora.” She snorted at him.

“Hardly, Austin.” She mocked squinting into the dark mine entrance. “Oh, you might want to be though. I think I see your mother in there.” He punched her arm, she laughed. Childish, yes, but when on Coruscant as the saying went. “We’ve not got long left before we’re moving in, is your team ready?”

Austin nodded, rolling his shoulders. They crunched softly, armour plates grinding. It was an ugly and heavy suit of armour. He quite obsessively worked out to be able to wear it comfortably. She’d also seen it take a thermal detonator hit at near point-blank range and not break, so she figured he was entitled to it. “Yeah, yours?” She nodded in turn.

“They are. Is *he*?” Austin cocked his head, listening to nothing.

“It feels like it. He’s hard to read.”

“It still creeps me out you can do that. They’ll give you a glowstick next.”

Austin snorted at her comment. “Hardly, I’m barely force sensitive. Telepathy training has taken me weeks and I’m only just getting to a point I can throw a message reliably. Reading people clearly is near impossible at the best of times, and I’m hardly ready to start reading *them*.” He sighed deeply. “I don’t like this part of the mission.”

***“You don’t have to like it. Are you ready to move? I have overridden the system.”*** Austin cringed, the Ewok Work’t’s voice slamming into his force sensitive mind more harshly than hers. She sighed and turned toward the midnight shuttle, nodding. Both of them felt the prickling connection to Work’t form. The training had helped, but the sense of another mind bleeding into theirs was uncomfortable.

In return, however, they could now feel the rest of the team. The faint sense of connection linked them to each other, and more importantly, Work’t who felt them all more strongly. They felt more then heard his telepathic urge to move into the mines, the security turrets on the edge now disabled and hanging limp in their swivels.

Aurora opened her communication device. “Remember team, Equite Work’t will provide us his guidance, but it’s on us to make our way through this facility. The research blueprints for the Collective’s new experiments into the Rak-Ghoul plague are inside the heart of this facility, and I have no intention of leaving here without them.” Austin opened his own connection to his fireteam, and she listened idly as they felt the desire to part and take the different paths.

They followed Work’t’s desire, branching out and splitting the two teams through the dark tunnels. The mines were cold white/grey stone, fairly bright when it caught the light of the team’s blaster-lights. It was interspersed with crimson veins of…something. She saw Aloia, her point-woman, step toward one of them. She staggered back before making contact.

Work’t, his force effort concentrated on the battle meditations, responded to the action by standard communications. “No. Danger. No touch red. No touch anything.” Aloia looked toward her, face plate blank and expressionless. They all looked like that, bar Austin’s custom heavy suit. Special forces sealed armour, brotherhood issue. The eyes invisible behind the glare from the flashlights. Aurora nodded; she wasn’t going to contradict the creature. She opened a private channel.

“Equite Work’t, we aren’t seeing any collective forces.” She waited for a response. “Sir?”

“No. Not here. Dead…gone. More possible dead.” She paused for a moment, parsing that.

“Dead?”

His voice came back impatient. “Yes, dead. Probably.” She swept her light over a junction as the six of them passed by it. The darkness loomed uncomfortably, lights not fully breaking down into the darkness and revealing the end of the corridor. It left a hungry darkness that left the mine making her wonder if she could discover a fear of the dark.

“Clarify that, Sir.” She said, tersely. “What are we doing here?”

“Told you.”

“Why are we here with *guns* Sir?”

“We found, mine. Signals, hunter detector satellite. Found survivor. Not collective likely. Experiments.” She took a moment. He continued. “Clear data centre. Get research. Leave. No…worries.” She felt his mind pressing reassurance against hers, his morale boosting hers. She let it seep in and nodded, but keyed for an open channel.

“Work’t thinks the Collective might have been wiped out by their own experiments. Explains the lack of guards. Keep your eye out for…” She heard something. They all did, trained as they were. They snapped into a semi-circle, two beams of light punching into the dark on all three paths on the junction. It was a strange sound, like steel on stone. Dragging, then tapping tapping tapping before dragging again. The pattern repeated in a four beat over and over again before fading into the dark.

“For whatever that was.” She grunted, nervousness trying to fray at her calm. He felt Work’t pushing on the squad, keeping them focused and dulling that edge. For the first time after a week of training with him, she appreciated his presence in her head. They moved quietly now, footsteps softer and slower. They panned the light side to side and saw red again. Different now though, metallic and regular. She stepped up, staring at it as her squad was moved to her will, her ideas relayed out by Work’t.

“Sir. Seeing a large container of hyperfuel. Not sure what it’s doing here, but-“

“Interesting. Move more.” She stared at the large fuel container built into the wall of a mine slightly longer before moving on. She opened her communications with Austin.

“Just saw a container of hyperfuel. What do you make of that?”

“Seen the same, Aurora. Someone here has this place rigged with a lot of it. I wonder what it’s powering?”

She grunted down the connection as Aloia reached the next intersection. Her light swung left and then as it moved to the right the rest of the squad filled in the gaps. Aurora and another of the squad forward, one on the rear, two on the junction. The movement felt incredibly fluid, the guidance meaning that everyone acted in concert. She felt the progress of Austin’s team above them, branching above as they dipped lower and lower into the belly of the bea- She caught herself. Despite the constant pumping confidence from the Ewok, she found herself nervous again. Worse, she could hear the strange quad beat of drag-tap-tap-tap again at the edges of her hearing.

“What the kriff is that boss?” Aloia asked, growling. The point-woman turned around to look at her. “It sounds organic, but that scrape...”

Aurora nodded. “I don’t know, but we’ll kill it easily enough. Be ready.”

The six pushed deeper into the mine. Finding themselves in a cavern, they fanned out and found the first bodies. Aloia pushed forward as the squad fanned around them. She felt Work’t’s curiosity pressing at her mind, and watched as the point-woman searched the corpse. It had been sawn almost in half, as if a large, serrated blade had slammed into them side and gutted whoever this was who had been wearing miner’s overalls in deep ground. He had a hole burnt into the centre of his forehead.

“Collective alright.” Aloia said, grinning. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer bastard.” One of the others kicked at one of the other bodies, flipping it. He waved another set of tags.

“Wonder what got them?” He asked, gruff. “It’s sloppy work. A beast of some sort?”

“No.” Aurora said firmly. “Look at the cuts on the armour of this one.” She’d found a security officer on the edge of the room, his breast plate chewed through. She felt Work’t’s focus shifting onto her more heavily. “It’s got two metal fragments in here; the armour is completely clean. But the fragments in this cut have rust. Something dirty cut this. And they all have headshots. Something made sure they’d stay dead.”

“Great.” He spat. “Giant sword monsters with blasters? What is this, an old horror holo?” The darkness loomed around the group, stood in a tight circle around the most recent body. “It’s stalking us.” He said, deadpan. “The sounds still there.”

“Correct.” Work’t said via the radios. “Sense…something. Much something.”

“Keep moving.” Aurora said. “We’re only about a half kilometre from the data centre. Get the data, get out.”

Suddenly, she heard the crack of laser fire echoing distantly. She wasn’t a rookie. She didn’t stop and interrupt someone else’s battle to ask questions. That was how you got people killed. As a result, she wasn’t distracted by screwing with her communication channels when the first beast jumped for one of her troops to the right. It was a mere shadow in the edges of his beam. She snapped her rifle up and blasted it, scoring right out the air as it dropped toward the man. It perished before she really saw what it was, skittering past and into the darkness. She got a faint impression of eight legs, two reflecting lights like steel.

It skidded with a screech of steel as behind her she heard a deep bellow of pain as the squad snapped around and opened fire onto another one of the creatures. This time she saw it clearly, one of her squad on the ground face first, bleeding on the floor. They shot it off, one of its organic legs flying off on one side, two on the other. Core shots landed, oozing acidic yellow blood onto the man below, whose screaming increased rapidly before cutting off.

The creature was a large spider, clearly modified. Its front legs were clearly prosthetic, rusty steel blades heavily serrated and chipped. The other six were pointed with steel tips, the deep brown hairs on it dirty with blood. Its pincers were also rusted steel, covering in some sort of black ichor. The eyes though, those were still organic, and catching the light they glowed a deep red. The thick bulbs of the creature’s body slammed into the wall.

“What the kriff.” Aloia growled, twitching. The human was always like this when angry. The team’s medic ran forward, then shook his head kneeling by the fallen solider. “Dead.”

Aurora would process that later. “Let’s move.” She said, calm. She felt the other team’s conflict ending, a sense of the battle leaking through the battle mediation.

Austin’s voice cut in. “Two down. Nasty bastards. Spiders?”

“Spiders.” She responded, the squad’s remaining five members moving deeper into the mine shaft. “We’re almost there. Another few chambers.”

“I’ve almost reached the command centre.” He said, grimly. “They’re coming again, we can hear them.”

Aurora listened carefully. “Yeah. Same. Good luck, fight well Austin.”

The five of them reached another chamber, and the creatures had evidently been waiting. Aurora hadn’t had time to scan the room before the Force in her mind pushed her to grab a thermal detonator and lobbing it into a wall. It blew, knocking three of the creatures loose from the wall and screeching onto the floor. The other’s had begun blasting at full power, knocking creature after creature down. It didn’t matter. Aloia was grabbed, then another member of the team. Aurora felt Work’t pressing hard and followed his instruction, almost rebelling as she realised what he needed of her. She through the next detonator almost directly into Aloia’s face, ending the woman and the six creatures around the two injured squad mates as they backed up furiously out of the blast.

The creatures died. The two of her troops in the blast went with them. The sound of their deaths echoed loud enough that when the man to her left was grabbed, she only noticed because of the Force once again spinning her. She turned and snapped of a burst of shots into the man holding her trooper, only to see a corpse with two punched holes in it.

“Ghoul!” Screamed the medic next to her. They killed the ghoul, blowing its head clean off. The man slumped, whimpering as he scratched at the bite marks in his neck seal. She raised her blaster and took his head off as well.

Then she began to run, Work’t again pressing at her. She felt the fading of Austin’s team, distant explosions going off. The medic ran by her, barely keeping pace. They hip fired off shots at the creatures as they dropped from the ceiling. She was screaming in her mind, but her body knew what to do. She unlatched a grenade and dropped it primed and timer on. Three second later, the blast shook the tunnel and the creature lost ground, rearing up in rage at the fire of the blast.

The door was just ahead. It started to slide open, which surprised her. She was here to hack that. No time to worry about that, and what she would have done if it wasn’t. The door began to reverse halfway up, coming back to seal the room. She dropped it in a slide, watched the last survivor of her squad on her right do the same. She cheated the same death by the narrowest of inches, a steel blade scoring a slash across her neck seal but not breaking it.

But the Sephi was much lither than her comrade. And the spider on the left was slower then his. She slid under in time to see his slide arrested before he was dragged back screaming. The door sealed, leaving her in total darkness as her blaster fell out of her numb heads, sliding into a corner and shattering it’s light. She felt her heart pounding, the scrape-tap-tap-tap sound all around her, in the walls, under the floor, in the ceiling.

**“You are safe.”** She felt the thought in her mind and projected back doubt, anxiety…fear. The darkness was all around her. **“Do your task, Aurora. You cannot rest yet.”**

She stood, the courage being pumped into her as if it was on an IV the only thing stopping her curling into a ball and fading.

“Aurora?” Came a voice over her helmet. It was Austin. “Aurora, come in.” He sounded weak.

“I read you.” She said, hating how her voice trembled.

“I’ve not got much time left. Two of us made it to control, but I’m bit and he’s lost his leg to a beast. There were ghouls up here, Aurora. Not many, but all hidden in control. We found more of that red crystal in the walls but broken. It’s leaking something, someone had placed it around the control centre.” He coughed. “I don’t know what they found or what they’ve done, but they made their weapon. You need to active the data room breaking. It’s been manually disabled. I can only get the door from here now.”

Ah. So that’s how it had happened. Work’t must have set up the timings. **“Yes. Now find the breaker.”** His desire was strong, and open to him as she was choosing to be to benefit from the mediation hard to reject. She stood despite her fear, feeling in the darkness. She followed his lead, her hands going her he wanted them. The breaker flipped on.

Aurora had seen massacres. She didn’t puke. She didn’t scream. But she did for a moment wish she’d never found the breaker. The room was full of bodies, each whole but a hole in their foreheads, each sat in a circle around the central terminal, so she had to physically step over them to get to the data terminal. She sat down, the dead watching as she sliced open a connection to Work’t’s ship.

“Aurora?” Austin said, voice tired.

“Yeah?” She said, her own voice still trembling in the dim emergency light of the data room.

“It was a good run, these last few years. Thank you. Don’t beat yourself up over this, and make sure to kick that stupid little Ewok right up his arse for me.”

She didn’t need it spelt out. They’d all done the required reading. There was no way to recover him in time to get a serum to him. “May your rest peacefully at last Austin.” She said, choking up. “Thank you.” She felt his presence fade, her connection now only to the Ewok.

She looked back down at the terminal. It was completely black. “No, no, no!” She yelled.

**“Fear not. I have it. And for the record, Aurora. I thank you too.”**

What? She thought confusion, concern toward him. **“Even now, I am flooding this facility with the emergency fail safe they built in. The fuel was not intended for restocking Aurora. I am, if it is any consolidation, very sorry.”** It felt genuine. That only made it hurt more.

“Why?” She asked, numb.

**“Because retrieving you is a lower priority then stopping this spreading. This entire site was sealed, but our efforts have almost led to a containment breach. We have already killed one of the beasts before we could seal this entrance. We detect breaches being dug elsewhere. They will escape soon. We cannot afford that.”**

“I understand. Is the data good, Sir?”

**“Pure. Thank you.”**

“May I press the button?” The screen flickered back to life, revealing the horde of warnings and integrity pop ups. She didn’t apricate him hiding it but did understand. “Thank you, Sir. Get clear.”

She waited four minutes and fifty-two seconds, watching the weakest seal integrity dipping toward thirty percent. Saw on the trackers she’d pulled down from the command room showed Work’t’s ship escape the area. “Sorry, Miranda.” She spoke. “It was a good run, but you’re really going to have work out a new Sephi for coffee dates.” She smiled at the memory, even as she pressed the button.