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Archean Tarentae motioned silently for his team to advance. The scorching sun of Korriban cast deep shadows, and the team was taking full advantage of them to conceal their positions. They advanced on the entrance to the ruins of the Sith Academy cautiously. Enemy units had been spotted in the area, but Arcona and the Nephilim had been successful so far in setting up defensive perimeters around the most important strategic points on Korriban. Enemy forces seemed to arrive on the planet in a continuous, steady stream. Some of Taldryan's Dark Jedi were infamous for their speed and stealth, and they had a renowned Grand Master at their helm. It was all but certain to Archean that his team would encounter resistance despite being well within the Iron Throne's defense cordon. Worse yet, it was only the best and the brightest of the enemy forces that could survive long enough to make it this far.

The team broke into a run as they burst into the sunlight, making a break for the Academy doors. It was an enormous building, built in the shape of a grand pyramid dug into the side of a mountain. The entrance was recessed into the back of a partially natural, partially man-made canyon which made a frontal assault both brutally dangerous and the only option short of leveling the entire site from orbit. Archean's team had to make up almost a quarter mile of ground in blistering sunlight before reaching the gigantic stone doors, flanked by crumbling fifty meter tall statues of kneeling Sith apprentices. The coast seemed clear.

They ran along the side of the canyon, each team member looking out for enemy movement. After a few minutes that seemed to take a lifetime the team came to a halt behind one of the crouching monoliths. Archean decided to give them a moment to catch their breaths and survey the canyon again for movement. The blind swordsman searched with his thoughts around the corner at the massive doors, noting that one of them was ajar. The gap was slim. *Somebody beat us in there. Let's hope they were Arconan.* There was no more time to waste. He signaled to Collins and Takeshi, the two demolitions experts he had requested from Tarentum's 1st Legion. In about a minute the two men had deployed shaped charges on the near door and had prepared to detonate. It was anticlimactic. There was no fiery blast, no huge cloud of smoke, and no deafening explosion. Archean could sense that a moderately sized portion of the door had simply collapsed inward, leaving enough of an entrance for about four men to enter shoulder to shoulder. He motioned to his team, and they advanced.

The entrance hall would have been very imposing in its day. It was wide and open with massive columns holding up the ceiling. Time had not been entirely kind, and large chunks of rock had splintered off from the pillars and the ceiling and come crashing to the floor. Natural cover was everywhere, and Archean immediately began mentally ticking off the potential attack vectors. His squad of Dark Jedi fanned out, checking each barrier for danger and

advancing slowly toward the next massive set of doors at the opposite end of the hall. *The far doors are intact*, noted Archean.

The blind Battlemaster's ears caught a muffled sound. Many would not have heard it, but Archean was already on high alert and the acoustics in the massive stone chamber echoed every footfall. It was just the tiniest gurgle, but he followed it with his senses instantly and his body was not far behind. One of his soldiers had fanned out a little too far on his own, and was now on the ground. Something crouched above him. It was masked but there was just enough for Archean's keen senses to discern. He waited until the last possible instant before activating his lightsaber and plunging it through the incongruous Force spark. A surprised shriek erupted as Archean's momentum drove them both into a slide across the polished stone floor. It wasn't until they came to a stop and Archean had rolled to his feet in a defensive posture that he realized the Taldryan Foxtrot Uniform on the floor was now deceased. He sprinted back to his comrade, but found the man bleeding heavily from a massive gash through his gut. He could last a few excruciating hours more on his own, and perhaps even survive given expert medical attention, but there would be none today. Without hesitation the Sith clamped his hands around the soldier's throat and squeezed the remaining life out of him.

"Arch here. I just gutted a Tally Foxtrot Uniform who was waiting for us in here. There are probably others, so watch each others' backs, be quiet, and stay in pairs. Watch the open door, and stay frosty. Over and out." Archean's voice was calm and authoritative, but he could feel the tension in the room rise a few notches as his men realized what had happened.

The sound of multiple lightsabers igniting confirmed his fears. The assailants dropped from somewhere high, near the ceiling, and fell in behind one of the pairs of his Journeymen that were nearest to the far doors. They were now engaged in a four way duel that reverberated around the chamber and dulled the blind Sith's sense of hearing with echoes. Relying on the Force to guide him, he ran toward the brawl with all the speed he could manage. When he was within a few dozen feet, he threw a shockwave of energy at the group that knocked them all flat on their backs. All but one. The one simply pivoted and readied both of his lightsabers to face the incoming Tarenti.

Archean fell into the awaiting Taldryan warrior with the savage elegance of a *Shii-Cho* master. His azure blade and his enemy's crimson blades sizzled and cracked against one another, sending echoes reverberating throughout the chamber. Somewhere in the back of his mind, beyond the focus of an expert duelist, there were other sounds. Someone's voice buzzing on the commlink. Shouts. The humming and crackling of other lightsabers. He sent a violent sizzle of Force energy through the air to envelop his opponent, followed by a precise thrust to the disoriented man's throat. The swordsman was rewarded with a satisfying gurgle and the sound of two lightsabers clattering to the floor. At once he became fully aware of the din surrounding him.

The entire chamber had become a crowd of bodies fighting one another. It was difficult for Archean to discern friend from foe as the echoes rippled across the stone walls, but he sought his brothers out with his other senses. They were few now compared to the flood of enemies that had now made their way inside, but they were still working in pairs as he had instructed. He positioned himself in front of the great inner doors, resolving to keep them sealed, or die trying.

“Archean,” the commlink buzzed in his ear. “Reinforcements inbound. Knights of Tau, Jen Kaari and elements of the 2nd infantry will arrive in five minutes. We saw about a company of Tallys break through the cordon just now. Are the inner doors still sealed? Over.”

“Affirmative. We’ll keep it that way until reinforcements arrive. Over.”

“Roger that, Arch. I’ll tell them to hurry up. See you on the flip side. Over and out.”

A group of soldiers had formed up behind one of the columns nearest to Archean, hoping to burst out and surprise him. He sprinted toward the column, ducking to the left as they prepared to rush around the right side. He cleaved his way through all of them in several broad, powerful strokes before any of them had time to react.

He turned, hearing a new pair of lightsabers near the inner doors. A tall, skinny man with an obviously practiced hand was affixing thermal detonators to them. Archean didn’t miss a beat, pivoting on the balls of his feet and sprinting back to the doors. He had activated his lightsaber and prepared to drive it through the man’s back when an explosion caught him in his side and threw him across the floor. He rolled to his feet, but it had taken a big chunk out of his side. The pain was almost too much to bear.

Archean could now sense the YVH-1 that had attacked him and, curiously, an ASN courier droid that hovered near it and seemed to be pumping some sort of gas into the air around it. A Dark Jedi jogged up behind the YVH-1 with his lightsaber raised over his head thinking to score an easy kill, but fell to his knees gasping for breath before he could strike. Mere seconds later he lay lifeless on the polished stone floor. It was an odd combination of droids, but it sparked a recollection from the briefings. *Synin Tonin*. The Elder was a One Sith agent. A mechanic of some kind. It was hard to remember the details with all this blood.

The droid raised its arm to point at Archean, and fired several blaster bolts that impacted into the floor around him. The blind swordsman caught the last one with his blade and reflected it back towards the YVH-1 but it missed. The second volley caught the Battlemaster in the shoulder and torso, and he hit the floor hard. The last thing he remembered hearing was a gleeful metallic exclamation from the YVH-1: *“We are machines! We are greater than the Dark Brotherhood!”*

It only felt like a few seconds. Like he closed his eyes for a moment and reopened them, but he could tell immediately that this was not the case. His side and his shoulder still seethed with pain but it was somehow tolerable now. The roar of battle had subsided to an imposing quietness, like that of a library. Or a mausoleum. Archean reached out with his senses and took stock of his surroundings. The floor was littered with corpses. Some men were dragging them away a few at a time, but he estimated they had a lot more work left to do. Medics had pulled the survivors away into a small area and were treating them; that's where Archean had been moved. The inner doors had been blasted wide open and a steady stream of traffic was flowing in and out of them. A momentary wave of panic flowed over the Battlemaster as he wondered which side had won the battle, and he wondered if he would be able to put up any resistance at all.

"Arch! You're awake!" Altheseus Levathan's voice was a most welcome indication. He let out a sigh, and a smile. "They're prepping for a medical evac right now, buddy. I'll make sure you get on it. That was some fight you were in."

"Did we hold the doors?" Archean asked weakly.

"No, that Synin guy blew them open. We arrived just in time to see them crumble. That YVH-1 he had protecting him was a monster! It took Bloodfyre and Darth Aeternus to get him under control, and the rest of us just to clear a path to him. And Arcona to hold Taldryan and Plagueis outside, as best as they could. There are thousands of dead, Arch."

"Oh. That YVH is what took me out. I was trying to protect the doors."

"Really? I know where they stored his parts. If you can walk I'll take you over and you can kick him in the head," Levathan grinned broadly. "Might make you feel better."