

SIDES OF A COIN

Darro Zhen
PIN # 14146

Florum

34 ABY

Clan Odan-Urr Forward Base

He had been on Florum for less than a week and in that time he had come to find just how much like his own home planet of Sacaya this world truly was. It was hot, it was dry, it was dusty and it made him long for the world he'd left behind so many years ago. But he pushed aside thoughts of homesickness and of friends and family long since gone, and instead focused on the mission at hand. From behind him he could hear the sound of footfalls crunching in the dirt. Spinning around he could see the Aedile of House Hoth, Edgar Drachen, approaching him with a look of concern across his face. "Edgar," Darro said in greeting.

"Darro," the younger man said with a nod. "We have a situation. A squad of our allies have been pinned down by a sniper, six clicks to the west."

"And you want me to head out there and pull their asses out of the fire?" Darro asked.

Edgar nodded before he said, "We're going to need as many able bodied troops as we can get to hold the Plagueians off. Even one soldier could tip the scales in our favour."

"Understood, give me the coordinates and I'll head out there immediately," replied the old Mandalorian.

"Thank you Darro," Edgar said. Punching a few keys on a small datapad he transmitted the coordinates to the small computer inside Darro's helmet resting a few feet away on a rock beside his rifle. "Good luck," said Edgar as he extended his hand. Darro reached out and shook the younger man's hand. As Edgar turned to leave, the old man picked up his helmet and T-21B. Pulling the helmet on he strode off through the compound past rows of pop up tents housing the members of Clan Odan-Urr and shipping containers serving as makeshift med bays and armouries towards a row of weathered looking speeder bikes that looked to have seen better days.

Moments later Darro was sitting on an old speeder bike, his rifle slung over his shoulder waiting for the heads up display in his helmet visor to show him where he was heading. As a small dot appeared on the HUD, he gunned the engine and flew out of the Odan-Urr base a dust cloud rising in his wake.

He flew through the barren Florrum landscape; past geyser fields spitting sulphuric acid high into the sky and herds of large skalders who, startled by the sound of his passing speeder, turned as one and stampeded off in the other direction. As he headed further to the west the terrain began to change. Gone were the wide flat planes and geyser fields, replaced instead by increasingly larger rocky mountain ranges with twisting turning canyons snaking their way through. Slowing down as he picked a trail through the maze of canyons, Darro eventually found his way through and was now less than a kilometer from the pinned down soldiers. Pushing the vehicle to its limits, he arrived at their position quickly.

Leaping from the bike he strode over to the group of militia soldiers huddled behind a series of rocks for cover. There were several Cathar and Barabel, and they seemed to be led by an Elomin who seemed to be missing half the horns on his head. As Darro stood surveying the troopers before him and the ground spread out in front of him the Elomin said "Get down you fool!" in a shout.

Without even looking down at the Elomin, Darro asked, "Why?"

"There's a sniper out there. He'll shoot you if you don't take cover," replied the Elomin commander.

Looking out over the wide, open, flat ground between his current position and the ridgeline a kilometer or so away Darro could see a half a dozen still bodies slowly baking in the oppressive midday heat. The Mandalorian could see that they were clearly dead, the closest body had had the back of his head smashed to pieces by the enemy snipers round. But the corpse was well over twenty meters away which led Darro to believe that it was the limit of the snipers effective range. Pulling down the rangefinder on his helmet Darro zoomed in on the ridge in the distance and waited while the device calculated the distance between himself and his target. A few moments later the small readout displayed *1296 m*. It was then that he noticed the small blinking light at the base of the ridgeline.

Turning around he shouted "You can come out, you're out of range."

Slowly, cautiously the group emerged from their hiding place but chose not to move any closer to the Mandalorian.

"That blinking light, what is it?" Darro asked.

The Elomin began to take a step forward before stopping still clearly afraid he would be gunned down like his compatriots. "It's the detonator for a series of explosives we placed along the ridgeline. We were on our way back here to set them off when the sniper opened fire." replied the Elomin.

"Well where's the trigger?" asked Darro.

Pointing towards one of the corpses the Elomin said "Out there."

Thinking for a moment Darro began to formulate a plan in his mind. He needed to get up on that ridge and deal with that sniper but how to get close enough without being gunned down. Turning to the Elomin and his men the Mandalorian said "Stay here, if you haven't heard from me in two hours it means i've failed and you need to get back to base and tell them what's happened here."

As Darro strode past the stunned militia soldiers the Elomin said, "Wait. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to capture your sniper." Darro replied as he climbed aboard the speeder bike and zoomed off.

He took off in a southerly direction away from the sniper's position making sure he was out of firing and visual range before turning to the west. It took him less than five minutes to cross the open ground between the two ridges and as he got to within a few meters of the cliff face he slowed the speeder down to a crawl. Slowly creeping along the wall the old Mandalorian soldier began to survey the rockwall looking for a place he could at least attempt a climb. There were one or two spots that he may have been able to scale if not for the over hang at the summit. Finally after twenty minutes of searching Darro found a spot he felt comfortable making an attempt. Pulling the speeder bike to a stop he leapt off and unslung his T-21B from his shoulder and set it against the speeder.

Looking up one last time to plan his climb up he took a deep breath and began to climb. The rock was crumbly and what he thought were solid hand or foot holds would occasionally fall away under his weight but he persevered. As he was about half way up he thought to himself *I am too frakkin old to be climbing walls*. But the one slip in concentration nearly cost him dearly as his handhold crumbled away in his hand. He slipped and began to fall, his hands grabbing frantically at the rock wall in a desperate attempt to arrest his fall. For what seemed like an eternity, but was in reality less than ten seconds, Darro's gloved hands searched desperately for purchase until his fall stopped as his left hand latched onto a small outcropping of rock.

Dangling forty meters above the ground with only four fingers between him and death he searched frantically for a better grip. His right foot found purchase first followed quickly by his other hand. Safe for the moment Darro took a deep breath and tried to calm the frantic beating of his heart. Even more cautiously now he continued his climb making it to the top without further incident. As he got to the top he fell onto his back, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he tried to get his breath back. His hands and knees were on fire as the climb took a toll on his fifty five year old joints. He stayed there for several minutes until he felt confident he wouldn't simply fall over when he tried to stand. Rising to his feet he began to jog towards the sniper's position.

He'd been running for about twenty minutes when he heard the sound of a rifle firing moments before something struck him in the helmet knocking him from his feet. With ears ringing he pulled his helmet from his head and opened his eyes, staring up at the sky through blurry vision. Acting purely on instinct he pulled his Westar 34 from the holster on his hip and began to fire indiscriminately in all directions. His aim wasn't to do any real damage but to keep the shooter pinned down so he didn't try and finish Darro off. Rising on unsteady feet the old man shook his head a few times trying to clear his vision as he stumbled toward a large rock for cover.

As his vision cleared Darro poked his head above the rock looking for his attacker. As he scanned the area he saw the barrel of a rifle rise up over a large rock a short distance away. He ducked back behind cover moments before the sniper fired, the round pinging off the rock. Darro smiled, he had the sniper's position now he needed to close the distance between the pair of them. Slamming a new power pack into his blaster he rose up from behind his cover and began to stride forward sending a steady stream of fire at the snipers cover to keep him down. As he rounded the rock his enemy was using for cover Darro got his first look at the sniper.

He was human and male dressed in a simple flight suit bearing the mark of Clan Plagueis. Darro took aim at the sniper and fired but his blaster was empty. The sniper looked to the blaster then up at Darro who looked at the blaster then at the sniper. It was the Plagueian who struck first. Swinging his rifle like a club he knocked the blaster from the Mandalorians hand before he swung hard at Darros head. The butt of the rifle struck Darro hard on the jaw snapping his head to the side as blood sprayed from his now busted lip. But the blow didn't quite have the desired effect the sniper had hoped for. Instead of dropping the big man it merely made him mad. As the sniper swung his rifle again Darro caught it mid swing and wrenched it from the Plagueians hands before snapping the weapon over his thigh.

The sniper looked up in disbelief as the large man moved menacingly forward. The Plagueian leapt to the right rolling out of harm's way pulling a dagger from his belt as he rolled to his feet. Leaping forward he slashed the blade along the back of Darro's bicep leaving a shallow gash before he leapt back out of range of the angry Mandalorians grip. Moving forward Darro lunged at the smaller man hoping to catch him in a bear hug but the sniper moved too quickly giving Darro another blow from his dagger. Changing tactics Darro decided to sit back and wait turning his body slightly he brought his right foot forward and brought his fists up in front of his face.

As the sniper darted forward again Darro snapped his right fist out catching his opponent square in the face. The sniper stumbled back a look of shock on his face as he brought his hand up to wipe away the blood streaming from his nose. Darro slowly edged forward snapping out jabs to keep the sniper at arm's length before unloading with a powerful left hook. But the sniper was too fast. He ducked under the blow and plunged his dagger deep into Darro's side in one of the few places not protected by his armour. As the sniper tried to pull his blade from the old

man's flesh Darro clamped a hand around his wrist and brought his free arm crashing down. There was a loud snap as the bones of the snipers forearm snapped, a scream of pure agony escaping his mouth. Before the sniper could escape Darro grabbed him in a headlock and began to squeeze, his huge biceps tightening like a python squeezing its prey.

As the sniper went limp Darro dropped him unceremoniously to the ground and pulled out the dagger still sticking out of his side. Dropping the weapon to the ground he placed a hand over the hole to try and stem the bleeding and wandered off to find his helmet. It was lying where he left it and as he picked it up he saw the blaster burn where the sniper had hit him. Pulling it over his head he activated the comm unit and said "This is Major Zhen, the snipers dead. Do you copy?"

A moment later a voice, that of the Elomin he'd met earlier in the day, crackled over the small devices speaker saying "Copy that Major."

"Track this transmission and get here as soon as you can." Ordered Darro.

"Understood Major, we're on our way." Replied the Elomin.

As he went to relax on a rock while he waited a thought popped into his head. Reactivating his comm unit he said, "And bring some rope."