

Man-made thunder rumbled through the fortress. Outside, men and machines clashed, the dark armor of the attackers making the bright white armor of the defenders stand out even more than it normally would in the nighttime gloom. Organic feet pounded rapidly back and forth, and chips of ruby light flashed back and forth chaotically as starfighters and bombers wheeled and danced through the low clouds in the sky above.

The Arconan Expeditionary Forces had come to call.

Their target was a small Imperial depot belonging to a small, would-be warlord who thought himself a contender to reclaim Palpatine's old throne. With only a handful of TIE Fighters, no capital ships, and only a bare handful of light armored vehicles, the New Republic had yet to consider him enough of a threat to move in their forces. But word had reached the Shadow Throne's ears that what this Moff Kydon lacked in military materiel he made up for in treasures, including one highly sought after artifact; one that could guarantee Arcona's ability once and for all to defend its allies against the madman on the Iron Throne of the Dark Brotherhood. Consul Atyiru Caesura Entar of Clan Arcona had taken a not insignificant amount of convincing - nearly begging - to allow her military to strike and seize the artifact, but in the end, the troops had been mustered and the ships set forth.

The battle plan had been almost too simple. Moff Kydon's fortress, for all its other faults, was well-positioned for defense against a set of high cliffs, with armorcrete walls giving it almost the air of an old-fashioned castle, albeit one bristling with several turbolaser emplacements and stormtroopers manning the walls rather than rock-throwing catapults and soldiers armed with swords. The only real method of direct attack was to march in and hit the walls from the east, sending men and machines against the wall to breach it as quickly as possible. Any such assault would be costly, but it was the only conventional method available short of battering down the fortress shields with orbital fire and simply leveling the entire facility. Which was why, three hours before the rest of the AEF had entered the system, three dozen black-clad forms had started the treacherous climb down the cliff face overlooking the complex. These commandos had taken the entire time to finish their insertion, then more time while the AEF ground forces assembled very obviously just outside the range of the enemy weapons. Finally, though, the ground assault had to begin before Moff Kydon (or one of his staff) became suspicious.

Major Kharoc Garrlan, raised his blaster rifle up to firing position and signaled the rest of his team to start their assault. They stormed into the fortress reactor control room in a rush, cutting down the uniformed personnel manning the consoles that controlled the beating heart of the fortress. Swiftly and without prompting, several of them sat down at consoles and began inputting commands, while others, including Garrlan, went to the reactor itself and began setting explosive charges at specific points of the entire assembly.

Tasks complete, a final command was entered and the reactor shuddered and died, giving a low sigh as if in surprise. There was a brief moment when the entire facility was plunged into

darkness, and the thunder of the heavy guns on the wall fell silent and the electric *sizzle-snap* of a shield losing all power in a moment was heard from overhead. Seconds later, a handful of blood-red emergency lights sprang to life, but the commandos had already moved on.

Garrlan, being the only full member of Clan Arcona on the infiltration team, had separated from the group and proceeded solo into the storage facility. Normally protected by a network of forcefields and automated turrets, the entire complex lay bare and vulnerable now. Slipping in, he looked around for the one artifact that he was charged with finding and keeping safe at all costs. The secure storage complex wasn't that large - not compared with the supposedly empty weapons and armored vehicle storage facilities buried into the mountain itself that supposedly were the *real* reason for the attack - and Garrlan found the item he was looking for quickly enough. It was encased in a small, low-power cryogenic stasis unit, but the silver and blue shape was unmistakable in the small viewport. Garrlan let his rifle dangle by its sling as he carefully lifted the storage device from the alcove in which it sat, and spoke his first words in hours. "Smoke Alpha to *Encanis*."

The voice responding to him over his helmet comlink was unfamiliar, but few SpecForce majors met the commanders of the Star Destroyers that ferried them. "Encanis to *Smoke Alpha*, Encanis *Actual speaking*."

Garrlan set the device in his pack, carefully, before turning back the way he came. "Commander, I have the target. Repeat, I have the Klondike Bar and am moving to exfil."