

As the Nu-class attack shuttle carrying Knight Justinios Drake began its final approach towards the planet Edrien the space around it became increasingly calmer. Much of the naval melee was now far behind the Aleena's shuttle as the front viewport became filled with the blue-green marble that made up the planet's surface. Justinios knew that in all three dimensions he was surrounded by transports carrying not only the rest of the troops assigned to his own mission but also countless other assault teams, each playing their own integral role in the capture of the two Iron Navy Star Destroyers that were at the core of the entire operation.

The former professor had memorized the plan three times over during the shuttle ride to the planetary surface. It was a simple plan, even to a novice soldier like Justinios. First, primary assault teams from Delta Company would spread throughout the facility in an effort to stretch defenders thin. Behind that mass of troops 2nd Platoon, which now included Knight Drake, would punch a narrow hole in the Iron Legion defenses and move to quickly take the command center. Once there they would hold that position as a strongpoint until the main assault team caught up to them and secured the rest of the facility.

During the entire mission briefing process Commander Rhyllance was insistent that Lieutenant Ryn Kibli, commanding officer of Delta Company's 2nd Platoon, was in full operational control of the mission and that her orders were to be treated as if they were Rhyllance's own. Justinios had no desire to lead the mission himself but was slightly irked at just how much emphasis Taldryan's leader was placing on the Lieutenant's authority. There was no doubt in the Aleena's mind that this persistence in the matter stemmed from Rhyllance's personal issues with Force Users.

As the pilot of his shuttle yelled back to brace of atmospheric entry a voice crackled over Justinios' comlink, one he immediately recognized from earlier briefings as his wonderful Consul. "Soldiers of the Retribution Legion, it is time to live up to your name. These may not be the same murderers that burned our homes but they no better than those dogs. There are no rules of engagement, just get the job done today. Commander Rhyllance out."

"Lieutenant Kibli, how many shuttles have we lost on approach?" Justinios asked.

"None," Kibli said curtly.

"A surprise but a welcome one to be sure," the Knight responded in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Lieutenant Kibli was having none of it and continued looking down at her datapad. Having been rebuffed again at forming any kind of bond with the human officer, the Justinios reviewed his own device for status reports coming in from the rest of the strike teams. Their landing zone was already secure, as was their infiltration point. It was unclear just how much success the infantry units were having in regards to pushing further into the facility but if the Lieutenant's command

efficiency had an inverse relationship to her interpersonal skills, the Iron Legion stood no chance.

It wasn't long until the Clone War era shuttle was safely resting upon Edrien's surface. As soon as the shuttle doors opened, Justinios made sure he was the first one down the ramp. The field all around him was being swarmed with other landing craft. Closest to his own shuttle, the other two squads in his group also began to disembark. The entirety of 2nd platoon formed up around Lieutenant Kibli, 36 soldier's in all. Justinios only gave half of his attention to the officer as she gave the amassed group a final rundown of the mission plan. The reality of the situation around him was too distracting. Having watched old holovids about the Clone Wars it was surreal to see soldiers clad in the old body armor of the genetically identical troopers walking this way and that as if it were a re-enactment. A year ago he was lecturing students on particle physics and today he was waging a war in a part of the galaxy his old colleagues didn't even know was inhabited. He had to stifle a giggle imagining the shock on the Dean's face if the Duros could see him now.

Lieutenant Kibli's voice snapped him out of his daydream, "Move out 2nd Platoon." Pointing at Justinios she said, "You stay back and guard our rear."

As the commanding officer of 2nd platoon led her soldiers towards the facility, Justinios followed in tow. If Rhy lance and his handpicked officer thought he was so unimportant to the mission then the Knight saw no reason to argue about taking point. The comlink strapped to the Aleena's round head chirped as he was the final member of the group through the formerly intact blast door.

"Knight Drake, there was an important detail missing from your mission dossier." Warlord Vodo Biask Taldrya was never one to waste time on introductions or pleasantries on a good day so Justinios took no offense to their omission during a battle.

"Wait, what?" Justinios said quietly into his own device. "Why would anyone..."

The Warlord continued, ignoring the confused mumblings of the Aleena. "The commanding officer in charge of that facility is not a grizzled old army vet but a Sith Warrior."

"Why would the Commander leave this out of our dossier?" Justinios whispered in reply. The sound of the soldier's armor clattering on the durasteel floors was likely masking his end of the conversation but he didn't want to take any chances in being overheard.

"It was only left out of your dossier professor, I believe the Lieutenant is fully aware of the situation." A grunt from Vodo's end of the transmission came through as the line was kept open. Clearly the old Taldrya was multitasking. "Our glorious Commander ordered his underling to take out that Warrior even if you are standing in the way so watch yourself."

With a click, Justinios knew that Vodo had ended the transmission. The Aleena's first reaction was to be incensed at the betrayal but quickly let the feeling pass. Once logic took back over he was not shocked at all with Rhylynce's decision. From Justinios' own history with the Chiss Consul it not a shock to discover that Taldryan's leader was willing to trade one novice Knight for two fully operational Star Destroyers. He would make sure have a chat with the leader of Taldryan later regarding the topic of sacrifice but for now he at least was aware that he needed to survive both a skilled Sith and possibly Taldryan's own forces.

The sound of blaster fire echoing ahead reminded the Knight he was still in act active combat zone. Using his tiny frame, the Aleena dinked and dunked his way through soldiers from his own unit and others until he came upon Lieutenant Kibli's crouched behind a makeshift barricade.

"Bring that heavy blaster up to the front, we need to push through to the command center now!" she yelled over the squad channel. A sea of white parted to allow the gun crew through to Lieutenant's position. The crew got the emplacement operation in record time and it was soon firing blazing red bolts down the corridor, sending the Iron Legion into a retreat.

"That's our opening Delta's, move up." She turned to Justinios next, "Why are you up here?"

Troopers filed quickly past the armored human and blue-skinned Knight, all while blaster bolts screamed through the small gaps in the air between them. "I heard someone was giving out pastries, clearly I had been mistaken."

"Shut it pipsqueak, you are our ace in the hole and I can't have you getting shot by accident before we secure our objective." The last of the troops filed past the heavy gun emplacement, which was now being powered down and dismantled. "You are under *my* command and your orders are to stay out of the line of fire until I decide to throw you into this meat grinder." Without even waiting for a reply, the Lieutenant sprinted after the rest of her unit.

It took a little extra boost from the Force to move Justinios' tiny reptilian legs fast enough to catch back up with the now swiftly moving forces of 2nd platoon. Their advance through the Iron Legion controlled portion of the facility was an impressive sight to behold. The three squads continually leapfrogged each other, the squad holding the most advanced position would provide covering fire for the rearmost squad's push to the next intersection. As this process repeated itself through the corridors of the enemy installation, Kibli's troops kept up a steady pace of progress. This tactic didn't allow the fast moving Delta Company forces to hold any ground permanently but the entire unit found themselves at their target location in short order and with minor casualties.

Justinios waited patiently behind the wall of soldiers guarding intersection leading to their target. Directly behind him, the blast doors of the command center were locked tight and currently being worked on by what he assumed was a slicer. To his front, left and right were three open corridors but Kibli's engineers were already setting up portable barricades and heavy weapons

inside the junction itself. Feeling confident that any attempt to dislodge 2 nd Platoon from this position would be a bloodbath, Justinios turned his attention back to the command center itself. As he pivoted around, the Taldryan Knight found that Lieutenant Kibli was standing right behind him, helmet off.

“Knight Drake, this is your time to shine.” It wasn’t just the markedly different tone Kibli took with Justinios that got his attention but also the fact that this was the first time she called him by anything resembling an official title. “We do not know what is in that room and need you to be the first one through that door when it opens. I’ll have squad one right behind you but squads two and three need to hold that strongpoint. Can you do this?”

Justinios decided that it was time for the ruse to end. “Can I do what, Ryn?” He chose to use her first name just in case it got under her skin. The Lieutenant’s only reaction was a slight eye twitch but Justinios decided that was sufficient for his amusement. “Can I kill a Sith Warrior? Well I guess that depends on whether or not I have to worry about one of your soldiers’ blaster bolts hitting me in the back while I fight.”

The stunned looked Justinios was hoping for never materialized but it did take a moment for the officer to respond. “I don’t have time to care why you have that information. That door is going to open in exactly one minute and as you know there is a skilled Sith waiting for us inside.” The female human put her helmet back on and continued speaking with the external speaker. “I’ll be nice today short stuff. I will order my troops to take out his infantry first but as soon as their targets are down they will immediately direct their fire at the Sith Warrior. If they have anything remotely resembling a clear shot they will be taking it while you have his attention. Got it?”

Snatching his Aleena sized lightsaber from his belt, Justinios calmly walked over to the blast door as the sound of mechanical parts activating indicated that the slicer had done their job. As soon as there was even a speck of light that could be seen in the openings, blaster fire began pouring from the other side. With an assisted leap, Justinios sent himself through the tiny diamond shaped hole in that was slowly opening in the grey doors and landed safely behind an one of the many unmanned consoles that filled the command center. More blaster fire began to slam into the front of the unit but not before it was finally met with return fire from Kibli’s first squad.

Gun fire was being traded back and forth as his “friendly” troops joined Justinios, also using the nearest console’s for cover. After a few more moments, Justinios finally heard the sound he was waiting for the *snap-hiss* activation of a lightsaber. The Knight quickly jumped up onto the terminal directly in front of him and activated his own weapon. Like any good Sith, the Warrior was charging headlong into first squad’s right flank, easily deflecting their fire as he cleared the space between.

Well, this presents an interesting solution to my problem, Justinios thought to himself. The Aleena deactivated his lightsaber, leapt down from his elevated position and began running

along the floor towards the Iron Legion troopers opposite the charging Sith monster. The densely packed control consoles completely hid the tiny alien from the enemy soldiers and he was able to slice neat cuts into the torsos of the first two he came across before they had even noticed him. The screams that came through his comlink announced that his Sith counterpart had begun his own assault on the Taldryan soldiers. The race was on.

Alternating between bounding across the top of the control terminals and ducking below them, Justinios continued his surgical removal of the Iron Legion soldiers. The Sith must not have been making much slower progress with his own extermination attempt because the sound of blaster fire was quickly deteriorating. Having removed his blue blade from the helmeted skull of the last Iron Legionnaire, the Aleena gave himself a little assist through the Force to jump up on top of the closest console.

It was immediately apparent that the race was a tie. On the opposite end of the control room the Sith Warrior stood silently in front of the open blast doors with the bodies of Kibli's troopers strewn around him. Down the corridor leading away from the control room, Justinios could see that squads two and three were still fighting hard to hold the strongpoint. It didn't look as if they were ready to break anytime soon but the Taldryan Knight knew not to expect any assistance from those soldiers any time soon.

Accepting that the outcome of the mission would now rest in his own blue hands, Justinios took a moment to get a closer look at his opponent and found that the human laughingly hit almost every stereotypical Sith bullet-point. Pale-skin, black robes, a red lightsaber and an angry, scrunched up face that said he had gone far too long without having good glass of wine. The Aleena also noticed that while in one hand the Sith held his weapon, the other held Lieutenant Kilbi's decapitated head.

"You did this!" the pale-skinned human bellowed, tossing the severed head towards Justinios. "Your weakness let them die!"

All Justinios could muster in reply was, "meh."

Undeterred, the Sith continued his attempt at intimidation, "Their deaths are on your hands Jedi!"

"I'm sorry I thought I had already made my indifference clear when I said, meh." Justinios' response must have triggered the Sith because the darkly clad human went barreling towards the Aleena at full steam.

As the Warrior was only a step or two away, Justinios quickly rolled backwards off of the control unit he had been standing on and underneath another. The pale monster let out a growl of frustration as he searched for the Knight. Again using his small stature to his advantage,

Justinios darted to another computer station towards the center of the room and climbed on top of it.

From across the room the Sith called out, "You scurry around like a nuna little Jedi. Are you afraid tiny nuna?"

"This nuna would like to know if you'd prefer to be cut into halves or quarters?" Justinios giggled to himself as the enraged Warrior charged him again.

This time Justinios did not roll away from his position but leapt gracefully his right, landing on another control unit as the Sith crashed into the one he previously inhabited. Not phased a bit by the collision, the human quickly regained his balance, pivoted and used his right hand to execute a powerful overhand slice towards Justinios' position. Having no hope of fully deflecting such a blow, Justinios again used the Force to propel himself to another console.

His blue feet never landed at their intended destination. The empty left hand of the Sith Warrior caught him in mid-air and slammed him into the floor with amazing force. Justinios was now on his back looking up at his opponent, who was adjusting the grip on his lightsaber into a two-handed reverse grip in order to deliver a killing blow. Gathering as much concentration as he could, Justinios closed his eyes and focused on pure, white light. In his mind he conjured up the image of a star going supernova and released that energy out into the control room.

As soon as Justinios opened his own eyes, he could see that his attempt at blinding the Sith had worked. Even with his own vision blurry, he was able to dart between the man's legs, climb his back and grab the pale skin of his neck. Leaning in, blade hand on his opponent's skull, Justinios whispered into the disabled Sith's ear, "halves will do."

Justinios activated his lightsaber and let himself slide down the back of his opponent as the blade cut from the top of the Sith's skull and down through his spine and pelvis. As soon as he was back on his own two feet he made contact with Taldryan command, taking care to walk away from the bisected corpse he had just created. "Put me through to Commander Rhy lance, this is Knight Justinios Drake."

After a few moments delay, the Chiss' voice addressing Justinios over the comlink. "Knight Drake, is this call to inform me the command center is under our control."

"Yes sir."

"And where is Lieutenant Kibli?"

"Well," Justinios elongated the "E" sound for emphasis, "her body is over by the door and I'm not sure exactly sure where the Sith threw her head. Hey did you know there was a Sith Warrior commanding this installation because I sure didn't!"

Justinios wished it was a holocall because the look on his Consul's face was likely priceless.
"What did you do Knight Drake?"

"Well you can read about it in my full debrief because I would *never* leave out such important details from official reports." Justinios was well aware he was toying with a Commander in the midst of a pitched battle but couldn't help himself. "But the short version is that I think you were trying to educate me on the topic of sacrifice but I decided I would go ahead and teach that lesson myself."