

Klaxons blared throughout the ship as emergency lighting bathed everything around him in crimson red. The ship shuddered, no doubt hit by another of the Collective's suicide tugs, almost knocking the old man off his feet. He clattered into the bulkhead to his rear, his mechanical arm shooting out to steady himself as bodies went tumbling around him. A young Pantoran woman, a bridge officer judging by her uniform, fell at his feet in a heap. With the shaking subsiding, the tall Human bent down and helped her to her feet, sending her towards the escape pods with the gentlest of shoves.

"Commander," came a panicked shout from his rear, "what should we do?"

The old Human, Commander Darro Zhen, turned and looked down at the panicked Bothan soldier looking to the veteran for advice. "First of all, stay calm," he answered as he placed a reassuring hand on the Bothan's shoulder. "Round up as many people as you can and get them to the escape pods."

Snapping a quick salute, the Bothan shouted, "Yes sir!" before he ran off, grabbing people as he did.

Looking around, the old Mandalorian could see the tide of panicked crew members had waned, so, after slapping his battered old helmet on his head, he threw his rifle strap over his shoulder and headed for the escape pods. The ship shuddered again as more and more suicide tugs slammed into its battered hull, ripping huge gaping holes in its once pristine surface. Darro was thrown off his feet, slamming into the bulkhead to his left with a thud. He crashed to the ground, his head ringing from the blow.

"*GET UP!!!*" his brain shouted to his body.

The tired old muscles and creaking joints of his aging body pushed him up off the deck and staggered through the corridors towards safety. Suddenly, the red emergency lighting, the only source of illumination on the battered vessel, ceased to operate, throwing the stricken vessel into blackness. The sirens, so loud only moments before, had also ceased their incessant droning, giving the Commander's splitting headache some brief respite. The old man groped blindly in the darkness for the bulkhead wall, stumbling slightly until his gloved hand bumped into it. At a slow but steady pace he followed the wall towards the closest bank of escape pods praying to whomever was listening that at least one pod remained.

He followed the hallway for a few minutes until his hand encountered a void. Taking the turn he prayed silently that he was going the right way. Up ahead in the distance he saw a flickering light, as though someone was standing in the darkness holding a candle. As he moved closer to the source of the illumination he could make out shapes, three or four of them, on the floor. As he got closer Darro could finally make out what they were, bodies. It looked like, at least to someone with limited knowledge about such things, that something behind the bulkhead had exploded and killed the four unfortunate crewmembers as they hurried past.

From somewhere ahead the old man could hear raised voices, only just audible over the crackling of the fire and creaking of the distressed hull. Hurrying forward, blaster at the ready, Darro prepared for a fight but was surprised to see the Bothan he'd spoken to earlier arguing with a Duros.

"I'm not leaving until he gets here!" shouted the Bothan.

The Duros, his face a mask of barely restrained panic, shouted back, "He's probably dead, and we will be too if we don't leave now!"

"I said we're not leaving until the Commander gets here," the Bothan replied bearing his teeth in a snarl as his fur rippled.

"Then let's go," Darro shouted as he pushed past the pair and entered the last escape pod moments before the pair of arguing aliens joined him.

Unbeknownst to Darro the pod was already occupied. Sitting in one of the seats was a female Shistavanen, a pilot judging by her bright orange flightsuit. Her fur was a charcoal black colour that looked even darker than it probably was when paired with the garish colour of her flightsuit. And from within that inky blackness stared a pair of dazzling golden coloured eyes. She gave him a slight nod as he strapped himself in which the old Mandalorian returned.

With everyone strapped in Darro said, "Let's go."

The Bothan punched the release and gripped the straps of his belt tight as the pod began to shake as the engines fired and the clamps released. The pod flew through the vacuum of space heading for the planet below, Nancora. The boxy pod rocked as it punched through the upper atmosphere, buffeted by high winds. Slowly, bit by bit, the buffeting subsided until it disappeared altogether. A red light flashed to life as a computerised voice said "Brace for impact."

The quartet braced themselves as the retro boosters fired slowing the pod down just enough for the limited shield generators to protect the pod from being crushed as it hit the sandy, rocky surface of Nancora. The belts holding the occupants in strained as the pod bounced once, twice, three times before skidding along the rocky ground before coming to a stop against small outcroppings of rock with a thud.

"Everyone OK?" Darro asked followed by a chorus of affirmatives from his fellow survivors.

The Bothan reached up and punched the door release, a wave of heat and dust entering the pod as the doors slid open. Darro unclipped himself from his seat and pulled his way out into the sunshine pulling his helmet from his head as he did so. The heat hit him and brought back memories of his home but they soon passed as the rest of the pods occupants scrambled out into the sun.

Once everyone was outside, Darro turned to the Bothan and asked, "What's your name kid?"

"Caren Vyn'kor sir. Used to be a Sergeant in T.D.U.C. but I'm an agent in SenNet now," replied the Bothan.

Nodding the Mandalorian turned to the Shistavanen and asked "And you?"

"Flight Officer Liraak Mon, sir," she replied.

"Why weren't you in your fighter, Flight Officer?" the old Human asked.

With a sigh Mon replied, "My X-Wing was damaged during our last engagement so I was sidelined until it could be repaired. Tried making my way to the hangar to find another fighter but the way was blocked."

"Lucky for you, those Collective fighters were tearing our fighters to bits last I heard," Darro replied. Turning to the Duros who looked absolutely miserable the old man asked, "And you are?"

"Lieutenant Doman Voras, comms officer," the Duros stammered.

With a nod the Commander said, "Ok, first things first," as he pulled his way back into the pod and began pulling panels off the walls. From inside the first panel he pulled a small comms device and handed it to Doman. "See if you can find a signal with that," he said before he ducked his head back inside. From behind a second panel he pulled a small medkit and pack containing survival gear and rations which he threw through the open hatch. Finally, from under each seat, he pulled a blaster rifle and handed them through the hatch to Liraak. As he exited he could hear the radio crackling, a faint voice fading in and out through the static. After a few minor adjustments the voice became crystal clear.

"This is Lieutenant Onora Dex of the OEFS *Torana*. To any Lotus forces that can hear this, my pod has crashed and my friends and I are injured. I don't know where we are but it looks like a ruined city. Please, come and help us," came a terrified female voice from the comm units small speaker.

"Voras," the old Human asked, "where is that signal coming from?"

After a few moments the Duros replied, "Umm, to the north."

"Then let's move," Darro said as he turned to head north.

"Wait a minute," said the comms officer, "I'm not a soldier, I handle communications."

Stopping in his tracks the old man turned and said, "I don't care. Those people need our help. What do you think will happen if the Iron Legion finds them? Or gods forbid the Collective. As far as I know we could be the only people in a hundred clicks capable of helping them. Now get off your ass and move or stay here and hope nobody finds you," before he tossed a blaster rifle at the Duros and walked away.

Doman stood there for a few moments, his mouth agape, as he watched the trio running off into the ruined landscape of Nancora. As they got further and further away the Duros comm officer scooped up the small comm unit and ran off after them. For more than an hour they ran at a steady pace through the rocky wasteland until the Duros could run no more.

"Wait," he gasped, "I need to stop, I can't keep going."

Darro turned and saw the state of not only Doman, but Caren and Liraak as well. The heat was nothing to Darro, his home planet Sacaya was pretty similar to Nancora, but the others weren't so fortunate. Pulling his helmet off Darro called out, "Five minutes, get some water but don't drink too much." He took the canteen Liraak offered, took a mouthful and handed it back. The old man wiped his brow and looked around, but there was little to see but sand and rocks. Off in the distance, through the heat haze, the Mandalorian could just make out a dull grey blob. *The ruined city?* he thought to himself.

Sliding his helmet back on the Mandalorian gave a quick wave and resumed his trek into the desert, not bothering to see if the others followed suit. He heard a groan then foot falls on rocky sand and smiled slightly to himself. The sun slowly sank in the sky as the grey blob on the horizon slowly coalesced into the form of a ruined city. Smoke and fire stained the darkening sky as the sound of explosions and blaster fire echoed through the desert.

Calling a halt below the remains of a bridge over a dried out river, Darro turned to Doman and said, "See if you can get in touch with Lieutenant Dex, we need to know where she is."

With a nod, the Duros broke out the comm gear and began playing with switches trying to contact the missing crew of the *Torana*. "Lieutenant Dex, this is Lieutenant Doman Voras, can you hear me?" the Duros asked. When no reply was forthcoming the Duros repeated, "Lieutenant Dex, this is Lieutenant Doman Voras, can you hear me?"

After a moment a quiet voice replied, "Yes, yes, I can hear you."

Voras handed the unit to the old Human who took it and said, "Lieutenant Dex, this is Commander Zhen of the Hoth JTF. My team is on the outskirts of the city but we need your help to find you."

"Ok," she replied hesitantly, "what do you need me to do?"

“Can you see anything we can use as a marker, a tall building perhaps?” the Madalorian soldier asked.

“Ummm,” came the response. “I can see a lot of buildings, there’s a big pillar...like an obelisk...to the south east and a dome-like structure to the south.”

“Ok. That’s good,” replied Darro. “Stay where you are and I’ll contact you again shortly. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” answered Lieutenant Dex.

“Zhen out,” he said as he handed the unit back to Doman. Turning to face the trio with him he said, “We need to get up higher, try and spot that obelisk.”

“I’ll take point,” said Caren as he scooped up his rifle and began the short climb up and out of the dry river bed.

Now that they were in unknown enemy territory, the group’s movements were much more careful, as they crept from corner to corner, always on the lookout for Iron Legion or Collective forces. Overhead, fighters screamed back and forth in a chaotic dance of death, lighting up the skies with blaster cannon fire and explosions. With a series of quick hand gestures, Darro indicated that he wanted the Bothan SenNet agent to enter the next building and head up.

Slowly, floor by floor, Darro and Caren cleared each stairwell while Liraak watched their backs and Doman merely did his best not to draw any unwanted attention to the group. Finally, after thirty five grueling flights of stairs, they reached the roof and headed for the edge. Hunkering down as best he could, Darro dropped the rangefinder on his helmet and scanned the horizon for the obelisk or domed building Dex described. It was an agonising few minutes until the old man spotted the top of the obelisk peaking over the edge of a destroyed building.

“There,” he said, pointing in the obelisk’s direction.

Without another word he rose and headed back downstairs as cautiously as ever. Once again, they made their way through the city, moving corner to corner, covering each other as they crossed the void between buildings. Suddenly, from the right, the sound of heavy bootfalls could be heard. Darro grabbed ahold of Doman’s dirt stained uniform and pulled him back inside what appeared to be a ruined store front. The Human risked a peek at the passing patrol and saw the modified soldiers of the Collective running, thankfully, away from their destination.

Once again the quartet set off towards the obelisk until, forty agonising minutes later, Darro could see the structure standing proudly in the middle of a large square. Motioning to the Duros

to hand him the comm unit Darro said, "Lieutenant Dex, this is Commander Zhen. We've found the obelisk but I need you to let me know exactly where you are."

"Ok, how?" she asked.

"In your pod there should have been a survival kit. Inside that kit will be a flare gun. I need you to aim that gun to the sky and pull the trigger," he said as slowly and calmly as he could.

"Ok," she replied. After a few moments of silence she returned and said, "I found the flare gun, firing now."

All four members of Darro's party looked to the sky hoping to catch a glimpse of the flare. Seconds felt like hours as the old Mandalorian scanned the sky for the flare until it rose above the buildings and shone brightly in the dark sky.

"Excellent, we're really close ok. We'll be there soon, just sit tight," Darro said before handing the comm unit back to the Duros and, with any thoughts of stealth now gone, ran as fast as his tired old legs could carry him towards the flare's source.

It was a good twenty blocks away and took them several minutes to get there but even with all pretense of caution gone they were still too late. A squad of Iron Legion stormtroopers were leading the survivors out into the street. Darro could see a Human, Twi'lek and Rodian on their knees, hands on their heads, while two stormtroopers carried a Mon Calamari before dumping him none too gently on the ground.

Darro swore to himself in Mando'a before he turned to the others and said, "On my signal open fire," before he headed off in a crouched run.

"Wait," asked Doman, "what's the signal?"

"I get the feeling we'll know it when we see it," answered Liraak.

As quickly and quietly as he could the old Human stalked around behind the Iron Legion troops and took cover behind a thick permacrete lane divider in the middle of the road. From his belt he pulled one of his flash bangs, thumbed the button on its top and hurled it towards the enemy position. It exploded with a deafening crack and a dazzling flash, throwing the Iron Legion forces into disarray. Rising up from behind his cover the Commander opened fire. His first blast caught the closest trooper in the flank, the blast punching through his armour, flash-boiling his gut in an instant. His second shot caught the next stormtrooper in the neck, just below his helmet, severing his windpipe.

As the Iron Legion troops began to regain their composure, his allies opened fire. Caren and Liraak carefully picked off stormtroopers as Doman fired wildly, never coming within a metre of

hitting anything but the sides of buildings. The fire fight was intense but short, the element of surprise leading to a quick victory for Darro and his crew. He rushed forward and took a knee beside the trembling form of the woman he assumed was Onora Dex.

With as gentle a touch as his rough old hands could manage he placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "Lieutenant Dex, it's over. You're safe."

She sprung up and wrapped her arms around his thick neck as tears streamed down her face. "Thank you," she said over and over again.

"It's ok, it's ok," Darro said trying to sound as comforting as possible. Extricating himself from her grip the old man called the rest of his team over and said, "Vorax get on the comms and get us a shuttle outta this *dar'yaim*," using the Mando'a word for hell.

"Roger that," the Duros said as he began fiddling with the comm unit. "Sir, there's an Arconan shuttle in the area that can pick us up but he needs some open ground."

"Tell him to pick us up back at the square with the obelisk. We'll fire a flare when we get there," the Mandalorian replied.

As the Duros comm officer relayed the message Darro picked up the wounded Mon Calamari as gently as he could, placed him over his shoulder, and headed for the square. As the group got within a few feet Darro placed the Mon Calamari against a wall, pulled the flare gun from the survival gear and fired. The dazzling red light flew skyward, hung there for several long seconds, then began to fall gracefully back to earth.

As Darro stood watching gravity do its work Doman approached him and said, "Sir, you need to hear this."

The Commander took the comm unit and said, "Arconan pilot, please repeat your last."

"I say again, signal flare spotted. You have enemy forces approaching your position from the west. ETA to engagement two mikes," the Arconan replied.

"ETA to your arrival?" Darro asked.

"Five mikes," came the reply.

"Understood," Darro said, "continue on your present course. I'll buy you some time."

"Roger that," the pilot said.

Taking a deep breath Darro turned to the Bothan SenNet agent and said, "We've got incoming. I'm gonna go hold 'em off until the shuttle arrives. I want you to make sure these people make it on the ship and get out safely. Understood?"

"But..." the Bothan started.

He was quickly interrupted as Darro said, "No buts, that's an order soldier."

With a hard look in his eye the Bothan replied, "Yes sir," before crisply saluting the old Human.

Without another word Darro scooped up his weapon, thrust his helmet on his head and took off to the west, determined to hold the line.