

"Halt!"

A tense silence passed over the street. The recon patrol ducked down behind the rubble and ruined vehicles, scanning for the enemy. Far away the crackle of blaster fire and the dull thud, thud, thud of the big guns spoke to the presence of a far larger conflict.

"What is it, Yeoman?" Lieutenant Sahara Pax crouched her way up through the ruined street, coming to a stop beside the Trandoshan. Grot growled, looking around the street before shaking his head.

"Nothing, Lieutenant," he said, slinging his rifle unto his back, "The wind."

Pax shook her head, standing up and gesturing to the rest of the detail, "All clear! Move out!" The squad fell back into line, grumbling about the false alarm. The solid thunk of combat boots filled the Axio City streets, adding a percussive beat to the nervous complaining of the soldiers. The narrow streets added a dull echo to every noise, the shrieking desert wind distorting the sound even further.

"Jumping at shadows, Trando?" Corporal O'Hare, the field medic, gently ribbed.

"Yeah, what gives? Thought you were some sort of black magic man, super-secret spec-ops special agent sent to grace us mere mortals," Private lancer, the resident joker and weapons specialist. Grot growled but didn't rise to his insult. He scanned the windows up above nervously.

"Maybe if you spent as much time on the gun range as you did belly-aching you'd be spec-ops too, shortstack," their sharpshooter, a Chiss who went by the name Jett, joked. He came up from behind, putting a hand on the much shorter humans helmet with a wide smile.

"For the last time, blue-balls, I told you—"

"Quiet! This is a combat zone, act like it!" The Lieutenant snapped, "Keep your head on a swivel!"

"Sir, yes Sir!" they snapped to attention, withering under her sharp stare.

The squad cautiously turned a corner, coming out on a wide avenue littered with rubble and bombed out vehicles. What had once been stores and apartment buildings towered on every side, broken and abandoned. A wide-open plaza laid in the middle, a fountain still weakly dribbling water from its busted spout. The heroic form of a cyborg that had once stood vigil over it was busted and shattered by a stray shell.

Here and there a corpse could be seen, not all of them in uniform.

"Guess not all the citizen's managed to evacuate..." Pax mumbled quietly, kicking over one of the corpses. A businessman, still in full suit and tie and badly mangled, "Poor frakker must have gotten blown right out of the office."

"Almost reminds me of home," Private Kan, their other weapons specialist, began, "On Coruscant we got to see a lot of this... when the Empire fell." She paused by the fountain, staring at the busted cyborg statue.

"I remember—"

CRACK!

Blazing red light filled the square as a blaster bolt struck Kan mid sentence, sending the Duros spinning to the ground. Her screams pierced the air as she clutched the bloody stump of her left leg, torn off by the force of the impact.

"SNIPER!" Pax shouted, diving behind cover.

"Kitty!" Corporal O'Hare leaped to his feet, only to be thrown down by the Trandoshan next to him.

"Get in cover, Corporal!"

"Kitty won't last long out there!"

"Neither will you!" Grot hissed, looking around the clearing, "If that sniper wanted her dead he would not have struck her leg"

"What?"

"I get it, O'Hare," Lieutenant Pax winced, listening to Kan's screams, "The sniper only wounded her so they could draw us out of cover. Go out there to help and you're dead meat."

"A common tactic," Grot nodded grimly, "one I have used myself"

Lt. Pax took a deep breath, taking stock of the situation, "If we want to help Kan we have to figure out where that fire came from. Anybody got eyes on?" A chorus of negative responses answered her.

"H-help, somebody, please!" Kan rolled on the ground, trying to drag her way into cover but finding herself too weak to move more than a few inches. Grot hissed in frustration, looking around the square. Wherever the sniper was, they needed to have clear sight lines, so they wouldn't be along the sides of the avenue. Which left either the far end or the way they had come from. Both had imposing multi-story buildings with plenty of rooms for a sniper to hide.

"Pax! We need covering fire, apartment buildings the east and west!" He voiced his guess to Pax, giving the officer something to focus on.

"Roger! Yeoman, Lancer, take the building to the east! Jett, you're with me to the west! O'Hare, retrieve Kan on my mark!"

Sencara A'theri watched the Brotherhood recon patrol scramble into cover, chuckling quietly as their shouts and screams filled the plaza. She lined up her sights on the fallen soldier, waiting for their medic to inevitably pop their head out and rush to help.

“Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match... now which one of you is the medic...” She flicked her rifle to the left as one of the soldiers got up out of cover, only to be pulled down by a comrade. The Umbaran sniper frowned, clicking her tongue “Well now, so you’re not complete idiots. Must have a competent officer in charge....” She waited, interested, watching to see what they would do next.

“NOW!”

With a shout, the squad burst out of cover, firing wildly. She ducked back into the room as a storm of blaster bolts buffeted her building, but just as many struck the building opposite her. Good, they still didn’t know where she was. She reached into her pack, pulling out a dataslate and opening a preset program.

Let’s try to keep it that way.

Corporal O’Hare rushed into the clearing, grabbing Private Kan as the rest of the squad opened fire. She looked pale, her eyes were unfocused, and her responses were very weak.

She must be going into shock. Thinking quickly, he reached into his vest for a stimulant, stabbing it into her arm to keep her stable before moving her.

“Hold on Kitty, we’ll get you out of here,” He looped his arms under hers, dragging her back towards safe cover. His palms were sweaty, his heart thumped like mad, worried that at any moment a single blaster bolt might put him down. Kan struggled weakly in his arms, groaning with pain as he dragged her over the rough ground.

BATOOOM!

An explosion rocked the plaza, sending rocks and debris scattering as a nearby vehicle exploded. Lancer grunted in pain as a large stone struck his helmet, knocking him down into the dirt. Surprised, the others ducked back into cover, letting their covering fire waver. Grot leapt back down into the rubble pile, but his eyes never left the building at the far end of the clearing.

They were going to fire, they had to, they’d be insane not to...

CRACK!

“Lieutenant!” O’Hare shouted, watching as the blaster bolt struck his commanding officer. Her armor blunted the impact, but it was more than enough to rip the plating from her chest, burning and scarring the flesh underneath. She collapsed to the ground, clutching her wound and gritting her teeth in pain.

“To the east! Apartment building, 6th floor!” Grot shouted, having seen the flash of a rifle in the chaos, “We need fire support, now!”

"The Lieutenant's down!" O'Hare shouted, panicking as the squad started to disintegrate around him. He wasn't trained for this, he was supposed to be a medic. It wasn't supposed to be like this, Kitty, Lancer, Pax, they were going to—

"Get on comms and call command, now! Authorization code one-five-zero-six-zero! Priority fire-mission!" Snapped from his panic, O'Hare desperately keyed the side of his helmet. He patched into the comms only to be rewarded with an ear-piercing static. He cursed, shutting off the communicator and turning to Grot

"We're jammed!"

"Sith-Spit!" Grot cursed, ducking back into cover and looking towards the Lieutenant. Jett crouched over, helping Lancer back to his feet and checking him over. He was dizzy, his helmet dented, but fine for now.

"Pax, we need orders!" Grot demanded, shouting down at their wounded commander.

Pax gave a wet, gasping cough, tearing her helmet off her head. Her blond hair spilled out onto the ground as she struggled to find words "W-We... We need to secure this area," she clutched her side, grunting with pain, "If we don't clear out this sniper then Task-Force Sentinel will be delayed. Grot, you're in command..." She trailed off, breathing heavily as she strained for her next words.

"Don't let them die."

"Roger, Lieutenant"

Sencara hummed quietly to herself. All according to plan. With their officer down, this bunch of Brotherhood slaves should scatter like rats. She tapped into her stolen Inquisitorius communicator, continuing to monitor the Brotherhood battleplans. From this position she could delay their advance, giving the 5th just enough time to defeat their mobile forces...

And earning herself a tidy bonus.

She chuckled, thinking of the paycheck she was about to earn, and lined up her sights on the scurrying vermin below. To her surprise, a hail of blaster fire came up to meet her, far more accurate than last time. The bolts shattered windows and tore through the thin walls of the apartment around her as she scrambled for cover. She ducked, cursing and frustrated at the patrol's resilience.

"So not the officer then, " she remarked dryly, "what in the void could possibly..." she wondered idly, tapping her chin. She pulled her datapad back out and tapped into the feed from her recon droid stationed high above the battlefield. From where it was on a nearby rooftop, she got an eagle-eye view of the enemy. She zoomed in, one of the patrol was rushing towards her, a Trandoshan by the looks of it, wearing a cloak and light armor...

"A Jedi? No, probably not. They'd have detected my presence." She caught sight of the large slugthrower rifle in his hands, and broke out into a wide grin. "A slugthrower? Interesting, not just any old soldier then. A mercenary?" she smirked.

"How ironic."

Grot slammed into the side of the apartment building, pushing himself up close to the wall and keeping his eyes upward. He had to get into close quarters if this was going to work, but that building was almost guaranteed to be trapped. He frowned, not liking what he was going to do, then waved to Lancer and Jett to grab their attention.

With a quick series of hand signals he told him to hold position and keep watch, then reached into his pack for a grappling hook. Hooking it to his belt, he gave it a few swings and with a mighty heave tossed it up toward the sixth floor. He hooked it securely to one of the windows and began the long climb up.

From her view on the datapad, Sencara could see the Trandoshan's attempt and shook her head in disbelief. "Oh gee, why not just gift wrap yourself too?" She grabbed her equipment and slowly crouched through the halls to another room. The Trandoshan may have avoided her traps, but shooting him off that rope felt almost unfair. She drew her pistol, keeping a close eye on her droids video feed, and shifted over beside the window frame.

Oh well, who am i to refuse such a lovely gift?

With swift and practiced movements she peeked out, leveling her pistol and firing a burst at the Trandoshan before his comrades could open fire. Her bolts struck home, tearing into his cloak and sending him spinning around on the rope a few floors down. She ducked back, diving for cover as the rest of the recon squad erupted into fire on her window. She quickly rolled over and checked the feed on her droid, only to find the lizard stubbornly climbing up into the window, his blood dribbling down the side of the building

"Armorweave cloak? Couldn't tell by looking at it, torn up piece of junk," She shook her head, retreating further into the building and preparing for a close quarters battle. "Stubborn frakker doesn't know when to quit."

Grot flopped on the floor on the opposite side of the windowsill, detaching his grappling hook and clutching at his wound. He could feel the Bacta injectors in his suit already working, dulling the pain and helping the wound to heal. They'd got him good, but he had the range now, he just had to—

"Trando!" Grot paused as a woman's voice echoed across the hall, "I know you're in here Trando! Why not make this easy on the both of us and just surrender now? Fighting you is cutting into my bottom line." Grot scrambled to his feet, drawing his pistol and moving towards the door. Scattered playthings and child-sized clothing littered the room, tossed here and there haphazardly. The family must have had to evacuate quickly.

"What's a merc like you doing working for the Brotherhood anyway? Must pay nice to keep you so well appointed..." Another silence followed as Grot refused to respond. "Strong, silent type huh? Look, there's no reason we can't be civil here, we're both in the same business."

"They rescued me." Grot answered, deciding to stall for time as he recovered.

"Rescued you?" her amusement was audible.

"I was captured. Left honorless and without points. I owe them a debt for life."

"Oh, Trando, really?" Her voice was sickly sarcastic, "How sweet, how very honorable. Let me tell you something Trando, and remember well because this might just save your hide should you live through this."

"Honor is no way to run a business"

The whirring of the droids repulsors were the only thing that alerted him as Sencara's probe droid come rushing in through the window behind him. He turned around, firing of a shot that grazed the droid's antenna as it tackled him into the hallway. Simultaneously, Secasta opened fire, the blaster bolts tearing down the hallway and ripping through the walls.

Grot rolled with the tackle, crashing through the door on the opposite side of the hall as he wrestled with the probe droid, but not before one of Secasta's bolts tore into his leg, ripping apart his calf muscle. He batted the droid away, ignoring the biting pain in his leg. He leveled his pistol as the droid raised its repair welders, sparking with deadly electricity. It tried to rush him, but Grot was quicker on the draw, and two armor piercing slugs tore through the droids internals, ripping apart its circuitry and sending it skidding across the floor.

"Sith-spit, do you know how expensive that was Trando?" Grot could hear Secasta padding down the hallway, almost skipping. He gritted his teeth, feeling his lifeblood drain out onto the floor. He only had one chance here; he rushed to reach into his belt. Secasta rounded the doorway, gun raised and ready to fire, but widened her eyes when she saw what the Trandoshan was holding.

An active detonator.

Turning on her heel, she sprinted down the hallway, diving into one of the apartments as the detonators beeping reached a crescendo. She took cover behind a wall, covering her ears to protect from the pressure blast.

Frak! Why do I always get the suicidal ones!

She felt a fizzle of sparks and electricity pass over her as the grenade detonated, her scanner and datapad fizzling out from the electromagnetic field. There was only a brief moment of confusion before she realized she'd been played, and growled in frustration. Down the hall she could hear the Trandoshan merc laughing like a madman in between his grunts of pain.

"Har-har Trando, but I'm not all cybered up like those technocrat freaks. Your little tricks have only bought you a few more seconds to suffer. Maybe more, if I'm feeling generous." She stalked back towards Grot, fully intent on revenge for her humiliation. She would make this slow, she decided, as she put on her vibroknucklers.

"It has bought me all the time I need," Grot coughed, barely able to get out the words through the blinding pain. He listened in to his squads communications feed with a knowing smile "I have already won this hunt."

"Venom 1, this is Eyeball. Strike mission, grid 57-9. Target central high-rise, 6th floor. DEM only, danger close."

"Talk all you want Trando, I'm going to enjoy this." She cracked her knuckles, but in the distance she heard a dull roar. Slowly it grew closer as she walked down the hall, louder and louder, more and more clear. She felt the floor shake, glass rattling, walls rocking as it grew closer.

"What the..."

The communications jammer...

She looked through a window to the outside, heart sinking as an LAAT dropped down into an attack run on the building. Its guns swiveled in her direction, zeroing in on the sixth floor like a hawk set to claim its prize.

"Oh Sith-spit"

Secara sprinted towards the stairwell as the LAAT opened up with its laser turrets, the sheer weight of fire ripping out walls and tearing apart the entire floor. Grot covered his head as the ceiling began to collapse, big chunks of stone falling onto his body, bruising and cutting. Dust covered the area as the LAAT ceased fire, but when it cleared Sencara was nowhere to be found.

Grot struggled to pull himself up from the floor, brushing off the rocks and dust, and limped over to the other side of the apartment building. Feeling faint he looked out through the freshly destroyed walls and could see the LAAT setting doing in the plaza, unloading troopers to medevac the wounded from his squad.

He sighed and sat down, his body weak and tired. He looked out over the city, and to the rising sun just beyond.