

Trouble in the Badlands

A Submission to the Competition:
GJW XII Combat Writing – Collective Strike



Written by
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35 ABY

**The Badlands
Nancora**

Reiden Karr paused for a moment to survey his surroundings. The ship he had been aboard, the ISN *Tarkin*, had sustained heavy damage due to the cowardly kamikaze bombing runs by the Collective's fanatical pilots. Eventually, it all became too much. He and the crew that had managed to survive the onslaught of bomb-filled Collective ships were forced to evacuate, and their escape craft had touched down on the surface of Nancora.

The original plan that had been in place was for Reiden to lead a strike team down to the surface, where they would attempt to capture or eliminate a high-value Collective asset. Brotherhood intelligence reports had indicated that a handful of Collective leadership members were currently on Nancora. Reiden was to make his way to a designated rendezvous point and meet up with his friend Orion, who would provide support for his team. But now, all of the careful planning was for naught, with him and his team currently traversing the barren landscape known as the Badlands. He had been lucky that all the members of his strike team had both survived the bombings and the journey down to the planet's surface. Reiden only hoped that there was still more luck to be found.

Reiden scanned the horizon with his electrobinoculars. It looked like there was nothing out there except for various ruins of old structures dotting the landscape. He knew that it would be foolish to assume that the enemy wouldn't take note of the various escape craft making their way to the surface. There were bound to be Collective forces out there, scouring the surface for any possible survivors. He had told his men to be on guard for anything.

Blaster fire suddenly erupted off to one side. Reiden whipped his head in that direction to find a group of enemy mercenaries. He drew his blaster pistol and let loose a quick burst of shots at them, before running for cover.

"This is where it starts, men!" he called out to his team. "Let's take care of these guys and continue on. We can't get held down in one place for too long. There may be allies out there that need our help!"

The members of the strike team rallied to his call to battle. They readied their own blasters, took aim, and fired at the enemy that had appeared. Blaster bolts filled the air. Reiden had found cover behind an old support from a long-ruined structure. He craned his neck out to check on the enemies' progress. He spotted several on the ground already, with perhaps another seven still standing and firing at his team.

He thought through his options carefully, trying to factor in the best way to avoid casualties to his team. An idea came to him, and he told his men to continue to exchange

fire with the Collective mercenaries. He had to act fast. The Marauder steeled himself and then broke out into a run, moving away from the blaster fire and swinging out wide to the side. His hope was that the enemy would think he was making a run for it and abandoning his men to their fate. But in reality, he was trying to circle around behind them in a surprise attack. He managed to circle wide enough to escape their notice, or at least that's what he assumed due to the lack of blaster fire directed at him.

Reiden soon noticed the Collective mercenaries up ahead and slowed down a bit. He approached carefully, not wanting to tip them off to his arrival. As luck would have it, his team had done well in his absence, eliminating most of the mercenaries and leaving only two remaining. Those survivors were currently pinned down, awaiting the chance to return fire. Reiden took the opportunity to charge forward and activated his lightsaber, its viridian blade erupting to life. He thrust his arm out and plunged the blade through the side of the chest of the nearest mercenary. The man's ally gawped in a wide-eyed disbelief, fumbling for his blaster. But Reiden was quicker. He jerked the blade of his saber from the corpse and brought it down in a savage arc, cleaving the other man's arm from his body. He watched as the arm, and the blaster it held, toppled to the ground. The man began to scream in agony, but it was cut short as Reiden quickly dispatched him and deactivated his saber.

Reiden was about to wave his men to move forward when something tugged at his awareness. He knew the feeling well enough — it was the Force alerting him to incoming danger. No sooner had he taken cover among the scrap heap the Collective mercenaries had been using than a blaster bolt seared through the air and burned into the ground where Reiden had been standing just a moment before.

"Karabast!" he swore, looking around frantically. "How could I have been so stupid?"

The intelligence reports that had been gathered about the Collective by Brotherhood agents had contained detailed information about Collective assets. All were potential targets for Brotherhood forces to take out if at all possible. Reiden remembered seeing something about a female sniper, going by the name of Sencara A'theri. The woman was said to be a skilled marksman, and reports had indicated that her clients said she was worth every credit. If it weren't for the Force's intervention, Reiden might not have been breathing any longer. He wasn't able to act fast enough to determine the origin of the shot, but he knew there would surely be more to follow.

Another blaster bolt tore through the air, coming closer to Reiden's position. He bit back a curse and backpedaled further. This time he was able to gauge the general direction from which the shot had come — it was from slightly to the left.

Reiden activated his comlink and contacted his team. "Captain Sloane. There's a sniper ahead of our position and off to the left a bit. If you and the team advance, do so with caution and take cover where you can."

“Copy that, sir,” the captain replied. “Watch yourself there without us. We’ll take care of anything that approaches from elsewhere.”

“That’s good. I want you to send some men to try flanking the sniper’s position. I don’t know what the distanc—” Reiden was cut off as another bolt smacked into the mangled metal of the scrap heap he was taking cover behind. “I don’t know the distance from our position to where the sniper is hiding, but I can’t imagine it’s too far away. I’ll attempt to circle around as well, but I’ll need you and the rest of the team to cover me with some suppressing fire. Can you handle that for me?”

“Yes, of course. You can count on us, sir,” Captain Sloane replied confidently.

Reiden terminated the connection and waited for his team to begin. Once they had opened fire, he made his move and ran out in an arc once more. He was heading towards the spot where he believed the sniper to be hiding — amid a tight cluster of tangled metal scraps, a perfect spot for a sniper’s blind in this landscape.

The Marauder kept an eye on the firefight being waged between his own team and the sniper. The enemy was still firing shots at them, and had now been joined by additional mercenaries that had recently arrived on the scene. He knew that his men could handle the task at hand, but he still wanted to take care of things quickly. And so he began to run faster.

With his attention diverted, Reiden almost missed that there was a pause in the sniper’s shots. At the very edge of his vision, he could just barely make out an object coming towards him, vaguely cylindrical in shape. It landed on the ground, not far from his position. He skidded to a stop on the dry, cracked dirt of the Badlands and took a more observant look at the object.

“Karabast!” Reiden swore loudly. It was a fragmentation grenade. With little time to spare, he quickly focused his mind on the present and what was directly in front of him, tuning out the rest. He extended a hand and, with an effort of will, sent out an invisible hand to swat the explosive away from him. He watched as it tumbled some distance away. Not knowing for sure if he had escaped its blast radius, he scanned his surroundings and threw himself behind a large, gnarled mass of metal nearby. He ducked down low, covering his head and ears, waiting.

A sharp note of *whoopewh* echoed through the air as the grenade detonated, unleashing the multitude of small pieces of shrapnel that it had encased. Reiden heard and felt the pieces of metal ping off of the mound of scrap metal he had hidden behind. His ears were still ringing slightly from the blast. He drew his blaster pistol and thrust his hand out from cover and angled it toward the sniper’s position, squeezing off a burst of shots. He waited a moment and didn’t hear any return fire coming his way — the sniper was likely

returning her attention to the members of his strike team as they advanced on her position. Reiden waited a moment longer to make sure that she had moved her focus away from him.

Once he was relatively certain that he could continue Reiden set out towards where the sniper was hiding. He gauged her location by the shots she fired at his men. His first instinct as to where she was had been accurate. He stayed low as he advanced, trying to present as small a target as possible just to be safe. As he neared his destination, he saw that it wasn't just a tangled mess of metal as he had originally believed it to be. It was, in fact, what appeared to be the ruins of a building. He didn't know how large it might have been while it was still standing, or what had happened to the rest of the metal, but it provided an adequate sniper's blind. The way the ruined metal that remained was twisted together made it rather difficult to get a clean shot at anyone that decided to take shelter behind it.

Reiden circled out a bit farther, and then began to approach the mangled mass of metal from the rear. He made certain to keep his footfalls quiet and his pace slow, not wanting to draw attention to his movements. He holstered his blaster and exchanged it for his lightsaber hilt. His thumb hovered over the activation stud as he inched his way forward. He could make out the form of a woman's body, lying prone face-down on the ground. Her eye was fixed to the scope of a blaster rifle, her attention focused only on what was through that lens. The Corellian glanced at the metal structure, taking in how there were some loose bits of metal, and where things seemed to be supported. An idea began to take form in his mind, and he progressed further.

Once he had reached as close as he dared go, Reiden stopped. He gauged the distance between himself and the structure. He had to make this count, and it had to happen quickly — there was little room for error. In one fluid motion, Reiden leapt into the air and activated his lightsaber. The viridian green blade sprang to life, and he swept it across the top section of the metal beams, slicing through the supports that held in place the loose beams he had spotted a moment before, as well as the makeshift 'roof' of the structure itself. Without anything supporting the weight, the beams and the roof collapsed in on the mangled mass of metal.

Reiden watched it all unfold from where he had jumped. He saw A'theri's head whip up at the noise, a look of confusion on her face. A moment later, it turned to wide-eyed fear, and she let out a shrill scream that pierced the air. But the note was cut off as the metal raining down from above struck her full on. Her head was sent to the ground quickly, and Reiden could hear a wet and sickening squelching sound.

Wasting no time, the Marauder sprang into action once more. He ran, bounding around the collapsed structure and towards where the mercenary reinforcements had joined the fray of battle. Captain Sloane and the rest of his team had done well in holding their own against the Collective's forces — there were only a few stragglers remaining.

With his saber in hand, Reiden charged into the fold, his blade a blur as he slashed it across the chest of one mercenary. Another man spun around to take aim with his blaster, but fumbled with it out of surprise and fear. Reiden simply extended a hand and sent out and effort of will and concentration, and the man went flying — right into a gnarled spike of metal, which impaled him. The soldier's body went limp, and his blaster clattered to the ground from his slack fingers. The Sith turned to face the last enemy soldier when a blaster bolt streaked through the air and bore into the man's head. Reiden spun and saw Captain Sloane take his eye from the scope of his blaster rifle, and gave the man a nod of thanks. The captain ordered some of his men to move to Reiden's position. They arrived a moment later and fanned out, searching for any enemies that they may have missed.

Once they had given the clear signal, Reiden deactivated his lightsaber. Glancing down at that last soldier, he saw that the man had perished with his face frozen in a fierce snarl. From the intelligence reports gathered by Brotherhood agents, Reiden knew that the Collective had a vast army of fanatical soldiers and paid mercenaries at their disposal. Having just seen a lightsaber-wielding man in action, and based on the fixed expression of rage and hatred on the fallen man's face, Reiden was certain that he had been one such fanatic. He had been one of those that believed the Force users in existence were the cause of all the problems faced by the galaxy, and that they must be stopped.

Reiden turned away from the sight with a shake of his head at the foolish logic. While there were conflicts that he and his fellow Force wielders became involved in, or even started themselves, it was a fallacy to believe that things would get better if they were all wiped out. There would still be wars. There would still be death and suffering and conflict. There were plenty of problems that people faced on a daily basis that had nothing to do with the Force and those that used it.

Reiden's attention was turned elsewhere as he spotted Captain Sloane approaching him with a communications officer. "Sloane," he called as the man drew nearer. "Have we received word from anyone?"

"We have, sir," Captain Sloane replied with a nod. "The transmission just came in, but the signal was weak. Lucky for us, the guy tried it again. There may have been some kind of signal booster involved because the message came in clear this time."

"What was the message? And do we know who sent it?" Reiden inquired. He likely knew who it was since the frequency to which they had their equipment tuned was only meant to be used by a select group of people. Even so, he had to be sure. It was always possible that the communication equipment had fallen into enemy hands, and that they had learned of the frequency.

"It was Orion, sir" Sloane said with a note of relief in his voice. "The message just came in. I was already on my way over here to inform you of the first contact when the clearer signal came through."

“That’s excellent news,” Reiden said, feeling relieved as well. “After we were forced to abandon ship and landed down here, I wasn’t sure what fate awaited my friend. It looks like he made it out fine.”

“Well, sir, about that...” Sloane began.

“What is it, Sloane?” Reiden replied, tilting his head slightly.

“It turns out that his ship was shot down as well. But he managed to survive the descent and landing, same as us.”

Reiden let out a laugh. “That Kiffar sure is hard to kill. I’ll give him that much. So, what was the message?”

Sloane’s face expression grew dour. “It appears that he’s made it to the rendezvous point that we had established in our original plan. But once he got there, he spotted Kendra Icasta, the leader of the Huntresses.”

Reiden’s posture changed from relaxed to rigid in an instant. “What’s his status?”

“He’s holding off a small team of Huntresses at the moment. It’s unclear if Icasta is among them, but he needs our help. He said that he would send up a signal flare,” Sloane informed him.

“Gather the men, quickly! Tell them the situation and to move out immediately,” Reiden snapped.

He grabbed his electrobinoculars and scanned the landscape in the direction of the rendezvous point. He knew that it wasn’t far off. After a moment, he spotted the flare in the sky. He turned to the remaining members of his strike team that had gathered before him. “Who’s ready to have some more fun?”

The men roared in response and readied their weapons.

“That’s what I thought. Move out, men! We’ve got an ally that’s waiting for our help not far from here!” Reiden’s voice rang out with authority.

Don’t worry, old friend, he thought to himself, help is on the way. Just hold out a little longer.

Losses in war were inevitable, but this was one loss that they could prevent. And if things worked out well enough, they could even strike a devastating blow to the forces of the Collective if they could take out Icasta. Grasping the hilt of his lightsaber once more, Reiden activated it and began to sprint towards Orion’s location. Captain Sloane and the rest of the strike team followed closely behind.