

*Oh Stars, oh Stars I don't want to die...*

*—ET TO THE COM—*

*Not again, not again!*

*...my research! Wait, I have to go back! Wait, wait for me!*

*...all according to my vision...*

*AAAAAAHHHH—*

*zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz*

*What are these things—?!*

*...aking fire, we're taking fire, where's the damned fleet?! Can't stop them—*

*—h-help...m...me...*

*I'm sorry, Mumma, I'm not coming ba—*

Smoke and burning metal. The groans of hundreds of thousands of tons of durasteel bombarded by cannon fire. The air was thick and stale. No electricity buzzed in the glowbanks above or below. Too much damage. Another section lost. Retreat.

She ran. It was black in the corridor, but that didn't matter to her. She didn't need of any light to see. She was one with everything around her, and it was with her.

Ten heartbeats. There were ten heartbeats up ahead.

She changed direction at a deadened turbolift shaft.

Nine heartbeats. Eight. She inhaled light and shadow, the storm of them within her driving her forward, faster, faster. Down another hall. Around a junction. Turn. Turn.

*zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz*

*MIA, NO!*

*NONONOIDONTWANTTODIE—*

*HEL—*

Seven heartbeats. Blasterfire. Screams.

*zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz*

No.

That thought was hers.

Atyiru skidded to a stop, dropped to her knees, slammed her palms flat against the steel, silver brows screwed tight in concentration and jaw clenched. Colorless coronas of protective energy manifested around seven still-beating hearts, barriers to keep them safe.

In moments, her senses enraptured, she knew.

Still and unmoving as a statue, her smile no more than a bearing of teeth in effort, she called out, "Go! Run! Take the way behind me all the way to the administrative section and join the evacuation!"

The three Acolytes hesitated, fear and anxiety pouring off them in waves, muddled in sharp shock, relief, and grief. They'd been sure they were about to die. Their soft boots were wet with the blood of their friends, pooling on the floor.

Further down the hall, across from them and her, her barriers shattered under storms of blasterfire. The four other heartbeats, the source of the Acolytes' fear, marched forward, guns raised.

"Go!" Atyiru shouted again; her words had to be enough. She couldn't move, couldn't split even a hair of her concentration to soothe their minds into concession, without exposing them to their attackers.

Another whine of firing mechanisms, more shrieks of superheated air as plasma split its atoms. She felt the impact against her shields, felt the fear, heard the hiccuping gasps of the students as they watched the invisible barriers cracking along fault lines, ready to crumble if the enemy squad shot again.

"Go! Trust me. My name is Atyiru, and I swear to you, you'll be safe. I'll hold them off! Run!" she commanded again, and finally at that they moved— stumbling over bodies and the long lengths of their robe skirts but made it behind her, disappeared around the corner, ran. Three heartbeats grew more distant. Distant, but alive.

Her instincts screamed just half a second before another hail of hellfire came ripping down the corridor in perfect precision. Atyiru broke from her stance and threw herself tumbling aside, rolling back to her feet with smoke streaming from her dirtied white robes, her colorful sashes.

Four heartbeats. Steady, steady. Four bodies, amalgamations shaped by scientists playing gods. She and them, they were alike: mixes of flesh and metal, more machine than organic, cyborgs with souls. And the four minds connected to them, to those four bodies, they were—

*Nothing.*

It was just...nothing. Not stone-hearted, just...empty. Like voids. There were heartbeats, but there wasn't anything inside. Nothing but—

But—

**zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz**

Over and over and over. Patterns. It was a pattern. All of them, all at once, the same pattern over and over. Destroy. Step. Destroy. Turn, aim. Destroy. Fire. Destroy. Advance. Fire. Fire. Fire. Destroy.

"No," Atyiru said, aloud this time. Her voice was small, cracked at the edges. She'd felt these people — *people*, not things, *not things* — distantly the moment they began their approach to the *Nesolat*, but now, here before them...if she could have wept, she would have.

The four hive-minded soldiers did not answer her. They wouldn't have been able to if they'd wanted to try. But they didn't want anything except to—

*Fire.*

The Miraluka threw herself aside again, pinwheeling through the air around blaster bolts, saber igniting with a flick of her fingers when she drew it to hand. She landed in a crouch, one foot sliding forward, body angling to the side, balancing arm raised out behind her. Her hilt spun in her palm before her, and the blades burned, washing the black hall in kaleidoscopic light.

Pain was a brief sear to her synthetic nerves. A trickle of the Force closed the wounds on her arms and legs before they could even well with blood. The Miraluka stood before the Marines and lifted her chin, her lips curved in a faint, reassuring smile.

"It's okay, I'm here," she declared, even knowing that their gazes would remain lifeless, flat. "Everything will be alright."

Again, as one, they fired. She dove forward into the fray, saber scintillating. Bolts spit and sprayed against her blade, and her arms could barely clockwork fast enough to turn back the sustained fire. Many snuck past, and she felt the burn, felt every one. They scabbed over and knit up with a furious itch as fast as they appeared.

She kept moving, her weapon an unrelenting blur, her feet ghosting across the slickened floor, circling, circling, closer and closer. Briefly, so briefly, the firing stopped as the front two soldiers dropped in synchronicity to one knee, bracing their arms on their carbines and allowing the other two behind them to lob grenades her way. Two *clink-clinks*, two rushes of hissing noise, and then there was nothing but smoke to breathe. The gunfire resumed almost immediately, blasting blindly into the smog.

But much like the dark interior of the halls, the obfuscation of the smoke meant little to the Miraluka. The woman leapt high, twirling overhead of the planted vanguard to land spinning into the middle of the group, flashing out with her saber.

Every living thing had weak points, and empty or not, these men were no exception.

She spun her staff hilt round, up along her arm, and thrust the tip of chromatic plasma under one Marine's arm, stabbing it into the meat of his armpit. His arm dropped, carbine clattering to the floor. A blade whistled through the air when she spun again, slicing into her jaw and cheek, nearly opening her veins from ear to sternum.

Atyiru ducked low, stepped away, spun, and sliced the end of one blade through the tendon at the back of one standing man's knee, the one who had tried to knife her, bringing him to the ground. In the same motion, her saber kept spinning, bringing the other end up in time to deflect another blaster bolt.

She attacked, and it was just one attack, never stopping her movement, one step, one twirl of plasma, flowing directly into the next. She danced out of their tight cluster and twisted away, rapidly backtracking when they started shooting again. The Marine down to one arm ignored his discarded carbine entirely, drawing a heavy pistol without hesitation. The one on his knees dropped his knife and picked up his comrade's fallen weapon, and the sustained fire came again, threefold.

The Miraluka threw up her free hand, willing another barrier into existence, but it shattered in a breath under the unending salvos. The force of the breaking sent her reeling back, just a stumble, and then she was burning again, more shots slamming into her.- Atyiru screeched, and the Force answered her as she clawed her way back upright.

Her wounds again knit closed, but this time— this time, she felt it. The drag, the undertow. She was using too much energy too fast just to stand and face these four. Her robes were littered

with tears and holes, charred black and brown and red, belying blaster bolts and razor edges where the skin was smooth and seamless beneath.

The Marine whose tendons she had cut fell limply to the side, but she could sense his heartbeat still. Shock and blood loss were setting in, whether or not he felt it. The one with the puncture in the armpit, wobbled, dragged forward a step. Lifted his pistol again and shot. Her saber spun again, and she made sure to reflect the bolt back at him. It burned into his heavy armor in the opposite shoulder, and his remaining arm went limp. Still, he walked forward.

Four heartbeats. Three advanced. Atyiru gritted her teeth and prepared for another assault.

But none came. They were closing in now, shoulder to shoulder to limit the exposure at their flanks, arms held tighter and lower to their bodies while they drew knives, closing gaps. They moved when she moved, not giving her any openings to their backs. No more smoke grenades, no more blasters, no more openings. They'd seen what she was doing, and even if they didn't understand it, didn't care, they countered it.

For just a second, it was her heartbeat that skipped.

She could retreat. Take what wounds she would get in the process, heal them, and try to make it to the exfiltration point at the command center with everyone else. Help who else she could along the way.

She could.

But she wouldn't.

She would stay. She would try here. Because if she didn't, no one else would. Not the people who had made these people into this, not their fellow Collective soldiers, not the Brotherhood forces, not even themselves. No one. They were as helpless as babes in a bed, as the very researchers and scholars the Clans had come to save today, and they needed to be protected too.

Her hesitation cost her. The three moved swift and brutal. She ducked and dodged away from one slice of steel, felt the incision of another across her shoulders. They struck out again, save the one with two spent arms, and again she knew steel in her skin, cutting to the steel underneath synthflesh that made her bones. She hissed, too busy keeping in motion to close them wholly or properly, just patching the skin over deeper damage.

Atyiru lashed out herself then, her blades pirouetting, cutting dangerously into a kneecap in a move she wouldn't have made had their armor not somewhat protected them from losing the leg entirely. That Marine fell flat, tripping his closest fellow, but then she caught the vicious kick the

last one gave straight in the ribs. Her breath left her in an aching gasp as her back hit the floor and she rolled once, twice, losing her grip on her lightsaber.

She panted hard, one hand keeping her off the ground entirely, curls tacky with sweat and blood falling in her face. She pushed, and her arm wobbled too hard to lift her. A half-sob of exhaustion escaped her parted lips.

*Get up. Get up. You didn't die for this. You didn't live for this. Get up. You have to protect them. No matter what, you have to protect them. We've come too far. All we have is this, now, here. Get up.*

Her other hand, shaking, skittered over the durasteel and claimed her weapon once more.

"I promise...I *promise* I'm going to save you. Everything will be alright," she murmured, tremulous. The Miraluka staggered back to her feet, breathing in. The soldiers didn't answer her. They dragged their downed back to their feet and advanced again, blades raised.

Behind them, something **CRACKED**, and then she was flying; they all were. Heat filled the passage, a burning wind that sent them tumbling, crumpled their forms and charcoaled their skin. Her pointed ears rang, folding tightly down to her skull as blood dripped from their canals. Her head ached and the world tilted on its axis. *Concussion*, she thought, dully. *I'm concussed. Br...broken ribs now. Anything dislocated? Definitely burns...de...wh...where are they...get up...got...got to get up.*

The woman groaned, made her battered body sit up, willfully ignored the sharp, stabbing agony in her chest that meant she was close to perforating her own lungs if she moved too much. She stretched out her senses, letting them tell her what her blown-out ears couldn't.

One heartbeat. Just one other heartbeat. The one further down the hall, the Marine that had been bleeding out...he was...he'd...exploded? More suicide bombs? But she hadn't noticed any such equipment on their armor...and...and the others...they were gone too. Had the explosion killed them? Or damaged them so badly that their own explosives went off?

She didn't know. All she knew was—

*One heartbeat.*

Atyiru shifted onto her knees, dragging one foot she couldn't quite feel right behind her, and started to crawl. She crawled over debris and little bits she knew to be fingers and shrapnel and gray matter and body armor. She crawled until she reached the side of the last soldier still living, his limbs twisted awkwardly while he tried to reach for a weapon, to wrap his hands around her neck.

She cupped the Marine's marble-slab face in her burnt hands and stroked her thumbs gently under his blank eyes. His fingers scrabbled at her throat without any gripping power.

"Come back," she whispered. "It's all right, I'm here. Come back to me."

But the words were wind. They couldn't reach him. Not this way.

And so she reached out to his mind.

*zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz*

*No. It's okay. I'm here. You don't have to fight anymore.*

*zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz*

*No, my friend. No more destruction. It's okay. I'm here. Come back. Come back.*

*...zzzdES...TroY...taRgETszzz*

*No. Come back. It's okay, you're safe. You can wake up now. You don't have to do this anymore.*

*zzzdestroy...targets...?zzz*

*Shhh, shh.*

*zzzdes-des...destroy...zzz*

*My friend, it's okay. No more.*

*zzzdes-des...destroy...me...zzz*

The empath startled.

*Destroy you? No. No, dear, I'm not going to hurt you. No one is. Not your fellows or creators, not my people either. I'll protect you.*

*zzzdes-des...destroy...me... Destroy me... Destroy me!!zzz*

*I won't.*

And then she did feel something more than the patterns and the nothing. She felt an anger. A fear.

The man screamed, wordless, a gurgling, animalistic sound. His mind screamed too, and it was joined by a thousand-throated, silent voices, a thousand other minds.

**zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz**

Atyiru recoiled, clutched at her head, screaming too.

**zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz**

**zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz**

**zzzThiS uNIt wiLl dESTroY taRgETszzz**

Her. They meant *her*.

"No!" she howled, shaking, shaking. "No, I don't want to, I *won't*—"

But she couldn't let go. She was connected now, and they were *devouring her*. Her mind was their mind. They shared breath. They shared life. They shared one, single thought, growing louder and louder, drowning out the rest.

**zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz**

**zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz**

**zzzdESTroY taRgETszzz**

**zzzDESTROY TARGETSzzz**

Atyiru fell to the floor.

A few moments later — billions of ticks, to a computer brain — two hive mind units rose to their feet, picked up their carbines, and, limping, proceeded down the hall.

They were not yet decommissioned, and there were targets to eliminate.