

Unity

Unity

It was what had lured Bri Pinut into working for the Collective. A young and capable Muun with an impressive service record for his age, he'd nevertheless felt estranged and detached from his own people. Capital Enterprises had appeared like an employer much like the rest, except for the promise of making a difference, of a team of like-minded people, of being part of a grand design; of Unity.

That was three years ago. Now, dodging blaster bolts while trying to command a group of rag-tag militia in an assault on a space-wizard archive station, that naïveté seemed painfully distant. A body slumped next to him, face left smouldering by blaster bolts. Another young life extinguished by the Jedi's pawns. Another bloody mark on their tally, and Bri was exceptional at counting.

"Sergeant, hold your men back! The crossfire is too intense!" Bri shouted at a wild-haired woman who commanded the Liberation Front contingent he'd been tasked to supervise.

Dalia gave him a withering look, cybernetic eye glinting, but relayed the order to her troops. They held their ground, mostly. A few were too eager even for Dalia's stern commands, though not enough to overcome concentrated blaster fire. And so, for now, the Collective contingent remained pinned down at the far side of a sprawling archive hall.

"What the *frak* we s'posed to do now, huh?" Dalia spat, lacking all decorum. She'd been dredged from some penal colony by the look of her, and Bri held no illusions the Human couldn't snap his neck with her bicep if she tried.

His slender fingers danced on the datapad, a practiced routine he'd perfected over the years, and drew out images of the battlefield from various angles. Dalia's obvious question was answered by a swift glance up high where, narrowly avoiding detection, a lone DRK-1 probe droid floated amidst the ceiling lights.

"We cannot advance across open ground," Bri stated, pointing at the devastated remains of tables and reading lecterns. "The defenders—"

"Jedi lap dogs," Dalia spat with venom.

"—are holed up under these two archways. With any luck, we can suppress one of them, but the other will pick off your men—"

“And women,” Dalia once again interjected.

“—while they are exposed.” He paused for objections. There were none. “We require a diversion, and reinforcements.”

“Think they’ll send us any?” Dalia sounded unconvinced. “We ain’t but a sideshow of an afterthought.”

“They will,” Bri said confidently. “When I relay them what lies beyond that strongpoint.” He swiped the datapad with his palm, swapping the tactical images to a high-resolution holo the probe droid had painstakingly collated of the shadowy room beyond. With a little contrast adjustment, it showed stacks of high-density storage media piled up in a central archival column. Their *Full Sabacc*.

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Unity

Krill-5 felt unity. Together with his bond-mates, seeing through their eyes, feeling their strength, sensing their heartbeats, sharing their consciousness in every vivid detail, he felt a profound unity that had eluded him before his ascension. Those days were but hazy dreams now. Sunbleached tapestries of a past that no longer felt real.

Rodus Peigo was a name. A name that held meaning, perhaps. Maybe he had been it, or it had been him before ascension, but that was inconsequential now. He was, had been, and would always be Five.

A flicker of sound from Krill-3’s ears. Krill-1’s eyes staring at the base grey of an officer’s garb. Orders, commands, sharp words from a man who held sway. Their band of brothers would serve. Serve as one.

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“Where the frak are those reinforcements?!” Dalia spat, ducking behind the scorched lip of an upturned bookshelf after letting loose a spiteful salvo at the enemy.

“I received verification from command,” Bri Pinut replied, flinching as a crimson bolt flashed mere inches past his face, his form slumping into an uncomfortable slouch behind their barricade. “They’re sending us a squad.”

“Better be some karkin’ E-Webs,” Dalia growled, weighing her chances at another exchange of blaster fire. She chose against it, for now. A pained howl down the line signaled another who’d taken that bet and lost.

“I trust in our commander understanding the value of our objective,” Bri replied as calmly as he could under the circumstances. It convinced her enough, even if it did little for his own confidence.

“They’re flankin’ us! Up on the rafters!” The cry of alarm was cut short by an explosion, a thermal detonator dropped from up high landing behind the Collective militants’ positions. A detachment of Brotherhood soldiers, faceless killers in dark armor, opened fire at the suddenly exposed fighters, gunning them down from above.

“Move!” Dalia did not hesitate, grabbing Bri by the arm and yanking him away from the false safety of their barricade while squeezing off shots at the ceiling. One lucky bolt struck a light fixture, bathing the scene with a rain of glass and flickering shadows that bought the survivors their lives.

Only a handful escaped, retreating into the corridor they’d fought so hard to breach. Now they would have to do it all over again, and for the bloodied remnants of her squad, Dalia knew, it was too much to ask.

“Sithspit!” she cursed, slamming her fist against the station wall. It reverberated with her anger.

Bri felt a warm trickle on his forehead. Touching his brow, he winced in pain as the fingers dyed red with his own blood. A piece of shrapnel had almost ended him. Without Dalia, he’d likely have died. He made a note in her tally, even as the raging sergeant turned her murderous gaze at him.

“Where tha’ *frak* are those—?”

The sound of cybernetic feet marching in *perfect* unison caught her by surprise. Spinning around, she almost drew her weapon at the sight of five heavily armed and augmented soldiers closing the distance at a disquieting pace. Their expressionless faces, even more robotic than those of most Technocrats, were unsettling in the extreme and the unarmored flesh still visible was pale and sickly. They were like walking corpses. They were the Hive Mind Marines.

“Identify: Bri Pinut, Commander,” the five mouths spoke as one. The monotonous choir struck the Muun silent, and the unit spoke again repeating their demand.

The familiar beeping of his datapad brought Bri back to the present. The same question repeated upon it, requesting uplink to the Marines’ command matrix.

“Yes, I am. Identified,” Bri blurted and tapped on the pad. “The enemy is inside,” he pointed at the hall beyond the doorway, “But, they’ve got the high ground. We were outflanked from the rafters.”

The Marines stood still, only a faint whirring of cybernetics emanating from them. Then, abruptly, they jolted into motion, fanning out effortlessly into a textbook breaching formation.

“No, you don’t understand!” Bri shouted in protest. “They’ll gun you down the moment you enter, they—!”

The Marines were already breaching.

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Krii-5 was the first through the doorway, wading through the smoke Three’s grenade provided. Flashes of red illuminated the haze, offering pitiful challenge for him to evade as he stepped right to allow Four to pass left. In perfect unison, they spread along the chamber’s perimeter, weapons raised and techno-enhanced senses peering through the same smoke that confounded their foe.

Krii-4 spotted a target. Two fired first. One served a shrapnel grenade high into the air and Five’s shot detonated it. The galleries above were raked with white-hot metal fragments, pinging harmlessly off the Marines’ armor, but finding that of the Brotherhood wanting. In moments, their resistance was subdued.

No further contacts were sensed above, and so they turned to the dug in soldiers cowering behind their barricades. The smoke was already dispersing and their fire grew more accurate. The Marines’ reply was unanimous. Raising their arms, a quintuplet of rockets streaked across the chamber and detonated just behind the defenders’ barricades.

The sounds of carnage were like music. The death cries of the Collective’s enemies was a hymn. A hymn to Unity.

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“What the f—?” Dalia stared in disbelief at the inhuman efficiency displayed before her, watching as a mere handful of soldiers blasted their way through overwhelming odds like it was nothing. Had these monstrosities not been fighting for her side, she would have been scared out of her mind. Instead, she merely felt deeply disturbed.

“I told you command would not let us down,” Bri smiled at her. “Have faith, and the Collective will provide. Together, we are strong.” He offered, gesturing at the archives.

Dalia glanced at her surviving troops, bloodied but bolstered by the sight of their reinforcements. She nodded at Bri. "Until every cage is broken."

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Krii-3 reported a malfunction. An impossible pattern of blaster fire slammed into its leg and arm. There had been no dodging it. The armor held by the shoulder, but failed at the hip and Five felt, as did every of his brothers, the searing pain in Three's leg as it fused under the heat of a blaster bolt. He managed to stumble a few more steps, carbine claiming one of the foe responsible for his torment, before the cruel calculation reached its conclusion. He was dead weight.

The creature that had once been Rodus Peigo wept behind his helmet as he felt Three's elevated pulse, the searing pain in his brother's hip as he charged at the foe. The barricade rushed closer through Three's eyes, desperate shots finding their marks but failing to halt him. He crashed into the toppled statue of a faceless Sith, shattering it before succumbing to point-blank blaster fire.

For a split second, Krii-5 felt fear. The blind panic of a condemned man when the floor gives way and the noose tightens. He did not want to die. Krii-3 did not want to...

The explosion gutted the enemy's defences, scattering wounded soldiers like ants from the conflagration of Three's demise. The remaining Marines ended their suffering, tears already drying behind Krii-5's helmet. Unity had been restored.

"Move!" a shout from behind them, female, Human. "Show those lap dogs we won't bow to them, or their masters!" Her bravado was irrelevant, all resistance had been subdued. Krii-4 dissented. His ears picked up a distinct *snap-hiss* they'd all been trained to recognize.

"Jedi!"

The alarm came late—for the partisans. Krii-5 and his brothers were already moving while the last syllable still sounded from the militant's lips. They spread out, surrounding their foe, and observed. Panicked militants snapped off hasty shots, feeding the golden yellow lightsabers of the purple Twi'lek Jedi with the tools of their own undoing. Wet screams followed. The scent of burnt flesh lingered.

"Fall back!" a gruff woman ordered, her aim little better than the others'. The shaken militants fell back in a stupor, reeling from the shock. More incoherent screams, reports of sounds unheard, snarling beasts, and flashes of phantoms.

The Marines registered none of it, instead tracking the Jedi's movements and analyzing her combat patterns. Already a strategy was forming, based on proven templates. They pulled out their sidearms, heavy blaster pistols to go with their carbines, and moved in for the kill.

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Bri Pinut watched with transfixed fascination as the Twi'lek Jedi moved with effortless grace, reflecting blaster bolts with the ease he drew breath. The barely trained partisans could offer no real resistance to her implacable advance, but the Marines were cut from a different cloth.

The Jedi seemed barely aware of them, moving in a trance-like state that defied mortal reflexes as she cut down Dalia's surviving partisans. When the Marines raised their weapons at one, drawing beads on her from all angles, she finally seemed to realize her peril.

The volley of shots was impeccably timed, the bolts all converging on the Jedi *simultaneously*. There were too many to block, even with two sabers at her disposal. Bri watched on with morbid fascination at the death of their elegantly lethal foe. But it never came.

The bolts splashed against a shimmering bubble, the Jedi sinking to her knees to maintain the protective barrier that absorbed the attack. Before a second volley could reach her, she'd darted away, clearly shaken by the experience, but now dangerously keen to the threat.

"We need to go!" Dalia spat gruffly, grabbing Bri by his slender arm. His fascination almost got the better of him, too eager to see how the Marines would dispatch their foe, but Dalia's insistent tug could not be denied. He nodded and hurried along, following the woman to a safer distance where only a few remaining militants held up a skittish hedgehog defence.

From the far edge of the archive hall, once again pushed back near where their first brothers had fallen, the remaining militants observed like children while the adults duked it out. Light flashed, golden yellow through the twilight left in the wake of Dalia's snuffing of the ceiling lamps. Blaster fire followed, unerringly tracing the elusive silhouette. It escaped, but barely. A moment later, a dull explosion announced a Collective casualty.

Dalia turned to Bri, her expression speaking volumes. For the first time in years, Bri had no answers to give. He raised his shoulders noncommittally. This was new territory for him as well, but surely...

"The Technocrats spent years perfecting them," he spoke. "Surely they can deal with a single Jedi?" His voice failed at the crucial noun.

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Only three Brothers remained, but the Jedi was injured. She'd been quick to escape, but not quicker than Five's blaster bolts. Working with ever fewer sensors, and fewer weapons still, the trio of surviving Marines knew they had to adapt to overcome. It was a base instinct.

Lights flashed again, golden illumination drawing their attention to the direction of their foe. Organic eyes offered precious little beyond a blurry haze, but cybernetic implants from One and Two betrayed the Jedi's ruse. A lone lightsaber swaying harmlessly in the air.

Had he not been forewarned, Krii-5 would have lost his head. Instead, he only lost an arm. The Jedi appeared as if from nowhere, her lightsaber biting through his forearm with sickening ease. Pain flashed in his organic body as the heavy blaster pistol he'd held clattered to the floor, still clutched by a fleshy stump.

He retreated, two paces back, one to the left. The line of fire was opened and One and Two took advantage. The Jedi was caught by surprise, but not off guard. Her blade moved to deflect, sparing Five's life and letting him escape, but a near miss burst stone off an ancient statue that raked the Twi'lek's face. Her cry of pain was music to their ears.

It was short-lived. One and Two had strayed too close to each other, a momentary lapse in the adapting code that prioritized a kill over asset survival. The Jedi made them pay for that. Stepping into view, she shot out her arms and as one, the pair of Marines were flung against the far wall with the force of an ion thruster's wash.

They activated their jetpacks in response, but One had already been skewered by the basalt sword of an ancient statue. The whine of his pack's blue thrusters counted down to the inevitable, his death rage shattering the statue of some nameless ancient warrior priest.

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"They're losing," Dalia spoke, body as tense as a wire string. "She's killing them all."

Bri had no words to offer, but he knew they could not retreat. Not after being given such an asset.

"Have faith in our purpose," he began, reciting dogma when all else failed. Dalia's bitter look silenced it. Then, his datapad beeped. It offered a simple question: *Override Asset Safeguards?*

The two exchanged a second glance and he made his choice.

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The two surviving Marines stopped in their tracks. The faint whirring of overclocked processors hummed in the devastated archive. It was joined by that of two lightsabers. Sensing an opening, the Jedi struck again, but what she now faced was thoroughly beyond human.

The pair lunged at the Jedi with reckless abandon, muscles spasming under inhuman demands for acceleration. Tendons tore from the strain, ligaments distending beyond their limits as any remaining consideration for self-preservation vanished with the flick of a bit. They met the Jedi head on, rushing into her weapons to pin them down with their own limbs.

Five let his remaining hand be skewered by a brilliant saber blade, but did not stop. What few tendons still worked curled his fingers into the Twi'lek's hand, sinking into purple flesh. Two did much the same, though his injuries were far more grievous as a defensive cut severed his torso from his pelvis. Still, he kept going, entrails spilling onto the floor in wet ropes while his hands wrapped around the Twi'lek's throat and *squeezed*.

He screamed. They both screamed. And she soon joined them.

Bestial, tortured howls filled the broken hall as the Marines descended on their foe, bereft of sense or self-preservation. Teeth sank into purple flesh. Hands tore at armor plate. Stumped limbs slammed into tender lekku, tearing, ripping, mangling with a ferocity beyond any sane beast.

Their foe ceased to resist. Her cries of panic and pain fell silent.

The Marines did not.

Sounds of wet tearing, sickening pops, and the soft squelches of organic matter continued until finally, mercifully, a resounding crack satisfied the Marines' programming. Krii-5 slumped into the slick of gore that was all that remained of the Jedi. He was bleeding profusely where the unity of cybernetic and organic had become unwound.

Rodus Peigo was alone. Sailing in a void, bereft of his brothers. Their voices silenced, never to return. In that stillness, he heard a long forgotten voice.

His own.

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Bri and Dalia peeked into the silenced hall like a pair of skittish rodents, the stillness that had descended feeling unnatural after the violence they'd witnessed. Picking their way towards the scene of the final struggle with conflicted, morbid fascination, they paused when they laid eyes upon carnage that had ensued.

Dalia felt the urge to vomit. Bri felt empty inside. And for a moment, both shared the faintest of guilt for having subjected such an end upon another living creature.

"I'm calling command," Bri finally broke the silence in a whisper. "We've secured the archive."

Dalia nodded, about to turn away from the scene when she caught the faintest of motions from the slightly less mangled Marine. It was still drawing breath.

"Call a medic," she urged, pulling a bacta bomb from her belt. "This one's still alive!"

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The creature that had once been Rodus Peigo felt unity. The days before ascension were but a hazy memory. Together with his bond-mates, seeing through their eyes, feeling their strength, sensing their heartbeats, sharing their consciousness in every vivid detail, he now felt a profound unity.

Rodus Peigo was a name. A name that held some meaning, perhaps. Maybe he had been it, or it had been him before ascension, but that was inconsequential now. He was, had been, and would always be Osk-3.