

# Operation Symphonia

## Part 1

### Rhythm

The arrangement of beats in time. Strong, regular, repeating in a constant pattern. The backbone and backdrop to every dance. A steady rhythm keeps the song alive. It takes the lead, guiding music into the open, into the fray.

The hollow thud of explosive detonations, echoing in the far distance. The reverberating impact of blasters, hissing through the air, burning against durasteel, searing into flesh. The clatter of an armored corpse hitting the floor, life cut short, their weapon still smoking in their hand. The thump of two pumping hearts, pounding, pounding, pounding to the rhythm of war.

Sera gasped, her breath rattling into a long, drawn-out sigh as she stepped back from the man that she had killed. Her team was uncharacteristically quiet as they filed in around her, mutely reloading blaster packs, checking over weapons, plastering minor wounds with bacta paste and binding them over with coils of snowy bandaging. Just another fight for Spectre Cell. Ugly, difficult, but that had proven typical over the course of their day thus far. The pinnacle of the AEF's elite forces, they'd been the head of the spear deployed onto the *Nesolat* Station hours earlier, and hadn't had a moment to breathe since then.

They had no idea where their allies were. A concentrated thrust on the Collective's part had split them from the rest of Arcona... and from there, their comms had been cut, their lines of communication jammed. Sera couldn't get the thought of her friends, her family, out of her mind. Sulith and Ziggy, Lucine, Karran. All she had were the people beside her... and they'd fought themselves to tatters. Through waves of Partisans, unleashed experiments of the Sith, the new horrors of the Technocrats...

Only to be betrayed. Evant Taelyan had turned against them. They'd seen it. Holding within a security station, a security feed of the command deck had given them a direct view of him marching in, backed by Collective marines, massacring those that remained within. Moments later, the whole station had been swamped by enemy troops... and the energy barrier went down. *Nesolat* had fallen. All that they could do now was... escape, and hope that their friends and allies did the same.

Sera blinked once, twice, steadying her breath as she gazed down at the fallen Partisan. Spectre Cell had run upon his squadron by chance, trying to make it to an escape pod. Now, he and his men were dead. His

blood dripped from Sera's dagger, staining the hem of her snowy cloak, now scorched by blaster fire and darkened by smoke.

A hand closed on Sera's shoulder, strong and gentle. She straightened, offering a small, frazzled smile as she turned. Ruka smiled in kind, though tension sat within his lilac gaze. "We need to keep moving, Sera. The whole station's breaking up. We've still got time, but..."

"I know. I was just... taking a moment to think," the Zabrak responded, her voice faltering. A team was at her back, expecting her to tell them what to do, where to go, and she had no bloody idea. She was a fighter, a warrior... but a leader? How could she even pretend to be that? Half of the people here had been soldiering before she was born, delving into the Force while she was still trawling the dunes on Iridonia.

Thankfully, her team wasn't providing her much time to worry herself.

"Save your karkin' thinking for the escape pod, Kaern," shot back a voice from just behind Ruka. Stepping away, Qyreia Arronen slapped a new blaster-pack into her rifle, wiping a lock of blood-matted hair from her crimson skin.

"We don't actually have one of those, yet," piped up Zodac, the old soldier's gruff voice tinged with a slight, drunken slur. Half of the team gave a slight laugh at that, though their hearts were obviously not in it. The other half was silent.

The Zabrak took a moment to steel her hearts. Then, she stepped up, levelling the brightest smile that she could manage at her team.

"We'll get one," Sera affirmed, her brow furrowing. Stepping forward, she drew her saber into her hand, levelling it down the hallway. "Just a little bit left to go. We take one of those pods, we can make it down to Arx's surface..."

"...and from there?" questioned Tybalt, the Togorian's eyes narrowing to worried slits.

"...no idea," Sera responded truthfully, giving a grin and a shrug. "We'll figure it out when we get there. Spectre Cell... on me!"

Igniting her saber with a burst of golden light, the Zabrak took off down the corridor. After a moment of hesitation, her team followed. Sera felt that she could hear the pounding of their boots resounding to an unseen rhythm that she couldn't quite pick out. Through shattered corridors lined by the corpses of the slain they ran, past broken terminals and tarnished wells of unfathomable knowledge, slaughtered scholars and soldiers alike. Distant explosions rocked the station, warbling klaxons the last swan song of *Nesolat* Station. It took them only minutes to find the escape pods.

And the Collective.

Sera felt them before they turned the corner, sensing the edges of their consciousness, touching at them through the Force. About a dozen in all... four of them the strange, alien-feeling Marines. She signalled to her team without even breaking her stride, and they spread out, shaping into two separate wedges, sabers forming burning spearheads. Keeping her hold on the Force, Sera bound them with a tight weave, touching onto the mind of each of the Force users before tying them together, praying under her breath as the battle meditation began. They slammed into the Collective line without a battlecry, like the Spectres from which they drew their name. For the poor Partisans and Huntresses that they clashed against, the surprise was fatal. To saber and blaster, most fell in seconds, overwhelmed by the unnaturally coordinated assault. Four men were cut down in an instant as Xenna Azara spun into their ranks, the burning, bloody blades of her saberstaff lashing through them as she laughed. Their officer was slaughtered before he could even give a cry, dying with a gurgle as he choked on the blaster bolt that Qyreia planted in his throat.

The Marines would not fall so easily. They backpedaled in perfect lockstep, holding their saber-wielding adversaries off with a concerted volley of blaster fire. When Sera reached out to them with the Force, she sensed a strange harmony; synthetic, but warping in perfect unison, like a ghostly whisper of cosmic wind. Dropping to one knee, Zodac tagged one through the belly with his Synergy, the armor-piercing slug blowing a fist-sized hole into the cyborg's guts, following it with a shot through the throat. They knew what came next, and Ruka capitalized on it. He thrust a hand forward, closing an invisible grip around the fallen man, before throwing him at his fellows like a great, bleeding grenade.

He exploded with a shower of shrapnel from his shredded armor, pulverized bone, and smoking gore. Both of his comrades were staggered for just a moment. That was all that Sera needed. Pulling her Zabradi dagger from a Huntress' throat, she pivoted on her feet and thrust her left hand forward. Yellow blaster fire burst from her vambrace just as the marines regained their balance, sparking twice off of the first man's armor, before burning right through his visor. Pulling a vibroknife, the surviving Marine charged into Sera's fire, juking around his fellow's corpse as it detonated. She felt where his attack would fall just before it came, balling a fist to activate her vambrace's energy shield. It caught the blade an inch in front of her face. Snarling, the Zabrad lashed out, throwing the blow away before shattering the man's left-knee with a downward, oblique kick, snapped bones thrusting from the flesh. Placing her right foot in the center of his chest, she pushed the crippled man away, before stepping back and shooting him twice through the heart with her vambrace's blaster.

She turned away before he exploded, new splats of crimson staining the pure white cloth of her cloak, the cloth catching some of the shrapnel before it could break into her armor. Her hearts were *pounding* like war drums, pulsing hard. Turning her gaze upward, she saw a team that was once again bloodied, but alive. Slowly, she exhaled, breathing a sigh of true relief.

Then, the entire station *rolled* under her feet, shaking with a titanic, unseen detonation. Immediately, the mournful wail of the alarms rose to a new fever pitch... and an ominous creaking filled the corridor. The sound of metal, ripping apart in the far distance.

“...I think that’s our signal to pull our choobies outta this karkin’ fire,” Qyreia broke in after a few moments, motioning them toward the bay of escape pods that they had fought to reach. They were greeted by the sight of a long line of closed-off airlocks, bays where pods had already been launched. Exactly *one* remained. At least it seemed like the Force was with them, after all.

As they piled in, the sound of rending sheets of durasteel grew louder, and louder, and louder, rising from barely a whisper to a seething roar. It was accompanied by dull detonations; the explosive decompression of separate sections of the station as they were torn asunder. The alarm seemed to grow panicked, wailing at them. Sera climbed in last, clambering into the pod, flinging herself into her seat, and slamming on the lifeboat’s emergency release before her restraints were even on.

There was a second’s delay. Then, the escape pod’s door slammed shut with a deafening *clang*, cutting off all sound from outside, and they shot forward into the void. Sera’s eyes widened as she watched as, behind them, the *Nesolat* station broke apart. Its once pristine hull now seemed to be one large, red-hot bruise, charred and cratered by an onslaught of turbolaser fire. One arm broke off. Then the other. She watched as both seemed to burst into flame as their internal atmospheres ignited. Moments later, the remaining sections detonated, illuminating the pod’s interior with stark red light.

There was silence.

“...how many?” Sera asked after a few moments, her voice almost a whisper.

“...Station that size? One hundred and fifty thousand. Give or take,” Zodac responded numbly. The old soldier’s hand shook as he reached for his flask. At that number, silence returned. The pod sailed through the void, screened by flashes of light as war was waged. They watched a star destroyer go down, breaking up as it hit the atmosphere. They watched the Collective move towards Arx.

“Where... where are we taking this thing? Most of the other pods are...headed towards the capital city, I think” Diy spoke up, breaking through the silence. Slowly, the Kiffar stood from her seat, moving to the pod’s control stick.

“Follow the administration section. Taelyan’s there. We hunt him down, we avenge all of them,” Ruka responded darkly, lilac eyes flashing, his normally gentle face hardening into a snarl. Xenna nodded her quick agreement, followed in turn by Zodac. Sera looked to them, and felt the anger in their hearts. Rage, and darkness. Then, she looked to the void outside.

“...Most of the Collective isn’t following him,” Qyreia interjected in response. “The ones that are breaking off from that battle look like they’re headed to...”

“Eos City,” Sera finished. “That’s where we need to be.”

“There’s only seven of us,” Ruka disagreed, the Mirialan’s voice coming gruff and harsh. “We can’t change a damn thing in a battle of millions. If we track down Taelyan, take him out...”

“We save *no one*,” Sera cut him off, blue eyes shining. “We need to link up with our allies in the city. Alone... alone, we don’t have anything. Together... together, we can stop them there, and finish this damned war.”

Her tone held a core of iron that surprised even herself. Ruka looked partially taken aback. Then, he gave a small smile, nodding once.

“To Eos, then. It’s gonna be a hell of a ride, *Ra’tueria*,” he responded, and she couldn’t help but grin right back. Before anyone else could butt in, however, a nearby detonation rocked the pod, throwing them back into the silence, interrupted only by the rhythmic thud and hiss of blaster fire just outside. The rhythm of war, pounding in their ears.

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## Part 2

### Melody

Notes in a sequence, following a set rhythm. One at a time, questioning, answering, flying from the highest highs, in bursts of light and beauty, before falling to the lowest lows, with shadow and darkness. The parts, the players, the musicians upon the stage, plucking and strumming and singing to their own sequence. A sweet melody brings clarity, direction. Its voices urge unity.

The roar outside the escape pod, pitched like a banshee’s screech as they tore through the upper atmosphere, slowly dimming into a deep, deep rumble, like a shroud of thunder falling over them. The rattle of the metal around them, ceasing, stopping, before growing louder, louder, louder. Breath, whistling from the lungs as the body around them clenched tight with trepidation.

“Impact in 10! Everyone, hang on to ya’ karkin’ bits, it’s gonna be damned hard!” Diy called into the escape pod, breaking into a mad whoop. Sera’s fingers clutched into her armored thigh with a white-knuckle grip, her lips pressed into a thin line. She wasn’t afraid, not exactly, but... well, she’d hardly gotten used to space travel as it was. Unshielded, barely guided atmospheric re-entry was an experience that she could do without having to repeat. Reaching out to the Force, she channelled it into her body, relaxing her musculature as much as she could manage. Her gaze trailed to the tiny porthole, staring at the urban skyline that they were very, *very* rapidly approaching.

Eos City was at the center of a maelstrom of fire. Veritable tides of red blaster-bolts, flaming green turbolaser rounds, and electric blue ion charges filled the sky, some by weapon emplacements on the city’s half-shattered walls, others from the dueling armadas of fighter craft that crowded the clouds. A pitched battle was being fought along the southern wall, as the Iron Legion worked to hold the Collective back... but even so, Sera could see countless flashes of small arms within the city itself, rising gouts of

flame and smoke. The walls were already breached, the enemy was already inside. The massive tower of glass and durasteel that sat at the city's center was the beacon that lit it all, surrounded by swarms of landing-landing craft and starfighters, dogfighting it out. Two, pale ships sat on the horizon, like pasty maggots. The Lancer-Class Frigates of the Collective, raining down sheets of plasma.

That was all she was able to see... before the ground rushed up to meet them.

White stars filled her vision. For a seeming eternity, there was only a dull numbness. Slowly, the Zabrak worked to blink the sparks away, groaning. A warm drip trailed down her face, the taste of iron startling her to full consciousness as it hit her lips. Blood. Her own blood. Shaking her head, Sera's vision finally cleared for the most part, and she took in the chaos of the escape pod. Most of her team seemed to be in similar states of shock and dishevelment. But, they were alive.

"...Everyone... in one piece?" she mumbled, clumsily undoing the latch to her seat. Already, she could feel her hearts pumping heard in her chest, filling her body with new vigor. Zabradi were famous for their resilience, she supposed... or maybe, it was just that they had thick skulls.

A chorus of low affirmations greeted her call as the others slowly freed themselves from their seats. The escape pod's door opened out into a ruined city street that smelled of ash and smoke, marked by a long scar of crushed asphalt where they had skidded along the ground. Diy gave the Zabrak an odd look as they stepped out, her tanned brow furrowing. "I am, Hornsies, but, uh... you aren't... exactly." Slowly, the Kiffar rubbed at her own forehead, which Sera did in turn, running a gloved hand over her horns. It didn't take her long to find out exactly what Diy meant; one of the horns at the very front of her crown had cracked, splitting to the root.

"...Hornsies, huh?" Sera responded dryly, dabbing at the stream of blood that trickled from the cut flesh at the horn's root. Definitely didn't seem like any of them were gonna come out of this battle unscarred.

"Sorries, couldn't resist myself," Diy apologize wryly, giving Sera a mischievous grin. "Least they grow back, right?"

"...slowly," Sera sighed, before cutting off as Qyreia broke in with a snort.

"Cut the PDA, you two. Should probably figure out where in the crying kark we're headed, yeah?" she questioned brusquely, slinging her long NT-42 rifle onto one shoulder. Ruka and Xenna filed in closely behind her, followed shortly thereafter by Zodac, supporting a limping Tybalt. Sera had no answer to that question, of course. She'd never even set foot on Arx, much less Eos City. She had absolutely no idea where they might need to go. Thankfully, she was saved as a high-pitched whine of comms-static crackled forth from her wrist-link, roughly coalescing into a patchy, but familiar voice.

*"Any and all Arco-...-equencies, this is Consul Luci-...-ano. Ground units are advi-...- to the central markets. Repeat, report for rendezvous in-...-"* the wrist-link squawked, before fading back into gritty static. Sera blinked once, and then smiled at Qyreia.

“That work?” she stated brightly, rolling the tension out of her shoulders. The landing left her feeling light one big bruise, but she could handle the pin without issue. “You heard the Shadow Lady. Let’s get moving!”

Thankfully for them, this part of the city held no immediate danger for them. Sprinting through, they were met only by the terrified faces of fleeing civilians, and the dark grey plate of Iron Legionnaires, trying to herd the occupants of the city around. Smoke, ash, and the thick, coarse dust of pulverized concrete choked the air, a stinking shroud of grey and black that smeared across the horizon. They appeared to have crashed down in the residential district, judging by the buildings surrounding them. Squat, modular structures of duracrete and glass, many windows held the set, stubborn faces of people who had refused the orders of the Iron Legion, waiting to defend their private sanctums. Most homes were empty... or destroyed. All it would take was a single blast from a turbolaser or blaster cannon to reduce a home smoking rubble and melted glass. One had been crushed by more direct means a Collective Headhunter had smashed directly into it, now a twisted, flaming mess. Still bodies lay on the pavement before it... alongside a squadron of soldiers halted in their tracks. They sat in silence. Sera paused as she gazed at them. Reaching out through the Force, she sensed only... confusion, and the crushing sensation of surrender.

Her brow furrowed. Then, without a word, she broke from her group, and walked towards them.

One soldier’s head popped up as she approached. Startling, he immediately jumped to hit feet, trying to pull two of his fellows up with him. One didn’t budge. The other, a dark haired woman, stood reluctantly. The other two didn’t even make a move. The man that jumped up was young, with bright red hair stained dark by a bloody gash. Directly underneath the emblem of Clan Naga Sadow, three brass chevrons marked the shoulder of his armor... not that Sera knew what those meant. “Uhh... Hey there! Uh...-”

“Sergeant,” Zodac whispered.

“Sergeant!” Sera finished in turn, beaming at the group. The soldiers that were still sitting looked up at her, but made no move to stand. “Could I ask... what’re you doing out here? Link-up’s at the central markets.”

“Well, uh.. Ma’am. We were ‘sposed to be evacuating the wounded,” the Sergeant started in a broken, reedy voice. When Sera’s bright, blue-eyed gaze met his, however, he straightened. “But our Lieutenant’s dead. He was getting people from the house... when the Z-95 came down.”

She felt a wave of grief roll over them, like a surging sheet of ice water. It struck at her hearts in turn. In that moment, her decision was made.

“Well then, Sergeant... link up with us, follow us over. We could use the help,” she offered, smiling as she stuck out her hand. He didn’t take it, instead glancing nervously down at her lightsaber, the swirling folds of her blood-stained cloak.

“Us? You’re... Jedi. Special forces, or whatever. And...Arconans. We’re...”

“Nothing,” cut in the woman at his side, her voice bitter. “Beaten.”

“You’re not beaten until you’re dead,” Ruka countered, his voice warm as he stepped up by Sera’s side. One at a time, her team followed him, forming a line at their backs.

“We’re dead if we fight,” a sitting soldier interjected harshly, staring up at them with a grime-coated helmet.

“And how many will die if you don’t?” Sera questioned gently, slowly dropping to one knee as she spoke, offering him her hand. With the other, she gestured toward the ruined home, and the bodies that lay outside. “The Collective came here to kill. To burn. Everyone they could find. *We* can stop that... but only if we fight. We can’t lose. We won’t. But, if we don’t fight... we can’t win,” she finished, beckoning with her open hand.

The soldier stared at her for a moment, silently. Then, he reached, took her offered grip, and pulled himself up. His fellows followed, standing one at a time. The Sergeant looked between them all, astonishment crossing his face... before it was smothered by a wide, sudden smile. Turning, he gave Sera a crisp salute, and in the light behind his eyes, she finally found a small bit of meaning for the word ‘leader’. New notes beamed in her hearts, streams of musical light that joined the thrumming rhythm from before.

“Well, you can call me Sera, Sergeant...”

“Dunnitz. Sergeant Dunnitz.”

“Alright, Sergeant Dunnitz. Fall in. We’ve got a city to save.”

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At the Central Markets, they found chaos, and the Collective.

Pillars of smoke and fire billowed from separate conflagrations, spots where Sera could only assume that the incendiary mines carried by the Hive Mind Marines had ignited chain reactions. The bright tongues of flame crawled over the shell of a collapsed Iron Legion AT-ST, fallen over a broad, open avenue that seemed to form the western border of the commercial district. The street was filled with shimmering blaster fire and blazing lightsabers, seething throngs of men and women fighting. For dominion, for slaughter, for their lives. The Collective line was marked by the rough garb of the partisans, the distinctive glimmering lightbows of Huntress-sharpshooters, and the black plate of their marines, marching doggedly through the battlescape. Suffice it to say, the whole field was utter chaos. Reaching out with the Force didn’t help to ease her blindness, either; a storm of emotion assaulted Sera when she



tried, numbing her with a sudden shock. Rage, anger, violence. The strange synthetic song of the marines, binding them together.

But, in the moment that she reached out, she felt something else. Familiar minds and friendly hearts. It wasn't much... but it was an objective to shoot for.

"Team," she muttered, igniting her saber and dropping her dagger into one hand. From their point of entry, they'd need to cut through a portion of the Collective line to reach their destination, but she trusted her team. Around her, more sabers burst to life, and Sergeant Dunnitz chuckled nervously. "On my flank. Time to save the Voidbreaker's asses."

"The *what?*" Dunnitz questioned, shaking slightly as he slapped an energy pack into his E-11.

"Friends," Ruka explained, stepping to Sera's side. "Let's go."

Once again, they charged without a battle-cry. Rather, it was a crackling volley of blaster and slugthrower fire that announced them, launched from the Sadowans, Qyreia, and Zodac. It slammed into the un-covered flank of a Partisan E-Web emplacement, cutting the men down before they could turn the gun around, bodies sizzling. They surged over their emplacement, Tybalt and Ruka covering one flank from blaster fire as more soldiers turned to face them, one marine detonating as a reflected bolt caught him through the eye of his helm.

Fire washed over them. But still, they held firm.

Then, they slammed into the thick of the enemy. Xenna and Ruka unleashed twin storms of cobalt lightning immediately, crackling energy leaping from body to body, frying cybernetic implants and cooking hive mind marines in their armor. More gore-filled detonations followed, immediately pierced through as Sera and Tybalt -still limping slight- stepped forward, sabers blazing. The Zabrak quickly lost sight of her white-furred friend, losing herself in the overwhelming momentum of battle. Dropping to one knee, she jammed her dagger between a Partian soldier's legs, before rapidly pivoting and thrusting at a marine with her saber. The first stab sparked off the plate, leaving molten durasteel and plastic in its wake. The second stab pierced through, gutting him as he staggered forward... just before she struck him in the solar plexus, flexing her first to activate her vambrace's repulsor. A pulse of pure kinetic energy threw the dying man backward, his heavy form crunching into a trio of huntresses, just before he exploded into a starburst of bone and metal shrapnel.

But she was surrounded. The Force screamed warnings into her mind, and she dodged and ducked for all she could, rolling underneath the swing of a vibrodagger, blocking a thrust rifle butt with an energy shield that exploded to life just in time... only for a heavy boot to strike her in the gut, throwing her back to the ground. Marines and partisans surrounded her, one kicking her saber from her grip, another stomping on her dagger. Her armor absorbed some of the blows... but not enough, and it certainly wouldn't be able to save her as a Duros Partisan raised a DL-44, levelling it at her face...

The shot never came. Probably because the Duros' bulbous blue head half-exploded as a golden saber pierced directly through his face, emerging with a burst of bloody steam from his mouth before dragging up through his skull. A half moment later, two of the monstrous marines were inexplicably yanked into the air by an unseen grip, struggling in unison just before they were violently slammed into one another. As they hung, limp and partially stunned, a bloody saber span through the air to decapitate them both, their bloody explosions painting the men below. The partisans holding her arms didn't last much longer; the first fell as a heavy, black electrobaton slammed into the back of his skull with a crunch. The other, who had pinned her dagger-hand, turned to flee... only to be hoisted off his feet as a power hammer was driven into his gut. The man folded in two, his spine snapping audibly, blood spraying from an open, screaming mouth. When he hit the ground, he didn't even twitch.

And that was it. Suddenly, Sera realized that there were no Collective operatives in sight. She wasn't given much time to think on that, of course, before something pinned her to the ground once more. The mass smelled vaguely of fur... but it seemed to be plated in beskar, if she was judging the weight right.

"Sera, you KARKING IDIOT!" cried a modulated voice from within the helmet, arms wrapping around to hug the Zabrak tight. Sera just laughed for a moment, trying to haul herself to her feet.

"Love... love you too, Ziggy. Can I, uh.. Get up?" she groaned, trying to push her friend off. Already sore from getting dogpiled by the Collective, the weight of her friend's armor resting on her shoulders certainly wasn't helping.

"Right...yeah," the Zygerrian mumbled, rolling off of the Zabrak with a little giggle. Then, there was a purple hand before her, offering. Grinning, Sera took it, pulling herself up into another hug. This one, far less rambunctious.

"It is goodt to see you in vell and goodt, apprentice," Tali stated simply, golden eyes shining. One of the Twi'lek's armored lekku slowly slithered up to wipe a drop of blood from Sera's cheek, gently flicking it away. "Ve vere vorried when we lost contact vith Spectre Cell. When the station vent..."

"...we assumed the worst," a deep voice cut in from behind her, tinged with an overwhelming sound of relief. Smiling, Tali stepped to Sera's side, and another, much larger Zabrak moved in. Karran's robes were stained with blood, most of it certainly not his own, and the cloak that she had gifted to him was in tatters. But, he was alive. Whole. Stepping close to Sera, he leaned forward, and they pressed their horned foreheads against one another's. No words passed between them, for just a moment.

Then, two massive arms, one soft and furry, the other mechanical, circled them both in a hug that very well could have broken their ribs.

"Sully...choking..." Karran gasped, joined by desperate nods of agreement from Tali and Sera.

"Right...heh, sorry," the Togorian mumbled, squeezing them tighter for just a moment before dropping them. Sera took a moment to catch her breath, pulling her saber and dagger to her hand before gently

looping them into her belt, fingers shaking. Looking up, she noticed another form, standing just behind Zig. Well, standing was one word for it. "Looming" fit the bill better. Unlike the others, however, Alaisy made no move for a hug, gazing at Sera through a cracked visor. The tall, latex clad sith shot her a short nod, to which the Zabrak could only grin in response, waving. Some things never changed.

Slowly, Sera's team and the wayward legionnaires filed in with the Voidbreakers, falling back into friendly lines. More embraces were shared, as Ruka flung himself into the arms of a light-robed Pantoran from Odan Ur, and gentle inter-house ribbing flew between the teams. But, there was something below the surface. As she reached for the Force once more, she was again greeted by a range of emotions; fear, pain from the wounded, grief from those who had lost friends and loved ones. But, more than anything else, she sensed... tension. Hostility, directed not at the enemy... but their own forces.

"...why does it seem like everyone in this army wants to kill each other?" she questioned vaguely, giving Karran and Tali a searching look. In response, their eyes met awkwardly, before hitting the floor like a sack of bricks. "...there's something you aren't saying. Who's in charge? Where's Lucine, or the others?"

Karran hesitated, before replying, in a stark, simple tone. "There's no one in charge. The gathered Consuls were... discussing with themselves, before the Collective struck again. There's no plan yet. Just... retreat."

The word 'retreat' took her aback. Fall back? Abandon the city? It was unthinkable, yet Karran looked totally serious. Brow furrowing, she nodded to herself, before reaching for her weapons once more.

"Well... can't let that happen. Where are they?"

"Where the fighting's hottest, of course," Tali replied flatly.

"...Great..." Sera murmured, sighing once again. Then, she turned to her friends with a smile. The Voidbreakers had merged with her own team and the collected Sadowans. An odd mix, to be sure, but... she was happy with it. "We can worry about calming 'em down when we get there. For now...you're with me?"

"Always," Karran and Zig replied in unison.

Sera's smile grew wider... and she felt new notes swell within her hearts.

Tali had certainly been right in her pronunciation. The Councilors and Consuls were found where the fighting was the hottest... not in the least because some of the most powerful Force Users in the Brotherhood happened to be concentrated in one spot. Cutting along the front lines, Sera could see flashes of lightning and molten plasma bursting through the air, often accompanied by subsequent, muffled explosions as more marines exploded. Even so, their enemy was the thickest there, Partisans replaced by elite Huntresses and the robotic marines, marching ever onwards. Unfortunately, she didn't quite have

enough of a tactical mind to determine the easiest way to route them... so she would go for the simple plan.

Attack. And trust in her friends, notes playing in the same song.

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## Part 3

### Harmony

A combination of sounds, notes, parts, individual pieces, forming one, beautiful whole. Trusting in the firmness of the rhythm that leads it, the strength and fluidity of the melody that supports it, harmony is the beating heart of every song, the blazing flame to every symphony. A harmony does not bring direction, or structure, but the truest, most beautiful form of strength. The strength of a million voices, a billion minds, a trillion souls, joined together for a single tick of time.

The tortured cries of the wounded, joining together as they screamed for mercy, salvation, anything. Anything. The wails and sobs of those who had lost their friends, their allies, everything. The gasping, wheezing breath of those who had barely survived, and the gloating exaltation of those who found some petty joy in their temporary, halting victory.

The scent of blood and sour, sulfurous smoke lingered in the air, hanging in a low, choking smog. The Iron Legion had set up a simple perimeter, field medics moving through the battlescape to attend to the wounded, saving those they could, and leaving the rest. The Collective had abandoned their dead when they retreated, falling back in structured, organized lines. Obviously, they thought that they would be returning soon enough to retrieve them.

The Brotherhood's command certainly wasn't doing anything to prove them wrong.

"We were called here by the Council. We're *paid* by the Council. Now, except for this karkin' glorified *schoolteacher* and good 'Ol Broodilocks over there, I don't see any damn Councilors, ya get that?" Declan Roark practically spat, levelling a blatantly dismissive look at his fellow Consuls. "The Collective's after Arx. I saw we give it to 'em. What's it to us?"

"We swore an oath," Aura Ta'Varr responded angrily, sweeping a hand through diamond-blue hair stained dark by ash and blood. "We have a duty; to protect, to se-..."

"Schoolteacher?" Headmistress Ciara Tiernan cut in blithely, her brow furrowing. Rescued by Arconan Forces from the *Nesolat*'s bridge, she'd made it out just in time to watch the seat of her power burn. "Schoolteacher. What does that make you? A mundane errand boy?"

“And *Broodilocks*,” Atra Ventus seconded, his eyes narrowing to slits. The trailing edges of his cut grey robes had been burnt to ragged cinders, but otherwise the Sith seemed rather... unperturbed about their situation. If anything, Sera thought that he just seemed *tired* of listening to the others argue. “Y’know what, I’ll give it to you, that’s a pretty good one. Schoolteacher doesn’t really work, though. Since there’s not a school anymore.”

Behind Sera, a chorus of low groans sounded at the pun. The Zabrak just watched on, blue eyes wide. They’d been bickering for some twenty minutes now, back and forth, on and on. Without a clear military leader, cut off from the majority of the Dark Council, they were directionless... and so, the Consuls had fallen back on old grudges. Even with the Collective quite literally banging at their front door, they were too busy with their favorite old foes: each other.

“I don’t know why I’m even listening to this dribble,” hissed Scholae Palatinae’s consul, the dark hilt of her saber clutched tightly in one hand. The other was bandaged, injured by the detonation of a Hive Mind Marine. “I should be hunting their leader myself. A Palpatine doesn’t need the help of the weak.”

*We aren’t weak*, Sera thought to herself. She remembered fighting through the Collective onboard the station, facing down the Hive Mind Marines in front of the escape pods. Weakness was certainly never the fault of the Brotherhood. But then, what was? Breaking from her group, she took a step forward.

“Well then, go ahead. That would be just lovely,” Bentre Sadow input sardonically, weaving one cybernetic arm before him as if to guide Shadow along. “It will be my pleasure to wipe your clan out, once they’ve ripped you to. Honestly, we wonder why we’re a mess; we’ve been plotting against each other since we arrived.”

*But we can trust each other. We can fight together*, Sera thought again. She turned just slightly looking to Durnitz and the other Sadowans. Trust and treachery wasn’t the main issue, then. Setting her jaw, the Zabrak took another step.

“Well, we wonder why we’re being beaten,” Ronovi Tavisain started, folding her brow into her hand. “We’ve ignored our plans from the start. We’ve fallen out of contact with our Command. We’ve bungled everything. It’s a mystery that we even survived this long,” she finished, brushing a scrap of gore from her starched white uniform.

*But we’re not fools. We’ve beaten worse odds before, haven’t we?*, she pondered, remembering how the Collective’s line had broken as they charged into them. Again, Sera stepped forward, right behind her own Consul. Her team, the Voidbreakers, and the Sadowans followed.

“To be honest, it was an idea doomed from the start,” Lucine Vasano interjected, swiping her fiery red hair over one shoulder over her light armor, scarred by shrapnel. “Our goals have never been the same. We are separate, divided, completely and totally. We are lying to ourselves if we try to ignore that,” she finished, moving to turn away. Aiden and Strong stood behind her, resolute. They were her friends, her allies, her leaders. Family. She considered Lucine a mentor...

...but she was just as wrong as the rest.

Sera stepped forward, passing her consul as she moved to walk away. When Strong tried to stop her, she simply slapped his hands away, stepping before the other Consuls.

Then, she spat at the feet of some of the most powerful Force Users, warriors, and mercenaries in the galaxy.

“This isn’t right,” she stated hotly, her hearts pounding a new war-beat within her chest. She stared between all of them, blue eyes blazing a challenge. “All of this... it isn’t right! We have a chance to take victory, right before us. We have the Iron Legion, we have our ground forces, we can protect the city... and we’re not even going to try?” she questioned incredulously, finally turning to Lucine.

“Sera,” the Consul started, her voice soft, placating. “The Iron Legion’s moffs are dead or trapped in the central command center. Our fleet has barely reorganized, and the Collective are assaulting the planet’s surface. The Dark Council...” she started, looking to Atra.

“Scattered,” he finished, dark eyes locked on Sera’s. “Selika’s with the fleet, aboard the *Matron*, and Justionios is probably still onboard the *Wrath*. Ciara’s here, Dacien last reported from the central command tower in the city, Entar’s MIA, and-...”

“Evant betrayed us,” the Headmistress finished, hissing under her breath. “He could be leading an assault on the city or the Dark Ascent at any moment. We have no idea.”

“So, two out of six,” Atra summarised, crossing his arms. “Maybe three. Not terrible, given the circumstances.”

“It’s enough,” Sera stated flatly, marching into their midst. The team that she had gathered spread out along the edges of the group, but they stayed close enough for her to see, to draw strength from their presence.

“How?” Roarke scoffed, rolling his eyes like he would at a child. “How, exactly? Go ahead? Didn’t you listen to what we said earlier, girl?”

“I did,” Sera retorted sharply. Stepping forward, the sun struck her armor, glinting from the sections of brass plating, blazing against the snowy cloth of her cloak. She felt the peculiar, ghostly notes of music from before strike her once again, drifting through the air like whispers. “I listened well. We aren’t weak; we’re *strong*, but not strong enough to stand alone! We can trust each other, but we *refuse* to take the risk, for even a second! We’re not foolish, but we ignore our own strengths! We have one goal, between all of us; *survival*. We’re fighting for our right to live, but we don’t have a chance if we don’t karking fight *together*.”

She looked to Spectre Cell. The Voidbreakers. The wayward Sadowans. And she smiled.

“We’re strongest when we fight together. When we trust in the Force. If we do that, the Collective doesn’t stand a chance.”

Turning, she looked to the Atra, Ciara, the Consuls. They looked doubtful. Shadow was still sneering, Roarke was openly laughing. But, they were listening. That was new, at least.

“That’s not a plan, Sera,” Lucine answered after a few moments, her brow furrowing. “We need something... more, tactically speaking. An objective.”

That stopped Sera in her tracks. Hesitating, she wracked her brain, and found nothing. She could fight forever, pluck at emotions and feelings with the Force, and kick someone *really, really* hard in the face. But... tactics? “I... that’s not my strong suit. But, I’m sure one of you...”

Helplessly, she looked to all of them.

And after a moment, Ronovi stepped forward.

“It’s... simple, really,” she started, levelling a hard gaze at the much shorter Zabrak. Sera stared right back, offering an awkward grin. The Consul just sighed... before smiling slightly, turning to the others. “The Collective ground forces here have a leader, most likely Varryn Antillus. Their main advantage, on the ground or in the air is those marines... but they must be controlled from a single nerve center in their fleet, and he’ll know where it is. The bulk of their forces is assaulting the central command tower right now. We punch in, take Antillus...”

“I can get whatever we need from him,” Ciara cut in, the Headmistress’ voice sinking to a low purr. “Get him to me, and I’ll have him praising the Force and feeding us grapes. Won’t even break a sweat.”

“And you’ll have plenty of assistance, there,” added another dark, smoky voice. Stepping away from the Voidbreakers, Alaisy Tir’eivra moved to the Headmistress’ side, looming over her, Sera, and even Ronovi. “He’ll break. Easily.”

Several people, including Consul Seraine, audibly gulped.

Ronovi pulled at her collar for a second, giving a long sigh. Then, she nodded her assent, looking back to her other counterparts in command. “When we have the vessel, we can route the target directly to the fleet. They’ll focus fire, remove it, and the marines, from play. It won’t win the war, or even the battle... but it will give us time. For more forces to arrive, and for Grand Master Tyrus to execute his plan... whatever that might be,” she summarised, standing to her full, erect height. There was, once again, silence, and Sera felt a drop of sweat trickle down her cheeks.

Then, Lucine smiled, nodding. “It’ll work. You have our support... Sera.”

There was another few moments of silence as the other Consuls looked between themselves, questioning. Atra Ventus broke that silence with a rough grunt of affirmation. “Much better plan than marching out and getting killed. Who knows? Might even work. I’ll grab the warhorns.”

There was silence for a few moments, as that lamest of puns sank in. Then, Lucine folded her face in her hands, and groaned.

The Zabrak beamed, a weight leaving her hearts. For a moment, she thought that she could sense that strange snatch of music once again. More complete, now... but still missing something.

Declan Roarke interrupted her musing by making a very rude noise, levelling an incredulous look at his fellow Consuls. “I... really? You’re being serious? Some stupid girl shows up, spouts some banthaspit about *‘the power of friendship’* and *‘trusting in the Force’*, and you’re just gonna... go with it? Karkin’ hell,” he sighed, eyes rolling as he slid his gold-inlaid helm down. “Well, you can count Vizla out. I’m not letting our asses be put on the fire just to end up on some gold-plated war memorial,” he finished with a sneer that they could practically feel through his helmet, turning to walk away.

The Headmistress just smirked after him. “We’ll pay. Extra.”

Roarke stopped in his tracks... then turned just a hair. “...how much?”

“Enough to gold-plate your ass and hang it in a memorial garden,” Atra supplied, his face totally level. “With some change extra.”

“It’ll say ‘errand boy’ on the base,” Ciara murmured loud enough for all of them to hear. “Mundanes. All the same.”

“What can I say, teach? Paycheck’s a paycheck,” the foul mercenary retorted, before turning back to the others “Well? Let’s get to killing.”

“...are you really sure that we need him?” Karran murmured in Sera’s ear as they broke up, moving to gather their forces. “...I could just... while his back is turned...”

“I think we’re gonna need all the help that we can get,” she whispered in reply, kissing him lightly on the cheek as she pulled away.

Little did she know just how right she was.

-

“Do you copy, Kaern?” Ronovi’s voice sounded through Sera’s wrist link, struggling through a slight, crackling burst of interference.



“Copy. Strike Force is...uh... in the right place, I think?” she answered uncertainly, looking to her team for confirmation. Behind her, Qyreia held up one red thumb, nodding with a roll of her eyes. “Yeah. We’re in position. Forces are arrayed, just like you said.”

“And *you’re* ready?” the Consul asked once again, her voice piercing. For a moment, Sera gave no answer, searching for what Ronovi asked within herself. *Was* she ready?

She looked down at herself, the armor that she wore. Past the saber, her blades, the vambraces on her wrist. Past the leather-covered plate, the shining brass, into herself... and found the pulsing rhythm in her hearts, pushing her forward. She looked to her friends, her family. The people who had given her strength, direction, who had saved her life more times than she could count in the past day alone. The song fluttered in her ear, a snatch of beautiful melody ringing clear, before fading.

But did she have harmony? The willingness, the ability to put it all together?

There was only one way to find out.

“I’m ready.”

“Then give the call. On your word.”

The comms crackled, and then fell silent. Sera fell silent in turn, staring out at the battle to come.

The Iron Legion’s command center within Eos City had been designed to blend in. Rather than grey imperial forts festooned with concrete pillboxes and snarls of razor-wire, it consisted of sober, soaring sky-scraped of glass, duracrete, and durasteel. Strong, erect, connected by a multitude of skybridges and open walkways, they almost seemed to blend into one enormous tower from a distance. It could be very easily mistaken for a mundane economic sector, which was the design. But, the Collective had easily seen through the facade. Now, the towers were consumed by battle. Pinned down Iron Legion forces were besieged on all sides by Collective battle lines, trying to push their way into the building from the ground, while swarms of starfighters duelled in the air. Sera could see some of the Collective Marines jetting to the upper floors, fighting into the higher reaches of the tower. A Dark Councilor was pinned down in there... and somewhere on the ground, Varryn Antillus was just waiting to be snatched.

Their plan was simple. The clan forces, the elite of the elite, were arranged to charge, en-masse, as a single driving spear, taking the Collective by surprise. They’d moved silently through the city, trying to deceive their enemy into thinking that they had fled.

And Sera was to be at the tip of the spear. The battle rested at her beck and call.

So what was the call to be? What was the word? Their battlecry?

Turning, she arched one brow at her comrades. Spectre Cell, the Voidbreakers, Arcona's summit, and the stray Sadowans were gathered behind her, milling quietly. She levelled them with a quiet, questioning look, first turning to Ruka, who gave a wry chuckle.

"Well? Don't look at me. I liked the silent thing that we were doing earlier. That's my vote," he stated flatly, twirling the hilt of his saber in his hand.

"How about... Invicta?" Lucine suggested, rubbing at her scalp. It looked like she'd washed her hair before heading out to fight again. "It's a classic. Always worked before."

"Too Arcona-ey," Tali disagreed, wrinkling her nose. "Needt something... universal."

Strong rapidly nodded his agreement from the Twi'lek's side, hefting his hammer onto one shoulder. When Lucine gave him a pointed stare, he could manage only a stammered excuse. "Well... it is truth, Consul. Perhaps... something simple? '*GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS!*', or something of the like.

"We are not having two thousand people charge into battle screaming *that*," Zig objected sharply, her ears twitching in disgust at the very thought.

"'Kark you, an' your mascots too?'" Diy suggested innocently, spurring a chorus of laughs... but none took her suggestion too seriously.

Then, Sergeant Durnitz cleared his throat, and the room slowly feel quiet, looking at him. The young man seemed nervous for a moment, before his subordinate punched him in the back of the head. Then, smiling, he stepped forward. "How about... just... 'together'."

Silence fell. Then, Karran gave a slight chuckle of admiration. "Together. I like it," he affirmed, looking to Sera with a smile. She nodded, grinning in response.

Together.

Together.

-

"TOGETHER!!" Sera shouted, her voice, amplified by the Force, rising to the sky.

"TOGETHER!!" cried two thousand voices behind her.

She raised her saber, the golden blade igniting under the blazing sun of Arx's high noon. Hundreds more sabers rose behind it, and in front of it. The Consuls and Councilors still took pride of place, of course... she was just the one who gave the cry... and reached out to the Force, first, just as they began to charge forward.

She fell into the battle meditation easily, invisible feelers reaching out through the Force, touching at those closest to her, melding. But, her sense reached farther. Searching. Searching.

She found the rhythm, pulsing in her chest, twin war drums pounding out like bursts of thunder, bursts of cannonfire, the impact of steel on stone. Her own strength. Her own position. She was not the strongest among them, and she wasn't even close to being the smartest. She was no tactician, no dealer in power or might... but she'd found a place, and a purpose. And she would defend it to her last breath.

She found the melody, rising around her like clear, piercing notes of music. They were the people that surrounded her. Her, their cries rising to the sky after hers. Their notes were unique, each and every one. She felt Sulith's, just behind her, strong and genuine and unflinching in her friendship, a low and steady tone of brass. She felt Ruka's, a rising high of dark, beautiful passion, mirrored by a blinding purity, a screaming note of brass. She felt Lucine's, a complex tone of ambition, and feeling, and lingering fear, the reedy, piercing shrill of wood and wind. She felt Tali's, a whirl of compassion and melancholy so sweet and sad that it made the hearts ache, rising like stream of beautiful strings. She felt Karran's anger and dogged, protective loyalty thrumming with a powerful, percussive beat. Sera had no true way to compare herself to them. Her life had been easy. But among them, she'd found a home. A family. And she would die to protect it.

Her meld reached to the Consuls before her, just as they cut through the beginning of the Collective's line. Their vanguard pierced through like a blade sliding into water. Lightning crackled along the front line, a joint storm of cobalt energy that reaped whole rows of men and women as they tried to retreat. Blaster fire, inhumanly precise, ripped through the air, this time slamming into their *enemy's* forces. Partisans died screaming. But something rose from the Collective line, moving to face them.

An enormous phalanx of Hive Mind marines. Hundreds of them. Sera could sense their synthetic song swelling, a perfectly united pulse of minds and hearts and souls chained together by links of silicon and copper. They were implacable, unleashing a torrenting volley of shots with hairline precision, and many in the first rank fell.

They slammed into the Marines, an unstoppable force crunching into an immovable object. And she hadn't found the harmony yet.

A marine pushed through two Vizlans, ripping one's throat out with a slash of his vibrodagger. He was bleeding from multiple wounds, and a throwing blade stuck out from his throat, but still he fought. Issuing a choking rasp, he pointed his wrist-rocket directly below him, screaming bloodily for the kamikaze attack. Sera rolled to meet him, attacking with just as much insane vigor; her golden blade swept through the air, and the hand fell away with a sizzle. Before the marine could flatline, he was plucked into the air as Karran thrust a hand forward, pulling him away just in time for Alaisy to catch him with a stream of force lightning. But already, two more stepped in. One move to grapple with Karran, the other unleashing a stream of blaster bolts upon Sera, the Force warning her just in time to catch several on her vambrace's energy shield. Another singed off on her cloak, and another was absorbed by her armor's central

breastplate... but a third slipped by, burning into her thigh. Snarling, the Zabrak shot a hand forward, a stream of invisible telekinetic Force shoving him off his feet in the tangled press of men. Ziggy and Sulith were there a moment later, the Zygerrian slamming him in the throat with a beskar-plated elbow, knocking him to the floor for the Togorian to throw her betaplast shield over him. Moments later the hammer came down, crushing the marine underneath the shield. When the detonation followed, it was muffled by the thick betaplast. Still, more marines poured through. Too many. While Sera was still kneeling, one charged her, vibrodagger slashing in a wide, downward arc that she barely caught on her own dagger. But, he was stronger than her, pushing the blade closer, closer, closer. She felt her scream catch in her throat, the Force flowing through her musculature. In a surge of strength, she shoved the dagger away, her own piercing through the T-visor of his helmet. But she was just too slow to dodge the explosion that followed. Torn pieces of his armor dug into hers, searing into her flesh... and one ragged shard cut a path along her face, just barely missing her right eye. Embedding to the bone.

Agony filled her. Despair threatened to follow. They were being overwhelmed. She hadn't found the melody...

But, had she really tried?

With battle raging all around them, blood pouring from Sera's wounds, she paused... and knelt, her saber extinguishing. She let go of everything around her, focusing only on her sense of the Force, diving deep into her battle meditation. Reaching out.

She'd been playing along before. But, now she was really *listening*.

The melody was waiting for her.

It was all around her. In her friends, her allies, and her enemies. Rhythm and melody joined them all, reaching between individual natures, single emotions.

It was Strong's steadfastness and unwavering faithfulness to his oaths, and Lucine's powerful ambition to serve her clan. It was Qyreia's fiery heart, Ziggy's brightness of feeling, and Alaisy's compelling darkness. It was the sadness, the pain and loss that drove Tali to serve, to protect. It was Karran's allegiance to his crew and family, Sulith's loyalty to her friends, Ruka's driving devotion to his husband and their kids. It was Sera's steel soul, her blind love.

It was the ties that bound them together, that pierced through them all, that sat in every one of their hearts. It was their souls.

It was the Force.

And it was the most beautiful song that Sera had ever heard in her life. A hundred orchestras playing a thousand songs, rising up in an organic anthem, clashing against the synthetic symphony of the hive mind. For a moment, the songs played in unison.

Then, the line of Hive Mind Marines faltered.

Sera smiled to herself, looking up from her meditation for just a moment. Beyond the line of retreating marines, she could see a knot of officers, pinned between them, and the towers beyond, where the Iron Legion's forces appeared to be rallying. One man appeared to match Varryn Antillus' description to the dot. He looked *terrified*.

"Oh, you are so fracked," Sera laughed to herself, before returning her focus once more to the harmony at hand.

-

Selika Roh sat idly within her command seat onboard the Godless Matron, watching the battle expand before her. New Clan fleets were joining the fray with each passing minute. Most were not whole, having left substantial forces at home to cover their seats of power, but it would be enough to tide them over. Especially when...

Her comms crackled. It was Ronovi... and Dacien Victae. They had good news.

Selika smiled to herself. Then, she broadcast an open channel to the whole of the Brotherhood's fleet.

"Iron Navy vessels, this is the Herald. You are to immediately direct all possible fire upon the Collective Lancer-Class Frigate *Boundless Mind*. Coordinates forthcoming. Clan Vessels, cover our flanks. Hold firm," she stated, unable to keep a tone of immense self-satisfaction from creeping into her voice. She could even see the targeted vessel. It sat just within the Collective's line, in a position that was easy to defend, but not obviously covered. A smart idea... so long as their enemy hadn't gotten an exact bead on what ship they needed to destroy.

It was an oddly shaped vessel, long and maggot-like, with a heavy, octagonal bulge near the engines. It never even stood a chance as their fleet turned over two hundred turbolasers at it. In minutes, it was sparking, molten scrap.

Grinning, the Herald cut her comms.

-

"We're not out of the woods yet," Lucine sighed absently, lifting her arm so that Strong could wind a bandage around her bicep, pierced by shrapnel.

"I don't see any trees," Atra pointed out in return, tapping his saber with one finger. "And if they're here somewhere, then they've got awfully strange leaves."

Lucine, and most of the others groaned to themselves, spurring Atra's face to twitch slightly in self-amusement. Only Zodac laughed... and that was probably because he was drunk.

Around them, Eos City's Iron Legion command center was carpeted by the limp bodies of Collective Hive Mind marines. In one moment, they had been fighting savagely. In the next... nothing. No detonations, no theatrics or colorful, exploding heads. They simply fell where they stood, armor clattering.

"At least we're better off than before?" Sera pointed out hopefully, though she didn't make an attempt to smile. With bacta smeared over half of her face, it probably would have hurt real bad to try.

"That's not hard," Aura pointed out wryly, hands on her hips. "That whole situation could only have been worse if Roarke was in charge."

"We're still not in a good place," Ronovi pointed out in turn, staring down at the gaping hole in her cybernetic arm. "Half of our moffs are dead, our fleet is still outgunned, we've still got an army hanging over our heads, and Evant's still somewhere beneath us with his own goons. He might pop up anywhere."

"The Grand Master said that he would deal with him," Bentre sighed, waving Ronovi off.

"And when was the last time we heard from him?"

"...a fair point."

"But, we made it," Sera pointed out blithely, simply ignoring all of the other pessimistic banthaspit. "Together."

Looking to the horizon, she saw only rising smoke and the distant bulk of the Collective frigates. But, she also heard a snatch of a song. A promise, perhaps, of something new to come.

This time, she was content to wait on it.