

Somewhere a few blocks away, another torpedo dropped.

The ground shook, and only decades of training and well-worn reflexes kept him from kissing concrete entirely, his shoulder slamming into the side of a building. The *beskar* of his armor dampened any pain of impact, but the shockwaves vibrating up through his bone marrow, vibrating his fangs in his gums, were still unspeakably uncomfortable. His eyes clenched shut behind his visor a moment against it, a whine rumbling in his chest.

No one answered it.

When the trembling leveled off, he cautiously backed away from the building he had been thrown against, wary of further collapse. Eos City was being *ruined*, and less by virtue of the assault on it and more by virtue of its design. Imperial-styled and militaristic as the capital was, it had not been built with attacks of this kind in mind. The demolitionist in him was horrified, had been horrified since he had jumped from the LAAT/i that carried him and his squad down with the rest of their regiment platoon.

In most buildings, even when damaged, there was not enough weight to create so much destruction underneath them when they fell. That risk came with superstructures, like Coruscant skyscrapers and their ilk.

The disaster was, *everything* in Eos City was a superstructure. None of these buildings would be collapsing cleanly. So many civilians were going to be crushed as they began coming down. He only hoped there were suitable shelters underneath them, and that they were not overcrowded beyond what they could possibly sustain in the time it took to unbury them.

This was not an entrenched land war. Not yet. This was a purge, a full on assault, and that meant instead of spending all his waking hours running around the city dismantling explosive devices, he was continuously looking up for any sign of bombers strafing overhead, ears constantly pricked for the whistle of nearby ballistics— just like the one nearby.

He activated his communicator and tuned it to the platoon relay's frequency.

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Erinos for the Thirteenth Battalion," he said. "Currently in quadrant Four-Mynock. Got another drop about half a klik west of here. Proceeding to investigate."

*"Are you still alone, Lieutenant?"*

He had already called in his squad's separation. Their company had been assigned along with a second to sweep the fourth quadrant of Eos City. While initial stages had been effective, the enemy had quickly disrupted their lines, between the aerial assaults and their own troops on the ground. His own company commander was already dead, and the second platoon captain had been tapped to assume command. After that, it would be him. He hoped it did not come to as much. He did not want to attempt to coordinate their forces from the field with all opportunity for communication jammings or live fire. At least the relays were live; that meant central command and their breachhead were still standing.

"Still alone," he confirmed, and began moving, his blaster at the ready but pointed down, finger clear of the trigger. The street he was on was currently empty, though it had not been previously, evidenced by strewn bodies, rubble, broken shopfronts, scorch marks— all sights he was familiar with. "Squad and I are planning to rendezvous with the eighth platoon in Four-Jakku per contact-separation protocol."

*"Your reported hit is in Four-Nerf, sir. You'll only be heading further away."*

"Have to check it, Sergeant. There may be civilians. Report my position and copy. Over."

*"Yes, sir, Lieutenant Colonel. Copied. Over."*

The man moved swiftly but carefully to his destination, constantly checking around him, poking into buildings and calling out softly for survivors. None answered in his block, and eventually, he was crossing into the next and the next, coming upon the outlying fringes of the bomb sight. The fires were few — that much at least could be said for all the duracrete and transparisteel — except for things like accented greenery and the carcasses of once-parked speeders, the corpses of various civilians. Perhaps the Collective had not made it here yet. They were still unsure if their patterns involved bombing runs and then troop intervention, or if there was no coordination between the two.

The real devastation was once again closer to the actual impact zone, where foundations had crumbled and floors had collapsed, chunks of stone the size of frigates falling to crater the streets. The air was thick. He switched the settings on his helmet over to their thermal detector settings, but the area had not yet cooled enough to make searching for live heat signatures easier; he was just as blind this way. The man sighed soft and toggled back to a normal view before reporting his arrival and finally entering the blast zone.

Again, he called out for survivors. Again, no one answered. He thought, at one point, that he saw movement in a close-by pile of rubble, and darted over, shouting out. But there was no response. It had only been another, much more distant bombing disturbing some of the dirt here, showering it over a small, convex collapse of metal and glass and rock. He peered at the shapes underneath.

He saw what might be the slope of a large back, and a hand.

A tiny, tiny hand.

Jax turned and yanked his helmet off just before vomiting beside the rubble. The dust in the air clumped up with the bile left on his tongue, muddying his teeth.

"Damnation," he growled out, rasping, hacking. He licked his teeth, spit, looked back up at the tiny hand. His ears pinned back briefly, and he rumbled a low sound. *"Kikalekki embrace you always in her arms, little one. May you know warmth and know peace and know the fields of fine sand and sweet fruits and rest under your own tree, for now you are free."*

The Twi'lekki prayer was old. Old on his tongue, old in his bones. He said it every year for his mothers on the eve of their deaths. It weighed on his shoulders, a desert stone long having lost the sleepy heat it held from the sun.

He put his helmet back on and kept moving. The commander only made it a few more streets, though, before he heard the tromp of boots. Had his shout drawn attention?

"Lieutenant Colonel Erinós to relay. Do we have any other friendlies in Four-Nerf?"

*"No, sir. You are our only reported contact."*

He swore in a particularly vile Zabracki subdialect.

"I have possible enemy contact at blast site. May require extraction. Going dark. Over and out."

*"I'll inform the eighth platoon, sir. Be safe. Over."*

The man ran, holstering his pistol, his launcher bouncing against his chest and the backpack of charges against his shoulders. He listened hard over the sound of his own measured breathing, hyperaware, feeling eyes from every direction, awaiting a blast around every corner. His fur stood all on end. A sick sort of buzz ran along the back of his neck, prickling down to his shoulder blades, like burrowing insects. Every animal instinct he had was terrified, caterwauling.

His gaze zeroed in on a disruption between street and slabs of siding. A break in the line. He pivoted and skidded through ash, mindful to pause long enough to rough up the disturbed area so he would not be tracked so easily. More careful steps took him over to the hollow, and peering in, he found a black cavern, pitted and crumbling, but— that might be a passageway. A basement, perhaps?

Risky. Suicidally so. It could be no more than a nook he would immediately be stuck in, given his size. It could collapse just from the slight disturbance of his passing. He could be crushed or trapped or suffocated.

The marching steps coming up *far too close*, just around the corner, made his decision for him. He sucked in a breath and slipped under the crumbling edge of a fallen portcullis and down into the deep dark.

Stone and broken struts of metal scraped at his armor. *Scree, screeeee, reeesccrrree*. The further he wiggled in, using his shoulder as a wedge, the more dust came showering down in the black. The light behind him quickly disappeared, and even through his suit, he could feel the abrupt, cave-like drop in temperature. His pack caught, and though every bit of wisdom, training, and flame-licked lesson he had ever learned protested it, he carefully unslung the entire kit of denton charges and carefully set it down. It was immediately a little easier to breathe with the immense weight off his back and slightly more clearance in the narrow crack. If he had had the room to maneuver, he would have stopped to disarm every bomb in the kit, just in case, but he found that even as he tried to stoop and reach for it, he could not; the jut of some stone would not let his shoulders down that far, his hips barely fitting.

Resigned, he shimmied out of his grenade launcher too, letting it slip down his legs and stepping out of the strap carefully when the weapon clattered to the ground. Without the added bulk at his front or back, he was able to squeeze further forward, pushing and pushing with his shoulder, straining to swallow a growl when his helmeted head scraped and *squeezed* through the gap, tendons in his neck straining under the torque. For one terrible moment, he thought he was truly stuck, the *beskar* helm completely unbending against the duracrete, wedged in place, leaving him a hanged man. But then he swung his cybernetic lower leg forward, back and forth, creating momentum by using its weight as a pendulum, and with a well-timed jerk of his torso in sync with another upswing of his leg, he yanked free.

And fell right onto his back, hard, head knocking into rock in at least five different places, having taken his own feet out from under himself. His ears rang. He groaned.

"I-is someone there?" came a faint voice from somewhere up ahead in the dark.

Jax's eyes flew open.

"I— is anyone— oh, blast and dammit, you're talking to no one, you're never getting out of here, you're—"

"I am here," Jax called, not quite a shout, not wanting to be heard, by chance, by those however many meters of rubble above. He carefully slid forward on his back, until he passed fully under the narrowest part of the crevice where he had been stuck, and then painstakingly climbed to his feet, hunched over, bumping armored elbows and knees everywhere. He kept moving,

flicking on the thermal vision again. Down here, where it was cold, he could easily spot the one bright, burning flame in his sightlines amidst a morass of cool, sepulchral cyanoid blue.

Although, the signature was only partial, only half-bright. Fainter, cooler shapes connected to it. Was it a child, that small? Or...

"I am here. I am coming to you," he said, as soothingly as he could pitch his tones. Not for the first time, he loathed his own voice.

Jax readjusted his vision and instead drew his blaster to switch on the mounted light over its barrel. Moving forward revealed more rubble, more of the little urban ravine he'd crawled into, and then opened into a larger space, seeming like a yawning chasm after the tight confines. Really, he only placed the bubble as about two meters in one direction, and three in the other, but it had enough vertical clearance for him to stand, and he had not realized how badly his spine was aching until it all but screamed when he straightened. He held back another groan and moved his light around carefully until it illuminated a face staring back at him without pointing directly at the person.

*Not a babe*, was his first thought, shaken with relief. *O'sik*, was the next. Followed by several more of his people's oaths.

It was not a child. It was a man, Human, he would hazard, and middle aged, and half-caught under a collapsed beam and several slabs. It had not been a child's body on the heat spectrum; he had merely looked smaller because...

...because the lower half of his body was deathly cool.

*"Haar'chak!"* he whispered before catching himself. *Damn it, damn it, damn it.*

"Are you just going to stand there blinding me or are you going to help me up?!" the man demanded sharply. Jax sighed, moving forward and lowering his pistol to the ground. He propped it up at an angle between some smaller pieces of rubble, so its light pointed at their makeshift ceiling and disseminated more evenly around them. Then, he crouched and slowly approached the man on his knees.

"Can you understand Basic?" he asked, to be certain.

"Of course, you bucket-brained grunt!"

Off to a great start. He considered the man's earlier, lonely words and again attempted his most soothing, purring tones.

"It will be alright. I am here to help you, and you are not alone." He touched his chestplate. "My name is Iran'Jaxerias, but you may call me Jax. What is your name?"

"I don't give a bloody damn who you are, boy! Get me out of here!"

"I am going to do my utmost to make that happen, sir, I swear to you. But it will not be so simple. You are going to have to cooperate with me, and it will be easier if you know that you can trust me. I am not Iron Legion, but I am here to aid you— I come from the Arconan forces, and hail from Clan Erinos. I am Lieutenant Colonel Jax Erinos," he repeated. "Now, can you please tell me your name?"

"Braett Drerru," the Human spat, surly, but he seemed a little less frantic about the eyes, which had started pinwheeling about when the place he was trapped became illuminated for him to actually see. Jax had watched his pulse fluttering against the man's thin-skinned neck, watched his chest start to rise and fall too quickly. He needed him to focus on him, not on their surroundings. Panic would make it worse.

He did not know how much air they had down here.

"Braett Drerru, it is my honor to meet you. Tell me, have you been down here very long? Or was it the blast about an hour ago?"

"Long enough!" He wheezed a little, wriggling uncomfortably, all covered in dust and blood matted in a pale of gray around his hair. It could have been any color. In the ash it just looked white, as did his brows and lashes and lips. "Hour? Hour?! It's been a bloody lifetime. Pull me out! Now, now!"

"I need you to stay calm for me, Brett. Please. Just take a slow breath. Not deep— just slow. Yes?"

"Blasted bloody—" grumbled the Human, but did so.

"Good. Now, I am going to inspect where you are pinned. Is that alright, may I look you over?"

"Just get on with it!"

"Yes, Braett, thank you. You are doing well. Take another breath."

Jax moved over to look at the mess, as he had said he would. As he had feared, it was not pretty. As far as he could tell, by the general lack of blood residue and the mass of the rubble, the pressure of the weight was keeping Braett from any possible bleeding out— internally or otherwise. He could see the end of one limp leg through a gap in the rocks, and the foot was sheared free, the lower leg twisted and crumpled at a mess of angles. The other was completely

pinned, out of sight. He ever-so-gently gave an experimental push at the largest slab, and did not feel it move even a bit.

The attempt, though, seemed to catch the Human's attention. Or rather, observing Jax did.

"Dark Lords help me, you're a blasted gimp! Who the kark gave you a gun? Get me some *real* help!" the man snapped. "Help with two arms!"

Jax bit back a very real growl, shaking his head. People got cruel when they were afraid.

"I am afraid I am all the help available to you right now, sir," he answered. He leaned back again and decided that it was best to rip off any further bandages now, releasing the locks on his helmet to pull them off. "And I would appreciate it if you could refrain, somewhat, from insulting me."

Braett's face purpled a little when Jax's came into clear view, without his Mandalorian pride to cover it. He did not smile at the Human; smiling only ever made most social interactions worse for those he spoke to in such high stress.

"What in the blazes *are* you? A Sithspawn? One of those horrid beasts off the Meanagerie's reserve? What hound-impregnated whore had yo—"

"Do not," Jax warned, and this time his words were flanged, "speak ill of my mothers. My heritage, certainly, but my mothers, I will not allow. Now, for the final time, Braett Drerru, my name is Jax, and I am here to help you." The man had no need to know he had come down here only to hide from overwhelming opposition. "Will you allow me to do that or not?"

The Human's jaw locked, his pale gaze flinty. He moved thoughtlessly to cross his arms over his chest and gave a low moan of pain when it aggravated some wound unseen. Jax sighed and stood.

Panic flashed across the man's face. He flailed a little.

"W-wait! You're— you're not going to leave me, are you?"

"No, I am not going to leave you," Jax told him firmly, making sure to look down, to meet and hold the man's eyes.

"R-right..." Braett shuffled more, moaned again, slumped. "You had better not, mut— Erinos."

Jax's ears twitched at his Clan's name, and he went back to what he had intended, stripping off his belt and armor. A part of him wished desperately another one of his crew was here, especially Avery — always Avery. Judging by how Imperial born and bred the man sounded, a

fellow Human would probably have a much easier time with him. Avery's engineering skills would not be missed either; they would probably save the man and Jax too, getting them out of the rubble with all the right tricks of physics.

The rest of him, though, wanted nothing more for his crewmate to be as many million miles away as possible. He did not ever need to be looking up every moment for the bomb that would snuff him out, did not need to be down buried in the dark ever again, did not need to see the civilians bleeding out and pulverized, did not need to see a teeny tiny hand covered in duracrete dust, whiter than bone, too still.

When he was down to his shirtclothes, standard-issue AAF affair, he started rearranging the pieces of his armor to free the body-glove suit below. Once done, he turned back to Braett and draped the suit over his chest and arms, tucking it up under his chin carefully. It probably reeked of sweat and sweat-damp fur, but it would do.

Braett coughed. "What— *what* are you doing?"

"You are cold," the Mandalorian informed him idly, lifting one brow. "Your lips are bluing, and so are your fingernails. Underground, it gets uncomfortably chilled for most warm-blooded species such as ourselves, and you are wounded. You have lost some blood. You need to stay warm. I have not got any blankets, and no rucksack. I was geared for battle. This is the best I can do for you, short of sharing body heat.

"No."

"Suit yourself."

Mentally, he was trying to count, to think. If he found some of the piping he had seen earlier, could he use it as a lever to lift the rubble off of Braett? Even if he did, he would not be able to drag the Human out; he did not have the other arm to do it.

Self-loathing curdled sad and foul in his gut. He swallowed it. Reminded himself of the same things he told his soldiers, of the same things his counselor repeated to him. *We are not less because of what we've lost.*

But here, he was, and he had to take it into account. If he could leverage the weight off of Braett, would Braett be able to drag himself out? He seemed to have no idea how badly injured he was. He likely had no idea that his legs were dead under there, had no idea how to move with half his body missing or unresponsive, not like Jax did, and that was not something that could be given a crash course. Furthermore, if the rubble *were* moved, it was as likely as not that Braett would die on the spot from blood loss or shock or some such. He had no recourse or knowledge for treating such degrees of malady.



The most likely outcome was simple, and he had known it since he had first seen Braett: the Human was not going to be getting out of here.

But that raised another quandary. He was in a live battlefield. They were in the middle of an attack. Troops were waiting in the field for him. Other civilians were waiting for him, ones that were not already dead. Every moment lost was one their enemy won.

In the end, it was no choice at all.

Jax sat down next to Braett, who had started to shiver despite the clothing the Mandalorian had given him. He looked up at Jax.

"Erinos?"

"Yes, Braett, sir?"

"...are...are my...how am I?"

"You will be alright, Braett. Trust me. I have seen much worse than this in many wars. You and I will both be alright. My sister-platoon is on their way, and they will be bringing mine with them. They will get us free."

Braett's eyes clenched shut, and his next inhale was shuddering, a hiccup. A wet trail cut through the thick dust on his high cheekbones, sliding up into his temple.

His hair was brown, not white.

*Kikalekki.*

"O-oh, is that so? Good. Good, ahem." The man shivered again, and Jax scooted closer, pressing into his more-exposed side. The Mandalorian's face was bruised. He stared straight at Braett, and Braett stared straight ahead. "You've been in a lot of battles then?"

"Mmm, indeed. All my life. And you?"

"Not a soldier. I worked in analysis. Ship systems. That sort of thing."

"That is important work. You must have been very busy here on Arx."

*Embrace this one always in your arms.*

"It was a dream," replied Braett, agreeing. "The Aliso system was rewarding, but here...to work under the Masters themselves, to have a hand in the greatness of our fleet...I'm very respected, you know."

"I can tell. The most demanding ones usually are."

The Human wheezed a short huff of amusement at that.

"I could have you whipped for that backtalk, Erinos."

"You would not be the first."

Braett regarded him quietly for a moment.

"You were a slave, then?"

"Does a man from Aliso care?"

"A man does care," he said sharply.

*Let him know warmth and know peace.*

"Then yes, I was— as were my mothers and their mothers before me."

"Small wonder then you angered so easily."

"They gave me everything, and I miss them every single goddamned day of my life."

His voice broke, like a yelp. It did not surprise him much. It did not seem to surprise Braett either. He actually seemed pained, closing his eyes.

"I miss mine as well. Isn't that silly? For an old man?"

"If you are old, I am old. So, no, it is not silly, and we are still young."

Another wheezing laugh while they waited between worlds.

*Let him know the fields of fine sand and sweet fruits and rest under his own tree.*

"...Erinos?"

"Yes, Braett?"

"PI-please. Stay?"

"Of course. I told you earlier, I am not going to leave you. I am going to stay right here." He offered his hand, so he would have something warm and real to hold on to— people didn't tend to realize how much they needed to just be able to touch another person, to be not alone, until it was taken away from them.

Braett gripped back what felt like as tight as he could. It was not much. There were no more comments about his fur or claws or strangeness. Just waiting, not unafraid but not alone.

Waiting, until the pulse he could feel stuttering under his thumb stopped.

*Kikalekki, carry him, for now he is free.*

"It was my honor to meet you, Braett Drerru," Jax whispered, brushing dusted eyelids closed, feather-light.

Then, he stood, gathered his suit up, donned his armor once more, took up his pistol and turned out the light as if putting a loved one to sleep softly. He tried his communicator, but found any frequency blocked by the rubble. Back outside it was, then, if he could manage to make it back out the same way he had come in. It had been long enough for a patrol to pass, and if there were more, than it was a risk he had to take.

The living were waiting for him.

Jax pulled his helmet back on, and the commander clawed and crept his way back through the crevice, stepping over his own equipment and leaving it behind, back to the light, back to the outside world. It was loud and hot. There was fire in the sky, debris raining down here and there. More bodies were in the street, but currently, it was empty. His communicator crackled with chatter.

"I am clear," he told the relay sergeant, after being given his platoon's position. In his brief interlude, it seemed the second platoon's captain had managed not to die, and so he was still on deployment. His shoulders relaxed just slightly. He would rather be in the thick of it with his people than anywhere else.

*—anywhere else, except, perhaps, in the fine sands, with sweet fruits, under his own tree, with his mothers beside him. But that was not for him, not yet. Not today. His crewmates, his trainees, Avery, Arcia, Elequin, Atyiru, the company, everyone—*

"I am heading for rendezvous. ETA, twenty minutes if uncontested. Over," he said into his communicator.

*"Glad to hear it, Lieutenant Colonel. Over."*

Before he left, the commander stopped to draw a canister from his belt pouches and faced the building he had sheltered under again. He pulled the cap off the small can of paint with his teeth and sprayed a few strokes on the largest available flat sheet of duracrete siding facing the street: a half circle, two horizontal slashes through it. Anyone in the AAF and likely most of the other Clan and Iron Legion forces passing by would know what it meant. *This building has been checked*, that symbol indicated.

*No survivors.*