

The Siege of Tokare

A Submission to the Competition:
Fiction [Event Long]: The Everlasting Enemy



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Part One

39 ABY

Approaching a TRF-controlled *Marauder*-class Corvette Orbit above Seraph

Reiden took a deep breath, trying to mentally prepare himself for what was to come, as the *Espada* traversed space. Orion skillfully dodged incoming fire from enemy fighters, only for them to be taken out by fighters under the employ of the Imperial Scholae Navy. An enemy fighter coming from behind managed to evade the Scholae fighters but was soon lanced by laser blasts from the *Espada's* auto-turret, causing the fighter to explode. The *Marauder*-class corvette belonging to TRF forces loomed ahead, filling his personal ship's viewscreen.

With the fighters and the main vessel otherwise occupied by Palatinaean forces, it wasn't so difficult a journey as they made their way toward the corvette's fighter bay. Even so, they remained cautious, coming in from below. Reiden gave Orion a signal and he activated the ship's comms, contacting allied forces to begin their concerted assault on the corvette. A new squadron of Palatinaean fighters swooped in and split into four groups, lasers firing away mercilessly. But they weren't aiming randomly – their strikes were concentrated on the corvette's tractor beams. Small explosions erupted in three points along the corvette's length. The fourth group had been flying interference, distracting the vessel and other TRF forces from the main objective.

The Force user looked around the seating area at those he had gathered for this mission. Captain Jake Sloane was there – always dependable and ready at a moment's notice – along with two other members of the Imperial Scholae Army. Kal Arias brought a talent for slicing and fitting into tight places. Reiden's apprentice, Kah'ri Marru, on the other hand, was a relatively new addition. In him Reiden sensed a confident man, and he seemed capable from what Reiden had seen so far. However, this was perhaps the true test for the apprentice – performing in battle, particularly during wartime. A couple other soldiers were standing in the ready room below by the shuttle's exit, and more would be joining them from another ship that would also be boarding the corvette. It was perhaps a smaller team than Reiden normally would have liked, but they were what was available, so there was nothing he could do about it. Even so, he knew that if they set their minds to the task at hand, they could get it done.

"We're ready for our final approach now, Rei," Orion called back from the pilot's seat in the cockpit.

"Good. Take us in," Reiden replied. He stood and strode over to the main control console and activated the ship-wide comms, patching in the other shuttle making an approach to the corvette so he could address all members of the team at once. "We'll be landing soon. We don't know what will be waiting for us on the other side of the airlock, so

be ready. I know you're familiar with the general layout of this type of ship, so I trust you all can handle whatever's thrown at you. Let's show these guys what we can do!" He turned to face those sitting nearby and saw them nod in acknowledgment.

Reiden knew that his team likely needed little encouragement for their mission, but it wouldn't hurt. Nobody ever liked it when they were accused of something they didn't do, and the members of Scholae Palatinae and its citizens were no different. Reiden had specifically chosen this assignment because of the shared familiarity he and his team had with this vessel. Of course, it may not be exactly what Battleteam Krennic had, but it should be similar enough that they wouldn't be completely in the dark regarding its layout.

The radar suddenly pinged as a TRF fighter closed in on the *Espada* just as it was about to enter the ray-shielded hangar. Orion veered sharply to the side, entering a sweeping turn to bring the ship about to face its oncoming foe. He fired the laser cannons, but the enemy fighter was already spinning to the side to evade, making good use of its high maneuverability and speed. Because of the evasive move, the *Espada* wasn't able to turn around again in time. The fighter quickly spun back around, hoping to score a hit. The auto-turret spun about and opened fire on the fighter. It missed anything critical, but the ship's wing was hit. Smoke spilled forth from the blast site and the fighter juddered in its flight path, but nothing more happened.

The fighter zipped past Reiden's ship and circled back around for another run. This time, however, both Reiden and Orion were ready. The Palatinaean had immersed himself in the Force and signaled for his friend to open fire. The laser cannons erupted in a barrage of fire, spearing across the void of space and tearing through the cockpit of the fighter. The enemy vessel exploded in a scintillating display, debris cast out in every direction.

Reiden laid a hand on his friend's shoulder and pointed toward the hangar. The Kiffar nodded and guided the ship inside without further delay. It was time to set their plan in motion.

This is where the fun begins, Reiden thought to himself.

Since the TRF leaders and citizens were so caught up in falsely blaming Scholae Palatinae for the assassination of their beloved leader, they wouldn't listen to reason, even when confronted with evidence. The propaganda campaign against them was just too strong. If they wouldn't listen to reason and insisted on fighting, Reiden would answer that call, as would the rest of the Scholae Empire.

Hangar Bay, *Marauder*-class Corvette

Reiden stood at his ship's airlock with Captain Sloane. His apprentice and Orion were on the other side, with the other soldiers gathered behind them, while Kal brought up the rear. Reiden noticed that it was one of the rare instances that the Ryn had his blaster out. He recognized it as a non-lethal model. It was a fitting weapon for someone who was raised by pacifists but understood that sometimes force was needed.

The second shuttle from the clan had already touched down in the hangar. They were lucky that the fighters normally housed there had been engaged with the Palatinaean fleet and that the hangar itself wasn't heavily guarded. In fact, it didn't appear to be guarded at all. Then again, one could never be too cautious.

The Force user placed a hand on the airlock door and focused. Stretching his senses out beyond the *Espada*, he felt for any enemy presences. He picked up on various emotions but they were faint, likely farther away than their immediate vicinity – although they must have been strong for him to feel them from this distance. He glanced at Orion, who looked at his wrist-mounted scanner and nodded in confirmation that the way was clear.

With a flick of his wrist, Reiden summoned his lightsaber hilt from its holster and into his hand, his fingers encircling the cool metal. It always brought him a certain clarity and could help center him – which was helpful when one was about to enter a battlefield. His other hand jabbed at the button to open the airlock and jumped out of the ship and into the hangar, not even waiting for the ramp to fully extend. The others emerged behind him, spreading out a bit. Out of the corner of his eye, and feeling through the Force, Reiden saw the team from the other shuttle following suit. Once again he found himself lamenting the small size of their team, but he would make it work – he had to.

The group headed toward the hangar's exit. Boxes and drums of varying size were strewn about the hangar, likely full of maintenance and repair supplies for the fighters. Just as they were roughly two-thirds of the way there, the hangar doors opened and TRF soldiers poured inside. Reiden and his team dove for cover and took up defensive positions.

"Eyes," Reiden shouted. He closed his eyes and focused, drawing the Force around him. Orion and the soldiers fired off a volley of shots from their blasters at the enemy to buy Reiden time, then ducked for cover and shielded their eyes. Kah'ri had not been in such a situation before with Reiden and simply followed their example, burying his head in the crook of his elbow and squeezing his eyes shut. After a moment Reiden turned toward where he knew the enemy to be and thrust his hand around the corner of the large crate he had taken cover behind. A brilliant white flash filled the space. The enemy troops shouted out as the light seared their retinas. Some clutched at their face as if it would somehow help them.

The Palatinaean team sprang into action. Reiden and Kah'ri bounded out from behind the crate. Reiden's lightsaber crackled to life, the viridian blade soon joined by his apprentice's yellow blade. Together, the two quickly closed the distance to the enemy as they charged their position while Orion and the Palatinaean troops provided cover. Reiden met a TRF soldier first. The man was beginning to recover and had managed to bring his blaster up to take aim.

Reiden's saber was a blur of motion as it swiftly cleaved through the blaster and across the man's torso. The soldier fell back, clutching it his chest, but it was already too late. Off to his side, Kah'ri was already making quick work of the next closest enemy. He spun the hilt of his saber around in his palm, the blade now parallel to the floor as he brought the hilt across his body to the left, slicing into the legs of the soldier. The man fell to his knees, screaming. The cries were cut short as Kah'ri's blade reversed its path the other way and plunged through the man's chest, spearing his heart.

By now the other soldiers had recovered and opened fire on the Palatinaean team. Reiden and his apprentice backed away, keeping their sabers moving to better protect themselves from the blaster bolts. Reiden watched intently and swiped backhanded at an incoming bolt with the blade of his saber. The bolt collided with the blade and was sent careening back to its source, striking the soldier in the neck. The man clutched at the wound. The others scowled and yelled, concentrating their fire at Reiden now, but he had used the momentary distraction to leap behind cover once more.

Reiden sensed a presence off to his right. His head whipped around to take in the possible threat and saw a soldier closing in. *I must have missed him in the skirmish.* Just as he brought his saber up into a defensive position a blue blaster bolt raced from Reiden's peripheral vision and struck the man in the leg. He cried out and grabbed at it – but there was no wound. A moment later a trio of green bolts hit center mass in the chest, striking him down. Reiden glanced behind him and saw Orion grinning as he offered a quick two-fingered salute and Kal merely inclined his head in recognition. He gave them a quick nod of thanks before returning his focus to the battle.

The enemy fire was intense now as the TRF soldiers strove to defend their ship and stop the Palatinaean incursion early. Reiden's eyes scanned the interior of the hangar, making note of his surroundings and enemy locations. He fixed them in his mind's eye as he visualized a plan of attack. Then a thought struck him – the objects they were using as cover could serve another purpose.

"Orion, head's up," he spoke into his comlink. "I've got an idea."

"No idea what you're planning, brother, but I'm ready when you are," the bounty hunter replied.

"You'll know when you see it," Reiden said, a grin dancing across his lips. "Cover me."

He concentrated a moment, pulling up that mental image of the interior of the hangar. Trusting that his team would act quickly, he leaned around the corner of the crate and extended a hand out, sweeping it to the left. A drum wobbled and took flight through the air, heading toward where the main portion of the enemy force was stationed. The Palatinaean team unleashed a barrage of fire at the enemy to keep them occupied as Reiden was exposed.

The drum sailed across the distance, but it was off-course. With a careful adjustment, Reiden guided it to its intended destination. As soon as it reached the enemy, a blaster bolt tore through it. The drum exploded with a sharp *bang* as its contents were ignited by the superheated plasma.

Fire and shrapnel rained down on the TRF soldiers. Reiden and his team rushed out of cover and closed the gap between them and the enemy, making quick work of them as they tried to deal with the burning contents of the drum. It had been a gamble – Reiden had no way of knowing what it was inside. Nevertheless, it was worth taking the risk. Reiden got lucky, and that was something he was happy to accept.

Reiden motioned for Kal to come over and the others gathered around. The Ryn asked his droid, an ID9 seeker model, to pull up the blueprint of the *Aegis*, Battleteam Krennic’s ship that fell in prior to the final battle with Meraxis. The droid’s holoprojector whirred to life and a blue-tinged schematic of the *Marauder*-class corvette sprang to life before them. Given that it was the same type of ship as the TRF vessel they were aboard, Reiden figured it would be safe to assume that the layout of the two ships should be similar enough for planning an attack. The Palatinaean glanced at the plans and pointed at one location in particular.

“Kal, you’re coming with us,” Reiden indicated himself, Kah’ri, Captain Sloane, and some of the Palatinaean troops. “Our goal will be to reach the power reactor and set it to go critical. We need to take out this ship so that our forces can continue on to the planet. We’ve got teams doing the same thing with some of the other ships. Think you can handle that?”

“Aye, that I can,” the Ryn replied. His tail was swaying about, a sign Reiden recognized from the past that Kal was excited about the prospect of having some fun.

“What about us?” Orion asked, indicating the other soldiers.

“You’ll be our distraction,” Reiden said with a grin. “You’re always telling me you need some excitement, so now’s your chance to get out there and raise some hell.”

The Kiffar looked amused and nodded. “I think we can manage something along those lines.”

Reiden studied the schematic once more. He traced a finger along a path, which then became highlighted. "This will be our route. It's the most direct path to our objective." His finger carved out another route, which was highlighted in a different color. "Orion, I think your team should go here. It will take you by the places that are likely to have the most concentration of crew members to help you stir up trouble."

Everyone nodded their understanding and made their way to the exit. It was time for the real battle to start. From here on out, everything they did mattered. They couldn't afford to fail.

Reiden and his team raced through the corridor of the ship. There was seemingly little in the way of resistance, but he supposed that was the way it should be. Ordinarily this pathway wouldn't be used much outside of emergency or maintenance and the odd patrol. Any enemies they encountered were swiftly taken care of before they were able to raise the alarm – although he doubted the TRF forces were completely unaware of their presence due to the commotion they had made in the hangar.

As they rounded a corner, they were met with a handful of TRF soldiers. The enemy opened fire while Reiden's team dove back for cover and returned fire. Kah'ri dashed forward.

"Kah'ri, wait!" he called out. He followed his apprentice and charged the enemy.

His apprentice leapt through the air to deliver a spinning slash, striking down the closest enemy. But there was another beside him that raised a knife in retaliation for his fallen comrade.

Reiden acted quickly. With a burst of preternatural speed, he brought his lightsaber up and launched it like a spear. The weapon hurtled through the air and skewered the man to the wall. Reiden drew his blaster and squeezed the trigger in quick succession as he took aim, unleashing a volley of bolts that drove the enemy back.

The Palatinaean troops advanced, cutting the TRF soldiers down in a hail of blasterfire. Reiden holstered his blaster and called his lightsaber back to his hand as he made his way to his apprentice. "You shouldn't act so quickly like that, Kah'ri."

"Relax, I knew I could take them," the younger man replied, an air of confidence to his voice and an assured look on his face. "I saw an opening and I took it."

"You were one wrong move away from being gutted," he said, tilting his head in indication of the man he had taken out. "You know what you're doing, but you lack the same experience I have. It's all well and good to trust in your instincts and abilities, but don't forget that you're also part of a team. Trust that they will back you, but they might not always be able to do so. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master, I do." Kah'ri looked almost wounded, but Reiden was just glad that it was only the man's pride that had been injured.

Reiden consulted the ship's schematic and pressed onward with the group.

* * * *

Orion and his team rounded a bend. The Kiffar nearly collided with a TRF soldier. Instead, he acted quickly and threw himself onto his back, his forward momentum carrying

him further. He brought his twin blasters up and fired on the soldier. The man crumpled to the floor. Before he could celebrate his attack, more soldiers came running toward him.

“Frak, frak, frak,” he swore, scrambling to get to his feet and under cover.

The Palatinaeans covered him, opening fire on the enemy. Orion reached around the corner and fired blindly. A yelp of pain was heard and he smirked. *Sometimes you get lucky, even when firing blindly.*

Crouching low, he emerged from cover and unleashed a flurry of bolts. That, combined with the fire from his allies, ended the little skirmish. But they weren’t done yet, not by a long shot.

They continued on. Suddenly one of them paused as he consulted a datapad to check the schematics. The others waited, maintaining covering positions in case any enemy soldiers came upon them.

“What is it?” Orion asked.

“It looks like the mess hall is just up ahead. What should we do?” the man asked.

The bounty hunter thought for a moment. An idea slowly took form in his mind, causing him to grin again. “Let’s do what Rei asked and stir up some trouble.”

The man merely looked at him. Orion could imagine a confused look in his face behind the helmet. “You know, sometimes I wish you guys didn’t wear those buckets all the time,” Orion mused aloud.

“Sir?”

“Nothing,” he said with a sigh. “Listen, there’s probably a good concentration of soldiers in there, right? We cause a commotion here, people will rush to help. That frees up Reiden and the others to continue their mission. We take out who we can in there, others come to help, and we catch them in a bit of an ambush. There’s a T-shaped junction up ahead, so we can post up there.” The team members nodded in understanding.

They carefully made their way along the hallway until they reached the mess hall. The door was already opened, so they stuck to the sides, a couple troopers quickly sneaking to the other side. Orion pulled a thermal detonator from his belt and motioned for the soldier on the opposite side of the doorway to do the same. They armed the devices and gave them a good, low toss. The explosives skittered over the floor, one heading to the right and the other to the left. Some of the enemy soldiers noticed them, but it was too little, too late.

BOOOM!

The detonators erupted with a flash of light and the sound made their ears ring. Those unfortunate enough to be at the epicenters of the blasts were vaporized. Others around were badly injured, and those farther away faring somewhat better. But the plan had worked. Anyone that wasn't hurt was busy tending to those that were. Since they were eating, it meant their weapons weren't at the ready.

Orion and his team capitalized on that by opening fire on them. The Kiffar might have preferred to go about it in a different way, but such was the nature of war. They couldn't afford to take any chances.

Once it seemed that most of the enemy soldiers were dead or otherwise incapacitated, they moved on, rushing down the corridors.

Reiden checked the schematics once more. They would be coming up on the reactor core soon. It should be just around the next bend. "This is it, people," he said to the team. "We're almost there."

"Don't worry, I'll get it done," Kal said as he drew alongside Reiden.

The Force user nodded and activated his comlink, contacting Orion. "How's it going out there?"

"Things are all good over here so far! We're wreaking havoc, trying to buy you guys some more ti—" the Kiffar's voice was cut off. Replacing it was the sound of blaster fire. Reiden grew concerned for a moment before he heard his friend's voice once more. "Sorry about that, Rei. We're a little busy here. Like I said, we're buying you time to complete your objective. Gotta go! Good luck!"

"Yeah, you too," he said, grinning at his friend's response. He could always count on Orion to have his back no matter what. The bounty hunter had a knack for causing trouble, which is exactly why Reiden had tasked him with causing a diversion.

They rounded the corner and spotted a large door up ahead. This was their destination. The team approached cautiously and one trooper strode over to the access panel beside the door.

Reiden stretched out his senses just as the trooper reached his hand out. There were a few presences beyond the door – including a Force user!

"Hold on," he said, trying to warn him. The trooper turned his head just as his hand pressed the panel. The door slid open with a hiss, revealing the enemies within.

Both sides opened fire and dove for cover. A figure with long black hair clad in light brown and tan robes stood to the side and ignited a lightsaber. A blue blade emerged from the hilt. Even from this distance, Reiden could tell that the man was smiling. *This must be the Force user I sensed.*

Some of the soldiers traded fire from a distance. Others rushed in for some close-up action, fists and limbs flying. Reiden leapt into action, Kah'ri following close behind as he headed toward the Jedi. But the enemy thrust a hand out and Kah'ri was sent flying back, colliding with one of the TRF soldiers. He recovered quickly and stabbed his saber through the soldier's chest. Reiden signaled for him to stay back, so he worked in tandem with the rest of the team to take on the enemy soldiers. His apprentice made quick work of anyone that dared get too close.

Reiden circled the Jedi slowly. The man seemed calm, which Reiden supposed was a testament to his training. He knew from experience that it could be difficult to do so in

combat situations, especially once the fighting began in earnest. The Jedi lunged forward and Reiden raised his blade to meet the enemy's.

The two blades clashed again and again, sparking with each contact as the two darted back and forth. Reiden could tell that his opponent was skilled and had the strength to back it up. But he wouldn't let that stop him. He watched the Jedi carefully, looking for the slightest hint. And then he saw it. The other man's leg tensed, even if only briefly, as did his arms, hands tightening around the hilt of his lightsaber. The Jedi lunged in again, about to deliver an overhead blow. Reiden was ready; he brought his own blade up to block it, while also pushing back to parry. The Jedi was sent back a couple steps, and Reiden seized the opportunity to make his own strike. He brought his saber to bear and slashed at the man's arm.

But he found no flesh, only the flowing robe of his opponent.

The Jedi sneered at Reiden. In the past, the Palatinaean might have risen to take the bait, but not this time. It was then that Reiden realized that the sounds of battle had lessened. Not wanting to risk taking his eyes off of his opponent, he reached out with the Force and felt only familiar presences, save for that of the Jedi he now faced. It seemed like his team had been victorious.

"It's over. Surrender," Reiden instructed the man.

"Never, imperial scum," the Jedi spat, his words dripping with venom. "You thought you could get away with killing our leader, but you were wrong!"

"We played no part in that. We even presented you with evidence and you all refused to listen," he countered.

"Lies!" The Jedi's face twisted up with rage and he charged at Reiden.

There's no time for this, Reiden thought. I have to end this fight quickly and move on.

He let the Jedi come at him then spun to the side at the last second. The move caught the man off-guard and he stumbled. In the same movement, Reiden quickly gathered the Force and with all his strength lifted the man with invisible tendrils of power and hurled him at the opposite wall. The strength Reiden put behind the effort and the enemy's own momentum flipped him over and carried him across the distance. He struck the hard, unforgiving metal wall back-first with great force, his head snapping back and hit the wall as well. The Jedi slid to the floor and lay motionless. As far as Reiden could tell, the man was still alive, but he wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

"Kal, get to work on that reactor," Reiden instructed. The Ryn nodded and pulled out his datapad, connecting it to the terminal attached to the reactor. He turned to face the soldiers next. "Sloane, I want you to watch the Jedi. I think he's out of commission, but you

can never be too careful. The rest of you should guard this hallway and make sure we're not interrupted."

"Yes, sir," the troopers said in unison, taking up their positions.

Kal's fingers flew over the virtual keyboard on his datapad's screen. Reiden looked over his shoulder for a moment and saw screens fly by as the Ryn swiped them aside. Whatever it was he was doing, they must not have contained what he was looking for. It's not like he'd understand any of it anyway. That sort of thing was beyond him, so he was just glad he had someone there who knew what they were doing. He trusted Kal, and the slicer had been a valuable asset in the past.

A thought suddenly came to him. "Kal, can you create any diversions for us? We need to be able to get out of here when the time comes, and that'd be easier with their attention further divided."

The Ryn's brow furrowed, pausing a moment from his work. "Aye, I could probably whip something up." His Coruscanti accent was thicker than usual now, likely a sign of the stress he was feeling. Reiden stayed silent, letting him do his work. "Let's see...if I cause an overload of some circuits here and maybe here too...oh and there...yeah, that should work nicely..." Fingers tapped away once more. Off in the distance Reiden could hear sparks flying and soon the smell of smoke reached his nose.

"What did you do?"

"Oh, I just started some fires. No big deal," Kal explained coolly with a wave of his hand as he went back to work on the reactor. "This here is a bit more difficult though. I got past the firewalls and now I can enter in the commands needed. Just a second... There! We're good to go, now let's get out of here!"

"How much time do we have?"

"Enough to get the hell out of here!" The Ryn flashed him a grin as he passed by.

"You heard him, men," Reiden said as he turned to the troopers. "It's time to head back to the hangar!"

Reiden took off down the corridor. The farther he went, the worse the smell of smoke became. Then he saw it, billowing black smoke coming out of the walls. His eyes watered and the scent stung his nostrils. But he kept going.

"Orion," he spoke into his comlink. "Get back to the hangar with your team. It's time to get out of here."

“Yeah, I figured you guys had something to do with the fires we’re starting to see pop up around here. We’ll meet you there!”

Reiden and his team continued along their path toward the hangar. By now alarm klaxons had begun to ring out and calls for evacuation were made. The TRF members they came across were more preoccupied with helping anyone injured and trying to escape than putting up a fight. Many were even unarmed. The Palatinaean team opened fire from a distance as they ran, making quick work of them.

Sparing a moment to glance at his datapad, Reiden saw that the hangar was coming up. He turned his attention back to the path before them. As he did, he sensed more soldiers making their way toward them. The schematics had indicated a cross-shaped junction after the next corner, but he had no way of knowing there was a T-shaped junction ahead, but there was no way to tell where the enemy was coming from.

The team rounded the corner and came upon the enemy. Both sides opened fire. Reiden and Kah’ri flicked their lightsabers up to defend themselves, deflecting bolts as best they could. The enemy force didn’t let up their assault. They had numbers on their side and pressed it to their advantage. Reiden and his team were being pushed back.

A large plume of flames shot forth from another of the branches of the corridor. A storm of blaster bolts quickly followed.

With their attention divided, Reiden and his apprentice advanced on the enemy soldiers, slashing and slicing their way forward until they were upon them. With the Palatinaean troops from both teams added to their strength, they drove the enemy back. Those that weren’t killed dropped their weapons and ran. There was a finite amount of time left on the ship’s stability and it was rapidly running out.

“Nice of you to finally show up,” Orion smirked. “We thought we’d give you a head with those guys.”

“Great, you can tell me all about it later. Let’s just get going!” Reiden quickly grasped his friend’s forearm before moving past him.

They all made the short trip back to the hangar unimpeded. The diversions Kal had set into motion with the fires were now in full swing. Smoke choked the passageways. The teams boarded their respective ships and began their escape out into the void of space.

Once the *Espada* and the other Palatinaean shuttle had reached a safe distance away, they began their ride to rejoin the rest of the Scholae fleet. Their flight path had taken a route that brought the *Marauder*-class corvette back into view once more. Reiden could see escape pods being jettisoned out into space as the crew evacuated and fled from the failing vessel. But they were of little concern to Reiden.

A flare of light suddenly burst forth from the enemy vessel. The reactor must have gone critical. As the ship exploded, debris was thrust outward in every direction. The concussive force spread through the void and reached the *Espada*. The shuttle shook with the blast wave but managed to escape unscathed. Their mission had been accomplished.

Reiden remained silent as the *Espada* sped off. They were due to meet with some of the summit and receive their next orders before continuing any further. Part of him wondered what those orders would be, but another part of him could already guess. Past experience told him that it was likely to be a ground assault. He only hoped that the whole ordeal would be over quickly. A prolonged battle wouldn't be good for either side.

Part Two

Aboard the ISN *Palpatine*

“Absolutely not, that’s out of the question,” the officer spluttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Oh? And why is that? It’s been done before,” Reiden countered, annoyed.

“Orbital bombardment? You can’t be serious.” The officer turned to his Empress, Shadow Nighthunter. The cloaked leader hadn’t said anything throughout the entire exchange. “Empress, please. Tell him that can’t be done. It’s not any kind of real tactical plan.”

Shadow remained silent. Reiden could tell she had a lot on her mind and was likely weighing the options that had been presented to her by various advisers and commanders. He took her silence as an opportunity to press on.

“Sure it is. Jorm Na’trej did it before, now I want to do it again. Besides, it’s mainly as a means of distraction,” Reiden explained.

“I’m telling you, you can’t just —” the officer suddenly fell silent as his mouth was forced closed. His head remained still but his eyes darted back and forth, confused. Panic was beginning to set in.

Reiden lowered his outstretched hand, releasing the careful telekinetic grip he had on the man’s mouth. “Listen to me. I may not be a master tactician like some of you military-types, but I’ve seen and been in plenty of battles myself. Sometimes the unconventional tactic is exactly what you need to catch people off-guard. We do that, in addition to distracting them, and we stand a better chance at ending this in our favor.”

“I suppose that makes a certain amount of sense,” the officer admitted.

“Right. So if you get me the resources I need, I’ll figure out a way to make it work.”

“Very well,” spoke the familiar voice of Shadow. It seemed that she had emerged from her thoughts at last. She looked directly at her friend, ignoring the officer. “What is it that you need from us, Rei?”

“Give me a ship and some ground forces – walkers would help, too. I know things are busy up here, but I have to believe that the sabotage efforts have made enough of an impact to make a difference.”

Reiden began to outline his plan, letting them know what he had in mind. It was fortunate that, even as they were still in the hangar before, his brain had already begun to work through potential next steps. That time, combined with his typically unconventional way of thinking about battle and his memory of past events, made for an interesting combination of ideas at times. This particular one involved firing on the city with one of the navy's ships, while also diverting attention through attacking key strike zones with the TIE Strikers attached to one of the army's regiments. The Strikers would work to provide some air support for the ground forces while supplemented by walkers. It would be a difficult play, but Reiden felt confident that they could pull it off, so long as they were provided the right tools for the job. The Force user hoped that the fact that it wasn't exactly a traditional tactic would only help to further their chances of success.

"So, what do you think?" Reiden asked.

"Make it happen," Shadow responded after some thought. "I've known you long enough to know I can trust you to carry this out. Relay your plans to the *Executor* and have them provide input on possible targets."

Reiden gave her a quick salute, grinning. "Will do, and thanks for the support. Oh, and I'll have Kal stay behind to help out however he can. He doesn't always like these big battles and, quite frankly, he's not really suited for it anyway. He'll probably be more use here than in the field."

He quickly hurried back to his ship, eager to get things moving along. Much like the officer he had just finished with, the ones aboard the *Executor* were equally dumbstruck by his suggestion. Luckily, some of those involved in the discussion remembered Jorm's unusual tactic and spoke up. The others seemed to be somewhat more receptive of the idea at that point, so Reiden was happy to consider that a small victory.

With the plan explained once more and attack sites picked out, it was time to act. Relying on the prior chaos of the battlefield, the *Executor* moved into position. Ion cannons and some of the turbolasers focused their attention on any ships that slipped by the rest of the Fleet while the remaining turbolasers charged their power.

Still inside the hangar of the ISN *Palpatine*, Reiden stood in front of a video feed from the flagship that displayed the battle raging outside. The view shifted to the *Executor* and he watched as laser fire lanced from the turbolaser batteries, hurtling down upon the capital of Tokare and the surrounding area. Some of the targets that had been chosen would cause minimal damage since they weren't deemed strategic, but it helped to sow the panic that they would take advantage of when they reached the surface. Other targets were suspected strongholds of enemy forces. Though they may have been a cobbled together militia, the Palatinaeans would do well not to underestimate them. Reiden had seen firsthand just how dangerous that could be – from both perspectives.

Once the attack had ended, Reiden instructed the *Executor* to break off its engagement and begin its journey to the surface to unload the forces he would need for the ground assault. He then signaled for Orion to take their team down as well, returning to his seat. The Star Courier lifted off from the flight deck and exited the hangar, angling down toward the planet. The bounty hunter carefully evaded enemy fire as he guided the craft to its destination, with Palatinaean fighters swooping in to pick off any enemy craft getting too close.

Staring intently out of the viewscreen, a myriad of thoughts flowed through Reiden's mind. He closed his eyes and cleared his mind as best he could. Taking a deep, calming breath and slowly letting it out, he focused on the thought that seemed to be at the forefront of his mind: *It's time to show these Jedi who they're really dealing with.*

Sahro Desert outskirts, Seraph

Reiden looked around at the gathered forces. They had landed just beyond the Sahro Desert's border, still in the Elaya side. The TRF border lay south of their position. They had little time to prepare since landing, but such was the nature of battle. Even so, Reiden had faith that they would be able to accomplish their task. By watching them and feeling it through the Force, he could tell that they were eager to set things in motion. He signaled for everyone's attention and instructed the leaders of the regiment of troopers what the plan was and that they should relay that to their own teams. They had to make it to the city. Luckily, the area close to the border was lightly populated and he expected little in the way of resistance.

Together, they all moved out, crossing the border and making their way into TRF territory. Desert sands slowly gave way to sparse grass. The greenery grew with each step they took. A breeze blew through the air, but it carried with it the faint scent of smoke. If Reiden had to guess, it was coming from the attack on the capital and surrounding areas that he had the *Executor* make before, and whatever strikes the other teams of Palatinaean forces were carrying out.

A warning bell rang out in Reiden's mind, telling him something was wrong. It was then that he stretched out his senses and was met with waves of hostility and malice. The enemy was on its way. Off in the distance, his eyes confirmed as much when they saw a group of speeders heading toward them. Given the average speeds those could reach, they would soon be upon him. He signaled the troopers to be ready.

One of the walkers opened fire, and a ball of fire appeared in the distance. *One less person to worry about*, Reiden thought grimly.

The speeders arrived in mere moments. Palatinaean speeders traveled out in an arc in an attempt to flank the enemy. As they drew closer, Reiden saw that there were landspeeders among them as well; enemies began to pour out of the craft and rush their position. Both sides opened fire. The walkers had lagged behind due to the pace the troopers marched upon spotting the approaching enemy, but they would be in firing range again soon. Even then, they were meant more for larger targets than people. That one shot that took out a speeder was likely a combination of luck and skill – not something Reiden could count on again.

Gripping the hilt of his lightsaber tightly, Reiden threw himself into the fray as well. Kah'ri joined him while Orion covered them both. He danced around the blaster fire and made his way to the nearest enemy, ducking under the butt of his rifle as it was swung at him. Popping up under the man's guard, he brought his saber to bear and cleanly carved him in two. Without even a second glance, he moved on to the next. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted his apprentice in action.

Kah'ri was a blur of motion as he sped forward, closing the gap between himself and an enemy soldier. His yellow blade swept upward through the soldier's blaster. The barrel fell to the ground, the other end glowing red. The soldier promptly threw the blaster at Kah'ri in a desperate attempt to stall for time, but it was easily dodged. The soldier drew a knife from the belt and charged Kah'ri. The Force user extended a hand and the enemy was suspended in midair, his forward momentum arrested. Kah'ri spun the hilt in his hand to hold the weapon in a reversed grip and stabbed the blade down into the man's torso.

Reiden allowed a small smile to cross his lips as he watched the scene unfold. It was over quickly, but it was telling. His apprentice was becoming stronger. The man had always been confident in his abilities – sometimes too confident – but now the skill was beginning to catch up more.

Another pang in his mind rang out in warning, pulling him back to the battle. He ducked and a blaster bolt sailed over his body. Not even bothering to make a counterattack, Reiden faced the enemy assailant and thrust a hand out, tendrils of unseen power winding their way around the other man's throat. With a flick of his wrist the tendrils enacted his will and the man's head suddenly jerked to the side, snapping his neck. The body fell limply to the ground.

All around the battle raged. The Palatinaean forces were gaining the upper hand based on their numbers alone. However, the TRF soldiers were putting up a good fight, undeterred in their pursuit. But it wouldn't last. Already, Reiden could see and feel their attitudes changing. Some fled in panic while others attempted to mount speeders to escape and regroup with the rest of their allies. But one enemy remained. The presence was a familiar one to Reiden. One that he had not expected to feel again after being aboard the *Marauder*-class corvette.

Reiden's gaze took in the battlefield. The numbers had thinned out and helped him in his search. His eyes settled on a brown-robed figure with long, dark hair. Even from where he stood, he could tell it was the man with whom he had fought on the ship. The man's eyes met Reiden's and he grinned, just as he had on the ship.

The Palatinaean strode toward him, his lightsaber raised. He stepped over fallen bodies from both sides of the conflict. The dark-haired man raised his saber in greeting. Reiden couldn't tell if he was sincere or merely doing so in jest – not that it mattered one way or the other to him.

"We meet again," Reiden called over.

"Yes, so it seems, Imperial scum," the Jedi shot back.

Reiden refused to even dignify that with a response. Instead, he lunged at the Jedi, thrusting his saber out. But the man was ready, parrying the strike to the side, following up with his own. Time seemed to slow as Reiden's eyes saw a ghostly image of the man's

movements, leading his actual actions by perhaps a second, if that. But however long it was, it was plenty of time for him. He just managed to dodge the blow by twisting his body to the side. Wasting no time, he slashed his blade at the Jedi's legs, hoping to take him by surprise. However, something in his own body language clued in the Jedi and he jumped into a back flip to avoid it, adding some distance between them as well.

The Palatinaean was already moving from the moment the Jedi's feet left the ground. He released one hand from his lightsaber and cocked back a fist. He threw his arm in a cross punch, striking nothing but air. The Jedi sneered at him, but Reiden threw back a grin of his own. A moment later the Jedi was struck in the chest by an invisible fist. He could hear the wind being driven from the man's lungs as it connected.

"You'd do well not to underestimate me, Jedi."

"I'll remember that."

"If we're to fight, it would be good to know who my opponent is," Reiden spoke evenly as he closed the distance carefully and the two circled each other once more, just as they had in the ship. "What's your name?"

"I suppose I can grant you that much before your death. I am Crix Tares. What of you, Imperial?"

"Reiden Karr. And make no mistake, I may side with Scholae Palatinae, but that doesn't make me an Imperial. They gave me a home when I had none, food and shelter. They helped give me purpose. Because of that, my friends and allies are there. They are the ones I fight for."

"Interesting. But yet you still side with them, even knowing what they've done?"

"If you're referring to the murder of Master Berckur, we played no part in that. Gaining another enemy only serves to harm us."

The two advanced on each other, blades clashing again and again in a shower of sparks.

"We dealt with Meraxis and weren't looking for another fight," Reiden continued as their blades met once more. He pushed against Tares' blade with his own, forcing the man back a few steps. But he didn't press his attack. "I'm sure whoever was behind his death sought to take advantage of that and laid the blame at our feet. Of course Imperials would be blamed for the death of a Jedi, but that does not make it so!"

Reiden was about to close in on the Jedi when a flurry of blaster fire streaked by in the space between the two. He turned his eyes, but only briefly, to see Orion, Captain Sloane, and other troopers heading their way. His gaze flicked back to the Jedi, but Tares

seemed unfazed by the arrival of reinforcements. Instead, the man raised an arm in signal and his own team withdrew.

“We’ll meet again, Karr. Count on it,” the Jedi warned as he mounted a speeder and zipped away, his long hair trailing behind him in the wind.

The Palatinaean troopers opened fire on the fleeing enemy force, but it was already too late; they were out of range. But it was no matter, Reiden was sure that, true to the man’s words, they’d face each other again. It was only a matter of time, really, given the assault on the capital that would be coming next. Fate had already thrust them together twice, so once more wouldn’t be out of the question.

A scan of the battlefield revealed Palatinaean troops rounding up TRF soldiers that had surrendered and eliminating those that refused to concede the fight. That was the part that Reiden hated at times. The senseless killing. He had played party to it often enough, but for the most part it was a kill-or-be-killed situation. But when the fight was done and there was no clear way of winning, and to continue fighting...he had a hard time wrapping his mind around that one. Then again, he knew that he would likely opt for the same thing, were the roles reversed. Given how much he had to fight to survive after the death of his parents, he would likely go down swinging, if push came to shove. But it was different when it was someone else’s life, he supposed.

Reiden and the team pressed onward. What resistance they met on the outskirts of TRF's territory was limited, and seemed to be poorly trained, for the most part. The Palatinaean force made quick work of their enemies. The Force user paused a moment to consult a datapad he had borrowed from one of the troopers. It was currently displaying a map of the area and intelligence reports that the clan and its operatives had gathered.

A small village was ahead of their position. It seemed like it was far enough from the capital's border that it shouldn't be too heavily guarded. But more importantly, it was close enough to serve as a good base for the Palatinaean forces. To make it work, they would need to root out any enemy soldiers and hold the location until more teams arrived. Reiden looked at the group that he was with and gave a nod of satisfaction. *They could pull this off.* The group set out to reach the village.

As they drew near to their destination, the Force user peered through macrobinoculars, scanning the area. As he had suspected, there was a small band of fighters protecting the village. An antenna was erected on the roof of one of the buildings. It looked new, likely a recent addition to better relay orders to the various TRF groups and so that the capital could get advanced warning of approaching forces. That would need to be their first target before doing anything else.

Reiden activated his comlink and contacted the gunner in one of the AT-ATs. "We've got what looks to be a radio antenna on a roof here. We need to take that out. Think you can do it for me?"

"Yes, sir, of course," the gunner replied. "Just give me the signal and it'll be done."

He quickly informed the commanders of his plan and they spread the word to their men. As soon as the antenna was taken out, the scout team on speeders would move in as the first wave of attack. Then the rest of the soldiers would advance, followed by the walkers as support. Once everyone had moved into position, Captain Sloane nodded to Reiden that the orders were relayed and they were ready.

"Gunner, take out that antenna," he spoke into his comlink.

"Right away, sir!"

The walker's head swiveled to line up the shot. Laser fire lanced from its cannons and streaked across the sky. The shot struck home on the radio antenna, causing a small explosion.

Just as the antenna fell, the speeders zipped over the landscape, charging the village. Already, enemy soldiers were milling about as they tried to determine what had happened and where the attack had come from. Laser fire from the speeders struck anyone unlucky enough to be in their path. The troopers advanced next.

Reiden and Kah'ri crossed the distance quickly, the Force aiding their movements. Orion was close behind, being propelled by his jet boots. The trio set to work on the enemy. Limbs lashed out, blasters were fired. The troopers soon joined the fray. Reiden and his apprentice ignited their lightsabers and began deflecting blaster bolts that came too close as they advanced, only to then turn those deadly blades upon the enemy.

A path of blood and bodies was carved out of the TRF force. When all was said and done, their objective was accomplished and the village was secured. To Reiden's surprise, citizens were found among the buildings. They were rounded up, secured in binders, and sequestered in one of the central buildings, placed under guard.

"Sir, I've taken the liberty of informing the summit that we have secured a possible forward base and are prepared to hold it as necessary," an approaching trooper reported. Even without turning, Reiden recognized the voice as belonging to Captain Sloane, despite the slight distortion to his voice caused by his helmet.

Even so, he turned, giving the soldier a nod. "I appreciate that, Sloane. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, sir, there is. We've received new orders."

Intrigued, Reiden raised an eyebrow. "Really? What are they?"

"They want us to proceed to the capital city of Tokare, sir. The other teams that made it to the surface are to do the same. I think this will be our final assault."

"Very well. Inform the commanders of the orders if they haven't already been made aware. We move out as soon as we've tended to our wounded."

Sloane snapped a salute and ran off. Reiden looked around him again and took note of the bodies lying on the ground. Both sides had suffered losses here, and there would be more to come. Still, the Force user believed their mission was worth whatever it took to accomplish. After all, what more worthy of a cause was there than clearing your own name of any wrongdoing, especially when falsely accused? In an ideal world, the fighting wouldn't be necessary, but there was nothing that could be done about that now, it was already too late. The Wards of the Force, the radical faction within TRF that seized control, had started this fight. Reiden was going to make damn sure that it would be the Palatinaeans that finished it, and that they came out on top when the smoke cleared.

Part Three

Tokare City, Seraph

Blaster fire flew by in every direction. The sounds of explosions could be heard in the distance.

Reiden ducked behind a parked landspeeder as a bolt raced toward him. The assault on the capital had been raging for some time now. Scholae Palatinae forces had descended on Seraph and fought their way to the city, approaching it from different points to try to split the focus of the TRF militia and Jedi. The attack plan had worked, but it would still be a difficult fight in the end.

His thoughts momentarily drifted to his apprentice. Kah'ri had headed to another location for the assault. He wasn't sure how he felt about not being there in case he was needed, but he knew that he could trust in the younger man's abilities. And at the very least, the Hunter had a good team around him that Reiden was sure would aid him. The troopers of Scholae Palatinae were some of the best Reiden had worked with and he knew they would be up to the task if it came to it.

When it came to the battle at hand, one comfort Reiden had was that Orion was right there beside him. The bounty hunter popped up and took aim with his blasters before squeezing off a quick volley of shots. The bolts struck home at center mass of one of the enemy soldiers. His place was quickly taken by the next, who retaliated with shots of his own. Orion ducked and heard a solid *thunk* as the fire struck the landspeeder. It seemed as though this one had a slugthrower.

Well, variety is the spice of life, Reiden thought as he took note of the different sound.

Something pulled at the Force user's awareness, causing him to turn his head to the side. A Jedi was running at their position. But he stopped short—only to throw his lightsaber at the two of them. The plasma blade traveled in an arc as it advanced. Reiden thrust a hand out and diverted the weapon into the side of a building, but not before it sliced into an unfortunate Palatinaean trooper that happened to cross its path. Reiden swore to himself at the mistake, but it couldn't be helped, and dwelling on it did nothing for them. Instead he pushed the feeling aside to deal with later and fought on.

The Force user stood and crossed the distance to the Jedi in a blur of preternatural speed. He lashed out with an open palm, striking the man in the chest, following it up with a sudden blast of telekinetic energy from his hand. The Jedi flew backward into the opposite building. Reiden had heard an almost sickening cracking noise. Not wanting to take any chances, he held the man in place with invisible tendrils while launching his lightsaber at him. The viridian blade soared across the distance and speared the man dead-

on in the chest. Reiden quickly recalled the weapon to his hand as he let go of the power that held the now fallen Jedi in place. Free from its influence, the corpse slumped over.

Another pull at his mind, and he turned to find a second soldier coming at him. This one wielded not a lightsaber but a bladed weapon. From the way it seemed to shimmer he could tell it was a vibrosword. The TRF soldier swiped at him with the blade, but Reiden met it with his own, neatly slicing the metal in half with one stroke. Then the man's head snapped back as a blaster bolt seared into his forehead. Reiden turned to see Orion flash him a grin before propping himself up on the hood of the landspeeder they had used for cover to unleash a volley of shots on more enemy soldiers, this time spreading it out over multiple targets rather than focusing on one in particular.

It always pays to have good friends you can count on to watch your back.

Reiden spotted a robed figure in the distance making its way toward them. He took cover by Orion and traded his lightsaber for a blaster. Aiming carefully, he loosed a trio of shots at the advancing Jedi. The blue blade batted them away, but more clumsily than Reiden had expected. If he had to guess, this particular Jedi wasn't as well versed in defending against blasters, or maybe he simply was new to the weapon. Either way, he intended to test it.

"Should we see what he's really made of?" Orion asked.

"You read my mind," Reiden said with a grin.

Together, the two of them sent a flurry of blaster fire at the Jedi. The man did his best to deflect and dodge them, a determined look on his face the entire time. But the onslaught of fire was unrelenting and proved to be too much. The bolts riddled his body and he collapsed in a smoldering heap.

A handful of Jedi came forth to avenge their fallen comrade. They had likely already been on their way when the other one had drawn near. Their lightsabers were ignited and at the ready. Reiden reached out with the Force, trying to ascertain their strength. What he found were stronger opponents than the ones he had faced thus far, but nothing he felt he couldn't handle. There was more to combat than waving around a glowing blade, after all. And based on TRF's reliance on allies for protection in the past, he wasn't sure how well trained most of its Jedi were. On the other hand, one could never be too cautious when evaluating an enemy.

Reiden deposited his blaster in its holster and drew his own lightsaber, the blade crackling to life as he thumbed the activator stud. He and Orion ran at the Jedi. The Palatinatean troopers, including a team of Praetorian Guards that had joined their ranks, followed suit. Blaster fire erupted, striking enemy soldiers and Jedi alike.

Orion holstered one blaster and drew his Kyuzo petar in its place. A brilliant red line appeared along its blades as his thumb pressed the activation switch. He ducked under the slow swing of a Jedi as he closed in, rising up inside his guard to deliver an uppercut using the weapon's knuckle guard. Then he flicked his wrist quickly to slice across the man's neck. Blood spurted from the wound, indicating a lucky blow had been struck. He brought his blaster around and fired into the man's chest at point blank range.

But there was no time to waste, as another came at him. Orion raised the petar in a block as the lightsaber swung down. The plasma blade struck the weapon, causing sparks to fly, but the weapon held firm. The Jedi's face showed visible confusion. Ordinarily there wasn't much that could withstand the blow of a lightsaber, and this one seemed new to him. The bounty hunter winked at the man and pushed back against the blade, sliding the petar down toward the hilt as he did. He drew blood from the Jedi's hand as the blade cut into flesh. But the Jedi was able to pull back in time to avoid a more serious injury. The lightsaber came at him again, and once more the petar met it, arresting its momentum. He pushed against the blade again, this time putting more force behind it. The Jedi fell back a step to regroup, but as he did, a green blade emerged from his chest.

Clutching at the wound to no avail, the Jedi crumpled to the ground as the plasma blade was removed. In his place stood Reiden. The two friends nodded at each other and went back to fighting off the enemy assault. The Scholae force was beginning to turn the tide, but it was far from over. Blaster fire flew from both sides as each opponent fought to best the other.

Lightsabers clashed as Reiden battled the Jedi. He extended a hand and snapped the neck of an incoming enemy with a clench of his fist and flick of his wrist. He stabbed another through the heart. The Force user hadn't felt the rush of battle like this in some time now. It was almost exhilarating, but he had to temper those feelings with caution. Experience taught him that losing oneself in battle could lead to disastrous consequences. Still, he felt most in his element at that moment. He truly was not meant for sitting on the sidelines.

It was then that a familiar presence tugged at his consciousness. His gaze turned in its direction and he quickly found Crix Tares. It seemed the Jedi had been right that they would meet again. Tares' gaze met Reiden's and the Jedi smirked, only to rush off deeper into the city.

Reiden gave chase, leaving the troopers behind. He knew it may have been a mistake and could very well be rushing headfirst into a trap, but he felt it was something he had to do. Luckily, Orion was there with him, leaping into the air and powering on his jet boots. He fired off a flurry of shots at the surrounding enemies to help clear the way.

As Reiden followed the path Tares had taken, he stretched out his mind and mentally tagged the Jedi's presence so he could find him, even if he lost sight of the man. He also took in the buildings around him. They were in noticeably better condition than the majority of the ones he had passed as his group marched on the capital. He had heard reports of the poverty affecting the nation and that the capital was where the funds had been directed, but it was something entirely different to see it in person. The citizens clearly cared for the capital and seemed to put everything into making it a good place to live – at least, for those that could afford it or were of the right station in life. Still, it reminded him of his time on Coruscant when he had lived there. He had made a point of seeing the location of the Jedi Temple there, even if from the seat of an airspeeder. It was an impressive sight, to say the least. The Palatinaean shook his head, freeing himself of the past. Now was not the time for reminiscing. Up ahead, Tares made an abrupt turn to the right and Reiden and Orion followed suit.

When they rounded the corner, they were met with a view of a park. Lush, green grass and mid-sized trees occupies the space, as did various little ponds and small stones scattered about. Based on what he had seen in his previous trip into TRF territory, Reiden guessed those were meant for meditation.

Tares stood nearby, his lightsaber at the ready. Reiden raised his as well and inclined his head in greeting to the man. He slowly approached the man. As he did, he reached out to see if there were any enemies in the vicinity. To his surprise, they were alone – for the moment anyway.

Reiden watched the man carefully, trying to predict what move he would make first. But as he did, the Jedi rushed forth in a burst of speed. Reiden's reflexes and trust in the Force as it rang out in warning were the only things that saved him from a savage slash aimed at his head as he dodged to the side. But Tares was quick, reversing the direction of the strike with an ease that betrayed his experience. Reiden now knew that the man was more skilled than he had initially thought.

This is going to make things interesting.

Their blades clashed over and over, sparks flying. Each combatant vied for an advantage and came up short time after time. It appeared they were about equal in skill, at least in the traditional sense. Luckily for Reiden, he tended to favor untraditional tactics.

The Palatinaean lunged with a thrust at the Jedi, but it was parried easily. As the Jedi made his move, Reiden dropped into a crouch and swept his leg along the ground. His leg made contact with Tares' foot, but it wasn't solid, and the Jedi recovered. Acting quickly, Reiden extended a hand and sent a wave of invisible energy at the man, just enough to push him back.

The Force user rose up and flipped the hilt of his lightsaber over in his palm, adopting the reverse grip he had been practicing with Kah'ri. He lashed out as if he were

throwing a punch, flicking his wrist at the last moment to bring the blade across the Jedi's body. The blow landed, but it was only a grazing one, singeing the sleeve of his robes. Reiden pulled the lightsaber back toward his body, hoping to catch his opponent off-guard.

Instead, the man reached into his robes to quickly draw and ignite a second lightsaber, intercepting the attack.

Reiden swore to himself and jumped back, making sure he was out of range. He had a feeling Tares was hiding something, but he hadn't known what. He flipped his hilt around to the standard position and watched Tares carefully. There was a tensing in his legs and Reiden knew he was about to make a move.

Tares lunged, both blades swinging. Reiden blocked one, only to quickly block the other as it followed the path of its twin. The sound of a blaster being fired reached his ears. He didn't have time to dodge it, especially with such a deadly foe in front of him. But the shot sailed over his shoulder and narrowly missed Tares. It was Orion backing him up!

The bounty hunter jettied over, holstering his blaster and unleashing a plume of flames from his vambrace instead as he drew near, driving the Jedi back. Orion launched himself forward once he was on the ground, swinging his arm in a vicious cross punch that connected squarely with Tares' jaw. The Jedi staggered back from the blow, spitting blood.

Reiden pressed the attack. With a burst of speed he got inside the man's guard and grabbed one of his opponent's wrists, digging his knuckle into the pressure point located there and bending it back sharply. The lightsaber clutched in his hand slipped in his grip at first, then fell to the ground with a clatter. Reiden and Orion both jumped back. The Palatinaean reached out with the Force and seized hold of the fallen weapon. He flung his arm wide and sent the lightsaber flying away, well out of reach.

Tares snarled at the pair and advanced on them, swinging wildly. Reiden feinted a block but ducked aside at the last second. Orion came in and caught the blow with his petar. Reiden sprung up behind the Jedi to deliver a swift slice to the man's ankles, severing the Achilles tendon. Then he kicked the back of his knees for good measure.

Tares cried out in pain as he sank to the ground. Orion tore the lightsaber from the man's grip and held it under his chin. The Jedi's eyes were like fire as he glared at the bounty hunter.

"Go on then, finish me," he spat. "You still won't win. We will crush you like insects beneath a boot heel." The Jedi appeared to be struggling to get up, but Reiden's outstretched hand held him in place, putting all of his concentration into the task of pinning him there with the Force. Of course, with the wound to the man's ankles, he likely wouldn't be able to do much, but Reiden wasn't willing to take the chance.

“Hey man, it didn’t have to be this way,” Orion countered. “We told you that Scholae Palatinae wasn’t behind anything. But no, y’all just listened to the propaganda instead, even when given evidence to the contrary.”

“And that is *your* propaganda. I know the truth when I hear it! It makes all the sense in the world that you Imperial scum would assassinate our great, beloved Master Berckur.”

“Listen, I know you think that, but I know these guys. Some of them are pretty decent people, you know?” He jerked his head in Reiden’s direction. “This one here has saved my life plenty of times.”

“So what?”

“He’s also a person that I trust implicitly. If he says they played no part in it, I’d believe him. Besides, I’m one of the people that found evidence that cleared these Imperials of wrongdoing.” He held up his free hand, wiggling the fingers slightly. “Ever heard of a little thing called psychometry? I’ve got it, and make liberal use of it in my job. Comes in real handy, see? Now, people leave impressions on objects, especially when it gets used a lot or strong emotions are involved.”

“Is there a point to all this?”

“Yeah, there is.” Orion rolled his eyes at Reiden before looking back at Tares. “See, I touched that murder weapon that was used on that Berckur guy. I know one of your own was responsible.”

“Lies, all of it!”

“It’s true,” Reiden said, finally speaking up. He had had enough. “The blade was steeped in the dark side of the Force; I could feel it as easily as the lightsaber I hold in my hands now.”

“I don’t believe you! I don’t believe any of this, I won’t” Tares shouted.

Reiden wanted nothing more than for this to be over, but something felt *wrong* to him, though he couldn’t quite put a finger on what that was. It also felt familiar somehow. He wracked his brain for what it could be. Realization sank in just as he saw Tares act. The Jedi was furious, even visibly shaking. He could feel the intense emotions raging within the man. This was the dark side of the Force at work.

Tares reached out toward Orion. Electricity crackled at his fingertips. Reiden poured the Force into his muscles and jumped over, throwing his friend aside. He had no time to worry about being gentle. Just as Orion hit the ground, lightning shot forth from Tares’ hand. Reiden brought his lightsaber down, cleaving the appendage from the limb,

spinning the hilt in his hand and driving the blade backward, plunging it straight through the Jedi's chest, the force behind the attack burying the plasma blade to the hilt.

Tares gasped in surprise, both from his own use of a trademark dark side power and at the speed of his opponent's attack. He coughed up blood. His eyes looked skyward as he fell to the ground. Reiden wasn't sure what he was doing, but he knew that their confrontation was now, finally and definitively, over. The man choked and coughed, then with a final gasp he laid still, dead.

Orion walked over and looked at the Jedi, with a look of almost pity in his eyes. He knelt down and reached out to closing the dead man's eyes. "Your fight is over."

The heavy footfalls of armored troops reached Reiden's ears. He turned and saw a trooper bearing a captain's pauldron running towards them. It was Sloane and a small contingent of Praetorian Guards.

"Reiden, sir, what are you doing here by yourself?" the new arrival asked. His gaze took in the fallen Jedi before he looked at Reiden. "Why didn't you wait for backup?"

"Sorry, Sloane," he said with a shake of his head. "There wasn't time. This is the same thorn in our side from the ship and just before that village where we set up a base. I just...I felt it was something I had to do, even if I was on my own. Luckily I had help."

The trooper looked at Orion and nodded. "So it seems. We've got orders to regroup and press the assault. Are you two okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine. Let's get back to the rest of our allies," he said, waving Orion over. The bounty hunter had wandered off and was kneeling down. As he rose, Reiden saw that he had picked up Tares' lightsaber and tuck it into his boot.

Well, I guess there's nothing wrong with a little souvenir. Maybe I can show him how to use it one day.

Reiden and Orion joined the troopers as they headed back to where the main force was. Despite having traveled this way, he still kept an eye out for any enemy soldiers. One could never be too careful. Although the battle was far from over, he felt that he had accomplished something today. He had also met a worthy opponent. It was just sad that the man wouldn't listen to reason, and that they were on opposite sides of the conflict. He found his mind drifting to his apprentice once more. He was sure the man was giving the troopers he was with a run for their money. Based on how he had handled himself during this conflict, perhaps Kah'ri was ready for what would come next on his path. Reiden grinned at the thought, wondering how Kah'ri would take the news. But just because he may be moving on doesn't mean the journey would be over yet.

This particular journey wasn't over yet and there was still plenty of work left to do.