

The screams should have been the first tell that something was wrong. However, in the midst of a raging battle, they were just an increase in one part of the soundscape.

Distant and near *pews* stood out the most, unique from the other sounds permeating the air in a sharp piercing melody over the beat of clashing weapons. *Clunks, shinks, cracks, snaps* and *crunches*, against ground, armour, and the one falling. Between it all, there was the rumble of vehicles both through the air and on the ground, forming a crumbling bass to the rhythm of death pounding in the chest of everyone still breathing. Then, there was the chorus of all those hearts, their voices crying out and yelling, in pain, vigour and rage. Call outs for bacta, for ammunition, for backup, for a parent, a partner, for the Force or a quick death.

It was deafening.

Hunkered down in what was once a store, Zuza Lottson had been deployed into the fight that had swallowed Tipool city. Even from the city's outskirts there had been chaos and destruction.

The Human took a breath. The windows had been smashed, creating an easy exit from the street, but under duress of not wanting to be caught in the crossfire of Principate soldiers or retributionist nutters, or worse, her allies, Zuza quickly decided it was safer to take cover. It wasn't much, but it was a few moments to reorient and consider where her group was.

Splattered blood stood out over the half-looted shelves and cream tile walls, mostly coagulated into a thick layer behind the counter where it seemed to have originated. She didn't really want to look, but Zuza stepped toward the counter, glass and tile crunching underfoot. If they were still alive...

She let out a soft sigh, brow creasing.

A elderly couple cuddled together. Their expressions were calm, despite the small crater in the floor beside them, and the lacking of their lower limbs.

Hopefully the shock killed them. With the soundscape outside, it was currently the best way to go.

Speaking of...

Whatever was happening was quickly approaching.

Zuza stepped away from the counter, and brought her blaster rifle to her shoulder, crossing the store and finding a back entrance. It was an emergency escape, with no windows, but with an escape route confirmed, the Human made her way back through into the shop, kneeling beside the broken window with shards of glass jabbing harmlessly against her armour.

Outside of the shop was still a criss-cross of fire from one end of the street to the other. The density had increased since Zu took shelter, for which she was now grateful. Being caught in what had become the deadman's land would be suicide. Instead however, she could provide angled fire once the forces approached closely enough before running out the back door to safety.

Settling into position, hands unsteady in such a static position, Zuza clicked her comms, finally checking in.

"Lottson calling in, Diy, Sage, Aru? You three okay?"

There were a few moments in which Zuza's throat became very dry as she looked at the communicator. It looked like it was working.

And it was, as Diy's voice finally broke through with a heavy background of blaster fire. "Zuza, sweetie, where the kark are you?" Even under the noise and her stress, her voice was shaking.

"I'm in some shop, 'bout 100 metres South from where the bomb landed. I thought you guys were behind me. Are you okay? Are Aru and Sage there?"

There was another moment, "Yes. Well, Sage is." In the background, Zuza could almost pick up the familiar booming voice of the Zeltron. "Y'know Aru, he'll be back. Zu, we went East, meet us back at the ship. It's hell and they're all over the city. We need to get out, Rasha's called for a retreat before-

KABOOM.

The comm went silent.

Still, Zuza couldn't help but ask in a pitifully high tone, "Diy?"

Nothing.

Kark. Okay. Taking several deep breaths, Zuza looked down the street. Shadows of soldiers were visible. They looked wrong but if she could take a few out, it could buy her a few extra seconds to make a run for it.

Seconds ticked past before they were in view, Zuza releasing a round into the first soldier to come into her vision. The constant fire from both sides of the street left painful streaks across her vision. It didn't hide the horror of what she just shot.

But that was an issue for later. She locked her jaw and pounded another round into the beast. Red crystals, sticking at odd angles from the skin and bones. It looked as if they should be collapsing under the weight, yet they shuffled forward, heavy weapons held.

After another round, the strange angle from Zuza's position was taken notice. The soldiers behind the monstrosities kept marching forward behind them, no one blinking an eye as a Twi-Leki woman, deformed with more crystals growing and replacing the continuous holes penetrating her flesh. It acted almost like an armour, reflecting any following shots. The locations of those that ricocheted didn't seem to bother the righteous marching forward of the Principate.

If it wasn't for the approaching danger, Zuza would have stayed at the window long enough to spit on one of the soldiers. She slowly backed away, stepping back amongst the shelves with her rifle reloaded with shots and trained on the target. It was hard to tell if it was just following the trail of the blasts, or if it had actually spotted her.

As is with every step the crystal creature took, Zu could feel the steady beat of heart behind her ribs, the sensation creeping up her throat. Already dry, her breathing got heavier.

It peered into the store, looking through the shattered glass.

With the red blaster fire behind, and the dim lights within the store, the still Twi-Leki features of the creature were shadowed, making even what should look like flesh and normality... Eerie. Soulless.

Maybe they were soulless.

It lifted its leg, stepping into the store.

Zuza let out a shaky breath, stepping back. And then watched as its head snapped up, a strange growl emanating from what was once a voice box, now turned crystal in its throat.

"Kark."

She unloaded the whole round into its face, yelling words she wouldn't remember before turning on her heel and running for the back entrance. The blasts had simply made it pause, disfiguring what little flesh was left on the torso, and decimating the remnants of the uniform it was wearing.

A blast smashed through a shelf beside Zuza's head as she ducked behind it. More followed. She got to the end of the room, and swung round, throwing her full weight against one of the shelving units and stumbling as it tipped, falling on top of it with a creaking crash. The flicker of hope that she'd have time was quickly quenched, as Zuza opened the back entrance and stepped through, the groan of metal informed her of how useful that idea had been.

About as useful as the back entrance.

Zuza cursed profusely as she looked through the door, hair swinging into her face as she looked frantically around the enclosed miniscule courtyard. There was only a ladder, there weren't any more on the front of the street.

It'd be death.

However, another crash from behind the now closed door, gave more than enough motivation to try that death rather than sitting cornered.

She climbed the ladder, adrenaline speeding her actions. Or it just felt like it.

The top of the roof was plain. A small wall going around the edge, a single vent sticking over the edge. No way down.

Zuza ran to the edge, looking over. The fall wouldn't be deadly but it'd break at least one leg. Which would be okay in a normal situation, however with the fight having met just further down the street, with principate extremists filling this side, she would take a shot to the head as soon as she hit the floor.

She turned around as the monster reached the top of the ladder. It had lost its rifle, not appearing to have another weapon. That evened things.

If there was one thing that could cut those crystals, it was a lightsaber. Surely. It took a moment to shove her rifle back into its holster, and by the time the saber was in Zuza's hand, the creature was in arm's reach. It stood over her with an expression that almost confirmed the soulless theory.

It grabbed the smaller woman, yanking her away from the edge and slamming her down into the roof.

Zuza gasped for breath, fairly sure a rib was bruised at least, but with newly grazed knuckles still clutching onto the saber. She clicked it alight, rolling over and shoving the weapon upwards against the torso of it. The motion was unexpected, blue fingers just missing the shoulder of the mercenary's shirt.

With horror, Zuza watched as the beam of the lightsaber struggled to slice through the crystals in its torso. Sputtering around them, burning sparks of energy clustering the air and ground around them as it scratched and marred the crystal, slowly beginning to burn through. Speckles of heat began to burn across what little skin was bare on Zu's face and hands. Unstopped by the damage being done to it, the grasping hand shot down and grabbed Zu by the neck, beginning to squeeze as it bent over her.

So the Human changed tactic, bringing her leg up and kicking it directly in the lesser armoured and/or crystallised groin.

Whether it was surprise or pain, it let go of her, giving enough time for Zuza to scramble back and roll onto her knees. It took a step forward, and slashed its arm towards her, barely having time to bring her arms up, flesh tearing under the force and material. She hit the ground again, feeling the sting in her cheeks as blood broke through as the adrenaline covered over the deeper pain that would surely come later.

However deep or large the wound on her arm was would be impossible to tell unless she could escape.

The beast stepped closer, shadowing her as it once again leant down.

Zuza, still clutching the saber somehow, swung herself over, catching it through its elbow.

The lower half of the limb detached in an arc of blood and shards. It screamed as Zu forced herself to her feet and ran forwards, shoving her whole weight into it.

They both fell, the Human on top. For a moment before she hopped back to her feet, taking several steps backwards toward the edge of the roof once more, she stepped up on the wall. If she could jump the building to the next, and keep going she might have a chance. The distance was hard to judge, nothing was quite staying still. It could be her heart, or her head pounding in her temples at this point.

Turning off the lightsaber, Zuza clipped it back to her belt, watching as the mutant slowly and disgustingly regrew its arm, crystals layered over. It was doubtful if there was even flesh there anymore. Even as this occurred, it was slowly returning to its feet, stumbling to turn and relocate its target. It wouldn't stop.

"You're a monster. And they think they're the good guys." Zuza muttered, staring at it, before snapping out of the distracted state and starting to run. It was a long jump, but she just had to-

She was yanked back as an arm wrapped around her shoulders.

Surely it couldn't move that fast? Zu went to shove her elbow back, to kick or wriggle or do anything until she saw the arm. And realised who the karkhead it belonged to was.

There was shooting, it was difficult to see but as Aru dragged her back towards the ladder, letting her go to usher her back down, the beast was on the ground again. Twitching.

"Aru? I thought you went North, with the other two."

"I don't know which way I went, but I heard you on the comms. I saw Sage and Diy from the end of the street, they're on the way back." He smirked down at her as they climbed down.

She was still processing, "*You* came back for me?"

"Couldn't leave a damsel in distress, could I?"

Zuza didn't have it in her to roll her eyes, hopping the last few rungs of the ladder and stumbling, just barely keeping on her feet. Oh yeah. Blood.

Her whole front was covered in it.

Arm.

A tight grip on her shoulder focussed her, the sudden buzzing that had started to form. She looked up at the taller man, smiling slightly sheepishly.

"Thanks Aru."

"Thank me over dinner, Zu." He hummed far too cheerfully as he gave her shoulder a squeeze, leading her through the bent and irreparably damaged back door.

The number of Principate soldiers had lessened, still more than comfortable, but few enough that an injured woman being guided out of a building didn't strike as enough of an issue to confront. Afterall, the man appeared elderly, a silver fox but certainly no fighter.

With this careful disguising from Aru, and Zuza's state, they managed to slowly return to Zuza's freighter. Hopefully Rasha would come up with an idea to avoid an ass kicking from mutated beasts.

Hopefully.