

## Fight with the Crystal Ascendants

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Sully looked at the replacement hand, flexing its metal fingers one at a time at the Harmonist medical droid's direction. He'd been through this twice before with the same arm, but that new hand feeling never quite got old.

"Try not to lose this one for a while," Zig suggested. "Er... If it comes between the arm and your life, well, *obviously* choose your life. But this is the only one we have in reserve, right now." After a pause, she added in a whisper, "I'm also obligated to tell you that it really hurts the budget to get another, but it's no big deal, I swear."

"Right," Sully said. He didn't know much about budgets, but the objective was clear enough. The exposed mechanical hand was finally released from the droid's grip, free for his natural hand to mesh fingers with it for the first time. He stood to leave, rising well above Zig. "Is my armor still here?"

She nodded and had it wheeled over. He was good to go in only a minute with her help.

"Before you run back out there—" Her arms wrapped around his waist. "Glad you're okay, Sully."

The scarring across his face creased into a wide smile.

A muffled scream reached their ears.

Both their furred ears flicked toward the door before their heads turned. Zig followed close behind as Sully slipped out, quickly picking up his pace. Down the halls of the temporary Harmonist base of operations, people were freaking out. The sounds of clattering tools were quickly followed by personnel rushing, some drawing weapons and firing.

Sully was close when the source of the chaos finally charged into view: people both in civilian clothes and Harmonist gear, but bright red crystals punctured their bodies from head to toe. One of them stopped over a tripped medic and lifted her hands. The worker was hoisted off the ground by an invisible force and promptly eviscerated in a flurry of razored crystalline slashes. Horrid, melancholic groans escaped the crystal people's gaping mouths, loud enough to drown the screams.

Sully's feet threatened to stop in shock, but he willed them into a full sprint. He didn't need to know what was going on or why they were attacking; he just needed to stop them.

One of the weird crystal people managed to tackle a civilian dead ahead and began bludgeoning the poor man with the shards sticking out of its limbs. Sully dove over the creature

and pulled it off the civilian into a roll, tossing it aside. It hardly seemed phased, and rolled its head in a discomfiting twist to glare eyelessly at the Togorian. His stomach churned at the sight.

“Sir,” Sully started frantically, turning back to the civilian, but the sight on the ground gave him pause.

A broken-off crystal shard was plunged into the man’s chest, where his heart would be. It would have been a death sentence without immediate emergency care, but his fate was worse than that. His body convulsed, his face broke into a shriek, and from head to toe, more red crystals began protruding out from him, as if they’d spontaneously grown throughout his insides. Worse still, as his eyes melted and the color drained from his tightening, decaying flesh, he was alive. He was getting up to move. Whoever he was before — the piercings, colorful clothes, and a stylish haircut hinted at what his life might have been — he was one of those *things*, now.

It was Zig’s shouting that finally pulled Sully out of his gaping trance and back to reality. *Zig*. Her beskar would have been the perfect defense, if she were wearing it. As she was, his captain had a bag of tools at her side.

Multiple crystalline bodies began converging against Sully, but he managed to wrestle aside the fresh crystal zombie now trying to claw at his breastplate. Using its body as a makeshift ram, Sully twisted around and slammed it into the one behind him. The crystals let out a ring that nearly pierced his eardrums as they collided and cracked, but their flesh bloodied like anyone else.

More threatened to flood the halls. At least one had already slipped past to chase the people fleeing. Zig’s best Corellian Kickboxing held another at bay for a moment, but a flick of its wrist suddenly suspended her, flailing mid-air.

Sully grabbed her telekinetic assailant by the neck and hurled him over his shoulder and into the two he’d already downed, only to see them getting back up, broken bones and all.

“What the *ffffrack*,” Zig let out between pants, hand reaching for one of her blades.

Sully winced. “No no no, you’re not—You’re too exposed,” he urged, desperate. “Get everyone out of here. I’ll hold them off!”

“I can fight without my armor, Sul—”

The air bellowed out from both of them as what might have been a train’s worth of telekinetic force slammed into them. Zig flew down the hall as Sully’s armor skidded against the wall and spun him onto the floor, leaving him gasping for breath. One of the freaks bolted over his body. He tried to grab it by the ankle, but his metal fingers clanked as they missed its speeding form.

“Zig,” he strained to call out, not loud enough to reach her.

Another crystal monster, the civilian he'd watched transform, leapt at him before he could stand. Sully's metal fist flew up to meet its face, breaking a good chunk of crystal off as its head twisted in a manner that could have killed it before. His other hand swung around to follow, but a barrier of raw energy blocked the punch in a perfect defensive reflex. Its own arms arced underhanded toward Sully, not close enough to reach him, but the air itself threw him off the floor and into a locker against the opposite wall.

Sully's chest hit the ground as a plethora of tools spilled around and on top of him. He breathed deep in the moment's reprieve he had before the thing came back at him. *Medbay*. His hand closed around a surgical blade and went for a stab as it threw itself down at him. The tool in his hand bent from the amplified force surging through its body; the blade was sheathed. Of course it was. The bright crystals overtaking the person's arm only failed in turn to stab him back because Sully still managed to throw its entire lunge off with the force of his arm.

As it collided with the floor beside him, Sully pinched the bent scalpel's sheath with his teeth and whipped out its tiny blade. The freak threw itself off the floor with unbelievable speed and immediately plunged its developing crystalline spike of an arm back down at his chest. Sully winced and threw his metal hand in front of it, but whatever Force-given powers this thing clearly had, he could feel the unnatural strength behind its physical form.

The prosthetic creaked and split at the palm. Sully could feel the plates and cords giving way before the razor-sharp red point began to pierce through the back of his glove, threatening to break open a wider hole by the second in his freshly replaced hand. All his strength couldn't wrestle it away from his chest, and it was pressing closer to the breastplate.

Sully stabbed the thing once, thrice, way too many times across its gut and chest, before plunging the scalpel into its throat, desperate to get it off, to not let it stick him with that crystal and turn him into a zombified monstrosity and make him try to kill Zig against his own will— *No!* He roared in desperate agony as his metal hand continued to break apart and push closer to his chest. His foe bled, but even as it groaned in nightmarish despair and wrestled with its full might, the wounds began to close.

He grabbed its neck without thinking and squeezed, hoping to crush its pipes or the top of its spine or *something* to get it the hell off before it stabbed him. The holes where its eyes had been stared through him like it knew it was spreading its crystalline infection.

As if it was getting more desperate to finish him, its whole body began shaking. The free hand drew back, and electricity began sparking from legs to torso and along the arm. After a final empty jitter, lightning erupted forth from its fingertips, chaining between all the tools across the ground and coursing violently through Sully. His roar became a scream. His entire body

threatened to flail about, but all his will kept his convulsing arms where they were, keeping that wretched red crystal just millimeters off his chest.

His metal hand suddenly shot up and smacked its face. Rough, broken stone hit his breastplate, not a piercing point. The lightning ceased as he and his enemy both staggered, and Sully quickly realized the tip of the crystal had broken off as his arm jerked out. The prosthetic continued to quiver and shake as electricity sparked all across it, but the freak was gaping at where it otherwise would have stabbed into him.

With his one moment to react, Sully planted his metal palm against the floor, peak of the crystal protruding upward. His other hand shifted from the neck of his enemy to the back of its head, and in a powerful twist of his shoulders, he slammed it down on his prosthetic. The crystalline man's skull split open on his own broken spike, and the thing fell limp for good.

Sully exhaled hard and shoved the corpse off. Screams coming from both ends of the hall continued to reach his ears. *Right*. He couldn't celebrate, not while there were still people in danger. These things could be killed; that was enough.

He recognized Zig's voice among those echoing through the hall. Without a moment's hesitation, Sully made to scoop up as many of the surgical tools around him as he could grab in both hands. Three of his prosthetic fingers didn't flex at his command, likely on account of the large red crystal piercing his hand and all the mechanical tendons beneath the plates. *Damn it*. He grabbed what bladed objects he could with the other hand and broke into a sprint off the ground, pulling off as many safety sheaths as he could fit in his teeth at once as he ran.

All that was between Zig and a horrifying new life as a crystal zombie thing was her toolbag blocking the swinging appendages of that freak who'd slipped by before. Sully charged from behind and threw his fist at the back of its head, plunging all his scalpels into its skull. Several of the fragile blades shattered on impact with flats of crystals in its head, but something must have gotten through, because that was the end of its assault. Sully heaved it off without taking his eyes off his captain.

"Sully!"

"Zig!" She was bruised, beaten, but okay. No crystals. She was fine. She'd make it. "Come on, you can't stay here!"

"Wait, your hand—"

"Fix it later." He frowned, expecting a bit of disappointment.

Zig huffed quickly. "Damn it, yeah, we will, but *that!*"

Sully looked at the crystal still stuck between what remained of the plates. "I... I don't know. I don't want to touch it."

"Just hold it there. We'll figure that out later, too."

She offered her hand, he helped her to her feet, and the two bolted. The makeshift base was in chaos, and they could only imagine it was getting worse as more people were being transformed. This mess was just getting started.