Ryan Hawkins’ hands opened and closed as he moved his tongue back and forth in his mouth, trying to find the slightest hint of moisture as adrenaline began to flood through him and he tried to ground himself in a familiar sensation. His mind raced and he wondered just what in the hell he was doing. His stance had found him rather at odds with his Jedi friends, an increasingly common occurrence as this conflict heated up and he wondered again as to what in hell the members of Odan-Urr were thinking. His eyes blinked open and closed rapidly as the shadows played on the inside of the landing shuttle.

 His eyes scanned to the white armored, anonymous forces around him, heads down in thought but every bit professionals as they remained silent with the gravitas of the approaching mission. The Jedi only barely understood war, Ryan believed. They either treated it as a distant failing of a lesser, unenlightened, mind, or, perhaps more contemptibly, treated it like a game of dash and elan where one could twirl about and swashbuckle, blues and greens flashing about and cutting down screaming enemies, coming out the other side with nothing but a dashing scar and a score of dead foes in one’s wake. They might attend a funeral for a fallen squadmate, but they just as soon go back to the lightsaber dance in a new time, a new place, and a new squad. They didn’t have nightmares. Not like the ones Ryan had. They didn’t remember the faces, the accusing eyes of imagined spouses, family members and friends asking Ryan why he didn’t bring all his troopers home.

“Why did HE think he had any right to come home when they didn’t?”

“Why could he send one blaster bolt flying but another killed my husband?”
“Why couldn’t he just wave his hand and send all the enemy flying away?”

 Jedi didn’t like answering these questions. Which is probably why they were at home with diplomats rather than those who faced these questions every time they went into battle. War was not an abstraction and peace is not born from talk alone. It came at the end of blaster and lightsaber. The difference between Ryan and the swashbuckling, devil-may-care “guardian” was that for him a lightsaber was light to lift, but the weightiest thing in the world to make descend and take a life.

“Get ready to go” a clipped voiced cracked over comms.

 Ryan’s thoughts returned immediately to the task at hand, snapping into place like a magazine into a slugthrower. The Odanite lowered his helmet and he cycled between thermal and regular vision to test its settings. While his Clone Commando armor looked quaint next to the more polished arms of his Principate companions, it had served him well in prior campaigns and had been repainted and repaired into a pristine white bearing a prominent blue symbol of Odan-Urr on the chestplate. He checked that his lightsaber was on his hip. It swayed slightly as the dropship began to jink and turn slightly as it entered the atmosphere.

 The Jedi hoped that the small numbers of his companions and the low number of dropships would reduce the likelihood of being noticed up until the action began. It was going to be a straightforward smash and kill sort of mission, but the moment shooting started it was a guarantee that the local scum or Hutt security would come running. Scum? Ryan had to watch that. While he loathed what the Revenants and the Hutt gangsters DID the moment he hated who they were was when he began the sharp slide to the dark side. Not just in the mystical, Force sense, but the sense where the enemy loses his humanity and the soldier becomes a monster.

 Ryan could feel the dropship leveling off and beginning to fly a straight course. Unable to see where the ship was headed from inside the crew compartment, he assumed the descent had finished and the ship was now flying nape-of-the-earth along with the three other ships on the mission. Each ship contained a squad of crack Severian Principate troops with one force-user each for support. The intended target was a Rodian terrorist named Dwipp Bruskars who while not a particularly tough target in himself was both wily and a valued leader. It was going to be violent and simple but it involved enough time pressure that the extraction was likely going to be the riskiest part of the operation.

Ryan’s Force enhanced senses kicked in and he braced himself as the ship shuddered slightly as the report of blaster fire from small arms began, ricocheting off the ship’s hull in defiance as the ship began to slow to surround the casino where Bruskars was identified by an agent of Principate Intelligence. The troopers around him stood up and their sergeant remained unflappable over comms

“Prepare to deploy.”

Heavier blaster fire now began to slam against the ship’s hull. Nothing serious, but the dropship continued to circle to give them a hard target. Even with relatively low-power weapons a lucky shot could happen and the danger to the troops inside was always there if a shot happened to penetrate. Louder blaster fire replied as the dropship returned fire to clear a landing area.

The rear ramp of the shuttle opened and Ryan steeled himself as he saw beams of red flash across the daylight sky, cris-crossing the beautiful blue of the bright day like streaks of errant paint on a master artist’s canvas. The move from the sterile environment of a dropship interior to the heat of battle was jarring, like diving into an ice cold lake on a hot day. Missions of this type rarely allowed for a warm-up, and one found oneself tossed onto the whims of the Force and destiny like a leaf on the wind.

The ramp now hovered above the ground and Ryan was off in a sprint. The longer the shuttle took to unload the longer it was vulnerable to small-arms fire from the ground and the Jedi was not in a mood to be the cause of any delay that could risk more lives. His saber flashed to life in a sapphire blur in his left hand while his right hand, extending two fingers whipped behind him, his blade now a whirling series of parries to his front.

Following close behind, his squad surged forward and spread out, two carrying a menacing E-Web between them. Imperial doctrine seemed to have remained prominent among the soldiery of the Principate and the use of heavy weaponry as a squad asset would be invaluable keeping Hutt security and/or Revenants pinned down.

The casino itself was not built for war. It was made of a somewhat golden colored sandstone with the lower level consisting entirely of a columned porch lead up to by a few short steps. Only two stories high, with no windows on the top floor to keep the “timelessness” casinos craved so patrons would not realize the hour, the building might be mistakable for a courthouse were it not for the tacky pink and teal neon signage advertising games of chance and other entertainments on the building front.

Ill-equipped cartel gunmen took pot shots from the roof and porch as the inaccurate fire did little to sway either the Severian forces or their force-user support. Ryan noted primarily the flash of red lightsabers and felt the slight inkling of doubt enter his mind, only to shake it away. There were Sith here, true, or Grey Jedi, but that did not make the cause any more right and did not mean the Jedi had any true understanding of the situation. Who knows, they might have opted for religious war score settling here and now, rather than fighting alongside the Sith to achieve the noble goal of preventing a terror attack by a sneaking Revenant.

 Streams of blaster fire cut down a screaming Gamorrean whose immense bulk could not not hide behind a pillar of the porch with the E-web scything across the shadows where any movement was found. Ryan sent a blaster bolt hurtling back towards an Aqualish thug who attempted a carefully aimed shot at the charging Jedi. He didn’t even scream and merely slumped to the ground. Ryan winced as he felt the pain at taking a life even in self-defense. He wondered if the Jedi who made light of the lightsaber and war ever felt the same.

 “Skywatch, are we still clear?” he said, his voice betraying a slight hint of worry.

 “All clear, the only cartel forces observed appear to be at the casino. No Revenant reinforcements observed either.”

 Ryan’s scanned the area in thermal and regular vision, left and right looking for danger in alleyways and outbuildings. Outside the casino proper appeared to be various lodgings, shops, and residences for workers in plain gray slate and durasteel. While most of the civilian populace was now likely hiding, each building could also present a threat and the Jedi had to remain alert. There was also the risk that always came with fighting an insurgency alongside soldiers who had lost friends to the Revenants. Namely, that the civilian populace might be a target of vengeance masquerading as a continuation of the counter-insurgency. War crimes were an inevitable product of the terribleness of war. Which is why war was to be avoided and, if Hawkins could help it, he would not allow them to be committed.

 Ryan continued to be a bulwark of sapphire blades supplemented by the occasional use of the Force to either propel himself forward or to reach out and throw an enemy from behind their cover and into the merciless crimson death of the E-Web’s deadly fire. At last his feet began to leap up the steps and into the shade of the porch, whirling as he cut down a shrieking Gamorrean raising his vibroaxe in a panicked wind up to cut down the swift Jedi.

 Supporting fire from the circling dropships continued to crash into the roof overhead occasionally followed by the death cry of a cartel gangster or the curses and calls to retreat of those who realized that credits were of little use to a dead man. Soon after the remainder of his squad rushed forward and took cover at the pillars of the porch. Ryan quietly counted. No casualties. All present. A good start.

“Orders, sir?” the sergeant said, already knowing and trusting the answer he knew was forthcoming.

“At your discretion sergeant, you know the men and the mission better than I do. Just minimize civilian casualties and cuff anyone who surrenders, but don’t risk the lives of you and your men unnecessarily.”

“Yes sir.”

The squad quickly moved to stack against the door, lined up neatly while other squads manned other entrances around the ground floor. Ryan took a position on the other side of the door, lightsaber humming and awaited the go ahead on comms. All was silent except the hum of lightsabers and the stacatto of dropship covering fire and the blaster fire of rooftop defenders, now more scattered and infrequent.

“Idle.” Skywatch said plainly.

At the sound of the code word, the sergeant hurled a flash grenade into the casino and at the flash and bang came the roar of the Force through Ryan’s muscles, sending him hurtling into the room with superhuman speed as he sprinted through the door.

His eyes took everything in in what seemed like a slide show as he crouched to begin a powerful leap through the air. Games tables, a bar, gambling machines, a few civilians cowering with heads down… armed guard behind the bar! Ryan exploded across the room in a powerful and cat-like leap, spinning once and sending the blaster bolt from the startled and dazed guard into the ceiling with a deft deflection of his lightsaber. The startled human tried to level a second shot but the Jedi quickly seized his weapon arm, swiping it to the side as he slammed his shoulder into his gut and brought him to the ground with an explosive takedown. The guard wheezed but went silent as Ryan struck him solidly across the jaw with a gauntleted fist. Rolling the guard on his side, the Odanite leapt to his feet and scanned the room.

The blaster fire in the room had been short and sporadic with most of the security forces on the ground level quickly being disabled or surrendering to the sudden surge of superior numbers, professionalism, and violence. As two squads moved upstairs Ryan listened and waited, his lightsaber still brilliantly humming as the remaining forces downstairs checked their equipment, the dead, and restrained any survivors.

Ryan noted that his squad still seemed to have all of its members with no casualties sustained. He listened for signs of trouble upstairs but oddly no blaster came, the only signs of violence being the sound of some scuffling and heated conversation and the blaster fire from the dropships outside providing security.

After what seemed like entirely too long a quiet, rasping voice came over comms

“He’s not here?”

“What?” Ryan replied

“He’s not here. We secured some other Revenants who said he’s slipped out. We’re going to move to extract them and see if we can continue to get leads and ewither find out where he went or at least get some human intelligence.”

 “Sounds g…” Ryan was about to reply but he got a sudden sick feeling in his stomach as the Force seemed to grab him by the shoulders and shake him.

Turning around and looking through the door to the outside he saw a sight that chilled his blood. On a distant rooftop, he observed a well armored Revenant, clad in fine heavy armor but with little other detail identifiable at distance other than a large, cylindrical object on his shoulder as he fell to a crouch. Ryan reached out with the Force as hard as he could but found the Revenant and his weapon too far out of reach. A hiss and a missile exiting the barrel presaged a sudden flurry over comms.

“MISSILE MISSILE! EVADE!”

“MISSILE!”

Various dropships called out warning and Ryan could hear engines straining and supporting blaster fire continuing in frantic bursts as he rushed outside to see what was happening.

Ryan saw the missile sail through the sky and as he reached his hand out, trying to get close enough to reach out and seize it through the Force it slammed into the engine of a drop ship. The rent metal of the ship and remaining engine whined and creaked in protest as the ship listed left, then right then lazily spiraled into the ground several blocks away with a resounding crash.

Ryan continued to sprint towards the Reaver as he loaded and readied another shot. This time he was close enough and as soon as the missile left the barrel, it froze in the air for a moment as Ryan seized it and then was hurled forcibly into the skull of the firer. While the missile had not traveled far enough to arm, the backwards snap of the Reaver’s head followed by him crumpling to the ground indicated a severe concussion at best.

“Skywatch, what’s going on?” Ryan said, slightly out of breath and trying to keep the stress out of his voice.

The sounds of various messages of squads trying to figure out what had just happened along with dropships figuring out how to evade more ground fire drowned out any reply from Skywatch, if one had even been issued in the current chaos. Ryan looked down the street to the fallen, flaming wreckage of the dropship and broke out into another Force-assisted sprint, deflecting stray blaster fire from the occasional window or rooftop. It seemed that resistance to Severian intrusion extended to beyond casino and Hutt security as Ryan turned and observed that one firer appeared to simply be clad in a plain white tunic and brown vest with brown trousers and black boots. His hair was graying and he had a wispy, thin beard and clear green eyes. A civilian.

Ryan locked eyes with the man and the man’s hands began to shake as they deathgripped his Blastech. The Jedi’s blue lightsaber hummed and Ryan felt a bit of anger rise in his throat. They were here to seize a criminal who works with terrorists and slavers and this… this man wanted to shoot them in the back and pretend he can just blend in and go back to pretending to be a harmless gardener or shopkeep. Ryan half unconsciously took a step towards the man, who had fired from the half open door to his home or shop. The man stepped backwards and fired another shot that went well wide of the Jedi, then another that was easily deflected by Ryan’s skillful parry, sending it to the sky rather than back at the man. Ryan stopped before he took another step as the old man stumbled and fell to his back, hands trembling heavily and aiming at the Odanite. Ryan suppressed his anger, realizing that this was a man who from his eyes was protecting his home, his life, from what he saw as invaders. He did not know about a terror plot nor did he care. He was afraid, and if Ryan’s anger had been higher, he would have sent that bolt right back into a man who had to this day been living an ordinary life, as ordinary as one could live in Hutt space. This man could have grandchildren he loved and played with and Ryan had fel the rising anger that would have taken that from them. Disgust at himself began to replace that anger and Ryan slowly backed away from the man.

“Just hide” Ryan said calmly. The old man nodded and began to crawl towards a hiding place.

Ryan ran two more blocks, the buildings a blur until he reached the crash site with one pilot desprately firing an E-11 through the smoke up the street. Two crewemembers lay dead, killed by the impact of the crash most likely. Activating the thermal vision of his helmet, Ryan saw the intense heat of the fiery crash and smoke, but through that he could make out several thermographic signatures. Mostly man-sized humanoids, some bigger, some smaller.

The Force filled his muscles as Ryan leaped to the top of the wreckage for a better view and his light saber came en-guard, his off hand pulling behind to profile himself against blaster fire.

Ryan saw a mass of what appeared to be everything from day laborers to gamblers, one even a baker judging by her flour-stained hands and apron and the white residue left on her black blaster as she took cover behind a sizeable flowerpot and leveled her weapon at the crash sight. Ryan stared down this makeshift militia and they at him. Even the surviving crewmember could tell something seemed wrong and ceased firing his E-11.

A voice came over the casino towns emergency address system. The accent was distinctly Rodian

“The invaders are here! FIGHT FIGHT FOR YOUR HOMES! EVERYONE TAKE UP ARMS LEST YOUR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES BE SLAVES!”

The rhetoric was quite clever and while Ryan glowered under his helmet at the lie, it seemed to resonate with both the civilians whose homes were now scorched with the blaster-fire of the fighting and the gamblers, smugglers, and ne’er do wells who wanted to live free in Hutt space. They leveled their weapons, some like experienced killers who had shot a man at the Sabacc table at some time in the past, some who were struggling to even point the weapon in the proper direction with the intent of taking a life; almost all of them fired and Ryan’s blade quickly set to fanning, parrying, and redirecting. In the chaos, it was difficult to single out and make moral judgments on who was an acceptable casualty and who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and Ryan found himself sending the bolts every which way but back at the firers as he could not bring himself to do it. No matter what the increasing anger in his heart wanted him to do. No matter how much those dead crewman burned themselves into his mind.

The rest of Ryan’s squad was here now. He could not believe he had forgotten to give them orders and thanked fate for the skill of the Severian NCO corps in that his sergeant took initiative. A unit thrives as a team and he let his emotions and even his arrogance as a Force-user to get the better of him. It was something he would have to meditate on later.’

They quickly returned fire and a blaster bolt struck a portly Neimoidian in the throat, a look of shock spreading across his face as he fell to the ground. He could have been anything but a soldier and as his blaster fell to the ground it was as if the threat had vanished and been replaced by a harmless sight. More fell and a stray blaster bolt struck a Severian trooper, causing him to cry out. His voice sounded so young, maybe 20 years old.

“Skywatch, how many?”

Ryan waited as he deflected blaster bolts from the defiant civilians and rogues firing at them.

“20 or so, but more inbound from other parts of the city. We’ve lost another landing craft and other squads are trying to fight their way out and extract the prisoners and intel.”

“Can we get my men out?” Ryan said, realizing the gravity of the situation.

“The secondary plan is to land armored support and exfil overland to a rendevous point for pickup.”

“How long?”

“Hours, maybe a couple hours after sunset. I’m sorry Hawkins.”

Ryan Hawkins looked out as watched a raven haired human, her lip curled in anger and defiance as she fired an aged Westar D-34 at the squad only to be struck three times in the stomach by the now operational and firing E-Web. She was a jeweler. He knew because he remembered her locking up her shop as the initially moved the casino.

They had seized intel, but their mission had not only failed with their target now beyond their reach but was quickly turning into a bloodbath. Another squadmate fell, an older man who quietly sighed as he fell limp. Many Jedi would charge on, blithe about these acceptable losses, but for Ryan a Jedi’s duty was to remember. He continued to be a bulwark as his squad continued to fight on, in the distance, angry mobs could be seen gathering courage to push up the street and reinforce the continued fighting of the civilians. Ryan steeled himself.

“Do not let them past this wreckage site.”

**8 hours later**

The fighting had grown sporadic as the advantage of night vision allowed the Severian forces to once again gain the upper hand and drive off less enthusiastic civilian militia. Ryan was exhausted but was able to deflect the occasional stray shot from the darkness by a militia member from a species with night vision or one that had simply made a lucky guess or was firing in the direction of his lightsaber hoping to hit the man behind it.

The Jedi only began to feel rejuvenated when he heard the familiar sound of a K79-S80 Imperial Troop Transport. Distant at first, but growing louder Ryan leaped to the ground and turned to the remainder of his squad. Only four left and the sergeant plus the surviving crewmember from the wreck.

“Get our dead, grab what you can, and let’s go.”

“Yes sir.” the sergeant said, clapping a quick comforting hand on his shoulder, hearing the pain in the Jedi’s voice.

Quickly lifting their dead onto their shoulders or casualty dragging them in haste, the troops began to run towards the transports. Grey, boxy behemoths that seemed to promise home more than these drab vehicles usually conveyed. Jeers and shouts issued from homes and the darkness, a thrown rock struck a trooper on the shoulder pad. But still they ran.

After blocks of running, the troops quickly fell into the vehicle’s side racks and locked into place, loading into the vehicle’s cab, much to the barely concealed disquiet of the transport crew. More rocks, more stray blaster fire, more jeers as the transports quickly were underway.

Ryan was quiet. There was nothing he could say that would not come from anger or despair at the mission, the death, or the Jedi who mostly aligned themselves with the idea that terrorists who used civilians like this could be freedom fighters or reasoned with. Death was abstract to them or an illusion, but to a Jedi Guardian who lived in conflict it was for more real. His conviction steeled that the Revenants had to face justice, and that he needed to be a moderating force to ensure that the justice did not become vengeance.

Ryan nearly nodded off as the neon of the casino and the lights of the town faded from view. The only sounds left were the distant jeers of the militia and Revenants and the hum of the transport’s repulsors.