

Against All Odds - Option 1

A Shanree Argentin Story

It had all happened so quickly. The crystal thing had crashed through the system, through the chill atmosphere of the small Kasiyan moon, and impacted the ground outside of the port city. Shanree and Zakai had only just landed, only recently returned from nearly a year of secluded exploration of the Unknown Regions and intensive training in martial arts and the Force. The time together had brought the two men very close, almost like a Father and a Son, but more appropriately like a Master and an Apprentice. The havoc wreaked by the sudden attack had the spaceport in a flurry of panicked action.

“Should we take off too?” Zakai asked his Master. The Kid, only seventeen now, was growing quickly but still had a slightly gangly look about him as his trunk struggled to catch up to his limbs.

Shanree sat beside him in the pilot’s cabin watching the streams of spaceships making for orbit through the Force, in the way only Miraluka like him could. He hoped to flee the system before they got caught up in whatever this was, “No, there’s going to be enough confusion up there right now without us adding to it.”

As if to offer an alternative, the com system chimed an incoming call. Zakai hit a couple buttons and a holographic image of the new Consul of Taldryan, Appius Wright, “Mr. Argentin, I hope I can borrow a moment of your time”.

Though the man’s words were polite, his tone was impatient. Shanree nodded to the hologram as his comlink implant helped him make sense of the image that was invisible in the Force, “By all means, Consul. I’m not sure what I can do to help, but I, and my apprentice, are at your command.”

The Consul’s 30cm image briefly looked Zakai up and down before returning to Shanree’s face, “I have a mission for you; Erinyes says you’re good at finding people?”

“I have found people and things before...” Shanree wasn’t sure where this line of questioning was heading, but he had a bad feeling it was not going to take him away from the front lines.

The Consul tapped out a few commands on a datapad, “I’ve sent you a packet of information regarding a scientist. Dr. Golen Temartis has been leading up a very important project for the Clan and I have a suspicion he’s high on the enemy’s capture or kill list.”

“Got it. Who is the enemy, by the way?” Zakai asked while Shanree’s head leaned to the left so he could watch a ship in the sky above them as it dodged ground based fire a touch longer, “From what little I’ve seen they don’t look Imperial.”

Appius shrugged his shoulders, a much bigger movement under the weight of his Mandalorian chest plate and pauldrons, “We’re still working that out. You have what you need, Argentin, get to it. The rescue of this man could mean the difference between victory and defeat.”

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“What do you mean I can’t come? You know I’ve seen worse than this!” Zakai’s body language was visibly distraught, though Shanree saw the emotional turmoil radiating from his Apprentice rather than the boy’s physical posture.

Shanree did in fact know his Apprentice had seen and experienced worse scenes of violence and war under his Father’s tutelage, but the old man had steeled himself that he would spare Zakai the worst of what war had to offer. He wanted to spare the boy from those things he’d seen and done in the Civil War that still haunted him. The son of Vodo Biask already had his own baggage to deal with. It didn’t help that Shanree still sensed echoes of Vodo’s dark instructions in the boy’s reactions to fighting and combat. There was a hint of something; a subtle mirth in witnessing or partaking in a fight. Shanree didn’t like it.

“I do. You’re still not coming with me this time. You’ll stay with the ship or, if you have to relocate, with Consul Wright’s staff. I’ll have my communicator and I’m taking Eye-Gee with me.”

“You’re taking the *Droid* with you, but not me? Come on, Master, please!”

He left the ship soon after. Zakai stayed aboard, still sulking about how unfair it was. Accompanied by the clank-clank footsteps of the aging IG-100 Magnaguard Droid he affectionately called “Eye-Gee”, Shanree made his way to the spaceport’s speeder rental kiosks. Appius had included credentials that allowed him, as an agent of the Consul, to commandeer a hover car from an indignant droid who couldn’t shut up about how unusual this all was. He’d loaded Eye-Gee aboard the car when the sound of explosions split the air nearby. The crack-thuds weren’t immediately close but near enough that he felt the thump of the air in his chest growing closer with each concussion. It was time to go.

Shanree gunned the repulsors and the speeder took off down the lane leading away from the port to the district of Arroyo, ground zero for the enemy’s landing and attack. At first, all he had to do was speed around the light traffic actually headed towards the fighting. The old Grey Jedi, becoming frustrated, pulled his speeder into the on-coming lane and began weaving through both directions of travel. It was when the traffic started getting bad, in both directions, that Shanree pulled the speeder out of the groundlines entirely and into the air above. The driver’s screens all blinked and chirped alarmingly, alerting the pilot to the fact they’d left the lawful right of way.

“Ah, cram it!” hitting an override button, Shanree silenced the vehicle’s warnings, though he noted the onboard computer almost-petulantly alerted him that the authorities had been notified, “Consider it noted.”

The din of fighting was growing closer and loud enough that it could be heard easily over the rush of wind over the open-topped speeder he’d commandeered. He fumbled with the wrist-comlink he wore on the left with his right hand, while he continued piloting with the left hand, and managed to hit the right combination of buttons that called up the navigational data to the target’s last known location. Having no eyes was no problem in the natural world for a Miraluka; lacking eyes, they saw the world through the Force, the lines of things both living and inert drawn and ever so faintly sketched-in and shaded by colors that were indescribable to those blind to it. For every physical thing that existed, he could usually perceive an otherworldly shadow of it. It became problematic for Shanree, and every one of his kind, when dealing with those things that don’t exist, or at least have so little presence as not to appear within his Force Sight. Things like letters on a page, holograms projected in the air, and of course, navigational information displayed on a screen. For these things he was aided greatly by an implant that plugged into his comlink and datapad, directly feeding the information he needed or the images he couldn’t see directly to his mind.

The navdata directed Shanree, who was now on the verge of fifty galactic standard years old, across the growing town of Port Kasiya towards the northernmost district of Arroyo. Built atop the prominent rocky cliffs that dominated the north side of the urban core of Port Kasiya, Arroyo District was notable for being industrial in character, focused on power generation, and an overgrown warren of decades of overlapping improvements and upgrades. The specifics of what Golen Temartis was studying or developing was not laid out in the dossier Appius Wight had sent Shanree. He wouldn’t have had time to parse it in his rush anyways but if there was somewhere in the city you were going to hide a secret project– this would be the place.

Shanree brought the speeder down low to the ground as he came up over the lip of the cliffs that looked out at the bay miles away. There was anti-aircraft tracer fire not all that far ahead of him, and this commandeered vehicle wasn’t rated to survive any level of firepower. He didn’t fancy another crash. The twist of pipes and ducting rose up towards him at a frightening speed, so Shanree pulled the throttle back a nudge so he could bob and weave in, around, and through the maze. His navigational data indicated he was getting close so he lowered the speeder even closer to the ground, slotting the craft into one of the byzantine ground-level streets. Already there were burnt and burning shells of airspeeders lining the road, flanked by warehouses now riddled with holes and explosive pitting.

The Force passed a chill through his body, giving him only the barest of moments to pull on the control yoke. His speeder’s nose pitched into the air again and began to slip sideways as it passed through a four-way junction of streets. A large bore blaster cannon’s retort was followed nearly instantaneously by the explosive disintegration of the repulsor motivator under the front hood. The speeder crashed to the ground rather than beating a fleet retreat into the sky, tumbling side over side until it slid with a metallic screech into a durabrick wall. Before the blaster cannon’s bolt had hit his speeder, Shanree was already undoing his restraints with

preternatural speed. He flung himself out of the tumbling craft, the momentum launching him high into the air towards the guarded roadblock he'd mistakenly stumbled across.

An AT-TE older than he was sat there behind the road junction, squatted on its six walker legs, and the muzzle of the top-mounted blaster cannon still smoked super-ionized gas, behind the pile of rubble it had dragged into the street to create the roadblock. Troops in matching armor, but a variety of weapons, were in position behind the barricade, all weapons trained on the crashed wreck of the speeder. No one's attention was directed upward. Shanree fell from the sky, having used the Force to nudge himself into a ballistic arc towards the walker. From the air, hidden by the glare of the afternoon sun, he fell. The AT-TE rose up toward him with growing speed until at the last moment he pulled out the two lengthy lightsaber hilts, strapped over his shoulders, and ignited them with a snap-hiss of twin blades of emerald light.

The blades passed through the barrel of the walker's top-mounted cannon effortlessly, a blur of green arcs as Shanree pulled them across his body in an X. He landed more softly than he should have, with the aid of the Force, his arms still crossed and the blades still held out to both sides. He quickly sized up the platoon arrayed around him, the stunned cannon's gunner the closest, as they all turned to find out what the commotion was. The sound of the severed barrel hitting the top of the AT-TE and then tumbling off of it, its end still glowing orange, was lost in the sudden explosion of blaster fire and lightsaber swooshing that followed. Muzzles of the troopers swung in Shanree's direction as he lopped the head off of the gunner now scrambling from his seat.

From the wreckage of the speeder came the wrenching screech of metal on metal. One trooper, a squad sergeant, glanced over his shoulder to see the skeletal figure of Eye-Gee rising from the burning wreck, "Contact front!"

Four or five troopers switched fire from Shanree on-top of the AT-TE to their rear to the Clone Wars vintage droid. Their heads were forced down to take cover as a spray of deadly accurate repeating blaster fire erupted from the TL-50 in Eye-Gee's free hand. Eyes glowing red Eye-Gee played the heavily modified, and meticulously cared for, blaster's fire over the barricade and the soldiers taking cover behind it. With long, loping strides Eye-Gee closed in diagonally on the road block, suppressing as many as it could. The troops took pot shots in return where they could but one such Human caught a trio of bolts to his armored helmet. The overcharged weapon's effect was devastating to the armor and the head under it.

Shanree lept from the top of the walker, somersaulting in air with twin swirls of green light beside him, and landed among a section of the troops. Suddenly between them, they hesitated to fire, lest they hit someone they knew. He was an old soldier though, having fought his way across the Galaxy and back from the time he was a teenager onward, and knew well the value in taking the initiative when the enemy was on the back foot. He surged forward with a speed and grace that suggested his graying hair belied more than it spoke. Drawing upon years of martial arts training in Teras Kasi, both the hand to hand school as well as that of the school of fighting sticks, Shanree danced and spun through the Troopers with his lightsabers always in motion. Sometimes he used the wood haft of the hilts like a blunt weapon or as a lever to control his opponents, but mostly he just used the deadly green blades with practiced efficiency.

In mere moments the section of five soldiers was neutralized. The action was happening under the chin of the AT-TE, close enough that Shanree could see the operator's frustrated face inside the transparisteel cockpit. Here, nearly under the walker, the operator couldn't depress the walker's four forward blaster cannons enough to hit the veteran Gray Jedi. Batting away a burst of blaster fire Shanree slashed at the heel of one of the walker's forward legs. His emerald lightsaber blade chewed deep into the armored durasteel joint and its mechanisms, severing critical pneumatic tubing, wiring harnesses, and leaving an ugly welted glowing-orange wound where he stopped about two-thirds the way through the entire thing. There was a twinkle in Shanree's eye as he reflected on acquiring the matching Verpaline crystals years ago and admired how they seemed to allow his lightsabers to slice through metal with considerable ease.

The Walker stumbled, the weakened leg buckling under the thing's considerable weight, and only managed to keep itself on its feet, instead of burying the chin of the walker in the street's pavement, when the middle leg moved forward to support the shift in weight. Shanree was already out from underneath the walker however and in the melee again with the troopers, the nearest of which were diving away from the stumbling armored behemoth. He moved with a slithering grace born of years of fitness, use of his body, and familiarity with its peculiarities. Each step was chosen carefully and deliberately so that he could turn and pivot, twist and reverse his direction seemingly effortlessly.

Eye-Gee sprayed the top of the barricade again as it reached its perimeter. The last of the soldiers manning the parapet let out a pitiful yell as they died under the hail of crimson bolts. The combat droid moved up the barricade, really a pile of rubble and former pieces of buildings that had been strewn across the road to impede progress and offer a modicum of cover to the troopers behind it. That advantage was lost to them now as the droid's long, loping stride carried it up and over the road block almost without slowing it down. The droid held the heavy repeating blaster in both arms, but held cradled down low, rather than shouldered like it had been intended to be. Twisting at the waist as it moved the droid methodically applied suppressing fire to the strongest concentrations of concealed soldiers while picking off targets of opportunity when each arose.

Shanree and Eye-Gee had fought together on numerous occasions and their movements looked coordinated to the untrained eye as the Gray Jedi criss crossed the small combat arena between the barricade and hulk of the AT-TE untouched by the IG-100 droid's incessant fire. Hooking his left lightsaber, unignited, behind a soldier's knee he pulled and toppled the Twi'lek woman to the ground. He didn't give her a chance to get up by planting his right-handed saber into her chest, the blade plunging into the ground beneath her. She was the last of the soldiers outside of the walker. He pulled the blade from the corpse and let the saber retreat into the hilt with a hiss. The AT-TE's operator could no longer be seen in the cockpit, which explained why the thing wasn't struggling to move any longer.

With his peculiar sight Shanree could tell there were two people aboard the walker and both were toward the rear. He slowly made his way that direction, sticking close to the outside panels of the legs' armor so no one above or on a view screen could get an easy look at him. As he neared the rear he heard the pop and hiss of an access hatch along with the muffled sounds of a scuffle. The Gray Jedi moved in closer, his thumb hovering over the activation switch of his saber in his right hand, and he noted the position of Eye-Gee as the droid moved tactically into

a position to cover him. The sounds of commotion continued just inside the walker's hatch, accompanied by the grunts and muffled yells of two men, until the screech of two blaster bolts was heard. It sounded like a smaller blaster pistol, something an armored vehicle operator might keep holstered.

Shanree approached the hatch, the barest of cracks demonstrating that it was open, and was momentarily caught off-guard when it swung all the way open and two bodies flopped out and onto the pavement a meter or so below. One of the bodies grunted as it thudded to the ground, *so perhaps that one isn't dead*, Shanree thought to himself, and it attempted to put an arm under itself to get up. An invisible hand gripped the back of the man's neck and pulled him upright and flung him none-too-gently into the nearest of the walker's rear legs.

Pinned there the man struggled to grasp for the pistol in his holster only to remember it had fallen out of his hand as he had fallen to the ground. Shanree approached the man, picking his way over the body of the dead trooper that had accompanied the Operator. The man was clearly terrified and scrambled, pinned as he was, to try and find a way to free himself, "Oh, Corellian hells! I don't want to die! Please! Oh hells!"

"Your fate is in your own hands. Assist me and you may find yourself alive *and* free", Shanree sheathed his left-hand lightsaber over his shoulder but kept the other one at hand.

Expecting a brainwashed zealot devoid of free thoughts, Shanree was again caught off-guard by the Operator, "P-p-please! I'll do anything! Please don't kill me! I have a daughter!"

"I'm sure plenty of these people had kids, or at least families", he gestured around at the carnage he and Eye-Gee had so quickly caused, "Why should yours be any more deserving?"

"I don't know, man. I just want to see her again, I'll do anything. Please." The man had stopped his fearful fidgeting but the terror was still plain upon his face.

Shanree shook his head, more to shake off the temptation to indulge his darker self than in disappointment that he still had a darker self to manage, and gently lowered the young man to the ground. With the Operator's feet on the pavement the Gray Jedi moved closer to him until they were almost nose to nose. Shanree was not a small man, by near-human standards, and he towered over the average height man, "Why did you kill that guy, wasn't he your buddy?"

The man looked at the crumpled form of the body that had cushioned his own fall from the hatch, "I wanted to run for it, he wouldn't let me."

Knowing his eyeless face was unnerving to many humanoids, Shanree stood still and did what those with eyes would have called staring, "Heh. How'd that work out for you? Nevermind. Now would be a good time to tell me how you can be useful."

The Operator stammered for a moment before he collected himself with a deep breath and inward prayer, "I- I have regimental level access credentials. I'm on regular rotations there as a day driver for the commanders."

"I'm not looking to infiltrate your beachhead operations. I'm looking for information on the deployment of your unit in this area", tapping a couple commands on his wristlink the device popped up a small holographic map of an area nearby.

The man studied the map quickly, "That's where 1st Battalion is headed, they're after some storehouse or manufactory of some-sort. That's all I know!"

Shanree used the tip of his lightsaber hilt, which at the moment appeared to be a forearm length piece of dense polished wood, to lift the Operator's chin a fraction, "A whole

battalion for a warehouse occupying a single city block? Are they expecting some stiff resistance?”

The Operator stared down the length of his nose cross-eyed at the lightsaber hilt under his chin, “I swear, I don’t know. I’m just a driver! Speeders and walkers. Wait! I did hear the Regimental XO talking about needing several heavy-lift shuttles to assist the 1st in its mission.”

Shanree raised an eyebrow curiously, conscious that he couldn’t leave security up to Eye-Gee much longer before they needed to move on, “Multiple shuttles? Are they dropping in whole companies?”

“No, not for deployment. For extraction”, the Operator was excited, sensing his Jedi captor biting at the information, “but not for personnel. It sounded like they were expecting to take things out of there, big things.”

The Consul was probably right about Temartis being on the enemy’s list, but not for kill. If they were expecting to take things out of this site, whatever it was, they would probably be more interested in a living expert rather than killing them, “Alright.”

“Alright?” the man’s eyes were wide with hope, “You’ll let me go? I can live?”

The wooden lightsaber hilt, which resembled an ancient Teras Kasi fighting stick, snapped out from beneath the man’s chin and cracked into the side of his temple. The Operator dropped to the ground limply, but alive, “Yep. Don’t waste your second chance, kid.”

Looking around at the scene, and then at Eye-Gee, Shanree shook his head and began trotting down the street. Eye-Gee followed at a respectable distance on the other side of the street, its weapon and head scanning second story windows and holes for surprises. Reaching out with the Force as he moved, Shanree could keep reasonably sure he was moving unseen. They needed to move quickly though now that they lacked a speeder. The trouble was that while Shanree, in great shape and with the aid of the Force, could move the dozen blocks or so they needed to swiftly, the IG-100 series combat droids were not designed with moving swiftly over distance in mind. Eye-Gee’s lengthy, inexorable stride meant it could often appear to move around a battlefield faster than a walking soldier, but it couldn’t match a Human runner, even without the Force aiding them.

“Alright buddy”, Shanree called over to his droid, “I’m going to go on ahead. Here’s the destination, stay out of trouble as long as you can. Alert me if you need help.”

The droid’s garbled mechanical voice replied an affirmative and Shanree set off. His robe billowed in the wind as he raced ahead, his muscles fueled by Force. His datapad fed him street by street directions as he moved, adjusting twice as he picked a course through the remains of a warehouse and when he reversed course to avoid another roadblock. Knowing he was close he began choosing his way upward, seeking rooftops he could leap from and to. He crouched low, landing softly on the roof of a building he knew was across from his destination, and moved up to the lip of the parapet surrounding his building.

It made no difference that it was now past dusk. The cool of night air was plain on Shanree’s skin, to him the scene was clear as day. These Children of Mortis, that’s what the Consul had called them in his dossier, certainly came well armed and they knew how to conduct a war it seemed. Units of soldiers were stacked up in lines and strings along the perimeter of the short wall that surrounded the compound. It took him a moment to distinguish it but it seemed

they were in position behind the wall, relative to the street. They were inside the compound already!

Fierfek, he cursed inwardly.

From his vantage across the street that the target compound's main access road connected to Shanree could see at least four groupings, perhaps squad element-sized with forty troopers or so, their heavy weapon sections set up at strategic crossfire points, and even a couple of light armor attack speeders. These guys were really dug in already and that concerned Shanree who went over the importance of his rescue mission in his head and really hoped it didn't come to the contingency option. He really didn't like that option. Temartis was inside, or so he hoped, and steeled himself. He had to go in.

Shanree backed up a few dozen strides from the parapet before he loosened his mind and body up with a quick little jog in place and a crick of his neck in both directions. He filled his lungs with air a few times, flooding his body with fresh oxygen in preparation for what was to come, and drew upon the Force. He didn't command it to do his will like a Sith might, but the Jedi prattle had never made much more sense to him either about surrendering to its will. Shanree only had vague memories of the Jedi Order and its teachings. He'd only been a youngling and had only been introduced to the rudiments of their philosophy, he hadn't absorbed much more than how to connect with the Force at all by the time the Empire came. He'd learned much in the decades since about many Force philosophies and had settled in his aging years on his own. He reached for the Force and asked for it to fuel his body again, and it did. It required no command and it required no surrender. Merely a request.

The Gray Jedi lunged forward more quickly than any trained Human or Near-Human sprinter could have dreamt. His feet made soft, sharp padding noises on the roofing material with each footfall until with his last stride he launched himself off the second story parapet into the air across the road. No one noticed his form sailing through the air but it was his crooked landing, and the sound of his fumbling the barrel roll to recover, that alerted the nearest trooper. Shanree couldn't distinguish their species or gender, but he could tell they were armored more heavily than the scout section he'd run into earlier by the way it clicked and rubbed together as the man moved.

"What's up? Did you hear something?" a second voice asked quietly, barely audible above the still rumbling din of battle from around the city.

The first trooper swung their weapon off the perimeter wall and looked down a scope as they scanned the expanse of the motorway and docking guides between them and the compound's warehouses. Shanree was pressed up against the form of a parked groundspeeder, his right shoulder smarting from his crash landing. So too did the ankle that had twisted under him and caused him to fly off balance upon landing. The two soldiers exchanged some more words and proceeded to investigate the noise the first had heard.

The beams of the lights attached to their weapons were invisible to the Miraluka but the shape and forms of the two men were not. He could see them, and what they were holding, as clear as if it had been day. If he'd had eyes of course. He waited for the right moment and then scurried from his cover to a pallet with something under a draped canopy. The shapes of the two soldiers played their two weapons over the space where Shanree had been moments ago and moved on upon finding nothing. They moved methodically, sweeping their weapons from side to

side, waiting for each other so that they always had mutual coverage. More evidence the Children of Mortis knew their business.

Quietly Shanree emerged from his second spot and moved up behind the first trooper. He had him on the ground, windpipe crushed, with little more than a muffled whomp in a heartbeat. Teras Kasi was often considered flashy and overly stylized, but many didn't realize that was just the version pushed by the Holo-cinematic industry. True Teras Kasi was brutally efficient and frighteningly effective, even if it did involve unorthodox movements and attacks. The second trooper didn't notice at first that their partner was no longer with them but, to their credit, they did shortly after. The Nikta was wide-eyed with surprise under their helmet visor as the Gray Jedi emerged from the dark just as he turned to look. Shanree's knee took him in the solar plexus, knocking the more diminutive alien off balance and taking the breath out of him. Without hesitation Shanree hit the Nikta in the throat with a deft chop of his hand, silencing any shout that might have arisen once he'd caught his breath. He finished the alien by breaking his neck, head cradled in both his arms. It hadn't been entirely quiet but apparently it had been enough, there were no cries of alarm.

The bodies were covered in hardened armor, he determined upon quickly searching them with his hands. He found some cred chips and a random assortment of issued gear and tech on both but one had an access card. Shanree pocketed it for later and dragged the two corpses into a less obvious position before he moved on. He'd been puzzled why the two soldiers had been so reliant on their flashlights inside the compound and about so much of the behavior he'd observed in other soldiers on his way here.

He'd heard a clue from the comradio of one of the dead troopers as he was searching for the body, "...doesn't know how long the power is going to be out. Looks like the Tallies cut the lines in all districts of the city."

That explained why the compound wasn't flooded with exterior lights now. He used the advantage to cover the rest of the distance across the tarmac to the loading docks and what he hoped was an entrance. Sure enough it was a door when he reached it, thanking the Force for guiding his intuition, and tried to open it. The access panel chimed sadly at him several times as he hit the open button with a few taps. He grumbled something rude and then fumbled around in his robe pocket for the access card. He tapped it against the panel and hit the open button again. The panel chimed sadly. He grumbled something else and put the card back in his pocket. Novel problems required novel solutions so he pulled a single saber hilt from its sheath and pressed it up against the panel. He thumbed the activator on and off, just fast enough for the emerging blade to incinerate the panel's circuitry and wiring. With the wave of a few fingers the sliding door moved into its recess.

Inside the lack of noise told him the power really was out. There was no gentle hum of cheap commercial lighting, no hiss of poorly maintained HVAC ventilators. Strange the building didn't have backup power— what sort of secret operation was the Consul running here? Seraine had made it sound like Clan Taldryan was a competent organization. It had a big part of her pitch for him to join her, knowing his past and dislike for bureaucratic bantha poodoo.

He stopped moving down the corridor directly off the entrance he'd forced open. He was about half-way down it when the Force told him to freeze. From the other end of the hallway

interior double-doors slammed open and blaster fire erupted. His second saber hilt flew into his free hand. Both ignited and began batting crimson blaster bolts away defensively. His arms moved fluidly, guided by the whisper of the Force, in an endless windmill that sent the attackers' bolts into the ceiling, walls, floors, and sometimes back at its source. Shanree moved forward as he wielded his sabers until he was close enough, wincing with each step as he put weight on his recently twisted ankle.

Strategically, Shanree sent two blaster bolts back to their origins, two different weapons, and used the sudden opening caused by their both instantaneous death screams to close with those remaining. The corridor was a cacophony of blaster rifle screeches, the crack of fighting stick on armor, the thrum of swinging green blades, and the shouts and yells of people engaged in hand to hand combat. Shanree tore through them like a razor blade, his two lightsaber hilts alternately acting as blunt weapons and levers, and as deadly swords. It had taken only a couple handful of seconds but the corridor lay littered with the unmoving bodies of fallen CoM fighters. The aging Miraluka dragged fresh air into his lungs, his chest rising and falling with controlled rhythm and he moved on, rolling his stiff shoulder to loosen it up.

The building was a maze of hallways, offices, break rooms, warehousing, and more. Shanree followed the line his navdata provided, via his implant, but just knew he would have become lost without it. The trouble was the nek was out of the bag and they knew he was here. Around every corner was guaranteed to be two or three, sometimes five or more, soldiers armed in their characteristic battle armor. It slowed his going, though he was certain there was a Platoon Leader somewhere scrambling to organize an effective defense against this intruder.

Coming across another grouping of three Troopers Shanree set into them like the rest. The first two fell before they knew they were under attack, a swirling thrown lightsaber dealing them both fatal wounds, but the third reacted quickly enough that Shanree's bisecting strike missed. The woman crashed into the wall in her attempt to dodge but had the presence of mind to have her weapon up in time to fire off a trio of bolts. Shanree's momentum thankfully carried him past the surely fatal counter-attack by hairs. He could smell the carbonized stench of his own robe where the bolts had gone through it. He twirled, swinging his right handed saber around backhandedly. The saber dug into the wall to the soldier's right and slowed it enough that she was able to fall to the ground on purpose rather than in two pieces.

Her legs scissored around Shranee's and toppled him to the ground. In a moment she was atop him in a full-mount. Her seat pinned his legs under her weight (augmented by the armor), her pelvis atop his, and her arms seeking a place for the vibroblade suddenly in her hand to sink into the Gray Jedi. He parried her arms with his own, his own hands having dropped his saber hilts, and redirected her stabbing attacks to either side of his head. She lifted her weight in a heave, enough so that when she plunged the vibrodagger with both hands the force of her body would be behind it. Shanree grabbed both of her wrists with his hands and pushed with all of his strength, preventing the woman from sinking the blade into his chest.

Bringing his knee up into the seat of her pants, Shanree knocked the Woman's balance forward. Surprise was on her face as she unexpectedly fell forward and dropped the vibrodagger in an attempt to catch herself instinctively with her hands. His face now buried in the trooper's breastplate, Shanree trapped her right foot under his left leg while he reached around her right arm with both of his hands. Shanree grasped each of his hand tightly and pulled back powerfully which caused her elbow to fold in. Shanree forced his right hip up into

the woman's pelvis as he rolled her to his left. Shanree moved with the rolling woman's body and ended up in her guard, both of her legs wrapped around his waist with her torso on the ground pointing away from him. He was on his knees, encircled by her legs and she grinned, thinking she'd thwarted his move, but Shanree merely wrapped his arms around the back of her hips and pulled with his back. She came off the ground and then he slammed her back into it.

Her head bouncing off the ground, even inside of her helmet, caused the trooper's eyes to spin. Shanree did it again, this time rising on his legs to put more height into the attack. Dropping her this time broke her guard and he was free. He reached to his right, called the saber hilt he could feel in the Force there, and held it to his enemy's face.

"You put up a good fight, but I'm in a hurry", he studied her aura and the waves of emotion he detected from her, "Do you want to help me and live?"

"Frack you, freak", she spat at him venomously.

It was never easy to kill someone in cold blood for Shanree, no matter how high the body count, "That was a no?"

"That was a 'go jump in a fire' you no-eyed—" the lightsaber filled her mouth, cutting her words off with a finality.

He quickly searched her like he had the others and found another access key. He put this one in a different pocket to keep from getting the two confused. As he was doing so he heard another snippet of com chatter, "...the Chief Engineer? He's still holed up in his office, I think. Understood Sergeant, I'll get right on..."

The Chief Engineer was Golen Temartis's title on this project. If he was barricaded in his office there was still a chance he could get to the man before he was captured or killed. The enemy knew he was there, likely was already in position outside of his office, and they'd be between him and Golen. They'd be between him and Dr. Temartis coming out too, now that he thought about it. He pinched the bridge of his nose again and squeezed his brow tightly together, knowing he was going to have to kill more rather than fewer people. *This isn't my war, why am I doing this?* He let the thought echo a moment before another thought replaced it. It was a memory, a recent one at that, of Zakai and his Quaestor laughing and performing some sort of practiced series of hand movements that only made sense to them. Shanree wasn't a Taldryanite, he'd barely even spent time among that Clan before he and Zakai had taken off, but Zakai was. Zakai was bound to Taldryan in a way that probably defied explanation. It was for his sake then. He would find a way to lower the kill total though, *someone else could mop them up.*

His momentary lapse into the world of the mind was shaken by the garbled mechanical voice of Eye-Gee over the comlink. Shanree spoke into his wristlink, "You're here? Good. Can you get in without alerting the soldiers up front?"

The droid responded in the negative. Shanree thought for a moment then responded, "Go ahead and light the whole line up. Stay in cover, keep moving, don't get hurt. Pull back if you have to, Zakai won't forgive me if he has to fix you. Again."

The droid responded in the affirmative. Shanree half-expected to hear the start of blaster fire before the line cut out like he'd heard over military coms for decades, but then he reminded himself the Droid's comlink was hardwired to its processing unit. It didn't even need to audibly speak to communicate. Hopefully the frontal assault by the droid would draw more of the attackers away from the office of the Chief Engineer and make his life easier.

He was through enough of the warehousing that the office complex which abutted it did not take long to reach. Detached by several meters there was a small garden with a non-functioning fountain between the two buildings. It was time to change tactics; he didn't need to cleave through the office to find his man, he knew where he was. If he could get there unseen then the enemy would have less time to prepare for their eventual attempt at escape. That's why when he located an exterior access ladder leading upward, around a corner, he trusted his gut and the Force and followed it up. The hatch that sealed the ladder off from trespassers opened with the swipe of the first access card and Shanree began climbing. It carried him up to the roof several floors higher and deposited him atop the ceiling of what his navdata said was Temartis' office.

Shanree used his feet to kick the majority of the gravel bedding laid down over the roofing material and cleared a circle about a meter in diameter. With his right-hand saber, he began carving a hole as quickly as he was able. It took nearly thirty seconds but the circular slab he'd cut out fell to the floor below with a crash, drips of still molten support girders followed after it until the cuts cooled soon after. He leapt down the hole, saber still in hand, and immediately had to use it to deflect blaster fire.

"Dr. Temartis! Stop! I'm here to rescue you!" Shanree shouted, trying to be heard over the retort of the man's holdout blaster, the screech of the bolt deflecting from the lightsaber's beam, and the thrum of the saber's beam as Shanree moved it around to protect himself.

Golen Temartis stopped shooting, a look of confusion on his face for a moment, "Rescue me? Oh. Oh! Oh my, yes. Yes, this is wonderful. How many of you are there?"

The man moved his head from his position in the corner, behind his sizeable desk, to look up through the hole in the ceiling but Shanree's shaking head caught his attention, "It's just me. Consul Wight is a bit tied up at the moment and doesn't have many resources available in this area. I'm getting you out of here with your data."

"Ah, yes. It's umm— all right here", he reached down and pulled up a briefcase that had been on the ground by his feet, "I was just finishing my preparations to leave."

Shanree stepped off the fallen roof section and toward the man but stopped. He heard what Temartis was saying but something was off about the way he was feeling through the Force, "Shouldn't you have finished leaving hours ago, Doctor?"

"This was one of the first places attacked, I— I've been busy trying to wrap everything up and get everything together. Don't want to lose that data. Speaking of which, it's very important we get that to the Consul... Perhaps we should leave?" Temartis holstered his small blaster pistol and grabbed the handle of the briefcase, moving to come join Shanree.

Shanree took a few tentative steps backward, away from Dr. Temartis however, "How have you been holding the attackers off? I haven't found much evidence of a fight."

"I locked my door. I sent all the staff home when it became apparent we were under attack. Not many people here on the weekend anyhow. Staff or security", Temartis stopped and

put a puzzled look on his face, though Shanree couldn't see it, "What's this about? Come on, we really need to be going."

Shanree could sense his emotions and could see the Force's agitated swirls around the man's shape though, "How have you held off the troopers in this building up till now, Doctor?"

Shanree didn't give the man a chance to answer. He strode to the door, hit the open button on the panel. It chimed sadly, indicating the door was indeed locked. Shanree reached into a pocket and produced the second access card. Holding it up against the panel he heard the beep indicating the door had been unlocked. The suspicion of what he'd find behind that door was confirmed when it slid open, revealing a half-dozen soldiers milling about, preparing their gear and holding their position in the executive lobby. Two or three of them turned their heads curiously to see why the Engineer's office had opened. They were not here sieging the office, Shanree could tell by their disposition, they were here defending it. He turned back to Dr. Temartis after slapping the close and lock button, and sensed the shape in the man's hand.

"It's too bad you poked your nose in here, Jedi", Temartis's voice was more controlled now that he held the little holdout blaster, again pointed at Shanree. There were shouts from outside the office as the Soldiers began alerting each other to the problem.

"You didn't really expect me to buy that ruse and take you out of here, did you?", Shanree stood still, his eyeless face staring-down the man he'd been supposed to rescue.

"No, it was only supposed to last long enough to lull you into a sense of false security", the Chief Engineer replied coolly. There was banging on the door behind Shanree, as well as shouts and commands to open it up.

"So you could pull the gun on me?", Shanree asked.

Golen raised the blaster a touch higher as he sighted down the barrel, "So I could pull the gun on you again. Goodbye, Jedi."

A paperweight from the desk collided with Temartis's head from behind but the command to his finger to pull the trigger had already been sent. The holdout blaster screeched again but the shot went wide. Shanree closed with the Chief Engineer and had him laid out on the ground with a single strike to his center of gravity. The blaster tumbled away from the Golen Temartis but he scrambled after it on the ground, tripping more than once on his lab coat. Shanree pushed him forward with a boot to the rear, collapsing the man on his face unceremoniously. The Force carried the pistol slowly and deliberately to Shanree's open hand. The shouts from outside were growing in intensity and someone had already fired a few shots into the exterior door panel to force it open.

"I'm no Jedi", Shanree picked up the briefcase by its handle, "You said everything you were leaving with was in here?"

The jolt of panic that ran through Golen could be sensed in the Force. It was all Shanree needed and pulled the trigger twice. Leaving the way he came he leapt through the hole in the roof and picked a path with the aid of his implant through the back of the compound and away from the fighting. He contacted Eye-Gee and told him to fallback, his diversion having

accomplished its task. Now that Temartis had been revealed as a traitor it explained so much about the strange behavior of the troops he'd encountered. He'd thought it so queer that the attackers were relatively dug in, why they patrolled rather than sieged. They weren't here to capture Temartis but take him, and his research, back with the Children of Mortis to wherever they called home. The distant roar of heavy ion thrusters powering up and taking off reminded Shanree that the CoM had brought ships to take away materiel as well and he hadn't stopped them from leaving with their treasure. That was a problem.

Appius had been woefully underprepared and sloppy with this project and who ran it. He would need to find out how the Consul had come to employ Temartis and probe how deep the infiltration of the Clan ran. Could he tell the Consul, however? There was nothing proving, one way or another, that Appius himself wasn't a double-agent himself or not. The puzzle, the parameters and size of it, began to form in his head. He felt a guilty sort of rush at the excitement he felt to be back on a case. For now he would turn in the research data obtained from Temartis. Would he tell the Consul that the Chief Engineer had been working for the enemy, or would that give too much away? In the end he decided to play it both ways; he handed the case over to the Consul, who was wearing his full Mandolorian armor, and informed him of Temartis' fate. He would continue investigating quietly until he knew the lay of the land better.

Appius was quiet at the news, back at a Taldryan field command position, but lifted the briefcase all the same in a gesture of thanks, "I will have to look into this further. Your assistance has been greatly appreciated Mr. Argentin. I have more work for you, if you and the boy are sticking around. There's a war on."

"Yeah", Shanree shook the man's gauntleted hand, "I think we can be of some help. What's next?"