

Star Wars

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N 81

Republic Commando

Omega Squad : Targets

by Karen Traviss

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Headquarters Special Operations. Coruscant: Arca Company Barracks.

"Go on," said Fi. "Shoot me. Do your worst."

He held his arms away from his sides, presenting a clear shot to his comrade

Atin raised the Verpine shatter gun and aimed two handed, his left hand steadying the grip

"You're all mouth, FI," he said.

Atin squeezed the trigger. Fi's armored breastplate puffed a cloud of coating with a loud crack, and he fell back against the wall of their quarters. Verps were silent except for the impact and the screaming that sometimes followed the blasts. Fi wasn't screaming. But behind his visor, his mouth was open in a silent oh of pain.

Atin stood over Fi and checked both the breastplate and the Verp's chamber before hauling him back to his feet. They took off their helmets and looked around for the spent projectile. Fi picked up a flattened disc of metal whose edges were split and curled back like a flower, and tossed it in the air for Atin to catch,

"Okay, the upgrade worked," said Atin. "But you can't blame me for checking. I spent a month in the bacta tank thanks to one of these."

Fi didn't trust Procurement any more than Atin did, not when there were more than 10,000 sets of cosily equipment to upgrade. They'd griped about the expense, but now everything - from their armor systems to their DC-17 rifles - was hardened against EMP and Verps. the two weaknesses that had almost got them killed on Qiilura.

Fi slipped his helmet back on and rapped his knuckle plate on it 'Well, nothing short of a sustained laser cannon is going to give us a headache now.'

The door whispered open. Niner, all grin responsibility, stood in the doorway in his black body suit. Darman was behind him, armored up, helmet tucked under one arm.

"What was that noise?" Niner said.

"Testing the new armor. Sarge."

"Testing my patience more like." He made an irritated click with his teeth, just like Kal Skirata used to; Fi could see more of their old training sergeant's, habits in Niner with every passing day. He glanced around the room "You fired a weapon in here?"

"It's okay, Sarge. we were wearing helmets," Atin stood his ground. Sensible precautions often placated Niner. "You can't trust Procurement?"

'Well, game over. We've got trade. Armed siege at the GC spaceport."

"Don't they have civil police for that son of stuff?" Fi asked. "We'll be directing traffic next,"

'Not when there are hostages and one is a Senator." Niner held out his hand to Atin for the Verpine, studied it, and then handed it back. 'They've never dealt with anything like this before, and they heard we were the boys for the job."

Fi lifted his backpack from its locker. 'I didn't have anything special planned for this evening anyway." Atin was right: He was all mouth. He became two men again as he always did when it was time to roll - the commando who was eager to put his hard-won skills to the test and the scared kid who wasn't sure he'd be alive tomorrow. He found himself worrying whether he'd signed out the Verpine from the armory. How much trouble could an armed siege be, anyway? He had his Katarn armor and he - and his mates - could take on a small army.

They all knew what the final score would be, more or less.

Atin gave him a shove and tucked The Verpine in his belt. "After you."

Maybe Atin was thinking exactly the same thing.

Holonews Update, 1530: Senator Meena Tills is believed to be among six hostages seized by an armed gang at Galactic City spaceport. Police have sealed off the area and all city traffic and interplanetary flights are being diverted. Expect long delays. More later.

Galactic City. Coruscant. was amazing.

Fi leaned out of the police assault ship's bay with his DC-17 clunking against his breastplate at every swerve and lurch of the vessel. Wind whipped into the hold, flattening his hair and peppering grit against his armor and his face. He'd never seen so many brilliantly

colored lights: The walkways and sky lanes stretched as far above him as they did below. No wonder they called this place the Abyss.

"Gel your head back in," yelled the pilot. 'What are you, a tourist or something?"

Fi leaned a little further out, trusting the safety harness. 'But don't you think it's amazing?"

"Yeah, every rotten, stinking shift," said the pilot wearily. "Get him back inboard, will you?"

Niner jerked on the line. "Fi, don't frighten the civvies." he said. 'It's not nice. And put your helmet on."

Cloud cars filled the airspace. The Coruscant Security Force pilot was trying to edge the custom VAAT/e between crammed civilian traffic packed solid in three directions, cursing under his breath. The pulsing wall of the emergency klaxon and flashing lights were enough to make the dead clear a path. But nothing moved in the gridlock. Speeders almost scraping the bodywork tried to escape into gaps that weren't there: 25 meters of assault ship didn't fit well into the tight sky lanes.

All that Fi had ever seen of Coruscant was barracks and a compound bounded by security walls. None of the commandos had ever been on a run ashore, a social adventure that Skirata had said they should experience at least once in their lives. From the crew bay, he could see crowds of every species pressed up against barriers, brightly lit shops and bars and apartments, exotic and unimaginable places that beckoned. Yes, he'd have that run ashore some day.

Omega Squad chatted on the privacy of their helmet comlink, audible only to each other. Fi dragged his gaze from the outside world and settled into the bitter, sweet cocoon of his helmet, at once both reassuring and confining.

"Receive schematics, people." said Niner. "And real-time view."

A display of lines and fly-through images filled Fi's HUD. The image that Niner had transmitted from his data pad was the plan of the spaceport building; long walkways led off vaulted halls and service areas, cubes of offices lined corridors, and power conduits wove through the image in green light. Superimposed on top of the overview, a readout image of the main spaceport arrivals area showed knots of blue-armored Senate Guards and CSF squads in yellow vests crouched behind security barricades, some engaged in animated conversation.

A blue hologram figure of a thick-set man in uniform shimmered into life in the hold, a little paunchy but still looking like he could give as good as he got. "Commander Obrim here, Senate Guard, Can you see this. Omega?"

Niner spoke for them, "Got it."

"They're holed up in a customs clearance corridor, and they've threatened to detonate explosives. Two sets of doors. and we've left them control of one to stop them panicking and doing something stupid."

"How many confirmed?"

"Six passengers, and we're trying to get pictures of them." Ogrim might not have played this game before, but he had some common sense. "Witnesses report four perpetrators armed with blasters and carrying something in backpacks, which we have to assume are explosives. No ID on them yet, but they were all on the same flight."

"Any contact with the targets?"

A pause. "If you mean the gang, they've issued demands and we have a secure comlink established with them."

"And you have primacy?" Are you running the show?" Fi could hear the doubt in Niner's voice. "I thought the city came under CSF jurisdiction."

"Not as long as I have a Senator and his aide in danger," said Ogrim. The hologram began to waver again. "Ogrim out,"

The CSF pilot brought the assault ship to a sudden halt. The undersized black and white marble facade of the spaceport terminal shimmered with ruby under flashing police lights. The front of the building was a crush of speeders and other emergency craft, none of them making a good job or keeping an access corridor open.

"Can't get in any closer," said the pilot. "You'll have to rope it down the rest of the way."

"Don't want for a tip." said Fi and wondered where he'd picked up the phrase.

"We are citizens of Haruun Kal. The Republic has fuelled the civil war on our world and now brings a fresh war to us. Remove your presence from our planet now, or your Senator and the passengers die. Now you know we can reach into the heart of the Republic." (Message sent to RHN newsroom by Nuriin-Ar, leader of the group claiming responsibility for the hostage incident.)

Fi braced his legs, placing both hocks on the outside rail of the ship's troop hold. He gave the rappel line one last tug, to check that it was secure before dropping 15 meters to the walkway, DC-17 ready in one hand, a sea of open-mouthed faces staring up at him from behind the police cordon.

A sudden movement in his peripheral vision made him raise the rifle. A hover-cam with a RHN logo was sitting motionless 5 meters to his right, too far inside the cordon, outlined against the clean, white facade of the port. There was no point being covert ops if you were on

the news and your target might be watching. The rest of the squad could see Fi's field of vision via an icon in their helmet links.

"I don't thlnk that carn's seen a Deece before," said Darman's voice.

Fi's boots hit the watkway and he aimed. The hovercam darted left then right in his scope, fast but not fast enough, "It has now."

A shout of 'hey!' followed the thwack of exploding hovercam. The rest of Omega Squad hit the ground and jogged toward the terminal entrance. "You shot my cam!" yelled a woman from the watching crowd. She was wearing a bright yellow tabard emblazoned with the word MEDIA in large letters. "You shot It!"

Fi touched his glove to his helmet in apology, just as he'd been taught, but he still thought it was a pretty good shot. "Oops. Beg your pardon, ma'am. "

He jogged after the others, conscious of the staring crowd. Fi saw his armor as safe and welcoming. But the expressions on a couple of faces made him realize that ordinary people were scared by it.

And it wasn't just the civilians who found Omega Squad a riveting spectacle. The CSF and Senate Guard officers at the forward control point stared, too. Obrim stopped a head-to-head discussion with a CSF lieutenant and stepped back from the defensive barricade of baggage repulsors and portable blast shields erected 10 meters around the customs halt.

"I see you're tooled up." Obrim said, eyeing the DC-17s with a distinct air of alarm. He almost slid his modes; police issued blaster behind his back. "They're not driving Trade Federation tanks, you know."

Fi decided that the police had a lot to learn about sieges. You could do anything with a Deece: A turn of the wrist, and it was a sniper rifle, grenade launcher, or a regular blaster. You could even club someone with it if you had to, although Fi hadn't tried that yet. He checked the vibroblade in his gauntlet out of habit. and the shunk-shunk sound as it extended and retracted made Obrim flinch.

Niner made that annoyed click. Fi took the hint.

"Let's get a cam in there first so we can see what's going on," said Niner. He beckoned: Darman and Atin forward. "Pictures, Commander? We need to know who to shoot."

"You're a bit keen."

"If you're not a hostage, you're a hostage taker, and that means you're dead a few seconds after we go in. We hate to make mistakes."

"What do you mean by go in, exactly?" The CSF lieutenant stepped between them. A name tab on his vest said DOVEL. "I'm incident commander.

I say how and when anyone goes in. We've got a Jedi coming down to negotiate with the leader."

Darman took his pack off his back and began pulling out coils of high-yield charges and detonators. He was staring at the security doors as if calculating. "We'll still get the charges in place, just in case."

"No, that's not how we do it," said Dovel. "We don't want the hostages char-grilled. No storming, no heroics. Not yet."

Obrim interrupted, "Senate Security Committee wants this ended fast to show Haruun Kal we're in control. They can't just walk in here, grab a Senator, and hold the Republic's finest at bay."

"Maybe the Republic's finest, or you to be exact, should have concentrated on ensuring secure transportation for Senators," said Dovel, "What about those other hostages? You want to tell their families that they got fired because you called in the heavy mob to save a politician?"

Niner waited, all mild, deceptive patience. Fi had decided on first meeting him that he was a misery-guts, but now he found him solid and reassuring, just the way a sergeant ought to be. "Let's be clear what we're trained to do, gentlemen. We go in and extract hostages by any means necessary. We don't ask for ID. We don't take targets alive. We don't avoid damaging the furniture. When you send us in, there is no happy ending," He paused as if waiting to see if the reality of the request had sunk in. "So we'll just wander around and rig the interrupts to the power and light, and you call us when you're ready to roll."

Atin took a couple of strip-cams from his backpack, each no bulkier than a sheet of flimsi. Fi switched to the internal comlink. "You think they're real terrorists or Haruun Kal government agents upping the ante?"

Atin shrugged. "I don't care as long as they fall over when we shoot them." A commando's life was all clarity. Fi was glad he wasn't Obrim - or Dovel.

Holonews update, 1700: The family of an elderly couple held hostage with Senator Tills have made an emotional plea for their safe release. Joz and Cira Larutur from Garqi were on their way to see their first grandchild when they were seized. Other hostages have been named as customs officer Berin B'naian and Senatorial aide Vun Merett Jai, but the identity of the sixth hostage remains unknown.

Obrim was talking on the comlink to Nuriin-Ar in carefully restrained tones while Omega listened in. Fi was concentrating on the sounds in the background with an intensity learned from growing up where everyone looked and sounded the same, distinguished only by minute variation; in tone and expression

He could hear the old woman's voice saying, "Oh Joz... oh Joz..." over and over very quietly. From time to time, he heard an equally quiet reply from the old man: "Don't you worry."

It made him uncomfortable. He wasn't sure why,

Obrim let out a breath. "The Jedi's here."

Fi's stomach churned when he saw the distinctive red-trimmed visor of an ARC trooper captain through the grimy, white helmets of the CSF line. The line melted away for the ARC: Behind him trailed a human male in a very well-cut business suit, a young Twi'lek Jedi. and...

...a scruffy, wiry little man who looked old enough to be everyone's father, a man with a face as wrinkled as his clothes, buzz-cut gray hair, and a limp that didn't stop him from covering the ground like a racing odupiendo.

"Sarge!" said Fi.

Niner's head jerked up. "It is!"

Kal Skirata reached them a stride ahead of the ARC captain. He grinned up at Fi as if he recognized him but that was impossible. He'd had a hundred identical young commandos in his batch. He couldn't possibly remember. He couldn't possibly see past the visor, either.

"Who let that vagrant in?" demanded Obrim.

"That," said Fi, "Is the man who taught us all we know,"

Obrim sighed. "We're screwed, then."

Fi touched his fingers to his helmet anyway, even if Skirata was out of uniform. "Sarge, what are you doing here?"

"Where there's trouble, Fi. there's always a job for me. Special security adviser now." Oh, he knew. How? How? "Nice new armor. Going on a date? And who's he?"

Fi followed Skirata's gaze. "That's Atin. Hang on, how do you...'

"Lads, this is Master Kaim and the Senate Head of Public Affairs, Mar Rugeyan. Fi heard Obrim sigh again. "And ARC N-11. We all want the same outcome-hostages out, scum bags dead, traffic flowing again. Let's get to it."

Kaim looked like a youngster aged early by responsibility. He stared at the door behind the barricades and closed his eyes for a moment, lekku moving ever so slightly, hands clasped in front of him.

"I'm going to ask them to let me in to talk." Kaim said. "When I have their attention, I will help them decide to release the hostages and to talk to me, which will not be easy with Korunnai" He took his lightsaber from his cloak and handed it to the ARC. "I have to show goodwill and enter unarmed."

"You're nuts, sir," said Ogrim. "You're giving them another hostage."

"One with a choice. * said Kaim. "Captain, if I get inside, you have command here."

The captain just nodded once. Atin took the strip-cams and held one out to Kaim. "'If you get a chance, sir, try to leave this inside. Anywhere. Even If we can't get an image, we can pick up audio."

Kaim examined the strip and tucked it in his sleeve, then took out his comlink. "Nuriin-Ar, can you hear me? Will you let me in so we can speak?"

The simultaneous chunk and uuiirrrr of 20 service-issue blasters powering up made Fi turn and aim in time to see the doors at the customs hall begin to part. For a moment, the commandos were a single wall of rifles with the two police forces. Slowly, the blade-thin gap opened wide enough for Fi to see a few huddled shapes inside.

Kaim went in.

GC spaceport terminal building. 1745.

Fi could see what Atin could see and hear what he heard. The squad had switched to the cam output within their helmets, and they were all focused on an unsteady image of folds of fabric and the muffled but audible conversation.

"Let these people leave," said Kaim. "You don't want to harm them."

"And no doubt you don't want to harm ordinary Korunnai, yet your interference does just that." The view from the cam shifted and Fi could see figures distorted by the wide-angle lens: four men, one in gray, one in dark green, one in light tan, and one in a loose, dark-brown coat. All had their faces obscured by black scarves. There were figures behind them, two groups of three, also with their heads covered in the same scarves. But they were the hostages, judging by their huddled positions and their clothing: out-of-date fashions from Garqi, a business suit, a customs uniform, a Mon Calamari Senator's formal robe, and a cheaper imitation of it.

Fine, thought Fi. His helmet was recording. I don't need to see your faces. I know what you wear, how you move, now you sound, and that's how I'll know who you are when I blow your brains out.

Kaim's voice was soothing and reasonable. "These people need food and water,"

"That's the least of their worries." The one in gray; Fi noted his voice. The one in light tan turned to look at the Senator and told him to shut up. Green Man was holding his blaster left-handed. Detail. "Take a look at their baggage."

Tan Man - Fi now saw the targets as color coded-grabbed; the old Gargian man by his shoulder and dragged him across the polished tiles a little way from the wall on his backside. The old woman's voice whimpered. terrified. Fi could see now what Gray had meant by baggage: The hostages had small packs strapped to them.

"Six lives are a price worth paying, Jedi," said Gray. "We will detonate the charges."

"This wins you no sympathy. Mercy will."

"We don't require sympathy. Just your compliance."

"Let the old couple go, at least."

There was a pause. Fi wasn't sure where Kaim had managed to place the stnp-cam, but Gray's shrouded face came closer and Fi saw two pale eyes as if he was looking into them personally.

"Lying Jedi filth! Spy!" Gray hissed, and the sound and image crashed to static and black.

"Fierfek...." said Atin.

They heard the screams. They weren't only from an old woman. Then there was a thud and shouting..."Shut up! Shut up, or you die now!" - then silence. Fi looked to the ARC, rifle aimed at the doors: Darman raised the remote detonators in his glove, a mute request for permission to blow the doors,

"Hold fire." said the ARC.

The twin doors began to part and Fi, Atin, and Niner had their Deeces trained on the widening gap. Fi could see the different views through their scopes in his HUD.

"I said hold!"

Something tipped and rolled onto the polished marble and the doors sighed shut again. It was Kaim. Fi and Niner edged forward first, and the police closed up behind them. Fi wondered how much the hovercams and broadcast droids could see. Could the gang see them?

Kaim wasn't moving. Niner put out a cautious hand to pull back the Jedi's robe, and Fi saw a flicker of light and heard Niner catch his breath.

"Booby trap - counting down!"

Fi didn't think.

The police officers were right on top of him, unprotected.

He flung himself flat on Kaim's body, eyes tight shut so he wouldn't see the shattered face, wailing long fractions within fractions of seconds before a shock wave lifted him like a body blow and raw noise filled his helmet. He felt as if he'd, been shaken hard in a metal box. For an instant, red light flooded his eyes behind his closed lids.

How long the next moment, took he didn't know. But he could hear the ARC shouting, "Droid those cams! Do It! Now!"

He could hear yelling, so he wasn't dead. That was something.

Holoflash, 1758: A Huruun Kal group holding Senator Tills has killed a Jedi negotiator. All location cams have been disabled in a news blackout. but we've just witnessed horrific scenes as the Jedi's booby-trapped remains exploded in the terminal. It's thought a member of the elite Republic Commando shielded the blast with his body. Viewers might find the following images distressing.

"What do you use for brains, Fi?" Skirata hissed, supporting Fi's shoulders. "You're a di'kut"

Fi could feel bruises forming everywhere he had places He sat upright with some difficulty, "Thanks for the sympathy. Sarge. I'm fine."

"You trust that pretty armor a lot more than I would." Skirata suddenly shook him fiercely by the shoulder. "Don't you ever scare me like that again, son. You hear? Let the cops look after themselves."

It hadn't been a big device. Just enough to kill or maim a couple of people, but not enough to breach Katarn armor He'd smothered the blast and the shrapnel that went with it. Fi hadn't been 100 percent sure at the time that the armor would absorb the energy from the blast, and now that the adrenaline had finished coursing through his veins he felt shaky.

The ARC stared down at him, fists on hips. Skirata kept calling him Ordo: Skirata insisted men had names, not numbers, whatever the rules said.

"Nice move." said Ordo.

"Nice skirt." Fi indicated Ordo's battle-scarred belt-spat, shredded at the hem like a flag that had been left too long on its mast. He wiped his armor, trying to forget what was smeared on the plasioid-alloy but the smelt kept reminding him. "Really suits you. Hand washable?"

Ordo's expression was hidden behind his visor but his tone wasn't. "It's a kama." he said, all Ice.

"Some day, Fi, someone's going to belt you one," Atin muttered. "And it's probably going to be Ordo."

He was right. But Fi didn't know any other way to keep his gut from shaking at times like this, it was how he coped. He was relieved and he was shocked, and now he had to get on with the job. He leaned on his Deece to get to his feet and saw that the cams and droids had gone: the illuminated displays in the terminal were black screens, and the amber emergency fighting was on.

So Ordo had deployed an EMP device to knock out the holocams. and it had taken out all the unshielded equipment around them too. Droiding. A crazy but necessary move. Fi thought, seeing as it might have triggered whatever explosives the gang had rigged. He linked into Niner's helmet and saw that he was running and rerunning the Images of the gang that Kaim had paid for with his life, memorizing the identifying details,

Rugeyan was looking around the terminal hall, chatting on his comhmk. The embodiment of pure calculation. "Okay, so we'll have to take the news conferences at the Chamber... any more bodies, and they go out via the back... I know, it's not good seeing Jedi body parts... the grunt was great, right?"

Ordo and Skirata looked at each other as if some common bond had sprung up from nowhere. Fi wondered if they had some commlink of their own: Skirata occasionally slipped something into his ear and removed it again. Ordo cocked his head but Skirata smiled lightly and without humor. He turned to Rugeyan and put a scarred hand on the sleeve of his nice, sharp tunic.

"Son," he said. 'I couldn't help noticing that you called my boys grunts. Don't do that again, will you?"

Rugeyan looked down at Skirata as if he'd noticed him for the first time and lowered the comhmk. "We want the Senator out now. Nothing else matters."

"I'm glad you pointed that out to me." Fi couldn't see what Skirata did next, but his arm dropped down and suddenly Rugeyan seemed to be taking a lot of notice of him. His eyes bulged visibly and a small uh noise forced its way past his lips. "Now that I have your attention, may I suggest that you remove yourself from the incident scene and let Captain Ordo and my boys do their jobs?"

Fi was mesmerized. Darman jogged up to the tableau of frozen pain. "Charges laid, Sarge. Ready to go."

Skirata's arm fell back to his side again, and Rugeyan inhaled sharply before brushing down his tunic and striding away with somewhat splayed legs.

"I'll remember that move." said Atin approvingly, "Vau never taught us anything like that."

But Vau had certainly taught Atin the exacting procedures for storming a building, Fi knew. He just wondered about Ordo. ARCs weren't team players.

"Fancy, a bit of action for a change, Captain?" asked Fi "Give yogr Deece a day out?"

"Don't worry, if your luck holds, I'll be right in front of you." said Ordo, toneless. "If it doesn't. I'll be behind you."

Fi thought about that for a few moments. Then he started wondering again why Nuriin-Ar and his cronies hadn't seized hostages in the transport before it landed: it was a better location to withstand an assault. The fools were facing certain death. They wouldn't shift the Senate's position. And they had to be stupid if they didn't realize that.

In the end, though, their intelligence levels wouldn't matter. He checked his Deece, rehearsing rapid changes between modes and aware that Ordo kept looking his way.

Holonews Update, 1830: The Haruun Kal government has denied knowledge of Nunin-Ar. leader of the group that's holding six hostages at Galactic City spaceport. But in an unusually robust statement, the Korunnai ambassador says she "fully understands the group's frustration and has urged the Republic to cease interfering in her planet's affairs.

One of the CSF officers brought a tray of caf in flimsi cups and handed Fi one first. A camaraderie had sprung up: Fi rather liked it. The cops actually seemed in awe of what he'd done, and he began to realize that it felt good to be held in that kind of regard.

"No cookies?" said Skirata, and took a cup.

The squad took their helmets off to drink. The officer seemed distracted for a moment, staring at their faces. "I'll see what I can do," he said.

"Don't wait for a tip." said Skirata. Fi smiled to himself.

Obrim and Dovel were observing a few paces away, and the group stared at the hologram of the temunal layout that Ordo projected into the space between them.

"It's an oblong room," said Skirata, and slurped his caf "No scope for anything clever. It's just going to be a matter of speed, force, and knowing who you're going to drop as soon as you're in there."

"But how are you going to stop them setting off the devices?" asked Dovel.

"By slotting them before they can move." said Niner, "We've done this more than 100 times, and we know how each other thinks. This is probably their first time."

"And their last." Ordo dipped the finger of his glove through the shimmering virtual roof space of the customs hall. "I'll take the roof

and keep the hostages still until we get bomb disposal in there to deal with the novices."

"All The hostages?" said Ogrim.

"I realise the Senator is a priority."

Dovel chewed his lip thoughtfully, clearly a man who no longer wanted primacy in this incident. Fi thought that was a smart change of heart. If anything went wrong, he knew who would get the blame now.

Ordo got up and tidied his rappel line before fastening it to his belt. "I'll get in position," he said. "And I'm switching to the general comlink channel. We go in at 1915. Darman counts us down, and Ogrim's men kill all the lights, okay?"

Dovel's communicator chirped. He answered it and adopted that middle-distance state that people had when they were trying to concentrate on something that they weren't expecting to hear.

"It's Nuriin-Ar." he said. "He's asking for buckets, food, and wafer."

"Ah. The power of the need for a "fresher" said Ogrim. "Looks like our hard men are softening."

"Even people who plan to kill engage in displacement activity," said Skirata. "I'll take the stuff in for you."

"I think I should be doing that, Sergeant." said Ordo.

"Yeah, like they'd succumb to your natural charm." Skirata began checking the pockets in his rumpled jacket. He extracted something that looked like a hearing enhancer - no, it was a hearing enhancer. Fi had always doubted that Skirata's hearing was perfect, and now he knew. "Atin, can you pick up my enhancer's signal? I hate this thing. But it does come in handy."

"I'll do." said Atin stabbing his finger into a small receiver in his palm. "Are you really deaf?"

"A bit deaf. Just like you'd be if you hung around live-fire ranges without a helmet for too long."

"With respect, you'll just add another complication." said Ordo. Skirata sipped his caf without looking up. "If you mean that my boys will have to worry about shooting me by accident, then it's simple. They won't worry about it. Acceptable losses."

There was a complete silence in all their helmet comlinks for a telling and brief moment: no breath, no swallowing, no lick of the lips. Fi had a sudden mental image so awful that he didn't want to deal with it, not then,

Now it was all down to a well-rehearsed procedure. The charges would detonate, and they would lob in a few flashbangs so close together that it would feel like the same split second and plunge into reactions so automatic that they wouldn't pause to think what to do next or even know how much time had elapsed.

It was drilled deep, unthinking second nature. Fi longed for the moment instinct and training took him over again.

"I'll give you as many clues as I can, so listen hard," said Skirata. He fidgeted with the enhancer, making the same irritated clicks that Niner had. "And if I'm in the way when you come in, it's too bad, okay? You drop 'em all, straight through me if need be."

"Will do. Sarge," said Fi, and knew he would never do anything of the kind.

Galactic City terminal. 1855.

The doors parted. Fi, standing well back, stared down the scope of the Deece, not planning to take a shot but ready anyway. Skirata walked forward a few steps.

"Grilled food board." he said, arms held away from his sides, a picture of sub-servience. "And... umm... facilities."

Fi could see past him into the enclosed corridor: The hostages were still split into two groups. One of the targets stepped up to Skirata and placed the muzzle of his blaster against his forehead, Green Man, Fi thought, and made a mental note of the target's gait. It was a clean shot he couldn't take but not right then. The sound signal was fuzzy but audible enough.

"Put the buckets down and back off."

Skirata - short, wiry, forgettable, dragging his left leg - looked like janitor. Fi knew Green wouldn't see what was really there.

"What about the old couple?" said Skirata. "Don't you think they've had enough? Why not let 'em go? Take me instead."

Go on. Go on. Let him in...

Green paused and then gestured Skirata inside with the blaster. "You can keep them company," he said. "You're too altruistic for a delivery boy. We better search you."

The doors closed, "Stand by," said Niner.

They look up positions on either side of the doors. Fi and Niner to the left. Atin and Darman to the right. They could hear Skirata's breathing-remarkably controlled under the circumstances - and the occasional rustle of fabric. They were searching him. The enhancer didn't seem to get their attention, the device was too obvious.

"You okay, missus?" said Skirata's voice. There was a mumbled reply, probably from the elderly Garqi woman. "Lie down. You'll feel better."

"Shut up." said a voice, a new one. Tan Man, thought Fi. He'd know that voice the next time he heard it. You'll get yours. Nothing personal, just business.

They heard Skirata and the targets again. Fi paused. Every word counted: Skirata was probably risking death or at least a smach in the mouth with a blaster. Dun to speak at all.

"Here, son, let me have a look at that chrono... wow. that must have cost you something....what kind of business you in, then? Where you from? Mayro, eh? What's your name?"

"Quiet."

"Mayro, Never been there...you're N'zaet Nir, eh?"

"Shut up." Tan Man again.

"Okay, keep your hair on. I'll just sit here with Joz and Cira you... okay, sweet-heart? Don't worry..."

"Shut up." Thwack.

There were indistinct sounds of fabric rumpling and occasional breathy sobs in different voices. Fi tried not to think what the thwack was. But at least they had a name for the last hostage. It might matter.

He closed his eyes for a second and visualized the layout. Skirata probably had three hostages right next to him then. That left Senator Till's position unaccounted for as well as his aide. But it was better than nothing.

"Why was he repeating Mayro?" asked Darman "Where's Mayro'*

Niner's voice filled his skull. "It's Corporate Sector. Ordo, you ready'

Fi took a deep breath. He activated his helmet spot lamp and checked the chrono on his forearm plate. When the doors blew and Niner lobbed in the flashbang - bright and loud enough to stun most species for several vital seconds - he would swing 270 degrees to his left, step in, and aim, ready to take down the first recognizable target he saw. He'd done it time after time.

"Roof team ready," said Ordo. "Darman?"

"Ready." Darman raised his gloved fist. "In three. Two. Go."

Boom.

Light exploded out of the shattered doors and Fi ran into it, Deece raised. Time slowed into a sequence of freeze frames. A man in a green tunic, stunned. Squinting against the helmet spot lamp, shouting "No!" in a voice Fi had memorized as target, struggled to raise his blaster, and Fi put a single bolt through his chest. Spot-lamp beams crisscrossed the room. Debris rained down from the ceiling as Ordo crashed down a couple of meters from Fi, Atin dropped Gray with two shots.

A second of utter silence. Then someone in dark brown got up from the floor and Darman and Niner both fired at once.

"Everyone down! Down!" Ordo had his rifle trained on a group of hostages. "Stay still! Republic forces! And Darman was shouting, "Where's Tan?" Where's Tan?"

Fi's lamp swept the wall to his left, and he saw a light tan shape with Skirata half-across it, transfixed by the beam, veiling, "No, Fi! No!" Fi felt his finger compress the trigger without any intervention from his conscious mind, and time slowed down a hundredfold.

"Fl, no!" Skirata had flung himself across the tan-coated figure. "Hostage. Fi! Hold fire!"

Fi's finger eased back. The silence was sudden and total again, punctuated only by the patter of ceiling panels still falling in chunks on the tiled floor.

I nearly killed him. I nearly killed Skirata.

Ordo, standing over the hostages, suddenly fired his Deece into one of them and yelled at them to stay still. The emergency lighting came on again. Six civilians were frozen in terror.

"Fierfek" said Atin. "I thought he'd shot a hostage for a second."

"Get ordnance disposal in here before these people start going hysterical." said Ordo. "And get the Senator clear first."

There was a man in an expensive suit crumpled on the floor between the other hostages with a blaster beside him.

"He had a weapon," said Ordo "It's something of a giveaway. Must have swapped coats with our businessman,"

Now that all the targets were down. Fi could think only of Skirata's horrified expression in his spot-lamp beam. He fought down an impulse to tell him he was sorry. The old warrior was kneeling in front of the stunned hostages, now making reassuringly cheery comments that everything was going to be fine as long as they kept very still just a little longer. They were rigged to explosives and a dead terrorist was still smoking gently in their midst. And yet they kept still, and they kept quiet. People generally did what Skirata told them.

He glanced up at FI. "Well, not exactly textbook. But dead's dead."

Explosives disposal officers moved in to check the backpacks and the squad moved out. Fi looked at his chrono: The assault had taken less than 30 seconds.

He could feel the adrenaline ebbing while his body - which didn't care how trained he was - tackled the aftermath of the massive surge of hormone. His breath rasped hard in his ears as he sat down on a baggage repulsor.

"All clear." The explosives officer came out of the wrecked hallway with an open backpack that rattled as he walked. "And I mean really clear. These packs are just full of used comlink parts. Nasty bluff."

Skirata wandered over to Fi and sat down beside him. "We don't like practical jokes like that, do we, lads?" he said. He motioned him to take his helmet off. "Serves the stupid bunch of dickheads right."

Obrim stood at the blast-shattered doors, looking bewildered, "Is that it?" he said. "We prate around for more than three hours, and you clear the room in 60 seconds?"

"Twenty." said Fi automatically.

It all looked easy from the outside. It probably would have looked great to the holocams. Fi could see only that he had come within an ace of doing what he never believed he could. If Skirata hadn't identified the man as a hostage. FI would have killed both of them with a single round.

Sergeant Kal's nearly a father to us. How could I?

He took off his helmet and wiped his palm across his forehead, still unable to shake Skirata's image from his mind.

"You really would have slotted me, wouldn't you?" said the old sergeant hoarsely.

"Sarge, I'm sorry. I..."

"No, you're a good lad." He still seemed able to read Fi's every thought, just as he had in training, "You only did what I taught you to do. What did I say?"

Fi swallowed. "Priority is to drop the bad guys. Sarge."

"Good. I'm proud of you. Sentimentality gets you killed." He tapped Fi's cheek a few times with the flat of his hand. "And matey over there is luckier than he'll ever know as are we all. They made him change clothes with them for a good reason, I reckon. He's CorSec."

The businessman. N'zaet Nir, was still standing by the wall, examining the scruffy tan jacket and pants as if appalled to find himself

in such tatty clothing. He should have been medevacked for a routine check-up by now, but whatever he had said had ensured he was still there and waiting. He walked up to Ogrim.

"I need to leave right now."

"You really should have that check-up. sir."

"But I have an important meeting. I'm a member of Co'Sec's Direx, and it's imperative that I attend,"

"Just as well you're in one piece then," said Skirata. 'I don't think your government colleagues would have found it amusing if we'd crashed in and shot you by mistake. Especially when the explosives were dummies."

Nir seemed to have forgotten his terror of a few minutes earlier. "No. they would not. We hope to stay cut of your disputes with the Separatists. Can I have my suit back now?, And who's paying for the damage?"

Fi thought a thank you might have been a nice touch, but he realized he had missed something in the exchange that had made Ogrim and Skirata just stare at each other.

Niner walked over to them, followed by Ordo. Neither looked as if anything left them trembling. "What have I missed?"

"It wasn't the Senator," said Ogrim. "He wasn't the key hostage. He was a lure to get us to storm in and kill the real trump card they were holding."

"You want to explain all that, Sarge?"

Skirata raked stubby fingers through his hair. "The Corporate Sector Authority is neutral and the Direx Board is its governing body. They've got serious money and armaments, so you don't want to upset them. So if Fi had shot a Direx member, the political fall-out would have been enormous - CorSec might have decided to take sides and throw their money and guns behind the Separatists. Want me to go on?"

"Fierfek," said Fi. But it still didn't feel as close a call as nearly killing Skirata. "That's a new one for the training manual."

"You said it. Heavy-handed Republic overreacts, storms in and kills top CorSec man, Nice stunt, whoever they are."

Ogrim shrugged. 'Well, you can sleep soundly tonight in the knowledge that you've given Rugeyan a timely public relations coup. Just a shame it wasn't live on RHN...

He trailed off. Ordo had taken off his helmet. For some reason, Fi wasn't expecting the ARC to look like them but of course he did. He looked Fi straight in the eye, but it wasn't like looking in a mirror at

alt, although it was a striking enough resemblance to reduce Ogrim to silence.

"We're not supposed to be in the public eye." said Ordo. "But it doesn't do the Republic's citizens any harm to know what we do." He was staring intently at Fi. "And you, brother, are very mouthy, very annoying, and stupidly brave. I forgive you for the crack about the kama. This time, anyway. "

Fi didn't feel brave, not right then. He also wondered, if smothering the bomb had been any more courageous than Master Kaim's actions. It was pure training, a split-second's decision exactly like Darman's or Atin's - or Ordo's.

And it was another thing that Kal Skirata had taught him to do. He remembered that now.

Holonews Update, 1930: The siege at Galactic City spaceport has ended with the rescue of Senator Meena Tills and all the remaining hostages. Commando forces stormed a hall in the terminal building and shot dead four terrorists from a group opposed to Republic influence on Haruun Kal. We now have our droid cams back on line, and we're going live to the scene.

Rugeyan was as smug as Ogrim had predicted. He came back into the terminal hall trailed by journalists and a cloud of fresh hovercams oozing satisfaction. Ogrim stopped them and took him aside, walking him to the knot of commandos and police that was waiting beside the shattered doors.

"Before you strike up the band, you ought to know the explosives were a hoax." said the commander.

Fi watched absolutely nothing cross Rugeyan's face.

"So?"

"Looks like a stunt to get us to go in mob-handed and shoot a member of the CorSec Direx Board, and that has nothing to do with the Senator. We can't be sure who's behind it. so let's think about this before we start crowing."

Rugeyan maintained his blank expression in silence for a few seconds. Then a practiced smile snapped instantly into place. "Commander, those thugs held innocent people and murdered a Jedi Master whose sole concern was the welfare of the hostages. The Senate does not tolerate terrorism. We deal with it robustly, and we have shown billions viewers tonight just what awaits anyone who wants to test our resolve." His smile disappeared like a light going out. "The rest is detail, and that needn't trouble our vigilant media."

He gathered up his smile again and walked back to where the media were waiting.

"Will he remember all that for the earns?" asked Fi.

"He probably talks like that in his sleep," said Ogrim. "Anyway, I just want to get home. Unless you boys would like a drink."

Skirata smiled uncomfortably. "We're always on duty, Commander, so we don't get to have a drink. But thanks. You go on home."

Fi couldn't find a joke that would help him right then. He was grateful for the privacy of his helmet,

I really would have fired.

Darman elbowed him in the back, more a playful gesture than one of annoyance. "We missed dinner." he said. "Maybe you can talk the cooks into fixing us something when we get back "

Ordo was listening to his private link, head down. It was a giveaway gesture with ARCs. Fi thought "CSF transport's here to take us back to barracks." he said, straightening up. "You're shipping out on a new deployment at 0600 tomorrow. Omega."

Skirata jerked his head round for a second, dismay unguarded, and then gave them a smile that didn't quite conceal his anxiety.

"You make sure you get them a decent meal first, Captain." He jabbed a finger in their direction, then appeared to yield to some private thought and gave them all a slap on the back. "No damaging government property, okay? And we'll have chat drink one day soon, I promise you."

He winked and pulled up his collar, limping into the crowds outside in the riot of neon and vehicle lights that was Galactic City, and changing before their eyes from time - served commando to anonymous old man as surely as any Gurlanin could shift shape.

"I've never had a proper alcoholic drink." said Atin. "Or a free bowl of warra nuts."

"Well, if they're free, that's worth staying alive for," said Fi, and they snapped their helmets back into place to become the Republic's ultimate, faceless deterrent once again.