

Advance Force – by Arythain Telcontar

Rolling over onto his back, Tydron blinked his eyes and worked his jaw to clear the pressure buildup from his ears. There was a layer of dust covering his helmet's viewpane, blinding him. As he moved to wipe it away, a flash of pain from his right forearm elicited an angry grunt. Gingerly attempting to use his left arm instead, he had more luck. Careful not to jar his injured arm more than necessary, he brushed away the obstructions and looked about.

He was lying in a field of rubble, really a shallow valley of ruin. There was a large slab of duracrete slanted over most of his body, stopping just short of his sternum - load-bearing struts kept it from coming to rest on him. It had saved his life, no doubt. The sun was shining through a thick haze of smoke and dust. Beyond that, the sky was punctuated by strange cloud formations, swirled and upset as if a titan had run his hand through a cloudy sky.

All of this was not good - the last memory Tydron had was of being in a heavily fortified bunker - underground. The rubble around him was plain enough evidence as to what had become of that. How?

The soldier turned his attention to his arm. There was another slab across it, the remains of what had been a wall. The force of the falling duracrete had managed to crack his armor and no doubt broken the arm underneath. Without the armor, his arm probably wouldn't exist in recognizable fashion anymore. Tydron was not a religious man, but mouthed a silent 'Thank you' to whoever might be able to hear it. The arm was still pinned, however.

Again using his left arm, Tydron endeavored to reach into the pack that he still wore. Upon the side was a very handy device when confronted with rubble fields - a simple durasteel rod with a powerful servo system. It was capable of shifting loads in excess of three tons, if only by a small amount. Jamming the rod into a gap underneath the remains of the bunker wall, he activated the lifter.

The angle was poor - the motion of the lifter caused the slab to drag over his arm, rolling the broken limb as it was freed from the crushing burden of the stone. Tydron managed to stifle the first yell, but as the servo system whined and groaned and the wall lifted enough, he jerked his arm out from under it. The sudden motion freed him, but the resultant agony reduced Tydron to a growling animal for a few moments. He was trained to be quiet even in great pain - as part of an advance scout force he often worked in necessary silence. Were an enemy close by, however, they could not help but know he was there. That thought made Tydron look about for his rifle. In the slight panic a soldier can feel when he believes himself unarmed, Tydron twisted his head to and fro whilst cradling his broken arm. A very short moment passed before he remembered that he'd had his rifle slung behind him. He was lying on it. With a slight sigh at his own foolishness, he used the strap to pull his weapon out from under him. Leaving the LJ-90 lying close by, he scooted out from underneath the stone that had him pinned.

A moment later saw a sling put around his arm - he had no other medical supplies, unfortunately, not even a pain killer. As a combat engineer he was loaded down with other equipment. Climbing gingerly out of the shallow hole he'd been stuck in, he gazed around at the scene of devastation.

The entire bunker complex was a ruin, an area of about quarter kilometer square at the base of a hill, surrounded on three sides by sparse woodland, the slope of the hill occupying the fourth. The haze of dust hung thick in the air, mixed with smoke from a few fires that were burning amidst the rubble. He could also see that the trees to all sides had been toppled, and any still standing were on fire.

He began searching through the ruin, keying his radio every few moments. "This is Engineer Tydron. Can anyone hear this? Respond." He repeated the message several times before he found a comrade. Not over the radio, however. Blood-red armor shone through more rubble. Clumsy with only one arm, Tydron worked to clear his fellow. Dragging aside a beam, he exposed the majority of the breastplate and hurriedly opened a small hatch to get at the vital sign display.

No use.

He gave an off-handed salute to the fallen soldier. Marking the spot in his head, he returned to the search, continuing his radio transmissions. They were coded, short-burst signals, with very low likelihood of interception by enemy forces - especially considering the relatively low technical achievements of their current foe.

Then again, they'd been advanced enough to do something major to Mandalore's advance force. A part of his mind puzzled over what had hit them. They'd had no forewarning the he could remember, neither from their ship in orbit or from either of the three listening posts that had been set up around their fortified area. After wresting control of this strongpoint from the planetary forces in a surprise assault, they'd been expecting a counterattack of some sort - they had all manner of missile defenses. Nothing ballistic should have been able to get through, and there were no enemy craft in orbit to hit them with a beam.

He stopped mulling the issue when a burst of static erupted from the communicator. He couldn't make out words, so he stopped in his tracks, afraid of losing the signal if he moved from the spot. "Come again, I say, come again!"

More static. Some voice came through this time. Another brief moment as the signal clarified, and suddenly it was strong and clear. "Tydron! Tydron! Corporal Hallens here. Come in!"

"This is Tydron, Corporal. Are you injured?"

"Negative, but I'm pinned. I'm seeing sunlight - do you know what hit us?"

"No. The whole bunker's wrecked. I just came to myself - got a broken arm, but it isn't too bad off." Tydron waited a moment before adding. "Kar is gone."

A resigned sigh. "Probably going to be more casualties, too. I'm sticking my arm out a hole above me, can you see it?"

The engineer had to glance around himself a few times before he did. The armor of the advance team had camouflage abilities, and the corporal's was still activated - though there were bits of red shining through where the adaptive layers had been damaged by debris. Very hard to see through the dust, but there it was - a multicolored, seemingly disembodied arm waving about amidst the fallen rock.

"Gotcha! Hold on, I'm coming."

Moving as fast as his injury would allow, Tydron had the lift ready by the time he knelt beside his comrade's waving arm and began moving away rocks with his good limb. After a short time he'd cleared enough rubble to see the man's faceplate. He switched to external voice. "Where are you pinned?"

"There something pretty heavy on my lower legs. Doesn't hurt, but *I'm* not moving till *it* does. How's the arm?"

"Fine for now. Let me see what I can do here."

It turned out to be a similar situation to how Tydron had ended up - the remnants of a barrier wall were lying across the corporal's legs, and luckily there was durasteel girder supporting most of the weight. He cleared a cavity into which he inserted the lifter rod. After a series of mechanic groans and whines, Hallens was free. Lifting himself out of the hole, he dusted himself off. "Thanks. Let me have a look at your arm."

Hallens was a former medical corpsman, having requested a transfer to heavy weaponry after deciding he didn't have a healer's outlook on life. He retained most of the knowledge, however, and served well as a backup in case of emergencies - or outright disasters such as this. After a short moment of careful fiddling with the afflicted arm, he gave a grunt and a nod. "Clean break, nice as you could want. We'll rig up a

splint in case we can't to any of our other supplies."

"Later. Gotta search for more survivors," Tydron said, unnecessarily.

It was a fruitless search for long enough to start dampening their hopes. Tydron continued his broadcasts, but there were no other replies. They booted aside piles of rock and clutter trying to expose what they thought were some of the larger areas of the bunker, where their fellows were most likely to be. They found some, all dead. Some rather messily - even Mandalorian Combat armor couldn't take multiple tons of rock crashing onto it. Finally, Hallens had greater luck. After shoving aside a large durasteel beam - part of the heavy re-bar - he was suddenly hit with multiple transmissions.

Finally quieting them down, he gathered the situation. Five Mandalorians were trapped together in a larger cavity. He called Tydron over and working together they were able to clear enough of a hole for one of the uninjured soldiers to squirm out of.

"Thanks, Corporal. We've got three injured men down there. One's pretty serious. Is Sween out here?"

Sween was the medic for the team. He had not been found, alive or dead - Hallens said as much. "I'll do what I can for him. How are the others?"

"One concussion, his helmet is busted up pretty bad but he'll be okay. Jak's leg is broken, also not too serious."

"Alright, let's work on getting 'em out of there. Tydron! Give me that gizmo."

Over the next half hour they alternated widening the hole and continuing to search the rubble for more survivors. They found none. Major excavation would be needed to do a thorough search, and that was unlikely in a combat area.

The corporal, currently in command barring the rediscovery of their lieutenant - or the return of a higher-ranked non-com from one of the listening posts - tasked one of the uninjured men to keep a lookout on the perimeter of the ruin. Whatever they had been hit with, it was a good bet that the local forces would be arriving eventually to mop up.

When they had managed to carefully bring the most heavily wounded man out of the hole, they took a short break, removing their helmets to shove down some rations and water and tending to the wounded. A moment after injecting him with some scavenged pain-killer and healing stimulant, Hallens caught Tydron looking to the sky, observing the disturbed atmosphere with a puzzled expression.

"It was probably a crowbar," the corporal said. Their engineer looked at him blankly. "Kinetic energy weapon, dropped from an orbiting satellite. All the signs fit - ground damage, air blast knocks over the trees around the impact site and thermal damage starts some fires. Basically they hit us with a small, super-dense meteoroid. Doesn't have its own propulsion so it's hard to detect and counter with regular missile defense. The satellites don't need to be very big or advanced, so they're easy to hide. Very basic. Very effective... under the right circumstances."

"Which these apparently were. Busted up their own real estate pretty well, though. How do they expect to hold this planet from the rest of the fleet if they wreck every strongpoint we take from them?"

"Maybe they're hoping the losses we've taken here will scare us off."

The rest of the Mandalorians laughed at that, until they realized Hallens seemed to have said it seriously. "They have much to learn about us, then," Tydron said.

"Yes. They may have reached that conclusion from other sources. We have not taken serious casualties in an engagement of this nature for nearly fifty years. Perhaps they hope we've lost the stomach for it."

"Nonsense. War will always mean casualties. A military that loses sight of that basic fact has rendered itself impotent."

There was general assent to that, and the conversation fell by the wayside. It was only a brief moment before Hallens stood, his helmet replaced atop his head. "Enough playing around. We need to get ready - they may have hoped that their rock would wipe us out, but they'll come check, no doubt."

"Do we hold?" asked one of the privates, as if there was some question as to the answer. Normally, there would have been. They had a grand total of six conscious soldiers, three of whom were injured. It was a far cry from the heavy platoon they'd had only a hour before. There were an additional nine men at listening posts around the wrecked bunker, but they had no communications equipment capable of contacting them - there was a jamming blanket blocking most communications beyond short-range helmet radio. They had to hope they would be coming to investigate on their own after witnessing the impact event.

"Yes, we hold. We've still got some advantages. They dropped a rock on us because they didn't want to come after us - they're afraid. Once they find that some of us are still alive, that fear will only grow."

Hallens outlined his battle plan. The two uninjured soldiers besides the corporal would take up an advance post, concealing themselves forward of the bunker. They would send back early warning of whatever forces came their way and try to down a few, abandoning their position when it became untenable. The pair in question took their orders without complaint, dashing up the hill and into the un-destroyed vegetation on the other side as soon as they heard the plan.

The rest of the Mandalorians, all those still capable of hefting a weapon, would dig in and wait. The natives were unlikely to bring heavy weapons, not having an abundance of them. That meant that a determined, fortified position could be defended for ages.

"Too bad we have to rebuild the fortifications, though," Tydron lamented.

The corporal gave a grim chuckle in answer. "Too bad indeed, but that's your show. Get on it and use whatever and whoever you need."

While Tydron was surveying the possibilities, Hallens called over another soldier, the man with a concussion. "Net'jee, how's your head?"

The slightly smaller soldier tapped his odd-shaped helmet - Devaronian skull dimensions necessitating allowances in such places - and joked, "Still on there." His helmet was actually partially shattered, cracks showing along one side and a chunk missing from the faceplate, showing part of one eye.

"Think you can run?"

"Yes..." the soldier said guardedly, already disliking what was coming.

"Good. I need you to get down to the nearest post and bring them back here, after getting the word out about our situation." Net'jee began to protest, which Hallens cut off immediately. "Don't yak with me on this. We need more soldiers up here and with your busted helmet you're the most vulnerable. It has to be one of us. Grab a stim to keep you up, and get going."

Hallens regretted the harshness. He'd generally always been friendly with the rest of the platoon, but the burden of command brooked no arguments - unfamiliar as Hallens was with command.

The Devaronian nodded, almost sullenly. In five minutes he had disappeared into the treeline to the south, a treeline that was over fifty yards further away than it had been before.

Hallens went to assist Tydron. He was now not only the ranking soldier, but the only truly able-bodied one present, though Tydron did more with his one arm than Hallens managed with two. Amidst the rubble they found a carbine weapon, which Hallens gave to the engineer. LJ-90's were not an easy weapon to manage one-handed.

They managed to rig up a perch for Jak, the platoon's sniper. With his broken leg he wasn't mobile, but they gave him cover from every direction and by twisting himself about he had an angle on most points in the rubble field.

"Never thought I'd help build my own coffin," Jak said cheerfully, managing to voice all their doubts and concerns in a way that brought them to laughter. And with that said, with the possibility - even the likelihood - of death brought out to the light, they found new strength.

It wasn't long before they heard blaster fire from the east, over the hill. The Mandalorians had made contact with the enemy. There was a series of high-pitched whines as each soldier primed the accelerator on his weapon. Hallens helped Jak climb into his perch. Before he sent them all off to their places, Hallens turned to his comrades, removed his helmet, and smiled.

"Have you ever wondered how terrifying it must be, my friends," he said cheerfully, "to be an enemy of Mandalore?"

Replacing his helmet, he flicked a hand gesture at them to get to combat positions. Live or die, it was a fine day for a fight.