

Despite the chaos of the upper levels and the field hospital, there was absolutely no order in the lower levels. Everywhere they went they found bodies, most of whom were slaves while they found one Destara and several of the smaller sentries also crushed hopelessly beneath tonnes of immutable stone.

Several slaves stumbled about, some with blood smeared over their filthy tunics, while others lay slowly dying on the cavern floor. A few slaves valiantly tried to help the terminal but were all but helpless in the face of the inevitable.

Kyle was torn between helping Derec and trying to stop and help the others. But Derec was relentless to find Sara and unfortunately, there appeared to be little he could do for them--even all the equipment back at the field hospital would've been insufficient to the task.

The two men continued onward for several more moments searching for Sara to no avail. Then, they rounded a corner on the way to the area where Derec knew she'd last been working, and were startled to find a wall of solid rock where once there had been a corridor carved out of the stone. Several other slaves worked feverishly, tearing rock away from the seemingly impenetrable wall all too aware that their fellow man had been inside.

A sickened feeling arose inside Derec.

He had to know.

Derec rushed to where the other slaves were tunneling into the rocks searching for survivors and frantically began to help them. Kyle immediately followed and also started digging...

It was not fifteen minutes later when another slave had located a woman trapped beneath the rocks, her wavy dark hair matted with blood. Checking her closely, he realized she was still alive and called it out. Immediately, Derec moved to investigate and was rewarded; they had found Sara.

He rushed to her battered body and was horrified by the amount of blood she'd lost--the crimson fluid was everywhere. He could tell she was cut severely in several places by the falling rock and worse yet, her legs were crushed beneath the remaining rock; there was no doubt the bone in them had been pulverized.

"Sara!" Derec cried out in terror. "Sara, speak to me!" He grasped her hand, feeling the lack of strength in her fingers.

Kyle must have seen the panic and fear in his eyes even as he bent over and checked Sara's body for trauma.

"She's going to die, isn't she?" Derec yelled, tears stinging his eyes.

Kyle examined the rocks surrounding her. "Her injuries are severe... but, if you'll look here, you can see the rocks that fell on her landed in such a way as to create an arch around her torso, protecting most of her vital organs. She's still alive because of that and, well, maybe--*maybe* if we can get her to the Destara in time..."

So there was still a chance... He'd received miracles in his life, the greatest having been Sara becoming his wife--but even that paled in the face of the chance he might still be able to hold onto her now. He couldn't lose her, he just *couldn't*... he didn't know what he'd do without her.

Her hand squeezed his weakly as she came to and tried to speak. "I guess... I'll be escaping too..." She paused, semi-conscious. "I'll be waiting for you when you finally... make that journey..."

Her fingers relaxed, letting go of his hand.

"Hang on, Sara!" Derec cried out frantically, the terror rising in him again. "Just hang on!"

"She's unconscious again..." Kyle noted quietly. He turned and looked at a nearby young man. "You! Quickly! Go find a Destara medic! We need their technology here--*now!*"

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Draxx Starr and Bishop made their way through one of the cave-in zones, investigating the damage first hand. Bishop, walking slightly behind his Commander, taking notes as Draxx pointed them out or noticing something worthy of recording himself.

"I can't believe this!" Draxx snapped. "How incompetent are Zernax's workers that they can't anticipate something on this scale?!"

Bishop nodded. "I believe I heard the words 'a few areas aren't properly shored up'. This seems a lot worse to me..."

"On the bright side, the majority of losses we took were slaves, a small consolation that our own kind were mostly spared."

Once Zernax returned from investigating the base's support struts, he would have to have a talk with him about this. The mining operations had been severely struck from this miscalculation and now the Centaurai facilities would be severely short on their quota for the next month or so until this was all cleaned up. To say nothing of the fact the core tappers would have to run at five percent for that time or longer until they could guarantee it was safe to put them back to full output--of course, now they were activated they could not be deactivated or the planet would destabilize and destroy itself prematurely.

By the celestial Lord Deceptar, the Emperor would no doubt hear of this and Draxx would have to answer for it. He doubted Straxus would have him executed for it, but surely any opportunity for not being

assigned to another mining colony when his tenure here was finished was out of the question now.

And that was to say nothing of the demands that would be placed on the colony now for workload. Draxx didn't even want to consider the headaches this little mistake was going to cause.

If only he could find some way to divert attention from the negative factors of this cave-in with Destara Command and find some way to salvage the situation....

But he knew even before he completed that thought that it was most unlikely he could put a positive spin on this--for the simple fact there was no positive element to be found.

"Well, it looks like we--"

Just then, a slave dashed into the cavern they were in. Draxx found himself for a split second in a defensive posture, until it quickly caught up with him that there was no danger to be found from a mere fleshling--it had just been old combat reflex.

"We need help!" the young male exclaimed to them. Stopping, he suddenly realized exactly whom he was talking to. "Sire! We need help for our wounded a level below--I was sent out to find a medic to assist us."

Draxx exchanged a glance with Bishop and looked back down at the slave standing at his feet. He felt like he always did when around one of the fleshlings, like he could step on him with ease and eliminate him. Like he was nothing to the power and authority that was a Destara.

"Where are they?" Draxx demanded. "Show me! And I will make the final assessment myself."

The slave nodded apprehensively and began to lead them in the right direction with Draxx and Bishop following.

This had better be worth it. Draxx detested the fleshlings and the thought of helping them out medically seemed to him like a waste of equipment and supplies. But, as Bishop always pointed out, for the sake of diplomacy and keeping them content he would have a look and evaluate the situation for himself.

Derec cradled Sara's head in his lap and wept quietly. Help would arrive, he kept telling himself--but he knew it wouldn't. Not in time, anyway. Sara would die in his arms and he would be alone. All alone in an uncaring universe.

"I love you," he whispered to her still form.

"Have faith," Kyle told him, patting his shoulder. "It might still turn out okay..."

Derec nodded half-heartedly. Did Kyle really believe it either, he wondered.

Several other injured slaves had been gathered from where Sara had been found and other nearby sections of the collapsed caverns. Some were suffering minor wounds while others were similarly in life-threatening condition. Kyle had organized them as best he could, directing the healthy slaves to attend them as best they could while waiting for aid to arrive. But they were low on medical equipment and things seemed dire. Derec had hardly noticed, lost in a world all his own.

Behind them all, the slave with Draxx Starr and Bishop in pursuit arrived on the scene.

"The Destara are here!" somebody yelled, catching both Derec and Kyle's attention.

Derec rose and rushed over to them. "My wife! She's hurt--badly! Please... please, my Sire, help her!"

He could see a possible new salvation. Lord Draxx Starr was the one who called the shots in the colony. He would convince the Destara Warlord to save Sara--he *had* to. There was no other recourse.

Draxx Starr looked about the cavern at the wounded and dying in the developing field hospital, apparently evaluating the situation.

"My Sire? Please! She's dying..." he pleaded.

Draxx regarded Derec silently for a moment.

"Very well," he replied. "I shall help her." He looked to his aide. "Bishop."

Bishop raised his side arm, aiming at Sara's body...

At Sara!

"NO!" Derec yelled, running toward her.