

**Fortress of the Unchained**  
**Ethereal Realm**  
**41 ABY**

“They’re still coming through!”

The panic in the Truthwarden’s voice was palpable, his mind reeling under the terror of the Brotherhood’s impending assault. They were not the last line of defense, but close to it, and the man instinctively knew they would not be able to stop the foe arrayed against them.

Deep inside the Fortress of the Unchained, the Aegises of the Truthwardens had set up a layered defense. In each chamber awaited a detail of their best swordsmen. Down each hallway a squad of marksmen. The enemy would wade down chokepoint after chokepoint, facing blaster bolt and plasma blade. It would not be enough, he had foreseen as much, but this would at least buy them the most amount of time. Their lives forfeit in exchange for a few more seconds.

“Have courage,” Loremi P’sum declared, steadying his own voice even as the sound of blaster fire and screams of agonizing deaths closed in. He could see the flashes of lightsabers reflecting off the hallway wall where it curved left into the previous chamber. The defenders there would not last long. The Wardens behind the barricade settled their blasters on the hallway and waited for the inevitable.

“I am not afraid to give my life for the Father, Arbiter,” the Truthwarden declared, looking up from his sights. “My only fear is that our work be undone. That we fail at this crucial moment.”

The Arbiter looked the man in his eyes, his own blueish-gray meeting the shimmering hazel of a Warden half his age. He was being honest in his words, Loremi could tell at a glance, and though it swelled his heart with pride that he’d taught them so well, he felt a pang of guilt for what he was about to do with them.

“We all have our parts to play,” he stated. “Do yours well, and we shall not fail. The Father needs only a little more time. You can buy that for Him, can’t you?” He extended his senses into the young Truthwarden’s psyche, gently stoking the fires of his conviction. It did not take much to turn doubtful embers into a roaring conviction that soon burned behind hazel eyes.

“Anything for you, Arbiter,” the Truthwarden rasped, enraptured. “Chains Unbound!”

“Chains Unbound,” Loremi agreed, patting the man on the shoulder as he condemned him to death.

The fighting in the chamber beyond died down. They all knew what that meant.

“Get back, sir,” the young hazel eyed Warden stated, stepping up to cover the Arbiter bodily. “We will hold this junction as long as we can.”

Loremi did not have time for a reply.

“Contact front!”

The Twi’lek that emerged down the hallway was singular, both in number and appearance. Her warplate gleamed a polished bone white under soot and blood splatter. Her purple lekku swayed in her wake like serpents, bearing the scars of wars past. Her golden eyes blazed with an inferno of supreme control, its intensity matched only by that of her lightsaber staff.

She moved with the purpose and grace of a nexu on the prowl, elegant and lethal. The clack of her boots upon the black stone reverberating in the air with a lacing of doom as the Truthwardens trained their blasters upon the vengeful banshee torn straight from spacer legends. They met her with a wall of blaster fire, but a specter could not be so easily deterred.

The Twi’lek shifted with preternatural speed, twisting and writhing through the maze of bolts faster than the eye could follow. Each time an impossible position was forced upon her and doom seemed inevitable, she brought her brilliant saber blade down to intercept, the flash of impact so bright it stung their eyes.

“Get back! We won’t last long, Arbiter. Go. Go!”

The hazel eyed man shoved him backwards, pressing him to flee to the next room and seal the blast doors. Normally, Loremi would have had the man flogged for such insubordination but self-preservation was oddly compelling. He fled to the mouth of the next chamber, turning around to see the hazel eyed Warden notice his hesitation and aim for the door controls.

He stared at the lone warrior and felt something awry. This was not how it had gone down in his visions. This was *wrong*. *She* was wrong. The shape of the Twi’lek flickered, glitching almost, as a blaster bolt passed through it—like thin air.

“Wait—!”

The Warden fired. The door closed. A rush of air rustled Loremi’s graying locks as the blast door slammed into the ground centimeters from his feet.

“—she isn’t real.”

The Arbiter felt his heart sink as he stared at the dull grey of the blast door’s durasteel surface. He could make out his own vague reflection, the periodic misting of his breath, and the faint pulsing glow of a golden lightsaber blade behind him.

His senses screamed a warning he knew would be coming. The golden yellow blade descending on him from behind like a reaper’s scythe. There was no time to draw a weapon. She was too close, but he turned to face her all the same, palm splayed.

The sight of the Twi’lek’s face twisted into a furious snarl almost stunned him, so close to his own was hers he could make out the faint creases in her brow and the dark freckles upon

her lekku. The brilliance of her blade flashed across his field of vision as he willed the Force to his aid, *pushing* her back with the frantic desperation of a drowning man.

Pain flashed across his arm, the stench of burning meat striking his senses as he heard a dull *thump* upon the floor at his feet. Shuddering, he stared at the stump of his arm, shorn off at the elbow and lying on the floor with palm still splayed, the cufflink Dolori s'Amet had gifted him on their fifth anniversary glinting at the wrist.

No. He would not die like this. He refused.

Anguish seared in his soul, fueled by a primal desperation for survival and the burning need to see his husband one more time. As the Twi'lek lunged again, he felt his body surge with the tides of the Dark, his conscious mind recoiling at this flagrant breach of his training yet silenced by his ego.

The golden saber blade met a shimmering shield of ethereal purple, the barrier manifesting between the two in a brilliant halo as plasma flashed across its resolute surface. Loremi saw the shock in the Twi'lek's eyes, having not expected such defiance from her injured prey.

Tongues of golden plasma snaked across the purple shield, lashing and tearing before fading away. He had caught her off guard, but she soon recovered, adjusting her stance to lever the blade through. Back against durasteel, he fumbled for a weapon, beads of sweat running down his brow as he struggled to maintain concentration.

The spitting hiss of the saber blade drowned out all other noise before a thunderclap report tore through the chamber, deafening to behold. The Twi'lek stumbled back, having twisted aside the last instant but still catching a portion of the bolt that raked across her abdomen. Plastoid armor ran molten from the wide scar the Soulscore Pistol had gouged in her warplate, but precious little blood leaked from the wound.

More bolts followed, the Arbiter squeezing off shots as he stumbled away, desperate to put as much distance between himself and the Twi'lek as he could manage. None found their mark as she swatted aside the Force-imbued bolts with a staccato of swings, but they kept the huntress distracted long enough for him to escape certain death, fleeing down a narrow side corridor.

Surging raw Force energy into his adrenaline numbed legs, Loremi sprinted along it until it disgorged him at the side of a gaping chasm, a link of the Chain visible in the distance. He turned around and fried the door controls with the pistol, a blast door slamming down with a satisfying *thunk*.

Immediate execution stayed, Loremi slumped against a pile of crates, gasping as he felt the drain on his soul like grasping claws. Each shot had torn a piece of himself to power the arcane weapon in his hand. Grievously wounded, he would not survive many more pulls of the trigger.

Awkwardly pulling his datapad from the 'wrong' sided pocket, he considered his options. He could send an emergency call to any nearby Truthwardens to come to his aid, but doing so

might weaken their defenses and leave an opening for the Brotherhood. If he did not, he would surely die.

Dolori S'amet's face flashed before him. The pleasantly off-green hue of his skin. The pleasingly symmetric tattoos on his cheeks. The kind brown eyes he could get lost into for hours. He loved the Father and the Children—but he loved Dolori more.

Datapad slipping from his fingers, flashing an emergency beacon, he considered how best to make his last stand. The lightsaber at his hip called to him, but knew better than to face a superior duelist with his weaker arm. The thought drew his attention to his injury.

The dull throb of pain from his stump was kept manageable as a medical implant in his brain flooded his system with sedatives, the plasma cauterized edge having saved him from bloodloss. Disturbingly, he found a part of himself wishing he hadn't taken the implant. To better feel the pain and relish in it. Shuddering, Loremi dismissed such depraved thoughts. He needed his head clear to escape—and see Dolori once more.

The Arbiter took stock of his situation, but the ledge he was on had little to work with. The gaping chasm was too wide to traverse, even with a Force-imbued leap. The few crates of supplies that shared space with him were leftovers from the Fortress' construction and of little use, and only a solitary path led to and from here. The one he had just barred.

Loremi prided himself on rational pragmatism, but even that had its limits. He could work miracles with scraps, but he still needed scraps to begin with. As the flood of adrenaline began to wane, he felt exhaustion begin to settle in. He could not afford that, not now, and with a morbid realization he did what he had to do to keep his senses alert.

With his surviving digits, he pushed into the raw meat of the cauterized stub, disturbing the flesh that was still reeling from the violent separation. Pain, hot and raw, flashed across his mind and he drew deep from it. It was wrong. A violation of the Father's teachings, but he had not come this far only to die over a point of dogma. If the Father saw fit to punish him, then so be it. Better to die by His hand than some Brotherhood *schutta*.

The pain rejuvenating him as he let the Dark flow, Loremi snapped to as the hiss of melting durasteel snapped him to reality. A golden beam of plasma jutted through the blast door and began to slowly carve an arc. It would not hold forever.

Centering himself, he reached his senses outward to poke and prod at his foe, using the time he had to learn as much of her as he could. Any weakness or kink in her armor. Any straw he could clutch to stave off impending doom. He did not need to beat her, that much was folly. He only needed to buy more time.

Tali Sroka gritted her teeth as the blade of her saber-glaive made agonizingly slow progress through the durasteel bulkhead. Droplets of molten metal hissed as they struck the ground by her feet, beads of bright yellow dulling swiftly to pearls of crimson red. Whatever twisted alchemies the Children used in their metallurgy, it made cutting their blast doors a royal pain.

Her ambush had almost worked, but almost was just another way of saying not. Constantly aware of the pressures of time upon her, she needed to finish him off to leave the defenders leaderless. Though formidable, the Truthwardens would be overrun without guidance and once she'd slain the Arbiter there would be confusion and chaos. She had foreseen it.

Leaning into the shaft of her weapon, the Twi'lek forced the final cut through, the glowing snake of the blade's passing devouring its own tail. Palm splayed, she *shunted* the plug of durasteel out her path, the jagged piece of metal hurtling into the gaping abyss of a cavernous chamber shrouded in red clouds.

Tali emerged through the doorway at speed, sensing her foe to her left and spinning around with weapon ready, expecting to swat aside another flurry of thundering plasma bolts. Yet he found her quarry lying beaten against a stack of crates, breathing laboriously as sweat beaded on his forehead. He grimaced, holding out his palm in a vain effort at stopping her.

"Stay back!" the Arbiter called. "You cannot hope to win by slaying me. Your efforts will not change anything. Only the Father matters. Only He can break the chain!"

It was a pitiful charade and she saw through it like glass. The empty, desperate words of a man trying to save himself. He'd seen the same played out so many times before. The strong, infallible leader suddenly begging for mercy and exclaiming his own unimportance when the tables turned. It would not sway her glaive.

He seemed to realize it the same instant, the splayed fingers suddenly curling as a *snap-hiss* sounded behind her. A brilliant blue pillar of plasma jutted straight towards her, the Arbiter's levitating lightsaber poised to skewer. It lunged towards her, guided by telekinetic trickery, forcing the Twi'lek to duck low or be run through by the remote weapon.

Loremi twisted his hand, the lightsaber spinning around in a searing arc, changing direction impossibly fast. Near prone, Tali found herself flatfooted and for once the reach of her saber-glaive proved more a hindrance than boon. But he was not the only one with a mighty ally.

The blue blade descended like an executioner's axe towards her face, before crashing against the disk of a hastily formed barrier. It crackled and flashed, struggling to solidify fully under the strain of the impact, but she only needed a few seconds. Depressing the trigger in the shaft of her glaive, the weapon collapsed in on itself, compacted to a more manageable length as interlocking plates wove together with a series of clacks.

Loremi pressed the attack home, teeth gritted as he *willed* his lightsaber through the defiant barrier, only to have it crash against the golden blade of the Twi'lek's own saber. His heart sank as he withheld the woman's eyes, blazing in the strobing glow of their crossed sabers. She could not be deterred.

Rising to her feet, Tali pushed the floating lightsaber back, the might of her swings driving back the flitting swipes of her foe. He lacked raw skill, but also leverage. Both hands gripping the hilt of her lightsaber, Tali shoved the floating blade back, sending it spinning end over end before swiping it in two with a clean horizontal cut.

The smoking halves of Loremi's weapon clattered to the ground, but he was already reaching for the next. Desperation burned in his eyes as he raised the pistol once more, but the Twi'lek was ready. Once. Twice. Three times he managed to pull the trigger, each bolt stealing another fragment of his essence, before he was too weak to fire any more, each bolt reflected by the golden beam of the Twi'lek's lightsaber.

Tali watched the Arbiter slump in place, pistol slipping from his grasp. He was done. His chest rose and fell laboriously, gasping for air like he was drowning. His skin was pale and clammy, blue eyes beginning to turn a bloodshot red. Had he not been such a dangerous foe, she might almost have taken pity on him. Almost.

"I yield," he croaked, lips numb from the Force drain. "I yield..." Loremi's head slumped down, chin resting on his collarbone. He had no more fight left in him.

Tali swept the pistol from his reach with a flick of her hand, the weapon disappearing down the gaping abyss from which the Chain hung suspended. Her eyes darted around his person, seeking any more hidden blades or threats, but beyond the idly flashing datapad by his side, she found none. Closing the distance to hold him at saberpoint, she considered her options.

The Arbiter might not have been the worst offender among the Mortis cult, but he was by no means innocent. Nobody rose to a position of power within this order without standing on a mountain of corpses. And yet, the thought of taking him prisoner had its appeal. They might be able to glean much from him. Dead, he was of no further use, and either in custody or cut down, the Truthwardens would have been leaderless.

"Please," Loremi whispered hoarsely. "I will tell you everything I know. Just let me see my husband one more time." He clutched the stump of his severed arm, gripping it tight with knuckles white. So tight it almost began bleeding again.

Tali felt her head spinning. Something was wrong. Something was *very* wrong but her senses could not discern it. Her senses *could* not discern it.

The thrumming sky blue blade burst through her chest in a flash, stealing her breath away. Her last sight she saw Loremi's relieved expression as he dropped the Suppression and truly relaxed. She felt a swiftly spreading numbness race through her body as the world shifted, her body toppling over the edge as gravity sank its claws into her. Pulling her down, ever down into the abyss.

Dolori S'amet shut off his lightsaber and rushed to embrace his husband who looked like a withered husk. Concern and care burned at the forefront of his mind, though some small part of him recoiled at Loremi's bloodshot eyes and cold, pain-stricken aura.

"Are you alright, love?" he asked, though he knew the answer.

"I will be," Loremi rasped, "now that you're here."

The pair locked lips as the detail of Truthwardens secured the area behind them, making sure no more Brotherhood assassins were waiting in the wings.

“What happened?” Dolori inquired.

“I lost your cufflink,” Loremi replied apologetically, raising the stump of his arm.

The Mirialan could not help but chuckle at the absurdity, tears welling in his eyes as he pressed his lips against his husband’s forehead.

“I’ll get you another, for our next anniversary.”