

"I am not comfortable with this," Zuji said, her arms crossed while she glared down at the researcher before her with such intensity.

"Ma'am," he squeaked, obviously scared of this woman. "S-She'll be ok-okay. There's no danger."

"Then I'm going with her." The researcher quickly shook his head.

"W-We have r-reason to be-believe if more goes in, i-it would be dangerous." Zuji exhaled slowly through the nose. "Then why she goes and not me?"

"Her Force is new, uncontrollable, and weaker, she might be less noticed in a realm where everything is wild and uncontrollable." A female researcher spoke up. "Is that the bloody reason why you contacted *her and not me*?" Zuji was fuming. How dare they go behind her back. Naluti was quiet for a bit before she nodded. "I'll go." Zuji whipped her head around to look at her young student. Naluti could see the concern in her eyes. "I'm trained well enough," reassured Naluti.

The researcher hooked her up with a bunch of technology and gave her a quick rundown. Zuji was pacing. "Every five minutes, Naluti. Unless of course, you need to be quiet, which I suggest you give us some kind of hint that you have to go silent for a bit. Any more than fifteen minutes, I'm going in," promised Zuji. Naluti nodded. She had a feeling that Zuji would be breathing down the researchers' necks and driving them nuts. They checked the equipment and double-checked it. Then another, under Zuji's request. She wanted to check once more but the researchers protested this time.

It was time to go in. With a reassuring nod to her Master, Naluti entered into the unknown.

It felt like falling into the water and being swept away by currents. For a moment there Naluti couldn't breathe and she lost track of everything.

A soft groan escaped from her. She grimaced. It was so bright. Her hand went up to shield her eyes but it didn't work. She patted around the commlink in her ear while her eyelids remained closed. The brightness was unbearable. "I'm okay. How long was I out?" It was the truth. Selonians don't lie. To lie was worse than murder in her den. She could feel the tension in the pause in her earpiece.

"Ten seconds, Naluti."

"Okay. In that case, I would say judging my head spinning it felt like I was out much longer. Maybe 30 minutes."

“Affirmative.” One of the researchers said back. Lowered her hand, she turned to her side and heard a splashing noise. Her hand had hit something wet.

Water?

Naluti started to sniff a bit more. Doesn't smell like water. In fact, this smell was odd. It was earth, minerals, and dampness all in one. Then the light faded. Hesitantly, she slowly opened her eyelids. She could see emptiness. Standing up on her feet, she brought her hands close to her chest like a timid child while looking around with her black eyes.

“Right now, I'm surrounded by water. There's nothing in sight.”

“Affirmative. Pick a direction and go.” Naluti could've sworn she heard the quick pacing of someone in the background. *Master Zuji most likely.*

“E-excuse me? Is anyone there?” Naluti called out. There was no response. An endless horizon of shallow water and emptiness. She started to walk. Each footstep was a soft splash. She had no idea where she was going. She just took a direction and went with it.

She constantly looked around for any signs and hints of anything. She used all of her senses, including her Force but when she tried, it was... overwhelming. Like a waterfall of voices bashing against your skull while slamming it against the wall.

“I cannot use my Force sense. It was as if many voices were screaming. There were sounds of crystal scratching another mineral. Maybe another crystal? It was painful to listen. I will try again later.”

“Affirmative. Continue.” She could hear the typing in the background. Another researcher was surely taking notes. After what seemed to be like awhile, she saw a figure. Her ears perked as she rose her head slightly. Naluti was informed about the Children of Mortis and the dangers they pose. So she was cautious.

“I see someone is here. The figure looks very feminine. Long dress. Is that... blood? I don't smell iron. Going to approach the figure now.”

“Affirmative. Be careful.” The pacing stopped and she could hear a slow hiss. Possibly Master Zuji again.

“Hello?” The Selonian called out to the figure. She started to walk towards it but it didn't move. Before she could get close, she watched the figure point at something behind her. Her ears flattened against the base of her skull as could hear the rapid splish splash hurling towards her. With a quick motion of turn, it was gone. The ripples remained. Someone was running to her. Her head snapped back to the figure. It was gone too.

Then intense pain. She had felt it before. *Something sharp and powerful bit her.* Naluti cried out in pain and fell to the side. Just like that, it was as if someone turned the light switch off in this realm.

“Naluti!? NALUTI! ARE YOU OKAY!? I AM COMING RIGHT NOW.” There were sounds of a few researchers trying to hold Zuji back. Pretty sure one of them just got punched with a sound of crunching bones and a yelp.

“No, stay.” She grimaced. “I’m fine. Give me a moment to register everything.”

Darkness. It was completely dark now. Panting heavily, she lifted herself up and the waters had changed color. Her hand went to her side and she found nothing. No bleeding, no damages from the bite, absolutely nothing. Did she imagine it? Then the water started to glow. Golden irises glanced at her feet and it seemed like a bunch of smooth red floors became red. The floor wasn’t exactly smooth. Squatted down, she reached out and hesitated for a moment. Then she submerged her hand and touched the ‘floor’ It was smooth like a crystal but had some cracks and roughness. Her nails scratched it. It was a crystal. That’s so odd. Why would a crystal glow?

Naluti groaned as she struggled with the comm for a bit. Before she could get a word in, she hears Zuji again. “Naluti? What happened?!”

“I’m alright, Master Zuji..” She cleared her throat, trying to comprehend what happened. “It sounded like I was being chased but there was nothing there. I felt pain on my side from a previous injury-” Naluti could swear she heard Zuji hiss and a researcher gulped loudly as if he feared for his life. “It was more of a memory of a past injury. There’s no blood and my skin has not been broken through. I believe my mind is playing tricks on me or it’s the realm that’s causing that.” Her eyes went to the floor.

“The floor started glowing red and it’s smooth as if I’m on a massive crystal. Here. Listen.” She scratched the crystal again and the sound would travel.

“Affirm-”

“Oh for frack’s sake, stop saying that! She’s a bloody person! Not a frackin’ droid!” Zuji was getting understandably frustrated. The researcher nervously cleared his throat. “T-thank you? C-continue, p-please.” Black eyes looked back to where she saw a figure. She forgot to mention it to the researchers. Instead of a figure, there was a building.

“I see a building. I’m going in. Going silent for a while.” This would give Naluti a break from constant reporting. She can only hope Master Zuji would forgive her. After what happened earlier, she was worried that this might be another illusion. Or a figment of her imagination. Naluti made her way towards it, the soft sounds of her treading water seems loud. It doesn’t help that it was the only sound in the emptiness. Made her way to the building, she glanced at

the open door with the bright hallway that already hurts her eyes. Pondered for a moment, she looked behind her. No one. Nothing. Maybe this building would have all the answers she needed. Her hand made its way to her belt as she grasped her lightsaber hilt and turned it on.

“I’m at the building. It’s very quiet. I can see papers everywhere and opened doors on the inside.” There was no response from the comm but she could hear the typing so it was still working. They were quiet for her which made Naluti feel better. She could focus at least. Saved for the worried pacing of her Master.

Naluti focused as she used the Force to manipulate water into a ball and sent it hurling toward the light source. It shattered, and pieces had fallen to the ground. Darkness was what she needed. Calmly, the Selonian had made her way down the hallway and into the building. The doors were all opened. Papers were scattered everywhere. There were pieces of that red crystal all over the place along with different colored bloodstains. Each door leads to a room of dead end. Naluti squatted down and picked up some of the papers. She didn’t understand enough but it looked scientific. Formulas and names. Then something caught her eye. Pictures. Different species bonded to the table and red crystals. Her hues glanced to the outside behind her. Red crystals. Was there a connection?

“I found several files. Taking pictures now.” It took Naluti a while to remember how to take pictures but she managed. She took pictures of everything. Files, blood, and pieces of red crystals.

“Aff-” the researcher stopped himself when Zuji cleared her throat in a threatening manner. “They are uploading now. Please, continue.” Naluti put away the camera and made her way further into the dark hallways. This oddly felt comforting to the Selonian. The dark tunnels remind her of home.

The young Sith ventured further in. An opened door with different pods that were frosted over. Naluti approached one and wiped the frost away to see better. It was a deceased Nautolan. That wasn’t the odd part. What was odd was those red crystals. The same one that was under the shallow water outside of the building. Out of curiosity, she checked the next pod. It wasn’t a Nautolan, but possibly a human. They are also deformed by red crystals. She took a step back while her hues glanced down at the rows of the pods and noticed one was broken. Made her way over, it was empty. Glass and red crystals were on the floor. It was evident seeing the broken glass on the outside of the pod, something inside broke it. She went back to the Naluton and took a picture of the room’s layout. Some of the specimens as well. And the broken pod.

“Are they dead or not..” She mused, slightly worried if every being in that pod was going to come alive and break out or not.

Without warning, she heard a loud scraping sound coming down the hallway. Naluti could feel her heart beating against her chest as she made her way to hide behind one of the

Pods. She pushed a button on her wrist to let them know that she may or may not be in danger and the clock started ticking down. She had a feeling that Zuji was ready and watching the clock. The scraping sound was getting louder and there was more of them. Carefully, Naluti took a peak and saw many creatures, all deformed with the same red crystals. There was no life in their eyes. She knew right away she wasn't going to be able to take them all.

'Stay calm. Stay calm. Look around. Seek. I will not let fear get to me.' Black hues frantically looked around for an out. The scraping noises were getting closer. Quickly and silently as she could, she made her way down to the back, the opposite side of the entrance she came in. There's a double door but it's closed. Blood was painted on the doors.

"Don't open. Rancor Inside."



Seeing no way out, Naluti hid behind one of the pods. The creatures didn't seem to pick that she was here. They had another agenda. Then she heard banging. Curiously, she peeked around the corner and saw the group of infected were trying to open the door that the Rancor was in. She knew she had to act quickly before they managed to open those double doors.

A finger was raised as she pushed down on the comm to relay one message, "I'm going to fight."

"Ten minutes, Naluti." "Oh no, it's going to be much earlier than that!" "Ma'am, plea-" The comm cut off. She assumed one of the researchers turned off the mic so Naluti could focus. That would help immensely.

'Dodge!' Naluti gasped as she ducked down and there was a shattering noise. One of the infected had used its brand new crystal scythe arm to cut the pod she was hiding in half. Shards and pieces of the now slain poor bastard landed on Naluti. Naluti smoothly ran on all fours while they gave chase. The good news, there was less banging on the Rancor's door. The bad news, a couple stayed behind.

Naluti swerved to a corner and her right hand went to the hilt of her lightsaber. Nimbly, she unhooked it from her belt. Jumping up into the air, she landed on one of the infects, her left hand clawed down the face. The Selonian was also using this to keep her balance. She could feel and hear the flesh ripping underneath her nails. While the body was falling, she swung her right arm and the lightsaber sliced through another. Her left hand went down to the throat. Dug in her nails, she grabbed the trachea and ripped it out.

With a flip backward, her left paw was charging with electricity before she shot it at one of the creatures, having it fall back. Naluti snarled while laughing. Her body lowered into fours again but her right holding up for the lightsaber. She was starting to salivate. Won't take her much longer.

Panting, she stood surrounded by broken crystals and torn limbs. Her black eyes glanced over to the door. She needed to take them down. She ran towards them, electricity charging once more. Aimed and lightning shot out at the duo. They both fell down to the ground. Whew. She had stopped them.

The double doors were blown open. Naluti snarled, teeth-baring as she started to step backward and away. The face of a Rancor with shards sticking out roared at her. Naluti growled. She stood, focused, as a black sphere started to form. Naluti stumbled forward a bit but she remained strong. Then a soft crack echoed through the room as it was engulfed in darkness that the rancor cannot see. It roared in confusion as she felt something grabbed her arm. With a snarl, she took a swipe to attack. Instead, her hand hit something hard and she realized Zuji had stopped her attack.

"Ma-master Zuji!" gasped Naluti. How long did she fight for? Was the time already up? "We're leaving." Her voice was firm and she was not taking no as an answer. Naluti agreed, "Yes. I am not strong enough to take down a Rancor." With that, both females ran before the black sphere dissipated. They had made it out safely. Removed the technology and helped with the researchers' questions, Naluti did her best to remember everything. Zuji was just relieved to have her back in THIS realm.

"You said you heard something shouted at you to dodge. Do you have any idea?"

"It sounded like my old master, Master Xira." She felt a pang of sadness from Zuji as Naluti ignored it. Xira made her choice and it was her choice that she died.

"You mentioned you felt pain on your side when you first arrived and that it was a memory of an old wound?" Another asked. Naluti nodded, her hand going to her right side as she rubbed it.

"Master Xira and I were attacked. One of them was a Karkarodon. I thought I was bitten by him again."

“He never left.” The researcher said. Naluti frowned and looked at him, “What did you say?” The researcher started laughing, his teeth started to become sharp and pointing like a Karkarodon’s. His face changed from human skin to blue. “I said-” He growled, everything went black as Naluti cried out, scrambling behind her to get away. He changed into that very same Karkarodon before her. “He. Never. Left.”

“Naluti! WAKE UP!” She felt her face being slapped around. Naluti woke with a startle and tried to back up but she realized it was her Master Zuji... wearing a gas mask. “Put this on!” She shoved a gas mask in her face as Naluti gasped and put it on. Her eyes glanced around. She was back in the pod room. There were no double doors. Not even the bodies she had slain. Nothing. The only thing that was the same was the glowing red floor with the addition of a red gas that hovered inches above the floor.

“What happened?” Naluti said as she quickly got up and checked the pods. The pods were empty. There were no dead bodies with crystals. Nothing. Papers that were on the floor were never there. It was just an empty building. Everything she had seen coming here, they all vanished.

“You stopped responding. I couldn’t find you for six hours.”

“No. Can’t be. My watch-” She looked down. “See? It only says one hour.” Zuji brows furrowed as she looked at the watch. “Naluti..” She showed her hers and it was six hours. “I don’t like this. We are leaving. Now.” Naluti nodded, “Yes, Master Zuji.” With that, they headed out. When they got back to the lab, all the pictures that Naluti sent were no good. They were too blurry or had too much static. Naluti growled in frustration as she kicked a chair clean across the room. All that work. It was for nothing.

“Naluti-”

“Everything I’ve seen was real! I wouldn’t lie about this. It’s a greater sin to-” “Naluti, stop. You are bleeding.” Naluti frowned. What was she talking about? She didn’t get hurt in there or out here. Right on cue, she felt warm liquid going down her side and the smell of iron hit her nose. “What...” whispered Naluti. Her hand touched the wound as she cried out, something sharp had cut her fingers.

“Back away!” One of the female researchers ran up to Naluti. “Get it out!” Naluti cried out, it felt like something was trying to get out of her. “Get it out!” She yelled again her hands going for whatever was trying to get out of her. The researcher fought back and Naluti grimaced, she felt suppression from the woman. “This will hurt,” warned the researcher as her fingers dug into the wound as Naluti gritted her teeth and focused on breathing through her nose. “I got ahold of it.” The woman pulled out a piece of red crystal shaped like Karkarodon’s tooth.

“H-How did that get in me,” stammered Naluti. There was no way. Unless those ripples she heard earlier sounded like something was chasing her when she first arrived and the pain. “You need to come with me now, we need to get the rest out.”

It took Naluti a while but she was now convinced she was really back. She reported all her findings to the researchers while Zuji stayed by her side. Once she was scanned and there were no more red crystals in her, she was cleared to leave. “I’m not going back in there again anytime soon,” Naluti muttered as Zuji and her left.