

Savran had traveled to every corner of the galaxy and yet they'd never seen anything like this.

Shifting tapestries of cerulean light danced around them. Seas of inky blackness seemed to both loom beyond Savran's reach and invade their vicinity in a way that made their feathers bristle. Behind them, a massive mechanical apparatus stood amongst the nondescript landscape, buffeting the surrounding air with periodic pulses of energy. The portal was their ticket out of this place should their mission go awry—their ticket back to Selen. Nearly a month had passed since they were kidnapped by the Children of Mortis. When Savi caught wind that Clan Arcona were seeking would-be explorers to investigate a strange world and known stomping ground of the Children, they wasted no time in accepting the contract. Credits were always a motivating factor for taking work from the Brotherhood but Savran also had a score to settle. There was no way they were going to pass up another opportunity to terrorize the Mortis dogs.

Savran checked their wristlink to contact their Arconan liaison. A digital *chirp* from the wristlink's speaker confirmed that the call connected successfully. Good. Radiocommunications were still online. That meant that this place wasn't totally disconnected from the rest of the galaxy, at least.

They lifted the wristlink to their lips and began speaking, "This is Savran Has—codenamed Tekuani. I've successfully traversed the breach into the world you call the 'Ethereal Realm.'"

Savi didn't know if it was the Brotherhood or the Children themselves who had given the world such a lackluster moniker but whoever was responsible needed to leave the naming to someone else.

"There appears to be no natural landscape to speak of," they continued, "I see shadows that stretch and contort into amorphous forms, and drifting lights."

Extending a single finger toward a passing light, Savran was surprised to see the glowing mote change course. It fluttered through the air and landed on their fingertip. How curious. They relayed across their comlink before letting the glowing creature drift away.

"Alright, time to gather more intel. Let's see what the Force can tell me about this place," they said to themselves. Savi had learned over nearly three centuries of life that whenever something

happened that defied their notion of what reality was and how it operated, there was a likely chance that the Force was involved. The ever-enigmatic Will of the Force operated in ways that were seldom fully understood by even the most astute minds. *Trust in the Force's will ...* Words of a silky, feminine voice spoken in an erudite dialect of Basic resonated in Savi's mind and offered a welcomed reprieve from their discomfort with their present circumstances. But that didn't last. With the familiar voice came memories of their childhood, of a fire-blooded Shani rescued from a world thrown into turmoil. The voice was none other than the woman who'd rescued them, and reassured them that everything would be alright. And for a time, those words proved to be true. That was, until—no. Now wasn't the appropriate time to ponder the distant past. And as far as they were concerned, there would never be a suitable time to reflect on *those* memories in particular.

Savran waved their hand as if they were shooing away the irksome thoughts, and continued on their investigation of their surroundings. They took a deep inhale, their shoulders rising and their chest expanding to accommodate the frigid air. Then, they exhaled while closing their eyes. Although the darkness of their mind's eye remained, subtle impressions presented themselves to their consciousness. Much to their chagrin, though, none of these were strong enough for Savran to get a suitable read on them to begin constructing a picture of where they were. It was as if there was some kind of interference that was keeping them from using the Force to scan their surroundings. They doubled their efforts, buoyed by their desire to get the fark out of this place ... whatever this place even was. Thankfully, their efforts paid off. Hitherto hidden amongst the minute impressions in the Force was a presence that initially felt as small as the ones they felt before, but further investigation revealed just how large it actually was.

Although Savi was no stranger to beings who were more powerful in the Force than they were, this was unlike anything they'd felt before. Even to a Force user of their advanced age and skill, this presence felt titanic in comparison—like comparing a pond to an ocean. Why hadn't they noticed it before? Surely, their senses were acute enough to detect it? Perhaps, this entity didn't want them to notice it until now. The notion that someone could conceal such a massive aura was a more unnerving possibility than the thought of Savran's senses dulling. They decided that it would be wise to avoid following that thread for the time being. Better to leave it to a proper research team. More information for their logs, though.

“I’ve detected an extremely powerful presence in the Force,” they said, relaying the information to their contact back on Selen. “Greater than anything I’ve felt before. And it feels old. Ancient. It doesn’t seem hostile but any personnel who investigate this realm further should exercise extreme caution.”

Ceasing their investigation of the area with the Force, Savran pulled their portable scanner from their belt and powered it on with a digital *chirp*. One of many ingenious creations the Shani had acquired from a smuggler who deals mainly in Brotherhood tech, the Collegium scanner would allow them to passively collect data on their surroundings as they traversed this strange realm. Steady footfalls carried them across the shifting ground. As Savi walked, a cloud of the tiny glowing creatures encircled them before drifting off toward their right. Well, that was odd. They suddenly seemed a lot more animated than before. What had changed? They made note of their change in behavior before continuing on their path to ... nowhere in particular. A landscape devoid of notable landmarks made it difficult to keep track of what direction they were traveling.

When the drifting lights pulled their stunt again, Savran stopped in their tracks. “What gives?” they asked, seemingly undaunted by the slim chances of the creatures understanding them. The cloud of luminescent beings contracted and swelled before their eyes, only to drift to Savi’s right again. Although Savi wasn’t sure, it seemed like they were trying to tell them something. “Do you want me to follow you?” they inquired, causing the living cloud to grow a brighter blue—a signal that Savi figured was as close to a “yes” as they could muster given their nature.

Well, it looked like this was what they were doing, now. Just following a cloud of glowing creatures they’d never seen before across a barren, shadowy landscape. They made sure to add the new development to the growing log of audio files sent through their comlink. As Savran proceeded, they noticed the amorphous ground beginning to shift and twist into the shape of a road. Though, it more closely resembled the haphazardly drawn pencil sketches they used to draw as a youngling, with its ill-defined borders and meandering path. Now that they took the time to consider it, the entire realm looked like an unfinished drawing. Like the vestiges of a long-forgotten dream.

The Shani’s trek eventually led them to an open clearing. Rocks of varying sizes were arranged into three concentric circles, the innermost ring the smallest in diameter while the outermost one

possessed a diameter of approximately six feet. Situated in the center of the tightest circle was a pillar of weathered stone. It held a peculiar object, an irregularly-shaped octagon made of ... metal? It looked like metal but the way thin streams of the material seemed to flow across its surfaces made Savi reconsider that assumption. Five of its eight faces were also etched with strange symbols that emitted a lavender glow. Whatever this thing was, they knew that the researchers back on Selen would kill to study this thing, so Savi took a few holopicts of it before beginning to collect details on it using their collegium scanner. A few minutes of data collection yielded more information than Savi expected, though, none that they could make sense of. They lacked the technical expertise to make heads or tails of the complex data uploaded onto their datapad.

“I’m going to collect a few more minutes worth of data and then head back,” Savran said into their comlink. “Start prepping the port-”

A flash of movement to their right forced Savi to cut their sentence short. One hand found its place on their beskad’s hilt, which was secured along the length of their spine. They figured it was only a matter of time for another enemy to reveal themselves. This was Mortis territory, after all. After taking a breath to steel themselves for the coming conflict, Savi unsheathed their beskad with a metallic *ring*. The silhouette of a humanoid appeared from the darkness beyond the clearing and began moving toward them at a laggard pace.

It wasn’t until the figure passed a cloud of the sentient lights that drifted by that their features became fully visible. Savran felt their breath catch in the back of their throat when the lights revealed the tapered countenance of a Cathar woman, with raven-colored hair. Two thin trails of hair hung far below the woman’s narrow chin, eclipsed in length only by an all-too-familiar braided ponytail. Draped over gray robes with navy trim, an unmistakable maroon poncho caught their eye.

Fighting through the lump that formed in their throat, Savi managed to utter a single word in a tone of pellucid saudade: “Master ...”

The sting of delayed recognition pierced Savran’s chest like a poisoned arrowhead. The feminine voice they heard earlier was none other than their fallen master: Jedi Master Nurysa Jal. A pair of

eyes that Savran remembered for their vibrance dulled, serving as the silent overture for a ballad of elegiac notes that resonated within the space between them. How was this possible? They couldn't remember the last time they even thought about their master before today, let alone seen them. As Savi fought back tears, the flavor of sorrow settled on their tongue—it tasted the way a rainy day smelled, the vaguely mineral scent born from the comingling of water and earth.

“W-What ... how are you here?” asked Savran. Even speaking was a struggle, as if every word clung to their lips.

“You brought me here, Savi. I'm here because you wished me to be.”

Nursya stepped forward with an outstretched hand but Savi took two steps backward, shaking their head as much as a way to convince themselves of their doubt as to convince their master. “No, that isn't true. It's been two-hundred-and-sixty years. I don't think about you any more. I *can't*.”

A disappointed look appeared on Nursya's face. “You can't hide from your feelings, Savran. You can't hide from what you did.”

Savran felt their feathers bristle at their master's words. They had spent the better part of the last century without so much of a thought about their old life or anyone in it but now, thanks to that wretched Mortis agent poking around in their head, they were seeing the last person they ever wanted to see again. The leaden weight of the emotions evoked from even the briefest of ruminations on their past had convinced Savran *lang syne* that they needed to be suppressed ... seal away in a mausoleum composed of memories of another life. And they had done an excellent job of that. It wasn't until Venrasu Gohweji, resident nosy *schutta* of the Children of Mortis, went looking for intel that their mind didn't have that Savi relapsed.

“I-I...” They tried to speak but found no words. What could they possibly say? They knew exactly what their master meant and even though Savi understood on some level that what they were seeing wasn't real, it didn't soften the blow of her words. It didn't absolve them from their guilt.

Their master stepped forward again, their face twisting into a look of bitter scorn. “You’re alive,” she said, her voice devoid of warmth and sympathy for the Shani. “You’re alive and I’m dead because of you. Because of your weakness.”

Suddenly, all the memories that Savran had worked so diligently to keep locked away came flooding to the surface. The Ethereal Realm’s bleak landscape peeled away like burnt paper, transporting Savi to a place they hadn’t seen in nearly two-hundred-seventy years.

*The sprawling grasslands of Kerkoidia stretched as far as their eyes could see. Rising far above the knee high grass was a sprawling urban center—the only one, in fact. Maldinian City was a megalopolis that rose to prominence during the late 3rd-century BBY, propelling many of its Kerkoiden citizens into a level of affluence that became the ire of its myriad competitors, none more than the dreaded Nihil. In Savran’s vision, thick trails of black smoke rose from several of the city’s buildings and nearly reached the fleet of starships that floated ominously above.*

*Then, they were running. Running alongside Master Jal toward the chaos, toward the sounds of desperate cries and blaster fire. The city was under attack. Savran craned their head to get a better look at the ships above their head. Those were Nihil ships. The galactic raiders had come to raid and plunder another planet ... to rob another culture of all they’d worked for. Righteous anger burned in their mind when they imagined all the lives whose trajectories had been altered drastically or worse, snuffed out entirely. Their anger would have boiled over were it not for the staying hand of their Cathar Jedi Master, who’d stopped them both in their tracks to address how the young Shani was feeling.*

*“Breathe, Savran, and remember,” she said, “As a Jedi, you’re still allowed to feel emotions like what you’re feeling now. But you mustn’t allow them to control you. The path of the Jedi is about learning to accept and make peace with those emotions. Only then can you truly attune to the Force, and call upon it to aid you in your service to others.”*

*“Thank you, Master,” they said, grateful for their master’s wise counsel and the sense of relief that her words instilled within them.*

*The shrill cry of a child ripped Savi’s attention away from her master. Their eyes darted to where the sound originated, revealing a Bothan man dressed in the leather fatigues Nihil loved to wear so much. The kriffer*

was dragging a young Kerkoiden girl out into the street with a blaster in hand. Savran wasn't going to wait to see what he had planned. They sprang into action, letting their legs carry them forward with speed only the Force could provide.

Two flashes of red exploded from the Nihil's blaster and Savi deflected the tibanna bolts with their lightsaber's radiant blue blade. As Savi charged, they felt a silent urge tugging at the back of their mind. An urge to inflict more harm than necessary. The call of the Dark Side. But they recalled Master Jal's words and used it as a bulwark against the Dark Side's encroachments.

The Force screamed at them to duck and they obeyed, narrowly missing another shot from the Nihil's blaster and creating an opportunity for a counter-attack, as well. Savran didn't think, but reacted. It was as if their body was already pre-programmed with the best moves for this exact scenario—one of many fruits of their labor sown during their training at the Jedi Temple on Banchii. Crouching low enough to touch the ground, they fired a foot upward into the Bothan's jaw hard enough to break his grip on the child and send him barreling backward into a collection of wooden crates.

Savi didn't bother checking to see if the Nihil thug was down for the count. Their instincts told them to ensure the child was safe. A sigh of relief escaped the Shani's lips when they saw that the child was unharmed.

"Don't worry, little one," they said, offering an encouraging smile, "I'm going to get you to saf—"

"Savran, move!"

Savi startled at the sound of Master Jal's cry and, by the time they lifted their head to see what was wrong, the Jedi Master was already in front of her. They saw it for just an instant: the Nihil, holding a rocket launcher. Then, a flash of intense white occluded their vision.

When they came to, the Nihil raider was gone. The child was, too. Their head pounded and the searing heat of fresh burns on their skin nearly took Savran's breath away. But they couldn't worry about that now.

"Master Jal?" they called out weakly, fighting to their feet so they could begin searching the area. Why couldn't they feel her in the Force? Maybe they were still too disoriented after the blast. They hoped.

*But what Savi saw felt like a saber to the chest. The charred and broken body of Nurysa Jal lay in the middle of the street. Her eyes, once vibrant and full of life, were frozen in a permanent state of shock and agony.*

*“Master?...” their voice broke, and their world shattered into a million tiny pieces.*

*Savi collected her body into their arms, tears streaming down their face as they desperately searched for any sign that Nurysa was still alive. But there was nothing. No breath, no pulse, and no presence in the Force.*

*She was gone.*

*Her master, her friend ... the woman who rescued her as a child and helped raise her, was gone.*

Savran was jolted back to the present, gazing back at the face of their fallen master with tear-filled eyes.

Distant figures wreathed in shrouds of brown and gold rose from the shadows, each bearing the visage of someone Savran used to know ... more members of the Jedi Order they'd trained alongside in their youth. As they continued to materialize from the darkness, Savi had to avert their gaze to spare themselves another second of seeing the faces of many whom they'd once considered their friends. Yet, either because of their own pitiable curiosity or some unspoken sense of obligation to face them all for the first time in more than two centuries, Savran was unable to look away for long. They opened their eyes again to see a crowd of fallen Jedi who glared at them with remorseless gazes.

Nurysa Jal stepped forward and despite wanting to move, Savi's legs didn't obey. The world suddenly felt incredibly small, like the entire galaxy had dissipated, leaving just the two of them standing there. A pair of cold hands enclosed Savi's face and sent a chill up their spine.

“It's time for you to atone, Savran Has.” Her hold on Savi's face tightened, her fingers becoming like daggers that dug into their saffron skin. Then, Nursya's gentle face transformed into the



gnarled, shadowy visage better suited for a holo-horror character than a real person, let alone their master.

“W-wha-”

They tried to speak but something took their breath away. Then, it clicked. It was this *thing*, digging its claws into her face. Instinct kicked in and Savi unsheathed their beskad in a flash, severing the entity’s hands at the wrists. But where they expected to see blood and flesh, they saw only wisps of smoke that poured from the wounds before the creature’s hands reformed nigh instantly.

Savi’s eyes widened when the specter rushed forward faster than they expected, releasing a terrible screech that made their ears ring. They managed to lift their blade in a defensive posture before it smacked into them with enough force to push them back several feet. Another flourish of their beskad forced the creature backward but Savran knew it wouldn’t be for long. The kriffing thing regenerated faster than they could.

Conventional weapons weren’t enough to do permanent damage, and Savran was in unfamiliar territory. That put them at a serious disadvantage. Savi hated disadvantages.

“Time to go,” they said to themselves before turning and breaking out into a full sprint.

They used the Force to propel themselves faster than they’d ever run before. Faster even than when they raced to recover the body of their fallen master all those years ago. Savi hadn’t sensed it before but now, they felt its presence in the Force. They felt countless presences that all coalesced into a tidal wave of pure rage and hunger.

Moving at this speed, it didn’t take long for the portal to appear in the distance. Each footfall brought them closer, closer to being free from this nightmare. But when Savran reached the final hundred feet leading to the portal, they had to skid to a stop when they saw the same shadowy figure standing in the way. Its eyes glowed like hot coils in the darkness, its wispy form illuminated only by the light of the distant portal.

As they eyed the entity from across the shifting field, their grip tightened around their beskad's hilt. "I'm not afraid of you," Savi said, "I'm not afraid of my past anymore."

The wraith released a deafening shriek before charging forward again with its spindly, jagged claws extended.

Unwavering in the face of this monstrosity, Savran continued. "You were right about one thing. I was weak, then. But I'm not now ... let me show you."

Savran inhaled sharply, filling their lungs with as much air as they'd allow. Calling upon the Force to magnify their voice when they released a bellow that made the very air tremble. The powerful scream rippled through the air and stopped the wraith in mid-air. It writhed and spasmed in a desperate attempt to free itself from Savi's attack, but the former Jedi didn't relent. They poured everything they had into their Force-assisted shout, exhausting their reserves in the process. But it was enough. The wraith emitted one, final wail that was so muffled by the volume of Savi's own that they only saw it open its inky maw before it dissipated into a cloud of black smoke.

It was done.

Savran ceased, and sucked in a much-needed breath of air before rushing toward the portal again, though this time with noticeably diminished speed. Once within arms reach, they took one final look back at the strange world before diving into the plane of swirling blue energy—their ticket home.