

???

??

?

An Echani woman walked into the maw of a cave. Outside were trees, silver hued as the hair and eyes of the woman herself. She disregarded them.

Even as they burned.

There wasn't time to contemplate the fire or what had caused such a thing before the woman entered the darkness.

There was more to the darkness though. Usually the dark was open, freeing, a lack of light that usually filled the cracks and exposed everything for the world to see. It was a blanket in a sharp world of watching eyes.

This was oppressive. It clung to the woman, weighing her steps down.

Fear.

Whatever she had been after, it was gone. Gone before she ever got to grasp it.

The darkness didn't ease away. It moved in, closer. Clawing into her skin. She kept trying to walk, to continue, to move. Her hand reached out.

The light responded.

It came from the ceiling, maybe? Or was it the walls? It was so bright it burned the eyes and nothing else could tear through. In a moment it had found her hand, raised above the darkness and exposing the horrors laid within.

Dead.

There was so much death, swelling, churning. Even as it retreated to the shadows left by the cave's crevices, the rot persisted. Sludge stained the ground.

The woman stood in the midst of it all. The light remained close, unable to burn but it was enough for now.

-----/0\-----

***The Shattered Plains***  
***The Ethereal Realm***  
**41 ABY**

The sensation of falling drew Melissa out of the vision. Her stomach seemed to roll over and squelch as gravity stopped behaving as it should. Scrunching her eyes closed didn't provide much reprieve as bile rose in her throat, but it did at least provide some comfort.

Well, relatively.

The Echani was belted into a harness. Through her eyelids she could see bright red as systems failed to catch up with the sudden twist, body slamming sideways one side to the other. Her head knocked backwards into the headrest, as the shuttle's momentum stopped. Melissa's nails dug into the seat, choking back what meal she'd managed to force down when she'd originally eaten it. A shrill ringing filled the air. She sat down with her eyes closed and knowing she was stationary, Melissa felt like she was still falling.

Regret joined the physical sensations, weighing her down. She'd promised Ruka and Cora, her adoptive parents, that she'd come home safe. That she could help and remain safe. She'd promised Draca too, that she'd do her best to stay safe.

To both, the Seeress had insisted on joining the conflict. Mostly, it was true that she wanted to help this group: the Brotherhood. The Childrens' goal wasn't fully known but what was known was worrisome at *best*.

Partially, the Echani worried for Draca. She'd only met the Zabrak Jedi once, who was an ex-member of the Brotherhood turned to the Children due to conflict with someone close to him. He'd brought her to the sky islands. He'd shown her how alone he was.

She didn't want him to be alone.

Eventually, the sickness and pain faded enough for Melissa to return to the present. A hand on her arm grounded her enough that she started working on unbuckling herself. Orders were being called out from outside.

"Who's injured? Get them on the ground outside! Kirreon, take Moifarn to secure the area as best as you can. Miss-"

Melissa looked up at the squad's medic, a Pantoran woman whose frown was etched into her face in wrinkles. She recalled the woman being introduced as Vaaso.

She then realised Vaaso was speaking. To her.

“Miss Luxor? Are you hearing me?”

Melissa opened her mouth to respond when the medic shined a light in her eyes.

“Ow- Yes. Sorry.”

Vaaso narrowed her eyes but nodded, “Your head is going to hurt for a few hours. If it hurts worse than it does now or you throw up, take some bacta and come find me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once Vaaso had moved to one of the other’s still in their seats, speaking in a similar tone as she had to Melissa, the Echani made her way out of the shuttle.

It was chaos. There was too much going on for Melissa to pick up details. The shuttle wasn’t salvageable here and more importantly, the sergeant was sending a few of those able out as scouts.

“I’ll go too!” Melissa stepped forward, raising her arm to draw attention and earning a weary look from the Zeltron sergeant. He nodded, despite whatever hesitations he clearly had. His hardened gaze glanced over, her up and down, as she stepped forward.

“Head into the North, North East caves. If you haven’t found anything in an hour, regroup either here or in the caves with the other scouts. We need a way back into the Corpse Fields before the these karking cultists’ forces get too brave on us.”

“Yes sir.”

A glow rod was pressed into her hands.

-----/0\-----

***Underground***  
***The Shattered Plains***  
**41 ABY**

The glow rod had been a blessing. The caves were dark and full of strange things. The only moment Melissa had debated *not* using it was particularly odd. A trill had scared the living daylight out of her, drawing her gaze to a pair of red eyes peering

around a corner. It had tilted its head, starting to step out, its fuzzy antenna bouncing in what could have been a comical manner if it wasn't so damn large.

Melissa had panicked, clicking off the glow rod and turning to run. Strangely, as soon as the light disappeared it had skittered away with only a quiet *clapping* alerting to the fact it was leaving.

It hadn't returned, so it could have been worse. Probably.

Sadly, the children had realised their presence in the caves. There had been echoes of gunfire. Echoes of screams. Melissa's situation was passable for now, though even as she started taking to the shadows, hiding in crevices and concealing herself with the Force, she couldn't help but wonder...

Was one of them Draca?

The likelihood was low enough she wouldn't risk being spotted. She was fairly sure the air was getting cleared as she wandered along, Melissa didn't want to delay finding the correct path. Yet, it lingered.

Until a flash of red lit the corner she'd taken up, striking her arm.

Melissa screamed, raising her hand and *pushing*. She'd long not needed to perform the motions but instinct took over. A bad habit that still worked as the attacker was flung backwards.

There was an audible *thud* followed by a deep yell. She didn't get up straight away, still huddled in her corner. Kriff, that hurt! The plasma had cauterised the wound as quickly as it had created it but that just left her nerves raw and aflame with agony.

Steady breathing, counting three in and three out, calming her enough to step out of her hiding place. The cultist was still there. He'd flown off of the raised path, dropping a good six or more feet to the ground with the momentum of the Force, making it so rather than bouncing off of one of the stalagmites, his leg had been impaled.

The Twi'lek was trying to get free, blood spilling down the rock formation as he tried to lift his leg.

Melissa felt sick. What had she done? She'd just wanted to get him away, not hurt him-

The Echani clambered down the side of the path, sliding a little but coming to an easily controlled stop, crossing the space to the man.

He reached for his blaster but it was out of reach. That was ok.

Melissa lit her shoto lightsaber, slicing the Blaster in twain before clicking it off again. She went to his leg.

“Hey!” His voice was strained, a gravelly tone strained with pain, yet still so full of anger. He raised his hand, “Get away!”

“You will die if I leave you here.” Melissa met his gaze as he narrowed his eyes, the green skin of his brow pulling into a frown. She continued, “I can heal you a little, then you can just leave. You’re unarmed, you can just stay down here. Stop fighting.”

“Or what?” He’d responded, snapping. Melissa paused, thinking of an answer yet before she could he spoke again. His tone changed, the pain ebbing its way to the forefront of his expression. “Please help. I’ll stop.”

The Seeress nodded. It took a few moments to lift his leg free, to stem the bleeding enough that he’d live. He’d screamed again, lekku twitching with the agony but the soft radiant light of the Force soon did enough. The wound was far from healed. He wouldn’t be able to walk.

It was enough for now. Maybe this was the light? It wasn’t as desperate as the vision she’d had implied though.

Melissa shifted to stand.

“Exits that way.” He called to her, gesturing toward the direction the path above them veered toward.

“Thank you.” Melissa murmured. Maybe this was the light from the vision. The light of kindness bringing kindness. A smile lit her face. She took a moment to rub the blood from her hands, then turned before she could see the smile on the cultist’s face turn sour.

-----/0\-----

It had all gone so wrong so quickly.

The exit had been there, an awful stench infecting any clear air wafting in but the twilight beams in front of her eyes brought hope. She’d spent almost the entirety of her hour but it would have been worth it if she’d found the exit clear for use.

Melissa had found the exit. It just wasn't clear. Instead, the Force pressed at her back, anger emitting from what should have been a haven. Thankfully her barrier had been enough to repel the blow. She felt more powerful. There wasn't time to question that.

There were so many paths to take. Winding ones that opened into cavernous domes, narrow ones that sharply inclined and were so claustrophobic that even with her small frame she scraped against the walls, dust and loose stones ripping against the burned flesh of her upper arm. The smaller ones were the ones she favoured as she ran. Scrambling round corners, running. Searching for the light.

Maybe it hadn't been kindness but if it wasn't, then what?

The Children of Mortis knew these caves. Each turn was met with a new threat. Melissa could feel them closing in, her senses expanding beyond her expectations as she reached out. Each shred of information was just enough to keep the Seeress alive. She turned, throwing herself to her knees, feeling the skin pierce under the sudden blow but stumbling up to her feet without pausing to wince. The rocks behind where her head had just been were raining down now shattered shards.

Surely it had to be here! There hadn't been anything that struck out to her but maybe now that she needed it, maybe it'd reveal itself. A crystal, a beast? Something, someone! *Please*.

Melissa cried out as the next corner led her into the back of another cultist, barely evading their grasp as they swung round to grab her. Lightning crackled at their fingers and Melissa raised her hands as she had before. This time she didn't wait to inspect what harm she'd done as their body disappeared into the darkness. It occurred to the Echani that she could draw her lightsaber, but she was already tired. Maybe if she'd done it straight away she'd have had a chance to duel.

Not that it would have been possible without killing someone. Even now, the idea repulsed her.

Where was that light?

Melissa turned, vying for another corner but her senses were quicker than her exhausted body. The barrier was moments too late as she slammed into the wall beside her. Something cracked in her arm, pain flaring. The same arm again. By the stars it hurt.

The cultists filled in. There wasn't time. Ruka. Cora. Draca. Their faces flashed in her mind's eye as she turned toward the group. Their eyes held no mercy. Just anger. Excitement.

She raised her hand, punching it into the air as she squeezed her eyes shut, calling upon the Force. The cultists cried out, Melissa couldn't blame them. Even with her eyes closed it burned bright enough she could see the blood vessels in her eye lids. She ran back the way she came, trying to blink away the blotchy patches in her vision.

The Seeress almost wanted to laugh. Had it really been that simple?

Fear pushed her forward despite that urge. She slowed long enough to focus, to channel her being with the Force and delay the exhaustion. It let her find a room that was familiar enough and settle down.

There was a moment of confusion when Melissa cloaked herself. Usually it took several seconds but this time it was almost immediate. Strange. They had mentioned the Force acted strangely here. It explained a few of the feats she'd achieved here. The Force wasn't something you could directly thank but as the cultists raced past, she murmured it anyway.

It was several minutes after the hour. Once the cultists' footsteps had faded, she messaged to the group:

*There's cultists on my path, but the exit is at the end. I can lead us there once it's safe. Hiding currently.*

Soon enough there was a response.

-----/0\-----

There had been more gunfire, closer. More screams. This time at least Melissa knew it was friend more than foe. Within minutes it came to a stop and reaching out with sense let her know that it was friends still standing now.

Melissa stepped out, heading toward the group with her back straight and chin held high. Her arm was broken, burnt. She was in pain but she wasn't alone. She wasn't afraid.

They were going to make it.

-----/0\-----

## ***The Corpse Fields***

**41 ABY**

Death.

There was so much death. It lingered in the air, the scent clinging to the eyes, throat, into the sinuses. It was more than the smell. Or the sight of so many dead. It lingered on the Force too. Like a yawning maw, grasping. More souls falling into it even as they desperately clawed at the edges. Their nails, their claws, their desperation extended as if sensing someone listening.

Melissa's eyes welled up. How could they do this? Just leave them here to rot. What had happened that caused so many to be dead. So much anger and pain and- her knees buckled. Vaaso cursed and Melissa wanted to apologise or try to walk but it was too much. She could feel them all and despite how thankful she was for the Realm saving her earlier, the Seeress wished that the Ethereal Realm would let her draw away. The blessing earlier was now a weight that she couldn't bear. Fragments of the dead remained here in a way that they didn't back home and she couldn't escape their cries.

The only silver lining to it was that she couldn't feel Draca's presence among them. Yet.

Though Melissa could barely pick out her own being as the grave itself cried out for reprieve. The silvery light she knew was her own presence dimmed under the pressure before, as her own vision did, flickering into the dark.

## ***Taldryan Forward Camp***

***The Corpse Fields***

**41 ABY**

*Ping.*

A pale hand snapped across the table. Melissa let out a disappointed sigh. Her message to Ruka and Cora had been received, just not by them.

They'd know she was safe for now if they survived their own battles.

Between Vaaso and the medics in the forward camp, it had been decided that Melissa would remain in the forward camp until more progress through the Corpse Fields had been made. It wasn't a hard decision for them to make when she'd arrived unconscious and injured anyway.



It'd take an hour or so of applying bacta gel just for the burn to heal, never mind the exhaustion from over-exerting the Force and the broken bone in her shoulder. Not that they wouldn't have an otherwise able-bodied soldier back on the field before *too* long passed.

Once deemed healthy enough, Melissa walked out of the hastily made and heavily crowded medic tent. There was a landed Sentinel-class Landing Craft, *The Sentinel Hotel* written across the hull. The vessel was grounded due to the gravity wells and it was an easy enough climb for higher ground. It was better than shuffling among a crowd of strangers, one of whom the very person Draca had been running away from. She had no idea which one they would be but her silvery gaze still glanced over the strangers passing by.

Reaching the top was a slow and cautious process, one that the Seeress found she wasn't the only thinking of this spot upon reaching the top. She left the Taldryanites to their own business as she sat on the edge of the wing, legs hanging in the open air.

The Chain loomed over everything.

It was beautiful. The realms it passed through cast different shadows, different lights, different winds upon it. It barely moved but the slight ones that did shift its being were unpredictable. A force of nature in itself.

The Children of Mortis wanted to break this chain. A binding of the Force. To them, this resembled everything preventing them from ascending to their true abilities.

Melissa frowned. It more reminded her of the chains that functioned within the chassis of many ships. Of speeders or the especially fancy doorways that the Academy so loved to use.

Some chains weren't intended to bind things. Some were as integral to their machine as Melissa's heart was to herself.

How bloody would all these worlds be if this heart was torn away?