



The Restless Dead

General Zentru'la

Chapter 1

The Ethereal Realm

“The Corpse Fields? Why can’t we ever go anywhere fun?” Rohla Trugaim, in the cockpit of the *Harbinger*, finished her drink in one and slammed the glass on the dashboard with a resounding thunk, perhaps harder than she intended. The shuttle suddenly lurched backwards, sending General Zentru’la stumbling towards Rohla. The boots of his heavy white armour clunked against the floor as he grabbed the ceiling for balance. “Whoops. Don’t know me own strength.”

“Stay focused on the job, Rohla,” said Zentru’la, his voice booming over the whirr of the *Harbinger’s* engines. “This is like nothing we’ve ever faced before.” It had only been a few minutes since they crossed the gateway into the Ethereal Realm, but there were already signs something wasn’t right. The Realm had a misty ambient light, provided by neither sun nor moon, and the *Harbinger’s* flight seemed unstable, as if something was pulling it around. It couldn’t have been Rohla. She was too good to lose control like that. And the shuttle was state-of-the-art, meticulously maintained, a technical malfunction was out of the question. It had to be The Ethereal Realm.

What else was different? The ground below was ruptured into deep trenches and huge ravines, which looked impossible to form naturally. Would their weapons still work? Would Lilina’s powers?

The ship lurched again, this time downwards. Zentru’la’s feet left the floor,

and his stomach jolted in a sudden moment of weightlessness before coming back down with a heavy thud.

Masakado marched into the cockpit, his hand hovering over the hilt of his sword, canine brow furrowed with murderous intent. "What are you doing Trugaim?"

"It's not me!" Rohla shouted. "I don't know what's happening!"

The *Harbinger* jolted again.

"Assuming direct control," said a smooth, robotic voice from within the walls.

Rohla pulled at the joystick and the ship rose for a second before the AI overrode her. "Gimme back control!"

"Negative," said G14. "Organic brains are insufficient under the current conditions."

The ship lurched left and right, up and down, forward and backward as Rohla wrestled G14 for control over who wrestled against the fluctuating gravity. "Rapidly losing altitude!" Shouted Rohla, as Zentru'la gripped hold of the wall for stability. "Pull up, you stupid machine, PULL UP!"

There was only one result. "Brace fer impact!" An ear-splitting, stomach-churning crunch of metal on rock. Bottles smashed. Zentru'la lost his balance. The *Harbinger* ground to a halt.

Rohla launched a tirade of foul language at the AI.

"Calm down, Captain Trugaim," said G14. "This outcome exceeds ninety-

"Don't tell me to calm down! Never crashed a ship in me life! Now we're stranded 'ere! And the rum is gone!"

"The shields absorbed most of the impact. Major systems remain mostly intact."

"Well, I guess that's good then," said Rohla as she sat back in her chair. There isn't much the pilot can do once the ship is downed.

Zentru'la was back on his feet. Rohla and G14 had crash-landed The *Harbinger* along the length of a narrow trench. It was not an eventuality that he had anticipated. It made the Ethereal Realm seem even more threatening, that the Realm

itself could defeat the combined efforts of Rohla and G14 to keep them airborne. But they had a contract to fulfil. “We still need to regroup with the other Brotherhood fighters. Can we get back in the air?”

“The hull has sustained minor damage,” G14 answered. “Without repair, the system has a 10 per cent chance of failure.”

“Failure meaning...”

“A catastrophic implosion.”

Rohla looked over her shoulder at Zentru’la. “Yeah and another gravity surge and we don’t even make it that far.”

“G14, call for evac from the Vornskr Battalion. We need a ride to the Corpse Fields.”

“Negative, General. Communications are blocked.”

The Voice of the Brotherhood had paid good money for their support in the assault on the Realm, and letting down a valuable business partner was not an option. Yet they had become stranded in an unknown location with no ability to call for assistance. There was only really one route forward. “Acknowledged. We continue to the Corpse Fields from here on foot. Wherever ‘here’ is. Where are we anyway?”

“Nowhere good.” Lilina was hunched over, her hands clasped to her forehead, her long electric blue hair was a mess and her blindfold askew.

“What’s wrong?”

“This place is strong with the Force,” she spoke as if every syllable was an immense struggle. “But it’s not right. The Force should flow like a gentle breeze. Here... is like a hurricane. Chaotic and unpredictable. The Force is not in balance.”

“We’re going to need you out there. Will you be able to fight?”

Lilina readjusted her hair, robes and blindfold. She took a series of slow, deep breaths. “I can fight. Possibility better. If I can control this power...”

“Don’t take any risks,” said Zentru’la. “We can’t afford anything else to go wrong.”

Chapter 2

The Voice

“Hate you.”

It was a girl’s voice, eerily familiar, childish yet haunting, coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

Survival instincts turned up to eleven, Zentru’la wheeled around, repeater raised, finger on the trigger. “Who said that?”

Masakado curiously cocked his head towards Zentru’la. “No one said anything, General.”

“I thought I heard something. A girl’s voice.”

Rohla laughed from the cockpit. “Wondered where my rum kept disappearin’.”

“I trust the General,” said Lilina with a soft confidence to her voice.

“You heard it too, Lilina?”

“No,” she said softly. “But I believe that you did.”

“Impossible,” growled Masakado, who like Zentru’la, had his weapon drawn. “I heard nothing, so it didn’t happen.”

“Nothing is impossible in a place like this.” Lilina’s soft words seemed to hang ominously in the air. Masakado shifted awkwardly. No-one was qualified to challenge Lilina on anything spiritual, and they all knew it.

Zentru’la pushed the voice to the back of his mind. They had a job to do. “We still need to reach the Corpse Fields,” he said, regaining his composure and tap-

ping at a map on a datapad. "Rohla, stay with the ship, we'll send support. Masakado, Lilina, with me on foot. Weapons at the ready at all times. It's a long walk to the Corpse Fields."

"Masakado," said Lilina. "Give the General a sword."

Both Zentru'la and Masakado shot Lilina the same, quizzical look. Zentru'la did not fight with a sword. A blacksmith before he was a soldier, he understood the basics. But Lilina didn't know that. Masakado was the swordsman. That's why he carried two - his own trusty Katana on one hip, imbued with the light, and a Sith Sword on the other cursed with the dark.

"Why?" growled the wolf.

"I'm not sure I understand myself. But The Force is my guide. Give Zentru'la Arcturus."

Masakado paused for a second, before unclipping the Sith Sword from his hip and passing it to the General. As soon as Zentru'la put his hand around the hilt, he felt a sudden urge to slice through everyone on board. He took unclipped his grenade launcher from his back, and replaced it with the sword as Masakado retrieved a spear from the armoury.

The boarding ramp unfolded and the trench below left a drop to reach the ground. The Realm quaked under Zentru'la's weight as the colossal general hit the floor, followed by Masakado and Lilina, who barely made a sound as they landed lightly on the rocks.

Zentru'la immediately raised his heavy repeating cannon, scanning the area for threats. Masakado had his spear ready, and Lilina's double-bladed lightsaber shone a brilliant white.

The area was dead, silent as the grave. The hazy glow lighting the realm cast no shadows but the network of trenches, tunnels and cave systems created blind spots everywhere. One long trench appeared to lead in the direction of the corpse fields. This was not the right terrain to be wearing heavy, clunky armour. But Masakado, on his cybernetic legs and the agility of a galactic athlete, had no problems navigating the landscape. Zentru'la and Lilina would only slow him down.

“Masakado, go on ahead and get word to the Corpse Fields. Don’t stop for anything.”

“Acknowledged, General.” The cybernetic assassin was gone in a flash. Zentru’la climbed down into a trench, finding it coming up to his shoulders. He had to crouch to hide his head. Snipers could be anywhere. Lilina jumped into the trench behind him, a head shorter than him, she stood at full height within the trench.

They continued down the trench on foot, slowly, trying to keep silent and avoid line of sight. The ground was uneven, and with Zentru’la’s heavy armour it was difficult to maintain balance.

“I sense a dangerous presence nearby,” whispered Lilina.

Zentru’la held his repeater cannon, fully loaded, in both hands. He had no idea what might lie in wait in the Shattered Plains, but Lilina’s instincts were to be trusted.

“I’ll never forgive you.”

It was the voice again. The girl’s voice, but her voice had dropped in pitch, and there was venom in the misty voice. There was no doubt over who it could be. But it couldn’t be her. She couldn’t be here. Zentru’la killed her on Lyra, she was laid to rest on Ragnath. Why would she be here?

“Tonal’la?”

“You’re hearing that voice again, aren’t you General?” Lilina said softly, as if counselling a patient over a cup of tea. Zentru’la nodded. “It’s your daughter, isn’t it?”

The question sparked something in his mind. Lilina knew more about healing than anyone he knew. If anyone would know, it would be her. “Lilina... I have to ask you something. Rath Oligard died, but they brought him back. Tonal’la’s spirit is here. Do you think... is there any chance...?”

Lilina took a deep breath. “There are techniques within the Force to bring back the dead. But it is taboo among the Jedi. Only life can pay for life, General. It requires a living sacrifice.” Lilina was far too dedicated to the Jedi Code

to go through with something like that. Zentru'la's mind wandered to anyone he knew who might help when Lilina continued. "And besides, I think it is no longer possible. Her spirit may be here, but it has no home to return to."

"So we'd need her to go to her resting place? She was buried in an unmarked grave on Ragnath."

"Four years ago, General. Oligard was brought back immediately. That, I think, will have made all the difference. And," she paused and looked curiously at the General, "After four years, her body... well..."

"I understand." The General was no stranger to dead bodies, but the thought of his daughter's skeletal remains were enough for him to drop the subject. He wanted her back, more than anything, to serve once more as her enforcer. But that was him talking from his own selfish desires. Perhaps, the dead should be left to rest.

Chapter 3

The Push

They continued in silence until the trench reached a tall ridge, giving a rare unobstructed view of the next mile of shattered plains.

“Get down.” Zentru’la placed the barrel of his repeating cannon on the crest of the ridge and peered down the scope. There were ten shambling figures, humanoid in shape, with a strange translucent glow, with a mix of swords and lightsabers. They looked solid, yet he could see the ground through them.

He had worked with Lilina long enough to know she would be seeing the same, whatever that meant to a blind woman who saw only through the Force. “What are they, Lilina?”

“I don’t know. But I have a terrible feeling.”

There were too many to sneak past. With no shadows to hide in, they’d have to keep line of sight broken. But there weren’t enough trenches, and they didn’t know the layout of the tunnel system. “Can they hurt us?”

“Usually, no. The living and the dead do not interact. But here. . . I’m not so sure.”

They still die when you shoot them. Those were words the General lived by. No matter what he had faced, it had always worked. Use a big gun. And if that didn’t work, use more big guns. But what happens if the enemy doesn’t die? When blasters and explosions have no effect. He zoomed in further. His crosshairs were

trained right between the eyes of the closest one. They were in perfect range to take out with sniper fire.

“Can I shoot it?”

The spirits walked closer towards them.

“I think it’s spotted us. Give me an answer, Lilina.”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

They didn’t have time to not know. The spirits had definitely seen them. They were moving faster. Zentru’la pulled the trigger.

The shot landed squarely in the head of the spirit, and it fell to the ground.

“One down.”

No sooner had he finished the words did the spirit come back to his feet.

“Use Arcturus, General.”

Zentru’la threw aside his repeater and drew the sword from his back. He felt a surge of power running through him. “CHARGE!” He leapt over the crest of the ridge. He heard the footsteps of Lilina behind him, and the ignition of her lightsaber.

“Don’t let them touch you, General!”

Zentru’la charged into battle with a brutal swing at the nearest spirit, and it vanished as the Sith blade cleaved through its midsection. He took two quick steps towards the next, battered its phantom blade aside and thrust his sword through its ghostly heart.

Behind him, Lilina’s lightsaber clashed against the spirits’ weapons, but his mind was on attack. He felt strong in this Realm, faster, and more powerful, like his body had extra energy. One, then another, then another fell to the Sith blade.

With no more enemies in front of him, he turned to see Lilina battling a spirit with twin swords, whirling her double-bladed lightsaber like a shield in front of her. It attacked relentlessly and aggressively into her defence, pushing her back. Then he saw the other spirit behind her. She had not.

It raised a ghostly sword to strike the killing blow. There was nothing Zentru’la could do. He was out of range. Lilina was too focused on the spirit in front of her.

“NO!” he roared, and without knowing why, flung out a hand towards the spirit. It was knocked backwards, and Lilina spun on the spot, cleaving both in half with her lightsaber, and they vanished into nothing.

“Did I...” Zentru’la took a moment to catch his breath. “Did I just use The Force?”

Lilina deactivated her lightsaber. “You saved my life, General. Again.”

Zentru’la had bigger questions. “I just threw that spirit with my mind, Lilina.”

“The Force has always been strong with you, General. Just like your daughter. The Force runs in bloodlines.”

“She got her power from me? But I’ve never felt it until now.”

“This Etheral Realm must have awoken the dormant power within you.”

“So could I learn to use it?”

“Had your power been discovered in your youth, you may have become a powerful Jedi Knight. But it is too late for that. And, perhaps, unnecessary.”

“What? Unnecessary? Your powers are amazing, Lilina. I could do so much more with them.”

“Has your natural strength ever failed you in battle? Your ability to inspire allies?” She was right, of course. Zentru’la was 65. Far beyond the life expectancy of a career soldier. And the accolade of ‘war hero’ stalked him wherever he fought. Not that war heroes existed. There were no heroes, just some monsters more ruthless than the rest. “You have power. People are drawn to you. Trust you. Your men will run through duracrete for you.”

“We’re mercenaries. They fight for me because I pay the-”

“And because they believe in you, General. Don’t underestimate that. The Galaxy is a dangerous place. There’s no shortage of work for a soldier. But they choose to fight for you. When they march into battle with you at the lead, they know they will return home to their families at the end of the war.”

Lilina was right, of course. Zentru’la never had any issue inspiring troops. But he had seen Jedi do things, powers that could improve his effectiveness. “But the Force... Mind Tricks, Battle Meditation...”

“Can inspire and persuade... even control, yes. It can manipulate minds. But not hearts. That is your true power. And that is why I have not attempted to train you in the ways of the Jedi. You are strong with the Force, General... but even stronger without it. What am I without the Force? A weak, blind woman. Power can become a crutch. Through your inner strength alone, you're a war hero to them.”

“I'm no hero. Just an old killer, with one foot in the grave and one bastard to drag down with me.”

“But they believe that you are. I followed you into this realm because I believe in you.”

Zentru'la sheathed Arcturus and the question popped back into his mind. “Did you know this would happen? Is that why you wanted me to have this?”

“No. I could feel a pull towards the Dark Side. Masakado has made progress on letting go of his hatred, but I didn't trust him with that sword in this Realm.”

Chapter 4

The Ghost

As they continued towards the Corpse Fields, Zentru'la had given up on the blaster, keeping his hand hovering over Arcturus. They could smell the Corpse Fields before they could see it, a stench of rot and decay, the Corpse Fields smelled every bit as pleasant as it sounded. And then he heard the voice again.

“Your path walks across my grave.”

Her voice was fully grown now — the voice of the scheming Empress Elinia the Illusionist, one of many roles that Tonal'la would play.

“Only one of us can return alive.”

He could never forget these words. Some of the last she ever spoke.

“Prove your loyalty! Finish your mission soldier!”

He couldn't. Couldn't kill his own daughter. He had fought so hard to earn her trust. Even if she ordered him to. He couldn't kill her.

“For the Empire.”

And then he did. Shot her right through the heart. He pulled the trigger, but Rath Oligard pulled the strings. He clenched his teeth, his hands balled into fists. He was glad Oligard had come back to life. It meant he might have a chance to kill the bastard himself.

Following these words, Tonal'la finally appeared. Ghostly like the spirits before, she appeared as she died, the shade of a twi'lek woman in her 30s, lekku

running down to her lower back, wearing a cloak with a burning hole in the chest where Zentru'la had fired the fateful shot. "It's been a long time." Her voice was echoey, but unmistakably hers.

"Tonal'la... what are you doing here."

"Waiting." She held an inactive lightsaber in her hand. "For my failure, traitor of a father."

Traitor? She couldn't be referring to her death. That was orchestrated by her. And failure? He had made progress on building a force to avenge her death. "I've been building an army, Tonal'la. To fight The Collective. To kill Rath Oligard. To avenge you."

"I didn't die to kill Oligard!" Tonal'la snapped. "I gave my life and honour to protect the Empire! You abandoned it and sided with our enemy."

"I'm not with the enemy! I choose my own fights. The Empire was weak without you. I could achieve more alone."

"Then you should have been the one to take command! You never could understand my plans, could never follow along. I obviously got my intelligence from my mother!"

"I'm not a politician, Tonal'la! I'm a fighter! And I'm fighting the enemy we shared!"

"And yet, after all of that, he is still alive."

"He died! Then came back."

"Did you strike the killing blow?"

Was there anything he could have possibly said? He had done everything he possibly could. And when Oligard returned, he had sworn that next time he died, it would be at Zentru'la's hands.

"Pathetic. Couldn't even get that right. You've failed me for the last time." The ghost of the Empress activated her lightsaber, her face contorted with wounded fury.

"Stay back, Lilina." Zentru'la met her eye as she readied her lightsaber. "This is between me and my daughter."

“Be careful, General. The Dark Side is strong here,” said Lilina. “This Realm has turned her spirit vengeful.”

“No, that’s her. That’s what she’s always been. I failed her as a father from the cradle to the grave. She never missed a chance to remind me when she was alive. And so in death.”

Zentru’la drew Arcturus. He held the sword above his head, two hands on the hilt, a stance he had seen Masakado use before, not knowing what he was going to do with it. Would this sword destroy her spirit forever? She stood relaxed, her lightsaber ignited but down by her side, the same way she fought in life.

In a mirror of how she died, Tonal’la’s ghost lunged at Zentru’la with her lightsaber. He took a quick step backwards and the blade glided past his neck. He blocked two follow-up attacks with Arcturus, keeping his sword between him and her at all times. She threw attack after attack, but Zentru’la’s defence was solid, staying true to his hand-to-hand fundamentals, keeping his guard up, constantly moving.

It was at this moment, on the night she died, that Zentru’la had moved into grappling range, grabbed her wrist, and disarmed her with a throw. But he couldn’t grapple a ghost.

Zentru’la burst forward and swung his lightsaber at her hand. Maybe if he could disarm her, he could leave her spirit intact. But she was faster, just as she always was, and twisted her arm out of the way of the attack. Zentru’la seized the offensive, but she never bothered to even block his attacks, always slipping out of the way, with his sword coming teasingly close to her hand over and over.

Nothing was working. She was better with the blade than him. Lilina was better still. But he couldn’t ask for her help. This was his fight, and his alone. He took one hand off his sword and extended it towards Tonal’la’s ghost. Invisible tendrils of The Force wrapped themselves around the ghost. Her movements immediately became sluggish, as if she were moving through water.

“What have you d-”

And then his blade passed through her wrist. The hand disappeared, along

with the lightsaber, and the ghost stumbled backwards with a short gasp of pain.

“You may have got your intelligence from your mother. But you got your powers from me.” Zentru’la readied his sword his once more, but Tonal’la took two steps backwards, her expression visibly softened, her body relaxed. Zentru’la could almost make out something that resembled a smile.

“Impressive. Without me, you have grown stronger.” Zentru’la could feel that she was no longer a threat. The anger had disappeared, and the tension immediately diffused. He had passed the test. He sheathed his sword. “The Empire lost a fine General when you left.”

“I’m sorry that I left. The Empire was holding me back from fighting Oligard. I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“I’m dead, father. I don’t have needs or wants. Your goals are different from mine. The Galaxy is for the living, not the dead. But if you can do one thing for me?”

“Anything.”

“Protect Aylin Sajark. And apologise to her, from me, that I never made more time for her.”

“Of course.” She had always been friendly towards Aylin, but Zentru’la never knew how deep that friendship went. Neither did he need to. Tonal’la wanted her protected. That was all that mattered.

“Appearing here is... exhausting. Kill Rath Oligard. Not for the Empire. Not for me. For you. That is your destiny. This is your story now.” And with that, her ghost vanished.

His daughter’s words continued to turn over in his head as they proceeded towards the Corpse Fields. All this time, he had been hunting Rath Oligard, building his own army to battle him on his own terms. To give himself something to live and to fight and to die for, he had deluded himself into thinking he was doing it for her. But really, he was doing it for himself. And that was fine.

The Brotherhood fighters at the Corpse Fields were in a state of disarray. Communications were down, most of them had been split from their allies and their

commanders, members of different clans bickered over superiority or whose plan was better as they prepared their assault. Someone needed to take charge, bring order to the chaos, and coordinate a tactical assault. It was almost comforting to be back in his element, away from the ghosts and spirits and back to commanding troops on the battlefield. It was time to take charge.