

As she fell towards the ground, every nerve and neuron in the Zygerrian's body rushed frantically to inform her of the *immediate* and *imminent* danger she was about to be in. There was no time to think through a clever solution. Even with the laws of physics, time, and space dancing to their own beat, Zig Kaliska's mass rocketed towards the alien soil of the Ethereal Realm like a falling meteor.

Impact.

Her vision vanished. There was no pain, just shock. Something wrapped around her, embracing, welcoming.

A sudden inhale of panicked breath. Like the first breath after submerging from a frozen lake. Yet there was no heat, or cold, or *feeling*. There was nothing, until...

Zig's muscles started to twitch and spasm as tendrils of slender shadow slithered away from her body. Her beskar armor was in tatters...which made no sense to the distant echoes of her mechanical mind. Blunt-force collision didn't cause this kind of damage to beskar. Her head, meanwhile, was missing the helmet that was *supposed* to protect it from aforementioned blunt-force trauma.

So of course it decided, now, to begin throbbing incessantly, starting as a dull pressure and rapidly spreading to a full crown of tension. The hammering sensation nearly caused Zig to blackout, but she pushed herself up onto her hands and knees. Her stomach, then, decided to join in on the fun as well, forcing her to empty its contents onto the murky ground.

With her hands spread to either side of her bowed body, she dug her nails and knees digging into the ground. She trembled as each vicious retch from the pit of her stomach burned the lining of her throat and stung the insides of his nostrils. A line of spittle and bile hung from her lips as she weakly pushed herself to one knee, her ragged breath mirroring the simple struggle of doing so.

Breathe.

The vomiting seemed to help slightly. Her vision blurred in and out of focus. She tasted copper on her tongue as she craned her neck back, her matted hair veiling the front of her face without the contour and discipline of her braids to hold it in check. She started to curl into a fetal ball, but the gesture and movement made her dizzy, so she stopped and simply sat there, on her knees, hugging herself.

Her armor likely saved her life. But it had given its life to do so, and now she was alone, in another dimension, separated from her friends and allies. Alone.

That's okay. You've been alone before, a voice whispered reassuringly to her.

She nodded to herself in agreement.



Iron Zig



Ethereal Realm

Somewhere

40BBY

Time seemed to move differently. If there was action happening in the distance or the “sky” above, she was not sure how much time passed as she sat and tried to get to a point where she could move.

It did not take a medical degree to recognize the symptoms of a concussion. It was not ideal, but Zig could slowly feel her thoughts begin to settle into place. Especially as her scavenger instincts assumed control of the situation.

She shifted to sit on her butt let her legs stretch outward. She wiggled her toes and rolled her ankles in an exploratory fashion. Those still worked. That was good. She tried to activate her rocket boots, but they sputtered, wheezed, and then seemed to simply give up. Quitters.

Her mind continued to recover its alacrity as she went through the familiar routine of self-and-equipment maintenance. The Zygerrian stripped off the remaining parts of her armor, and was left with just the leggings she wore underneath it and a skin tight, long sleeved synthweave shirt. But even her under-armor had cuts and gaps in it that exposed her auburn, fur-lined skin.

What else did she have to work with? Guilty Spark, her ascendent drone, was nowhere to be seen. Her grenades, which had been in a separate sling back, also seemed to have been lost in the detonation of her shuttle. She winced at the thought of losing the Diamond Sword she had been carrying. Maybe it would...show up somewhere.

Yeah.

As she slowly stood up—shakily at first before finding her balance—she looked down at her wrists and felt a small spark of hope. Her vambraces. She toggled the different functions on each one with the same casual efficiency of a sniper assessing their rifle’s

components. Her almond eyes widened slightly as a flicker of panic flashed across her face as she patted down her hips at her belt.

Her hydrospanner. No...not her hydrospanner! She didn't see it on her belt or in the immediate area. Her burgeoning momentum sank and spiraled. She could handle breaking or losing any of her equipment, but *not* her 'spanner.

No no no...

As she looked around frantically, something caught her eye. Protruding from a small dune of midnight sand—or what she both *assumed* and *hoped* was some kind of kinetic sand—was a gleam of golden light reflecting off an emblem. She scrambled forward, falling to one knee but quickly pushing herself back up and then swearing as her vision swam. She had to be careful with sudden movements like that.

Zig made it to the source of the reflected light and dug with her clawed nails into the dark sand and dug out the Envoy Corps messenger bag.

“YES,” she squealed in delight as she hugged the bag tightly to her chest. Then she fumbled the magnetic clasp open and quickly inspected the contents. To her relief, everything was there—essential supplies she knew she would need to survive, a small nerf-wool towel (one should never leave home without one) and...her hydrospanner!

Zig felt her heart flutter with hope and excitement. She hugged the tool close to her chest.

She could do this. She just needed to find a way to communicate with the other Voidbreakers, or someone in the Brotherhood at this point.



Ethereal Realm

The Shattered Plains

Zig wiped the sweat from her face with the nerf-wool towel. It might not have changed her situation, but it did give her a momentary relief as she scrunched her nose, blew into the hand towel, and felt her nasal cavities sigh in relief as she exhaled.

A quick survey of her surroundings let her know she had landed in what the intel briefings had identified as “The Shattered Plains”. She was at the bottom of a large chasm, it seemed, with large mountainous peaks and crags jutting out and forming an intricate pattern of disconnected platforms spreading out across the horizon. She tried to envision the stretch of moon-bleached terrain as once having been a straight stretch of land, but failed on the sheer scale. What she did know was that she needed to find the

“Corpse Fields”, which is where the Brotherhood and Clan Arcona were headed to stage a forward operating base. If her team was anywhere, it would be there.

She had used what was available to her, otherwise, to increase her likelihood of survival. She applied the one-time use bacta patch to her most pressing aches. She rigged the glowrod to the outside of the messenger bag, making it easier to see where she was going. There was no night or day cycle, it seemed, so the shattered plains seemed to have a perpetual blanket of dusk.

Without a datapad, she tried to patch her wrist computer gauntlets into the radio frequencies from the comlink. But radio waves didn't seem to work the same way in the Ethereal Realm. No, that would have been too convenient. So there was no signal, unless she could find some kind of communications tower that had a direct line—somehow—back to Arx. Inconvenient, but she'd dealt with worse when visiting remote worlds with archaic infrastructures.

Which meant she couldn't even message Zuza. While they both tended to do their own thing when it came to operations like this one, she still worried about her partner's well being. Leading and being responsible for the newbies had seemed to *decrease* her reckless stunts...even if only by a small margin.

As she walked and walked, she did not seem to be making any progress. There were no signs of any other crashes. No signs of any kind of machinery or equipment. No signs of any dead or living bodies. There was...nothing. Which was probably what unnerved her the most.

Zig knew she could build or fix anything. Confidence was never the issue there. But without anything to...work with, well, who was she?

No one...

She took a sip from the thermos. Just enough to clear her throat from the coarse dryness after puking. The Zygerrian then took a small portion of her rations, partitioning and saving the remainder as best she could.

I guess there are some perks to having run away from home at such a young age. You learn to make do with less, the voice once again spoke to her.

At first Zig thought it was her own inner monologue, but as the words hit her, she realized that she rarely thought about her childhood or upbringing. This was a *different* voice, but still familiar enough for her not to have been immediately put off by it.

“Look, it’s been years since I had an imaginary friend, and that was before I learned how to code my own droid personality matrices,” she spoke aloud, since there was, quite literally, no one else around. Maybe she had gotten hit harder on the head than she realized. She wasn’t an expert in concussion protocol, but—

—*Clever, but If you’re so smart, why have you passed the same sand marker multiple times?*

Zig blinked a few times, then swore under her breath. The voice was right. She had used her plasma torch to score the rocky outcroppings, and the smiley face she had drawn at the previous checkpoint was staring—now seemingly mockingly—back at her.

“Great, so I assume you have a better idea?”

I do, the voice seemed to purr, pleased by the attention it was finally being given. Follow my directions and you will find my camp. I’ve been waiting for you, and can share the secrets of the Children.

“That’s sus,” Zig replied dryly.

*Trust me, **Kaliska**. I know you’ve been wondering where I’ve been, and finally I can share why I had to leave.*

Zig froze. Realization washed over her. The way the voice, feminine, powerful, and dark said her name. It had been so long since she last heard it. The Zygerrian’s pulse quickened, and sweat started to bead beneath her brow.

“Alaisy...?” she spoke in barely a whisper.

Come. I will explain everything. Turn where I say turn, and you’ll find my camp.

Zig nodded, hugging herself and feeling a sudden shiver she hadn’t noticed until that very moment.

“Okay,” she said, and she obeyed and followed the voice of her former friend, mentor, and partner.



Zig saw a small fire burning bright against the grayscale landscape she’d spent...however long she’d been wandering through it. As she approached, she saw a figure, clad in all black and with long, inky hair. As she approached, she could easily see the skintight latex contouring against the sitting woman’s figure. Zig felt her throat tighten, her heart skip a

beat, as Alaisy Tir'vera turned and looked at her and slowly rose to her full, towering height.

“Zig,” she spoke in her own voice, which seemed to somehow ground this moment in reality. It was her. It had to be.

“Alaisy. I-I...I...”

Alaisy shook her head slowly, then gestured for Zig to come closer. Zig felt herself move, compelled by the familiarity and warmth of the fire and someone she'd thought she'd lost forever. As the two women drew close enough, they embraced. Zig buried her head into the taller woman's shoulder, clinging tightly, tears leaking from the corner of her eyes.

Alaisy made calming noises and ran clawed nails slowly through the Zygerrian's hair. “It's alright. Come, sit.”

Zig nodded and found a seat near the fire, next to Alaisy. After the initial shock had settled, she realized that there was a giant purrgil in the room she hadn't addressed.

Oh god. Zuza. Does she know?

“Yes, I know about you and Zuza,” Alaisy replied, seemingly reading her mind. “I'm happy for you, Zig. You deserve to be happy.”

Zig made a little whimper-like sound. “I...it just kind of happened.”

Alaisy shook her head. “It's okay. We have more pressing things to discuss. I need to tell you what I've learned of the Children of Mortis.”

Zig nodded and exhaled slowly. “Alright. Dump it on me—I mean, uh, share that infodump, I mean, meep,” her words stumbled over one another and face planted. Alaisy, as she always had, didn't seem to mind, and just waited patiently before continuing.

“This Force Chain. They hope to break it, and free the Force of its shackles...”

Alaisy continued to reveal what she had learned. She listed names of members of the Children of Mortis' different factions. She revealed the internal strife, who disagreed with who, and who had formed backdoor alliances. All solid intel. Something in the back of her mind seemed to...know this information already, but watching Alaisy speak and orate the information seemed to be stuffing that more rational part of her mind into a dusty corner.

“Now, I have shared what I have learned. Could you fill me in on what the Brotherhood is doing? Where are they staging, what percentage of the forces from Arx are here? What is the Council planning?”

Zig fidgeted with her hydrospanner out of habit and opened her mouth to speak. “Well, we—”

She cut herself off as a moment of clarity struck her. Alaisy had left **no** trace when she left. She hadn’t ever had interest in the Children of Mortis. Just her own research into Sith Alchemy. Also, why would she need Zig for information? She was the former Herald of the Brotherhood. She had contacts still in the Shroud Syndicate and aboard the Matron. So why would she...

Zig quickly pushed back from the stone seat she’d been sitting in and dropped into a combat stance, fists raised, plasma shield on her vambrace activating and forming into a protective disk at her side.

“Who are you,” Zig sneered.

“Oh, my poor, desperate little girl. I am whoever you want me to be,” the voice warped and changed as an inky black smoke enveloped Alaisy.

As the smoke cleared, she now stood staring down at a man who had nearly ruined her life. Flawless skin, a full beard, sharp nose, and malicious green eyes.

Rodrigue Tyris. Marick and Wyndell’s father, the man who had brainwashed her and turned her against her own friends.

“No. You’re in Dusk Station. You can’t be here...”

The voice laughed, at first rich and bassy but then cracking and becoming more of a cackle. More smoke appeared, and the figure split off into six distinct figures, all of which moved to surround Zig. When the smoke cleared, they all appeared wearing dark cloaks that obscured their faces, with the one in the middle wearing a crimson cowl.

Children of Mortis cultists. How could she have been so stupid?

“You will tell us all you know. One way or another,” the crimson-cowl’d figure snickered.

“Try me,” Zig spat, readying her second vambrace.

“Get her”

All six cloaked figures let out shrieking wails as they attacked as one—not the way grunts usually attacked one at a time in the holovids. They converged on the lone Zygerrian like collapsing waves, brandishing an array of Praetorian weapons, with the first cultist—Cultist One—wielding a freaking lightsaber-whip. She was never going to tell them apart, honestly, so she just gave them numbers instead like in a ship schematic.

Said Lightsaber-whip lashed at her from the left. She raised her wrist-shield and angled it to bat the whip aside. Usually she had no problems with whips, if she was being honest, but she focused on the more immediate issues like the reach of other cultists—Cultist Two—halberd. The polearm's edge scythed for her head, but Zig managed to duck and slide backwards and away from that and the follow up stab that aimed to skewer her through the chest.

Bad touch bad touch bad touch!

The third cultist—Cultist Three—actually seemed to hang back and fired off a blaster pistol.

“Way to break the theme,” Zig sneered as she rolled under the volley of crimson bolts and came up with her shield at the ready to deflect Cultist Four's incoming lightsaber strike.

Surprisingly, her shield pulsed a bright blue, but the power indicator didn't seem to deplete. Huh. Fortunate.

Cultist five did not wait their turn, but Zig struck first. Raising her other hand, she let loose a stream from her flamethrower that output at a higher thermal velocity than the stock-settings. She'd modified the firmware to allow her to overclock the limiters, and the result was a giant plume of flame enveloping the—apparently—very flammable robes of the cultist. Cultist 5 cried out in pain and agony as their body started to leak misty shadow, before they slowly faded away into nothingness.

Nice, one down, five to—

Cultist 6, the leader, the one who had seemingly lured Zig into this trap, appeared behind the Zygerrian.

“*Be a good girl and kneel,*” they spoke the words with the weight of command. Zig felt her knees buckle against her will and she wilted. She then felt a warm sensation in her shoulder blade, just as the whisper *shlick* of a blade pulled itself free of her unarmored flesh.

Zig cried out in pain and whipped her flamethrower around, but found no purchase as this just opened her up to the other cultists. Zig spun a roundhouse kick to bat away another strike from the halberd. She whipped her shield around like a battering ram and pushed off another lightsaber strike. She tried to sweep the leg of the one wielding the lightsaber-whip, then re-trained her aim and let loose a micro rocket towards the cultist hanging back from the other and trying to pin her down with blaster fire.

The rocket missed its mark. However, it seemed that the laws of thermodynamics still played a factor in this part of the Ethereal Realm, and the cultist was still caught in the blast radius. They cried out as their body, too, became wreathed in flame, turned to ashy dust, and wilted away into the aether.

The remaining three that she could see did not bemoan another loss to their numbers and pressed their attack more aggressively, never seeming to tire. Zig did her best to move on reflex, her martial arts training helping as she ducked, dipped, dove, but was given no chance to counter strike. She hopped over a sweep at her ankles from the halberd, twisted out of the hit-box of the lightsaber-whip, and punched away the wrist of the lightsaber wielder's stab.

Her vision blurred from all the movement. While she was not a doctor, she knew that excessive exertion was usually not the smartest thing to do when recovering from a concussion.

Fortunately, she had one other trick up her sleeve. Lowering her shield, she instead toggled a button that she had rigged to control the apparatus that had remained around her waist. She had helped design it, afterall, so the source code had been accessible to her.

With no magic to aid her, Zig used plain old science to activate the Golden Envoy escape belt. She waited until all three were about to strike her at once. Blinding smoke enveloped her suddenly, but the Zyerrian squeezed her eyes shut and reached out into the world around her, focusing her hearing and...

Shockingly, she felt a preternatural awareness and understanding of her surroundings come to her. That wasn't...normal. Was...was this what the Force Users got to experience everyday life. All the time?

“Holy karking hell,” Zig exclaimed. “They really **are** OP.”

Not one to question this gift, Zig somehow intuitively tapped into the awareness of the Force and could suddenly *feel* where each of her enemies were around her in the smoke.

Discipline and muscle reflex took control. She had learned early on the limitations of just using her fists, or a single type of weapon when going up against demi-gods and space wizards. So she had begun to train extensively with all kinds of weapons. She grabbed the haft of the halberd with surprising strength she didn't realize she had, twisted deftly, and wrestled it free from Cultist Two's grip. She spun the weapon deftly, sweeping it out in a wide arc, and bisected the cultist into two even halves across the waist.

Still using the smoke to her advantage, she spun the halberd again and tried to skewer the lightsaber-whip cultist. Cultist One was too quick, feinting despite the lack of visibility, and let the unique weapon wrap around the edge of the halberd before *yoinking* it with enough torque to send it flying from Zig's grip.

Without skipping a beat, Zig used her last remaining trick and activated the whistling birds in her gauntlet.

PEW-PEW-PEW-PEW-PEW

The micro-projectiles emitted a high pitched screech that gave them their name and, even without true-aim, were in close enough proximity to find purchase in the different areas of the lightsaber-wielding cultists body. There was no effect this time. The cultist simply just disappeared in the afterglow of the whistling birds detonations. This left the one cultist with the lightsaber-whip.

Zig let out a battle cry and charged Cultist One, who in turn shouted and charged back. At the last possible moment, however, Zig juke to the side, activated the fibercord whip in her gauntlet and like a matador baiting a bull wrapped it around the cultist body to ensnare its arms to its sides. She pulled tight, then used the sudden confusion to her advantage to grab a hold of their cloak and *hurl* them into the fire at the center of the camp.

A final shriek filled the area as the cultist was reduced to ash in the flickering flames.

One left—

Then she felt the pain in her stabbed shoulder blossom and ignite. Poison of some kind? Kark it *hurt*. She winced and felt shivers run through her body as her limbs slowly began to feel heavier.

“You cannot defeat us. The Force is with us, here, and the limit is only our imagination. You, on the other hand, are **nothing**.”

The last cultist with the crimson cowl summoned a circular contraption that materialized into their hand. With a press of a button, two beams of ochre light extended from

different emitters on opposite ends of what was clearly a unique lightsaber hilt. Then the blades started to rotate, slowly at first, until they accelerated to create a blur of (allegedly) intimidating light.

“Wait, seriously?!” Zig exclaimed. “Why does it have to spin like that? That’s not even practical. That’s such a waste of gyroscopic servos that are probably draining that emitters power output for the sake of...what, looking like a radioactive windmill?”

The cultist sneered, but then started to laugh in a high pitched squeal. “FOOLISH GIRL. ALL BARK AND NO BITE!”

Zig squared up with the Children of Mortis cult. While she may have had no idea where she was, or what she would do to find her friends again, she did know that she had to think of a way to win here.

The limit is only your imagination....

Imagination. Zig blinked once.

She held a hand out to the side, palm open, stretching her mind out into the slipstreams of the Force, or what she assumed was the Force. She’d heard her friends talk about their relationship with the mystical energy that seemingly bound all living things together. She was starting to see the edges of it, she thought, but maybe, in this place, in this realm, there was something even more that could happen.

Zig counted a series of heartbeats. *One...two...three...*

It would be really great if I had my sword right now, she put the thought out into the very fibers of the Ethereal Realm.

Four...five...six...

As she waited, she focused on the mechanism that powered the spinning double-bladed lightsaber. She could see a pattern through its almost hypnotic image, and her eyes focused intently on a certain spot that, if she timed it right, she could...

Nine...ten!

On the tenth heartbeat, her Diamond Sword materialized into her open palm. She instinctively closed her fist around it, gripping it tight, and darted forward with a speed and precision she’d never thought possible.

Sure, she might have just been a non-name scavenger from a backwater planet that had run away from a perfectly stable and happy childhood life. But it was *her* life and *her* path and pain and struggles that had made Zig who she was.

Zig struck at the center point of the weapon, ignoring the gyrating plasma blades. She followed through and stepped past the cultists guard, ending up a few feet behind them.

Even without her armor, or her full arsenal of weapons. She was still Zig Kaliska. She was, and always would be, *Iron Zig*.

The Cultist had no dying curse or words to share. They simply evaporated, leaving Zig alone in the camp, fatigue bringing her to her own knees. Then everything seemed to hit her all at once, a welter of emotion and repressed thoughts, and she started to cry, freely, with no one around to see or console her.



The Corpse Fields
Forward Operating Base
Selen Training Corps Read Guard

“Halt! I’m under strict orders to let no one through this checkpoint!” the guard yelled as they pointed a laser-mounted scoped rifle at the approaching figure.

“Hi ‘under strict orders’, I’m Zig Kaliska,” the Zygerrian replied, her face dusty, sweaty, and her body covered in bruises. She looked like a loth-cat that had been left out in the rain, the naturally dark circles around her eyes seeming to cast shadows over a harrowed, haunted expression.

“I don’t know any—”

“—stand down, Leutenant,” a warm but steady voice explained. “She’s with us.”

“But we can’t be sure—”

“It’s Zig,” the mousy-haired woman explained. There was no room for negotiation in that voice, so the guard, wisely, stepped off.

The Zygerrian looked up and rubbed her eyes, almost as if trying to see if what she witnessed was true and real.

‘Z-z-uza?’ she said, her voice weak and cracking.

Zuza moved forward and wrapped her arms around Zig. As the scent of the Human woman's hair brushed against her nose, any trace or semblance of fear that this was somehow another illusion and not *real* was instantly dispelled.

Despite her usual height advantage, Zig melted into Zuza's arms and tried to hold back sobs that she knew would cause her entire body to shake. But she did not care, and she did not care who watched or saw, because against all odds, in a strange world, Zig Kaliska had overcome odds and made it *home*.

And that would be enough.