

Frost and Hope

By Malfearak Asvraal (16826)

The triplet suns Ochara, Dhaeus, and Ikrhan slipped beyond the horizon and twilight swept over the Unnamed World like a veil. The night sky stretched beyond the edge of the steppes, past the spectral hint of a mountain chain in the distance, an amethyst tapestry of pulsing stars and dancing auroras. His heels crunching in the fresh snow with each step, Malfearak Asvraal could not contain a gasp. The picturesque scene that lay before him was a familiar one, one which he had witnessed many times in his life, but it had lost none of its splendor. It had been far too long since he had last cast his eyes upon it, and it was, in many ways, like seeing an old friend again. Behind his visor, his eyes swept across the land, recalling familiar shapes plunged into equally familiar hues of pinks and purples and blues.

He stopped in his tracks and slipped his satchel from his shoulder, dropping it in the snow. Then, raising his hands to his helmet, he engaged the release mechanism, a sharp whistle of depressurization cutting through the softness of the moment. Plates parted at the back and he pulled the helmet off, sweat-drenched silver hair falling freely. He cradled it under an armpit as he took a deep breath, long and drawn out, the icy air like pins and needles in his lungs. The scents of nature wafted into his nostrils, immediately recognizable, particularly that of fresh snow and the sweet aroma of Jave trees. Through his Kessurian montrals, he could sense the vibrations of the living world around him. The crispening of vegetation beneath the new snow, the swaying of trees in the light breeze, the nocturnal creature rousing from its sleep in a nearby bush, each sensation so different from the constant and oppressive hum of civilization that permeated his daily life. He blew out a cloud into the night and as he did so, his sharp, ash-pink features softened, a smile creasing his lips.

In many ways, it seemed as if just yesterday he had crossed the plains of the Unnamed World as he did now, a young and naïve Wayseeker. In other ways, it felt like it had happened in another life, to someone else. There was some sense in that. For better or for worse, he *was* someone else now, though he wasn't sure exactly who. His return to the Brotherhood after a prolonged absence had not been as he had expected. Indeed, he had thought to settle into the Shadow Academy, to keep his head down and work on his research. But a gnawing feeling endured in his gut despite the open arms that had greeted him. He felt diminished, lesser, like the world had passed him by and he was stuck catching up. Even now, a sense of failure crept through his heart. He could not explain it. He knew in his mind that he was being unreasonable. He knew that he was being unfair to himself. After all, had he not been appointed Herald of the Brotherhood mere months after his return? Had he not been given a seat on the Council based on his merits and considerable qualities? And yet, something felt... off.

That is why he had returned to the Unnamed World. Back at the beginning.

He had walked for two days since landing the *Nomad* at the old research outpost, the structure now abandoned and reclaimed by nature after years of disuse. The trek had taken him through the outskirts of a dense forest, around the jagged edges of an ancient crater to this place in the

middle of the steppes. At first glance, there seemed to be nothing of note in the area. Empty flatlands as far as the eye could see. He recalled telling his master as much as a teenager, the memory only widening his smile. Now, he knew what to look for. Or rather, feel. He dropped to his knees in the snow, placed his helmet down, then sat back on his heels, closing his eyes, his features relaxed. He breathed in, puffed another cloud and reached out with the Force. As he did so, he brushed his fingertips over the snow, embracing the cold biting through his gloves, then raised his arms to his sides at shoulder height, palms open to the world about him. His consciousness swept over the area, pinpricks of life lighting up in his mind's eye. He sensed it all, from the long blades of grass trapped beneath the white coat of snow to the bush and the critter hidden within, watching him, its curiosity clear upon the wavelengths of the Living Force. Then, as his master had instructed him long ago, he searched for something else, something she had described as the immaterial within matter. He had not understood at the time, but now, he knew what to look for. He found them in the Force, eight stones, flat and of different sizes, their mystical signature pulsating. Two of light, two of shadow, and four a melding of both.

A subtle vibration in his montrals cut through his concentration, revealing a change of pressure in the atmosphere, warning him of what was to come. Then, he felt it from within the Force, a bloom beyond the edge of his consciousness. It amused him that even now, after all these years, despite his training and experience, it was his montrals that picked up on the change before he felt it through the Force.

It begins.

A crooked grin spread across his lips. Knowing what was coming, he knew he should have been putting his helmet back on and dashing for cover. It was the logical thing to do. Only, he had come here for this very moment, a singular purpose on his mind. He would not leave before it was achieved. It was time to prepare, so instead of covering himself, he unwrapped the scarf from around his shoulders, folded it neatly, and then placed it inside the satchel by his side. He peeled his robes away layer by layer until he knelt with his torso bared before the elements. The cold air trickled over his skin, the film of sweat freezing already, turning to crystals on his skin. He unclasped his talisman from around his neck and it too disappeared inside the satchel. Then, he bunched the satchel under his knees so that it could not be swept away. The temperature was dropping steadily as he completed his preparations, the cold now biting into his bare skin with voracious hunger. All the while, he maintained his focus on the eight stones. Once he was all set, he closed his eyes and waited, his breath slow and steady.

The winds grew stronger, lashing at his skin and whipping his hair, and so did his excitement, even if fear and doubt were beginning to take root in the pit of his stomach. In the Force, beyond the signature of the stones, he sensed the nocturnal creature in the bush frantically scratching at the earth, its survival instincts flaring. It lasted only a moment, followed by a sensation of relief as it burrowed into the ground and curled up safely inside. Malfearak pushed the critter from his thoughts, focusing again on the stones, though the relief it felt stayed with him.

The wind turned into a gale, howling, the sound almost overwhelming for Malfearak's hypersensitive hearing. What began as a flutter grew into a violent tremor, causing his montras to twitch and tremble. His skin felt as if it was on fire, the temperatures reaching inhumane lows. Still, he concentrated on the stones through the Force. Fear danced on the periphery of his concentration. He knew he was breathing faster now. He could no longer hear anything but the ear-splitting wail of the storm like a thousand wretched souls crying out in unity. Part of him wanted to scream, wanted to run. Still, he concentrated on the stones. He did not need to open his eyes to know what was coming. He could sense the wall of ice and snow now hurtling through the steppes towards him from the mountains. Memories of pain and agony flooded his mind and the walls of his concentration cracked. The stones faltered in the Force.

Find balance, whispered his master's voice in his mind. Startled by her voice, his eyes tore open. He could no longer see the sky. Everything around him was engulfed in a flailing white haze of indiscernible shapes. The cold whip of the wind was like claws scrapped across his eyeballs. Then, before his eyes closed again, he glimpsed the wall, an opaque mass of wind and snow and sleet and ice reaching to the heavens above.

Find balance, repeated his master's disembodied voice.

"I don't know how," he whimpered into the elements, echoing his younger self. His words were swallowed by the gale.

Remember my teachings.

"There is no shadow without light," he croaked, his words trembling. He reached out again with the Force, seeking out the stones. He found the light stones. He drew them close. Something slashed his skin, a shard of ice borne by the storm. Then another.

"Light without shadow yearns for purpose," he said, his words steadier.

This time, it was the stones that beckoned to him. The darkness called and he answered. Again, he drew the stones close. He could sense the clash between light and dark, opposites, drawn to one another, yet impossible to connect. They pushed away from one another.

"There is nothing without balance," he shouted these words, casting them onto the winds.

The four stones born of both light and darkness joined the others to float around him, untouched by the storm, like moons orbiting a planet. He lingered in the moment, bathed in the energy of the Force and it was some time before he set about rearranging the stones. They moved at his will, switching places as he deemed fit until each stone of light and each stone of darkness were linked together by a stone born of both, a stone of balance. Then, finally, set the stones on the ground before him one by one, layer by layer.

Malfearak smiled.

He had to shield his eyes when he opened them next, so blinding were the triplet suns high in the sky above. As his eyes adjusted, the white blur before him manifested into banks of gleaming snow crusted over by ice, all reflecting the suns' glare. It was like staring at a quadrillion diamond. Malfearak too was encased in ice. It cracked and shattered with a shrug, peeling from his skin in heaps. The sudden movement startled the critter that had been sleeping in his lap. It squeaked as it scurried away, stopping some paces away and craning its long, furry neck to observe him. It tilted its round head to one side, then the other, its bulbous black eyes unblinking. It must have been drawn by the energy flowing from him in the Living Force.

Malfearak couldn't help but laugh.

"You must think I'm crazy," he said as the critter hopped away back to the safety of its bush.

He moved slowly as he climbed to his feet, his skin and his limbs burning and numb all at once. Dark spots marred his chest and arms had formed across his chest and arms where the frost bit hardest. Gashes and frozen blood were apparent where ice pellets had nicked his skin. Already he longed for a dip in bacta.

A smile hung on his lips as he slipped an arm into the sleeve of his robes and pulled it over his shoulders. Once his robes and scarf were fastened around his shoulders, he retrieved his helmet, which he had to dig out of a snowbank. But before he could put it on, a voice interrupted him.

"I would have you wait a moment longer," said master Jahana Ylin.

He turned to find his old master standing before him, but not as he remembered her. Where she had worn dark grey robes, she was now dressed in flowing white robes, a cavernous hood casting a shadow over her features. Only her mouth, her smile, was visible. She circled the stone cairn he had built, looking it over, a teacher evaluating a student's work.

"How are you here?" He could not help but ask, his words a breathless whisper. He remembered her death.

As she moved toward him, he noticed there was a translucent property to her, almost ethereal as if she glowed, and for a moment he thought he was looking at a hologram. There was no holoprojector to be seen. She reached out to him, a hand cupping his cheek but he felt nothing. No touch. Had he lost sensitivity from exposure to the cold? But when he reached for her hand, he found there was nothing to grasp. A vision, then? Or was he hallucinating?

Her smile was mischievous, as it had been in life, "The Force works in mysterious ways. You of all people should know that."

He grinned at her words even as he blinked back tears. Seeing her again, it was almost too much. Jahana Ynil had been more than a master to him. She had been a friend, a confidant, a mother figure, and so much more. The loss of her was a wound that would never heal.

"You are an important man now, my Mal," she said.

He peered into her ice-blue eyes, but he found he could not hold her gaze, for he felt too ashamed.

“Doubt has been a constant companion of late,” he admitted.

“Just as it was in your youth. Remember that doubt is the bedfellow of introspection, and you were always a mindful boy. This is a strength. Don’t let it become a burden. You have achieved so much, and you will achieve so much more.”

He nodded.

“The past is the past, my boy. Your failures are a stepping stone to your greatest successes yet.”

He swallowed hard, struggling to find the words to explain how he felt but she shushed him as she had done so many times a lifetime ago. She placed a hand on his chest, and though he could not feel the physical contact, there was a warmth emanating from her form.

“The Force is with you. As am I, always,” she said.

Then, in the blink of an eye and gust of wind, she was gone. His legs suddenly felt weak and Malfearak half-fell, half-sat in a snowbank. He stared at the stone cairn for some time, the shadows growing longer as the suns chased one another across the sky. He mulled over her words and her past teachings, until finally, he nodded to himself. He put his helmet back on, shouldered his satchel, and began the long trek back to his ship.

The Brotherhood awaited its Herald.

As did a nice, soothing dip in a bacta tank.