***BAC Darkest Night***

***1930 Hours***

***Five days before Mission Launch***

They were informed that Ziost was next, and handed hastily scrounged-together briefs. Atyiru brushed her fingers over the datapad in her hands idly, half-listening to her Consul discuss the intel they had on the planet. It was frozen, like the first one she had killed on.

She still dreamed of Rhelg.

Rhelg had had no seasons. The sharp air had occasionally bled out its dry bitterness and settled into dank stagnation, and the freezing winds whipped snowstorms across the lesser hills and broke them against the expansive spires of the mountains.

When she’d asked, the sighted soldiers around her would tell her that it was nothing but red and white, snow and blood. Neither stood out, because only novel incidences caught one’s attention, and the carnage was not unique.

The two regulars on Rhelg had been the next person dead at your side and the overcast, pale skies. Same old *kark.*

That certain constancy wasn’t a luxury afforded her. For the sighted, blood only came in so many colors, and everyone bled just as everyone died. For her, each presence in the Force was a distinguished novelty, come once and only once to the world, invulnerable until the moment it was not.

Those moments far outnumbered her ability for comprehension, but she attempted to contain them in her head all the same. Each time she squeezed the trigger of her blaster, or counted the final slowing of a pulse beneath her fingers, the tally grew.

Ziost would not be different.

Some days, Atyiru laid awake among her comrades, clamped her jaw shut, and simply dug her nails into her skin, just so she didn’t burst at the seams. Sometimes, it was so painful that she wished she were Human. They, among the entire galaxy’s species, seemed to have the greatest and most diverse aptitude for emotion, capable of complete apathy, ambivalence, and concern all in the same degree. Humans, she’d long since noticed, were experts at compartmentalization.

There was a skill about them for coping, for being able to care but not care at all. She recalled that day, years ago, over the buzz of his tattoo gun, how Jerak had told her of his time as a trooper. How the drills they marched to, the cadences, had seemed so gruesome the first time he’d spoken them; and how they’d stopped fazing him at all. He’d chanted, quietly:

“*A little shreebird,*

*With a crooked bill,*

*Perched upon,*

*My speeder’s grill.*

*I drew him in,*

*With a piece o’ Noryath bread,*

*And then I smashed,*

*His karking head…”\**

Humans. They could find death tragic one moment and yet be completely desensitized to it in the next; like children with old toys. Some aliens would call it fickle, or impetuous. She tended to think of it as an evolutionary adaptability. Humans had so much variation. Even genetically, they were dynamic unlike many others. Their inconsistency was built into their bones, and granted them a freedom none but they possessed in such expression.

Miralukas such as she were not so. Her people saw everything, *felt* everything, in the Force. Their sympathy was as blood borne as any one individual's eye or hair color. Their pacifism was so integrated into their culture that rashness and malignancy were mutations.

She would not have been able to ignore the pain around her if she’d tried with everything she had. She didn’t want to, either, never; but she was exhausted enough in those dim hours that having the option would have been liberating in and of itself.

Yet in those battles, spanning one world of *click-boom dead, click-boom dead* to the next, her deeds earned valor, awards, and accolades. It made her sick. It also pleased her, in odds ways. Knowing this endlessness resulted in *something,* just something *added* rather than expelled, was a blessing. She welcomed the grace and thanked her gods, because it was all worth something, somewhere, to someone.

Each time, she stood from where she’d been told to kneel, and went back to scavenging for a single beating heart among so many rigid corpses. Her Clan, in whatever capacity, valued whatever these bones and blood wrought for them. Another step, just a little closer, to victory. Not an end, never an end, not to war, but *a* victory.

It had given Atyiru something to be hopeful for.

She didn’t think she could hold on to that anymore. She felt like she was slipping. She always felt like she was slipping, not that she could tell; but the whiskey and the anger and the nightmares seemed good enough indication.

Every different planet had just been so empty. Lots of blood, and then, eventually, they were ordered back to their respective warships again. There was nothing climactic to mark the occasions, nothing great and omnipotent that they all felt in the marrow of their bones to inform them of their success. Just orders down the chain of command, sergeant to soldier.

Done. Moving on. No more lives to take or save. Not here. Here was done. They’d won. Congratulations. This planet is over. This planet, that planet, is “ours”. It’s done.

The abrasions on her skin, the scars, and the grit under her nails and in her hair could not seem to reconcile this. Each scrape was a direct contradiction to the statements her superiors continued to repeat: “New orders, back to the fleet”,“We’ve won, good job soldiers, it’s over, we won”, “Move out, team, we’re done here”.

It didn’t feel victorious. Atyiru found herself without proper explanation, a little bit of failure in each endeavor. She supposed there was a bit of failure in everything anyone did.

Somehow, the thought was more comforting than it was disillusioning. If there was failure everywhere, and they still continued on, then such was the way of the world. Other things managed to function damaged and bitter—maybe she could force herself out of bed in the morning too.

“Atyiru.”

Her head snapped up. Marick stood nearby, having rounded the table of their seated comrades. He’d probably been explaining something.

“Sir.” She replied, nodding once contritely. The business-like Consul said nothing, just moved on, communicating without words that he was not wasting time and she would not dare to do so again either.

Atyiru clenched her fists around the datapad, just to move her fingers, and breathed. Still here. Months, weeks, days, minutes.

Still here.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

***BAC Darkest Night***

***2316 Hours***

***One day before Mission Launch***

Days of organizing and counting and reorganizing again passed. They determined death tolls by counting who was left alive, rather than tallying the too-many-bodies. The numbers were documented, posted, forgotten until there was a proper time to remember them. Supply lists, enough to fill up all of space, it seemed, to be accounted for. Plans, plans, plans. There was always more to do, more people to manage, more to say.

The day before Ziost’s arrival, they rallied around speeches. There wasn’t applause or cheering—how could there be?—but a sort of grim, spiteful resignation to balance the exhaustion and fear. Atyiru smiled encouragingly at her subordinates without meaning it. Her grins felt like diving into a lake and finding lukewarm water instead of the expected cold shock. Just a bit less, a little tepid, something dying under her skin.

The Aedile knew she had work to be doing, people to be talking to, but as she left behind the halls and the bile-flavored martialing addresses, she felt more inclined to shut herself up in her office. She ignored her buzzing comm and collapsed into her desk chair, not bothering with the lights—she didn’t need them, and wasn’t expecting company, so why apply the courtesy?

The Miraluka sat, holding herself still in the dark and the silence. Here, in the fleeting, perennial hush they conjured, she knew her greatest fears, all she was guilty of, all her ghosts, and all her pain.

It was times like these that she was broken, because she was broken when she was alone, when it was just her, because then there was no one else to blame anymore. There was only what she had done or failed to do, screaming soundlessly in her ears.

Screaming that she’d failed to protect anyone.

Atyiru almost wished she’d gone to one of the ship’s many cobbled-together cantinas. Kordath would be at one--he would, typically, not want to be going to war sober. But she didn’t want to see him, or anyone. There was her few bottles from Nath stashed in her desk...but no. She couldn’t be drinking the night before battle. Marick would skin her alive, and she’d be less help to the team than a brain-damaged nerf.

...But the whiskey would drown the voices and echoes. She knew it would, if she drank enough. She was sick of thinking. She was sick of a lot of things. Memory was one of them, because memory was faulty. The more often you thought of something, the more illusory it became.

They were all gone. She was here. What was the truth then, if there was only one to memorialize it? That individual’s reality became fact, for it was all there was, and no more.

So much lost. Memories. Feelings. Faces. People. So much blood, drained and gone in waves, smashing up the shore they crashed against. So very much could be taken from the body, so much abuse and emptiness endured; and still it would not die. It simply kept breathing, like that was the only way to heal. Perhaps it was. The gods knew it was. Atyiru knew too, because her respirations just kept stamping out the beat of her heart, no matter how much she might wish they wouldn’t.

She wasn’t the one that should be breathing.

The Miraluka stopped herself from raiding her small, personal liquor supply exactly six times, spun her chair in circles, and started redoing her braid to keep her hands busy.

Atyiru was...agreeably content. Happy, most days. Becoming ordinary again happened, one way or another, because routine was the maker of habits and habits made for normalcy. Even as she kept all the memories of the lights close, she grew away from them. Their bodies had fallen where they had, and that was that. Downed. Stopped. The end. There, right there, the last moment in time. They were dead, and she was not. She was still here. She was still alive. Mangled, perhaps, but here.

In the interim, there was this. The Brotherhood. Arcona, and Galeres. Uji, Marick, Timeros, Cethgus, Nath, Etain, Kooki, Kordath, Andrelious, Legorii, the Entars, the d’Tanas, the Erinos, the unnamed. Everyone. Everyone she was living through this for.

War would go on endlessly. Not just the Brotherhood’s, but those within each of its members, and all others. There was always an after, always more, always more to lose.

Atyiru clenched her fists in her hair to resist reaching for her desk drawer—*seven times, now*—and thought about Ziost. She needed to focus. Touchdown was twenty-three hours from now.

She wondered if it would be worth it. More blood and pain. More loss. The gods only knew who she would lose next. Her loved ones? Herself? Another hundred brothers and sisters?

The insipid hatred, choking in her chest, rose up again. Her hands uncurled and her fingers worried at her braid and the cuff of her robe as she swiveled in her desk chair. Focus? She was too distracted to focus. Why bother?

...*Why bother?*

It hurt badly. The anger was easy. The confusion and turmoil, however, was exhausting, and searching for herself within it each time wrought an explicit tiredness of the soul. Even her dedication to her friends and her want to see her home bettered seemed to be slipping. Atyiru loved many here. The people. The lights. She owed them all she was. Her life was theirs.

And that *had* to be right, because should she invest her life anywhere else but here, it would stagnate, just as it had with the Order and just as it had while she wandered. This place gave her purpose, direction, and made her limitless. This was something worthwhile. Something those lights could be built into.

It was *so hard*. The war would have its way, and go on, and take with it what it did, and it would get no simpler or easier to endure; yet she would survive. She just didn’t know if she could do that without turning into something hateful with too many crutches and faults.

Her hands stilled. She inhaled. She exhaled.

The woman struggled to find a meditative center. If she didn’t contain her emotions, she’d start projecting horribly. No one needed to feel a Miraluka’s unique turmoil, and she certainly didn’t want to draw attention.

Inhale and exhale. She was still here. Regardless of those lonely moments, she was still here. Each breath was a confirmation of that fact. Each breath was another hammer blow to a blade on an anvil not yet finished. She lived, and continued, and the war around her did as well. Its only goal was to continue, and it would have its way. Of that, she had no doubt. As long as time turned, so would war.

Atyiru breathed in again. Even now, somewhere in the endless blackness on the other side of the metal under her feet, the battle raged on. War was also a patient thing. Days, weeks, and months meant little; and there was no definite season for the carnage to end. The blood of One Sith and Brotherhood members alike could dye Ziost’s snows red until the crimson soaked the soil frozen far below, and still, it may continue.

Before this, she’d been a simple doctor, then a vagabond, a foolish Jedi, a combat medic, an outcast. On Rhelg, for a second, she’d been nothing more than a greenhorn, then a murderer. On Bhargebba, she’d been a friend. On Svolten, a teammate. On Kalsunor, a war martial. Now, and truly, for the rest of her life, regardless of when this short tour ended, she would be a soldier: trussed up in medals, held up for exemplary status as a killing machine, and weighed down with a thousand phantoms, because she couldn’t forget this. And so it would go.

This was what this *holy* *war* had wrought of her.

Atyiru kept breathing, each breath anticipating the next, and allowed herself her quiet imagination of home: sunlight on her skin, the people she loved so much, her Clan, around her—the dead were there too, and they laughed and it tickled her ears, because where else would they be but alive and well? Marick was smiling—she could hear it in his voice as he replied to Etain. S’nar and Uji joked together, prompting general raillery amongst the group. Nath actually spoke quietly to others, socializing, Kalon and Kordath at her side, sharing good drink all around. Cethgus, Timeros, and the rest of her family stirred up unforgettable trouble, because Ashla and Bogan knew the Entars wouldn’t be satisfied without breaking the very foundations of history, never mind simple remembrance. Young Kooki and Andrelious relaxed, while Wuntila reposed with his peers, more at ease than she’d ever known him.

Hopes were such cruel, deaf things.

She startled from her musings as her office door *hum-snicked* open, and resolute footsteps drum-beat into the room, carrying a warm presence—so warm, that she’d not recognized it at first, some months ago, for the cold void in her memory.

“Uji.” She said, his name sighing on another exhale, the syllables tumbling and wrecked, almost hushed by the mixture of affliction and relief quashing her lungs. She half-stood from her seat, vainly steeling herself, dropping a hand to her saber. “W-what are you doing here? Has something occured? Is everyone well?”

“Nothing is amiss with the others, Atyiru. I sensed your distress.” The former Jedi replied bluntly as he approached, his tone implying a certain tender edge. She could almost taste the words left unsaid: *You have to ask? I’m here for you.*

The Aedile nodded mutely, suspended, half-risen as if from a grave. She bit her lip, debating a response but finding nothing come to mind but a pallid numbness and a quivering, primordial sense of need. Atyiru’s shoulders sagged and she lowered herself weakly back into her chair, a pantomime of some ruined marionette. The action seemed to convey the exact things she did not say: *Help me. I can’t do this alone.*

He circled around the desk behind her and drew close, one of his larger hands settling on her shoulder briefly. She inhaled softly, appreciating the gesture.

“What’s troubling you, my Priestess?” He asked, withdrawing a step and dipping in a slight, overly polite bow.

Atty opened her mouth a few times, flexing her jaw. She pressed her fingernails into her desktop, wishing away the urge to just drag them down her arms and peel off her skin.

“I’m scared.” She answered quietly, hating the tremble in her voice.

“For the battle?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

Her fists clenched. “You know exactly what I’m afraid of.” She whispered. And he did. He knew better than anyone else.

It was his fear too.

“You aren't walking the same path I did. You see your path; you only fear what lies ahead along it, even though you know where it takes you is where you are meant to be. You should not fear, Atyiru. What you become, that is your choice. This war won’t take that from you…” He trailed off briefly, perhaps recalling their previous conversations. “…and neither will the Council.”

“They already have.” She admitted bitterly, tasting the failure, the frustration, and the pain. Her body seethed with that grave-dirt flavor, poison and ashes and wild strength that dragged her head above the water. “I want them dead. I can barely stand to hear from one of my Entar brothers. I hatethem, Uji. I *hate* them. *I* *hate them.*” She spat a curse, few though there were, in her native tongue. “I let them do that to me.”

“Then why do you not hate Marick and Cethgus and everyone else too?”

That surprised her. She’d expected him to advocate for Valhavoc, rather than challenge her with such a question.

“Why would I?”

“They committed horrible acts, too.”

“They were following orders the Council gave them!”

“Having orders to do something does not make it the correct course of action; and it does not mean you are right to follow. You know this.” He intoned gravely, and she swallowed her tongue. Again, he knew better than anyone. The mistakes of his past had been in following orders. “They still had a choice. Each and every one of us. Everyone who participated in this campaign is just as liable as its creators and just as much at fault for its consequences. The Council killed your companion; but so did your superiors; so did your brother; so did your other friends; and so did you.”

“I…” Atyiru began, spitting through clenched teeth. “It doesn’t matter! It doesn’t!” She snarled angrily.

But it did.

So much anger. *So much* hate. Not just for the Council. Not if she admitted it to herself. She hated her friends too. She hated Nath, and Cethgus, and Marick, and Timeros, and all the people like them. She hated what they did, how they killed so easily, thoughtlessly, even joyously, in a maddened, raving sort of way. She hated how necessary they were, how the world needed those killers, how she needed them to be that. She hated that she needed them there to yell at her to pull the trigger. She hated that they did it at all, that she was weak and listened, that she couldn’t be powerful enough to do better by them.

She hated herself the most.

“I hate them.” The Miraluka hissed invidiously. And she did, even though she loved them, too, because these were the people who were happy with her, shed blood with her, who were her brothers and sisters, her world. Yet the resentment was *there* and that *wasn’t changing* and she didn’t know how it *could.*

“You speak as though you are still in the Praxeum. You are better then that.” Uji said, in the way he always had, not as a reprimand, or a buffer, but a statement of fact—*you are not a child. You have the ability to do better.*

“*Thousands of men* are dead because of their war! My friends are dead because of their war! S’nar’s dead because of their war! And for *what? For what?* I don’t even have the slightest *karking i*dea! *The people I love are dead for the gods know what reason, and it’s all because of them!*” She cried, though Uji wouldn’t know who she spoke of. “I can’t forgive them!”

He didn’t speak for a while, just breathing; then, he murmured, “You forgave me.”

“They’re killing the people I love!”

“I killed someone you loved.”

Atyiru pressed her lips together. She didn’t have words for that. Her chest ached.

“I don’t know *why* I can’t.” She muttered, pressing her hands to her face, nails biting into her scalp. “Maybe because you were my friend.  I already knew you, cared about you. You can’t stop loving someone—at least, I can’t, not once I do.  Maybe that’s why I can so much as stand to be around everyone. But the Council? The Council is far away from here.” Her nails dug deeper, making little furrows. “I don’t know, okay? I can’t forgive them. I don’t want to. It makes me sick even thinking about it. Just because I could do it before or a thousand other times doesn’t mean I can do it here and now, with this.”

The silence stretched. Uji’s reached out again and gently pulled her hands away from her face, rubbing a thumb over the small groves she’d left before retracting his grip.

“I know you’re not human, and that that fact defines you in ways I and many of us can’t truly understand. But I also think you’re more human than you might know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that not always being able to stand by your convictions is very much a human tendency.”

Her brows furrowed as she turned that idea over in her head.

“…And what does that say about me? That I’m…not weaker, but becoming…different?”

“You have to answer that for yourself.” He paused, and then chuckled once, humorlessly. “*You* told me that.”

“What if I can’t do it myself?”

“Then you’ll have support until you can.”

“What if you don’t like the answer?”

“Everyone else’s opinions might restrain, but they do not honestly matter.”

“What if *I* don’t like it?” She asked, although she already knew. She’d overcome that conflict many times.

“Then you change it.” Uji replied.

Atyiru bowed her head over her hands, pondering. He was right, of course. And yet…

“I’m still afraid.” She admitted softly.

“That’s to be expected.” He returned just as quietly. The Templar squeezed her hand gently before letting it go, withdrawing. She didn’t say anything else, and he waited noiselessly for a long time.

Eventually, she found some strength in her to paste on a patient smile and lift her hand to wave him away. His heels clicked as he snapped a salute, accepting the dismissal. “Anything else, my lady?”

The Miraluka snorted a bit at his formal address, catching the sarcasm in his tone. “No, that’s all. Thank you, Uji…really.”

“Of course.”

She smiled at him, knowing he’d be smiling back, and then he walked away. When she was alone again, her face smoothed, prone and blank. She sat, turning over the last few minutes in her head, the last months.

She sat thinking about this damned thing, this flood that had wrecked her home, and wondered in whose face could she honestly scream, “*You caused it!”*

Everyone’s. No one’s. The figure’s on an Iron Throne. The mundane soldier’s to her left or right. The Arconaes’. Her own. Too few. Too many.

She couldn’t wrap her head around it. She couldn’t do this. She was too close. She needed to step back, but she was firmly drowned. There was no one here who was unblemished, no one distant enough--

*No one* here.

The Miraluka woman paused.

*Perhaps...perhaps they’d…*

She reached for her comm one more time, arm almost paralyzed by nervous apprehension. There was one more call she needed to try if she had any hope of surviving tomorrow and every day after it.

Atyiru entered the number and listened to the electronic shrills as it connected to a point far, far away, half-surprised that the address had remained the same. There was a *buzz-click-beep,* and then an electronic hum of static and air filled the seconds between one moment and another.

*“Hello?”* A female voice asked in a language that seemed both ancient and revolutionary. Atyiru’s breath hitched. *“Hello? Is anyone there?”*

In the background, a tinny, distorted, deeper voice joined in. *“Who’s calling, Bright Heart?”*

She choked back an unexpected sob at that. It was an endearment she hadn’t heard directed over her head or across a dinner table in almost seven years.

*“I don’t know. No one is answering. Who would call here?”*

There was a muffled reply she couldn’t make out, and then a pause of just more air. Something clattered.

*“Atyiru?”*

She froze.

*“Yiru, little star, is that you?”*

She tried to open her mouth and couldn’t.

More background conversations, then, arguing not-so-softly, before addressing her.

*“Honey…Atyiru, dear if you are there…well…we…Hello, sweetie. How are you? Is everything well?”*

She still didn’t respond.

*“…hum, if so, then that is good! We’re glad. If not, then, well,  just stay strong, dear. Keep your faith. Love the Light, and adore the Darkness, and never fear the Void. The gods are with you, and so are your parents. We love you greatly. We always shall. We—”*

“M-mom. D-dad.” She managed to croak out at last.

*“Atyiru! Oh, honey, it is you! Where are you? How are you? Are you well, dear? Tell us everything!”*

*“What your mother means, Yiru, is that we are right here. Whatever it is you need, little star, we are here.”*

She choked out a sob, nearly keening softly in relief, her chest heaving. Concerned hushing issued from the other end of the line. Her pager beeped as she tried to get herself under control.

“H-hol-ld o-on.” The Priestess muttered, muting the holocall and snatching her pager off the desk. She stuck the earpiece in and listened to her brother’s voice as the Quaestor alerted her to another War Council meeting in two hours’ time. It seemed Trouty had returned at last.

Replying a quick affirmative, the woman switched back to her call, coughing and rubbing her nose, taking deep breaths and drawing on the Force just a bit to aid a meditative calm. “S-still there?”

*“Of course, Yiru. We are still here.”*

“I-I’m s-sorry, I haven’t...I…”

*“Yiru.”* He interrupted firmly. *“You need never apologize to me. Go on.”*

She stilled. It was strange to hear her own line said back to her; and stranger that she’d grown so isolated as to forget where she had gotten it from.

“Father, I…I don’t know where to start. It’s…so much…I…I-I…I’m not sure you’d recognize me anymore. I-I’ve done a lot of things. Awful things. I…”

*“Atyiru, honey—”*

“No, mother, you don’t understand, I—”

*“Shh, Yiru. Allow me to ask after one thing. What do the stars look like?”*

Atyiru hesitated, her communicator rattling in her shaking fingers, and breathed deeply. She could taste that memory.

It had been late evening, the quickening hour, when the wildlife came out, and with the sun setting it was just warm enough to still stay out before bed. She and her father had been sitting on the porch, biting into sweet roots, dirt under their fingernails from working the fields—few of the everyday technologies most of the galaxy enjoyed were bothered with, particularly since Miralukas didn’t tend to like droids much. He’d said something about the stars coming out soon and she’d asked him what they looked like, thinking, in her tender age, that he would know, because he was her father and he’d known the answer to everything she’d ever asked about before.

He’d told her that he didn’t know, and she’d have to decide for herself. And while, in practicality, it had been a simple fact, that her imagination would have to serve her when she’d never *see* the stars, it had become so much more than that. Like the ambiguous answer to an impossible riddle, something they always fell back on when the questions got too big.

But, despite all her confusion, despite the rage and pain, the *karking* sadness and tiredness…Atty smiled, because it was the first time she’d ever had an utterly certain reply for him.

“They look like my friends, the ones, I’m with now, at home.” She answered softly, fondly. “These people are my stars. They’re all the meaning I know.”

*“…well then. I think everything will be just fine, no matter what you are worried about, Yiru. Do you not, Heone?”* Her mother murmured a positive reply. *“Well, that is that then. Go on, little star. Talk if you want to. We will listen.”*

“I’ve…I’ve only got a couple hours. Things are a bit busy right now. And I still don’t know where to start.”

*“We will listen.”* Her father repeated. *“Why do you not just start talking?”*

“Well…” Kicking her boots off and drawing her legs up to her chest, the woman slumped back into her chair, settling in, fingering her braid with idle nervousness. “I suppose…Let’s see…there’s some things I can’t tell you, sensitive, so it may be confusing but…hmm…I-I guess there’s my family—not just the Entars I mean, and, uh, I’ll get to them, of course, but—but my *Clan*. And…well…it goes back before that…I guess…I guess a good place to start is this grumpy old guy I met a few years ago. He was ex-military, lots of salted wisdom. Talked similarly to Uncle Heyn, but more ribald. Good drinker. Gave me my tattoo—”

*“Your WHAT?”* Her prudent mother exclaimed sharply on the other end. She heard her father laughing.

“…about that…” Atyiru began.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

***NSD Invicta***

***0356 Hours***

***Twenty-one hours before Mission Launch***

“About time you showed up.” Was the greeting she got outside the council room, in the usual cold, I’ve-got-a-cryo-round-up-my-rear tone. Atyiru just smiled at her Quaestor and clapped him on the arm.

Even if her brother acted grumpy, the fact that he didn’t react volatilely to the touch anymore spoke volumes. He even elbowed her lightly back.

“Oh, do calm yourself, Brother dearest. Timing is everything. I know you don’t understand tact or timing or any of the like, but you can manage fashionably late, at least.”

“I might not have tact, but I can *manage* to rip your head off your shoulders.”

“Oh, eager to show off those muscles for me, hmm?” She chortled, just sensing his glare. “Hush, Cethy. We’re fine.”

“It’s your duty as Aedile to keep your appointments*.*”

“Pah. We’re not even *late*. We’re right on time. You’re just too fond of being early. If you arrive early to places, you’ve not gotten all you can out of your time before getting there.”

“I’m going to break you.”

“Sithspit. You’d miss me too much.”

He just grunted at that. The Miraluka grinned over-exuberantly and strode for the doors, sensing Marick, Timeros, Trouty, and Legorii already within. Punctual lot, them.

Cethgus’ hard grip caught her shoulder. She turned, raising a brow at him.

“You alright, Sis?” The Zabrak asked with gruff, pointedly causal concern. Atyiru paused, her grin slipping for a second. She looked aside, then back at him, giving a tiny shrug.

“No, Brother. I’m not. Not at all.  But I *will be,* I think.” She replied, scrounging up a tiny, genuine smile for him.

“Good. You need to be ready for battle.” Her fellow Entar muttered brusquely, brushing past her. Her smirk grew a bit before it mellowed, lukewarm and effete.

Atyiru took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and followed him into the beginning of the final moments of their crucible.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

***Special Forces Drop-point, somewhere over Ziost’s surface***

***0001 Hours***

***Mission Launch***

“Go. Go. *Go.*” Marick Arconae’s perfectly neutral voice crackled through the comms in their helmets, never raised in volume despite its commanding emphasis.

“Confirmed. Moving.” Atyiru replied, holding a quick breath bated in her lungs, and stepped off the lip of their shuttle after her comrades, body falling into the rushing, open air.

They descended. She did not know why they did, or why she did not know. What did she know of anything, here, now, except for that she could hear the cold splintering, breaking, under their feet as they dropped one after another? Nothing. Something?

Breathe. Move. Because whatever there is, it is going to fade and there’s no way to know what it is becoming, so just...

“*Go!*”

\*Based on an excerpt of a  U.S. Army marching cadence, *Yellow Bird.*

*#13486, Atyiru Caesus Entar, Clan Arcona, Special Forces*