A’lora Kituri broke from her meditation with a start. Countless hours of reflection on the strange parchment’s meaning had resulted in a vague understanding of what had transpired. The messenger spoke of a Dark Councillor of the Dark Brotherhood, and his fall at the clutches of some unknown assassin. It was inevitable, a testament to the treacherous nature of the Sith. Yet, there was something unnerving, buried within the fine penmanship of the author’s hand. A cool, unwelcome sensation prickled down her exposed spine as she read the artfully encoded message, traced in what she assumed to be the finest of inks.

For days, the Togruta had maintained a hidden presence on Nar Shadda. The apartment she occasionally called “home” was nothing more than a series of downtrodden rooms, located within one of the most vile and gut-wrenching establishments this side of Nal Hutta. While the hunter preferred the overwhelming footprint in the Living Force on forested worlds, the constant reminder of small organisms living beneath the stained carpets was enough to make her detest the half-abandoned apartment complex. For that reason, she sat cross-legged on the shallow mattress that made up her meager sleeping quarters in intense concentration.

It wasn’t a chance meeting that the messenger had come to her to deliver a message. Weeks ago, an encoded message for a meeting on Nar Shadda was sent to her after carefully building the misconception of being a practitioner of the Dark Side of the Force. The ruse had succeeded, for the most part. Operating with the illusion of being an agent sent by the Dark Council, A’lora could have cared less about the death of Orv Dessrx d'Tana. Her true interests were far more important than petty revenge for a murderer.

The message that was delivered by the messenger was brief. She did not know from where it had originated, or by whom it was written. All she knew was to trust in the Force as it offered her guidance. The elaborate calligraphy ended without a signature. It its place remained a faint, watermarked image.

*My fellow brethren,*

*The war has expanded past the borders of Sith Space. Already, various sources have indicated the presence of an assassin. An assassin capable of destroying a Dark Councillor is a direct threat to our stability. If you are reading this, I have compiled a set of reports procured from my sources on Nar Shadda on the attack. Thus far, there has been no word from those tasked with extraction and recon for the Dark Councilllor, Orv Dessrx d'Tana. The Herald’s primary mandate rested in the execution of former Councillor of New Tython, Morotheri Mithfaron. Any such information irrelevant from the task assigned to you will be withheld with utmost secrecy.*

*As an agent for the Brotherhood, you are tasked with tracking down the would-be assassins and eliminating the threat. The extent upon which you complete your objective will be considered complete after proof of success has been reported to intelligence. Do not fail in your task.*

“No, it isn’t watermarked… It’s blood.” The realization hit her with such an impact that she broke from her cross-legged position, causing her to instinctively scan every immediate entrance to the decrepit apartment. Sensing nothing, and detecting no movement ultrasonically through the use of her Montrals,

“What could Morotheri have been doing on Nar Shadda?” She pondered, crossing her arms in contemplation as she paced the limited confines of her apartment. Perhaps the late High Councillor had departed on a mission that led him here, to uncover some greater mystery in the grand scheme of the will of the Force. A’lora hadn’t known the Miraluka on a personal level, although her investigation into his notes and journals had turned up a great many disturbing facts. However, for all her research she had questions left unanswered.

The intentions of the late Aedile remained a mystery – as did the reasoning behind his departure from the Knights of Odan-Urr. Remaining true to the will of the Light Side of the Force, the Miraluka’s last entries in the volumes collected by the Togruta highlighted only a series of vague references alluding to his mission. In his later years, Morotheri had distanced himself from Odan-Urr to fight against the Iron Throne, without drawing attention to those he cared about most. A’lora knew beyond doubt that he found something. Whatever it was that he found, and how detrimental it was to the Brotherhood’s eventual downfall, she didn’t know.

A’lora walked towards the window. Several meters below the full-length window, the Jedi could see a figure moving through the crowds, his form obscured with a loose-fitting robe. Apparently having seen through the Jedi’s false identity in their brief meeting, the messenger’s even stride quickened to a near sprint. Tossing wanderers aside in his attempt to escape, he continued onwards in the direction of the nearest establishment.

“Of all the places for criminal scum to hide...” A’lora mused, scanning the artificially-lit establishment with a look of distaste. The entrance to the building was flanked on either side by two brutes – One of them Trandoshan, the other a particularly hideous Gamorrean. Both of them guarded the establishment from unwanted ‘guests’ – those that weren’t interested in the same, corrupting substances used by the spice den’s inhabitants. Gathering the familiar, natural hilt of her lightsaber from the edge of a small dresser, she broke into a Force-fuelled sprint through the apartment complex, slamming the door behind her as she left – despite its inability to properly lock within its bent frame.

Bursting from the interior of the apartment complex, A’lora didn’t break pace as she found what she was looking for. A lone, rusted-out speeder bike hovered mere inches from the duracrete pavement, humming loudly over the sounds of Nar Shadda’s streets.

“Hey, that’s mine!” A Weequay shouted after her, as she raced towards the building’s sole speeder pool and clambered atop a speeder bike, nearly as decrepit as the apartments themselves. The vehicle sputtered through its exhaust before being driven nearly vertically down the length of the complex, roaring even as it narrowly missed the trajectory of oncoming speeders that would have bisected it.

A hiss, followed by a sharp crack rang out clear behind the Togruta. She felt a sharp pain as one of the crimson bolts bounced off the speeder’s metallic surface, and skimmed along her side. “Stang!” She shouted, above the guttural roar of the speeder’s sole functional repulsorlift. Although minor, the sudden reflexes in her muscles caused her to drive the controls directly in the vector of an oncoming vessel. She sensed the shift in motion long before it occurred, and knew that recovering would be a pointless exercise. Instead, she balanced atop the speeder bike with both feet planted precariously on the Bantha hide seat.

“You shouldn’t have done that, thief! Now you’re going to burn!” The Weequay called, barely audible above the crashing of metal against metal as the two objects made contact mid-flight. The high-speed impact sent A’lora airborne for several meters horizontally before contorting into a well-timed roll to minimize the damage. Landing more-or-less on her feet, the Togruta escaped with minor lacerations to her back and forearms. The charred wound left of her midriff was numb, and barely noticeable.

“I hope you’re not looking to make trouble.” An approaching Trandoshan commented, gesturing towards the pieces of scrap that once comprised an unstable missile with a set of largely unresponsive controls, “You just scared away our customers.”

“That depends on you.” She replied, “I’m looking for someone. A man with an interlocking pattern on his forearm. Have you seen him?” Her question was amplified with a small undertone of reassurance.

“We don’t answer questions to offworld scum. Get outta here, before I have your hide flayed and sent to the Boss.” The Gamorrean interjected. His scarred face didn’t hide his disgust towards the small woman, scowling in such a way that it accentuated his curved tusks, making them seem more imposing than they were in reality.

The Togruta smirked, “And your ‘Boss’ is exactly who I came here to see. Now, move aside unless you would like to answer for your unruly behaviour towards his - very honored guest.” Several moments passed for what seemed an eternity. The Gamorrean grimaced with an infuriated expression, and A’lora could sense a rage boiling inside the gluttonous alien.

Thrusting forward a swollen fist at the intruder, the Gamorrean’s sluggish attack was easily avoided by the Togruta. Ducking underneath the rippling mass of muscle and fat, A’lora delivered a swift kick to the creature’s stomach, the surface of which only rolled in response. The counter-offensive hadn’t so much as angered her opponent before he gripped the Jedi’s forearm with his free hand, and used his superior mass and strength to lift the woman several feet off the ground.

Expecting the reaction of the dim-witted bodyguard, A’lora planted her foot in the Gamorrean’s snout, causing him to reel backwards and nearly collapse atop his Trandoshan partner. Summoning her lightsaber to hand and igniting it in one swift motion, A’lora balanced the glowing blade’s point directly towards the bouncer’s eye, “Do you really want to continue, or would you rather take me to your master?” She challenged.

“Do as she says! Let the Boss take care of her.” The Trandoshan commanded, scrambling out from behind the massive figure before being crushed under his immense weight.

“Good choice.” A’lora nodded in approval, deactivating the emerald blade of her lightsaber, “Now, take me to him.”

Reluctantly, the Gamorrean lowered the lavender-skinned Jedi to the ground. Snorting in frustration, he fell in step behind the Jedi while the Trandoshan acted as their guide. His golden scales reflecting the diminishing light as the approached the building. A’lora made a mental note of the entrance’s appearance as they entered the spice den. As soon as they stepped inside, the artificial light that had covered Nar Shadda’s streets vanished, being replaced by a sickly illumination that flickered rapidly above her in a random, nausea-inducing pattern. Peering into one of the rooms as she passed, the Jedi could see several figures huddled around a bonfire. Normally, the Togruta would have kept walking, but one of the figures held her attention. Staring back at her through bloodshot eyes, the downtrodden man that stared back wore a cruel expression – one full of hate and distrust. His once-calm features had mutated over the years of abuse, leaving behind a collection of scars and horrible disfigurements. All of the emotions that she sensed emanating from the addict sent a rush of memories into her mind – memories of the Yuzhaan Vong invasion. A’lora felt the raised scars on her back throb with the reminder. The junkie, who had once been an orphan on Nar Shadda’s streets, suffered from the same powerful addiction as the rest.

“Glitterstim.” The Togruta muttered under her breath in disgust. Gluuk contorted his face into something resembling a grin at the Togruta’s sudden distaste.

At that instant, A’lora felt a heavy hand on her back, “Keep moving!” the Gamorrean barked.

Resisting the urge to drive a lightsaber through his tusk, A’lora thought better of it and instead followed them through a series of rooms, dimly-lit with a heavy stench that filled her nostrils. Her senses flared as her Montrals detected a rapid movement. When she turned to look, all she saw was the same figure from before, following them from a distance. Again, she felt the same fiery intensity of his emotions. This time, the feeling was strong enough to send an uncomfortable sensation creeping down her back. Her Lekku began twitching even as the two escorts stopped on either side of the doorway.

“We go no further. The Boss doesn’t like our other customers bothering him.” Nodding, A’lora Kituri felt the unsavory prickling along her spine fade, knowing that the man who had followed her was out of reach. Even so, something felt strange in these walls. The building, not so much a spice den as it was an elaborate ruse for something far more sinister. As a precaution, the Togruta unclipped the hilt of her lightsaber, positioning her thumb over the activation switch.

“In you go!” The guttural squeal of the Gamorrean guard announced, as he shoved the lavender-skinned Jedi into the room beyond. All A’lora felt at that moment was immense pain, as if her flesh was being seared over a roaring inferno. Her vision blurred, and she could smell something oddly familiar before darkness consumed her. Her body, ravaged with electricity fell to the ground convulsing in short, violent spasms. The last thing she heard was the approaching click of boots against the durasteel ground, and the last thing she sensed was pain, anger and rage.

Many hours had passed – or was it seconds? It mattered not as the Togruta’s vision returned, clouded. Summoning strength into her limbs through the Force, A’lora attempted to stand before her head collided with a metallic object above her, nearly sending her back into unconsciousness. After several minutes, she regained an awareness of her surroundings. She was in a cage, locked away like some ruthless animal.

*So,* she thought, *the hunter has become the prey.*

“We have delivered to you a Jedi! Surely she is worth a few credits on the market.” The Gamorrean suggested promptly, before the distinctive snap-hiss of a lightsaber ignition filled the chamber. Several heartbeats passed before anyone spoke.

“Such an elegant weapon.” A familiar voice remarked, “Simple in its design… yet, difficult to manipulate.”

Before the Gamorrean could back away, A’lora heard a loud thud as Gluuk’s head feel from his shoulders. The mass of fat, muscle and bone that was his decapitated body collapsed to the floor, in the last throes of death spasms. When A’lora’s vision finally returned, it seemed as if Gluuk’s head was staring back at her with an expression of sheer panic through lifeless eyes, only inches from the metals bars separating her from the oddly familiar figure.

“You’re the messenger.” She called out, painfully. It seemed that her muscles had not yet recovered from the assault from the electrical surge that engulfed her. Staring back into the eyes of Gluuk, she noticed something… something that could help her escape. In his clumsiness of having handled an unfamiliar weapon, the assassin had nearly missed his mark, severing not only the door guard’s head, but one of his tusks, as well.

Chuckling at the obvious remark, the messenger deactivated the lightsaber, giving the hilt a single spin before clipping it securely to his belt. “A messenger… yes, among many other things. I feared you might discover my disguise before my snare captured its quarry. I was, after all, expecting to capture one of Muz Ashen’s greatest assassins.” He turned around with an amused grin spread across his face, “Not one of his most hated rivals.”

*So, that’s why the figure I sensed had a familiar air about him. It was all a ruse. And I wandered foolishly into his trap,* she fathomed.

“The way I see it, our goals are aligned in more ways than one.” A’lora insinuated, “After all, we share a common enemy. Free me from this prison and I will help you find whomever you seek.” Her efforts of conversation created the perfect cover as she stretched out with the Force, however weakened her connection was. As if by the will of the Force, the sharpened bone darted across the room, and into her outstretched palm only seconds before the messenger turned to face his prisoner.

He laughed, in an almost sarcastic manner, “Are you implying that the enemy of my enemy is my ally?” He mocked, “Surely even the Jedi are above such paltry excuses. I have already determined your fate, and I assure you, the outcome will be far less pleasant than meaningless alliances. You will be brought in for questioning, where you will be tortured, interrogated and violated until you are on the verge of breaking. Then you will be executed, along with all of the servants of the Iron Throne.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” The response caught him perplexed, as he reeled around on instinct to intercept the plate of durasteel soaring in his direction. With the tusk of the Gamorrean, A’lora was able to loosen the bonds holding the less-than-confortable container together, and using the strength of her legs coupled with her efforts of telekinesis, propelled the top plate of durasteel towards her would-be captor.

The tattoos obscuring his forearms rippled as they stopped the airborne cover. Underestimating the force of the impact, the assassin lost his balance, tumbling backwards onto the worktable behind him. Reaching to his side, the assassin retrieved a hold-out blaster and flipped it around in a fraction of a second to face his target. A’lora felt a sting in her shoulder as the blaster seared a hole through the flesh, leaving behind a cauterized wound. Clutching her other hand to cover the wound on instinct, A’lora dodged several of the incoming bolts before calling upon the durasteel panel, levitating it to rest as a barrier between her and the assassin.

A series of clicks coming from the messenger’s direction announced his failing luck. “Stang!” He swore, before the Togruta raced towards him with a fierce snarl that revealed her sharpened, fang-like teeth. Tossing the jammed weapon towards a heap of dismantled electronics, the man prepared himself for the inevitable onslaught. Broadening his already muscular shoulders and turning his profile towards his opponent at an angle, it was unmistakable that the man was a talented practitioner of Echani.

Only five meters from the assassin, A’lora closed the distance swiftly, using the durasteel cover of her former cage as a springboard to hurl herself at the soldier. In an effort to catch him off-guard, she beckoned a crude quarterstaff to hand from the litter cluttering the floor. He expected the attack, pivoting from the hip to reflexively sidestep away from the oncoming strike. The forward section of the quarterstaff crashed harmlessly against the workbench, opening up the Jedi’s defenses long enough for her opponent to retaliate with a counter attack of his own. Striking with his vastly superior muscle mass at her forearm, the Togruta winced in pain before bringing the rear end of the quarterstaff to strike him squarely in the jaw.

The sudden blow sent him reeling; nearly letting his defenses down long enough for the Togruta to launch a second consecutive swing of the quarterstaff. However, with military resolve and an unquenchable desire for vengeance, the messenger traced an arc through the air with his massive right forearm to intercept the next blow at its point of origin. Successful, the experienced brute caught A’lora by surprise only moments before the hit made contact. She could see the tattooed patterns on his forearm distort on the impact. She heard, and felt an audible ‘crack’ as her wrist exploded in pain, fracturing under the intense pressure.

As if guided by the savage predator instincts of her species, A’lora bit down on the assailant’s forearm. Her naturally-sharpened teeth easily tore through the flesh, puncturing the muscle tissue that made him recoil in shock as she did so. Multiple trails of blood ran down the length of his arm after he tore away from the brutal attack, the crimson liquid pooling on the floor beneath him.

She used his reaction to bring her quarterstaff to bear with her one good hand. Only instead of attempting another futile strike, she swung the weapon in the direction of the wood-hewn lightsaber clipped to his waist.

“Wha… What?” He stammered, even as the emerald blade snapped into existence, materializing in the hands of its true wielder. His agonizing scream echoed through the spice den’s infrastructure as soon as the glowing blade came down upon the bleeding limb, severing it off completely at the bicep. He collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony at the loss of his limb.

“In the name of Morotheri Mithfaron, and all those who have suffered as a result of your doing, you are under arrest.” The Togruta announced, before the thwack of her boot against the man’s skull silenced his torment.