***Antei, Antei Sector***

***38 ABY***

***Four days before the battle of Nicht Ka***

*Puh-ping. Ping-ping!*

The shrill ping rang through the training hall, interrupting the staccato thumpsof flesh against synthetic fiber and eight-odd pounds of sand. I inhaled slowly, raggedly, lowering my fists. Huffing out the breath, I stretched, unwrapped by hands, and walked across the otherwise empty space to my bag.

My datapad blinked, alerting me once more to the newly received message. I opened the file, blinking in surprise at the personal address I hadn’t seen in...months? Longer than that?

*Sender ID: 13486*

*Received: 0457*

*Encryption protocol 6-Aurek-0*

*Subject: Let’s chat*

*Monty,*

*Hello there, my friend. It’s been quite some time. We haven’t spoken as much since you retired from Plagueis and went off in the stars to Antei. I hope you’re doing well there, and that the Light and Dark are blessing your passing days.*

*As I’m sure you know, the Brotherhood soon departs for Nicht Ka. We just got word to prepare two days ago. I expect you’ll be quite busy, but it’s been a long time, and impending doom and gloom always has a way of making us remember all that we’ve not done in our lives. I don’t ever want to forget a friend. If I die a week from now, then I’d like to be able to say I caught up with you one last time.*

*You needn’t come to all the way to Selen if visiting again makes you uncomfortable. I’d like to invite you to my family estate on Gethsemane instead. And don’t worry--the family never gathers here, excepting the most special of occasions.*

*Let me know if that’s amenable. I wouldn’t protest otherwise. The Force keep you safe, my friend.*

*Always your cave-buddy,*

*Atyiru*

**-x-**

“Go,” the White Knight’s voice bid me before I even opened my mouth.

I bowed then straightened again. “Master?”

“Go, have your goodbyes. You will not be missed for a day of leave. Everything is going as planned.”

I didn’t bother asking how he knew--he always knew, and I would never question him. I bowed again, murmuring, “Thank you, sir.”

The Deputy Grand Master merely kept his eyes fixed on the black and gold helmet in his hands. Without another word, I nodded and left, the door *snicking* shut behind me.

***Entar House, Gethsemane***

***Dajorra System***

***38 ABY***

***Three days before the battle of Nicht Ka***

“*MONTY!*” someone squealed.

There was a flash of white and tan, and then the air was just about knocked out of me as a small figure barreled into my chest. I planted my feet to keep us from falling over and returned the overly excited embrace with a little more moderation.

Atyiru stepped back with a sheepish, bright smile, looking up at me--sort of. I grinned easily back. “Yo, cave-buddy.”

“Hey yourself,” the Miraluka responded easily, beckoning for me to follow as she moved towards the enormous mansion behind her.

“Nice place,” I commented, looking at across the green grounds and up at the house.

“It is,” she agreed. “A bit big and fancy for my tastes, but amazing nonetheless.”

We moved through so many halls that I started to lose track, all decorated and lavish. I saw no other people, just the occasional droid cleaning something already spotless. Atty said hello to all of them that we passed.

She finally stopped in front of a particular door and went in. The hefty aroma of caf and something spicy filled my nose as I trailed after her. The carpet was plush and white, and I wondered if I should take of my boots.

“Make yourself comfortable, and don’t worry about any mess,” Atyiru said, a secret smile on her face. “Something for Harold and his friends to do.”

“Harold?”

“Our droid chief-of-staff, if you will. He didn’t have a name, so I gave him one, like all the others.” She handed me a piping mug, the heat bleeding into my fingers. “It’s a blend Chef Twiggy whipped up. I’m not sure what’s in it, pleasant surprises and all. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I’ll try anything once,” I assured, sipping. The liquid was still hot enough to hurt a little, but that was fine. The taste was a little strong and a lot strange, but not terrible. I drank more.

“That’s what the Twi’lek said,” Atyiru joked, eyebrow pulling down in mimic of a wink. I chuckled.

*This isn’t so bad,* I thought, a tight feeling squeezing in my chest. It was good to talk to an old buddy like this once and awhile. Too many were long gone.

“Want another cup?” the woman asked kindly with an expression that looked like a smile.

“Sure,” I replied, taking the refill. “So, how goes it? Done anything wild and fun and Attytastic lately?”

She chuckled. “Not really. I’ve been a bit boring. Just following orders and trying to do my best to help my Clan. It’s hard sometimes though. Sometimes I just want to drop what I’m doing right now and *run* screaming.”

Awkward phrasing, but I nodded in understanding. “It can be tough, but we do what we do.”

“You’ve got to fight for what you believe in,” Atty agreed. “For your friends, your mentors, the people counting on you. Cheers, eh?”

I extended my glass, clinking it to hers shakily.

My lips pulled into a frown. I stared, watching my arm tremble badly, and realized I couldn’t feel it. The mug clattered to the floor, the reddish-brown liquid splattering all over the pale carpet.

I opened my mouth to apologize and nothing came out. My eyes went wide and I stared at Atyiru. She sat perfectly still, her smile gone. Her face was sad.

Her mouth moved, but I couldn’t hear her anymore. Darkness rose up and encroached slowly on the edges of my vision.

Then, sudden and deep, sleep dragged me down.

***Unknown Location***

***38 ABY***

Coming back to consciousness wasn’t fun.

It happened slowly, the way only drugs or one kark of a concussion did. All my limbs felt like lead, and my head was thick with fog. The world spun. Thinking and moving were about as hard as swimming through mud with fifty-some pounds of equipment.

Then something rubbery touched my forehead and a cool sensation washed over my body, through every vein. I gasped and bolted upright, eyes flying open.

I took it all in: plastic face shield,  biosuit, cave walls, dimness, Atyiru next to me, hands still outstretched.

“What’s going on here?” I demanded sluggishly, then shook myself. I got up and paced the numbness out of my legs. “Where are we? What the frak?”

“A remote cave on Nicht Ka,” Atyiru answered, her voice muffled by the breather on her own suit. “There’s quite a few of them. I just sort of picked one and went with it. It’s the best recreation I could do, considering Svolten is a little far off…It seemed fitting, y’know since...well, I don’t think we ever really left. Do you?”

“What do you mean?” I narrowed my eyes at her, jaw tightening. “What *is* this, Atty? Don’t give me any sithspit!”

“You could call this a kidnapping, I suppose--”

“*What?”*

“--but that’s such a harsh term…”

“Atyiru, just...stop. Is this why you wanted to visit? So you could capture me? What’s this about? Conspiracy theory? Ransom? Interrogation? I won’t talk.”

“No! None of that. You’re my friend, Monty, I wouldn’t--I’d never hurt you if I could help it.” She spread her hands pleadingly from where she sat. “Listen, I just wanted to talk, really, and I needed to get us away. I have a mission to find a traitor on the Council, and--”

“And you think it’s me? I’m an assistant, not a--”

“Not you, my friend, your commander--”

“Pravus? No,” I spat. “Enough of this. I’m getting out of here.”

I spun away, moving to tab the internal comm on my suit, but finding there wasn’t one. Glowering, I marched away--I’d walk until I found an encampment. Atyiru did not move to follow.

“You’ve got two good eyes, Monty. Sit down, open them up, and *use* them!” she snapped. “Everyone else is running around finding traitors in every shadow--*I’m* here to find the few good men, okay? I’m not using you to prove that Pravus is betraying us. I’m using you to prove that he’s *innocent.”*

“And what makes you so sure?” I retorted over my shoulder, cautious. Atyiru was supposed to be a friend, but this...Could I really trust her anymore?

“Because you’re a good person, Monts. You wouldn’t follow someone that didn’t deserve your loyalty. It’s just not you. If Pravus had wronged us, you would have paid him back tenfold, somehow, someway. You’re not a man to take betrayal with impunity.”

I hovered near the cave entrance, filtered breath fogging up my vision, and stared out into the barren, desolate expanse of rock. Fires burned somewhere far in the distance. “Don’t contact me again, Atty,” I said.

Atyiru sighed. “I don’t suppose it’d change your mind if I told you I’m dying?”

I stiffened. Blinked twice. Turned around.

“What do you mean?”

The Miraluka shifted, clumsily struggling to move, her legs dragging along. I dimly realized why she had not chased after me, and drew closer, unsure what exactly she was trying to show me.

She turned her back to me. *There.* Obvious. The gauge on her atmosphere tank was at zero, and the tube was disconnected from it. I thought of the poison air. I thought of another world, with a beautiful beach, a crash, a cave, and madness.

I clenched my fists.

“Figures, huh? Of all the ways to go. I was so busy thinking about my mission, about this little stunt, that I didn’t bother checking my equipment before I left. I’ve been breathing Nicht Ka in this whole time. Talk about a greenhorn mistake. Stupid,” she laughed like she didn’t have her boot on a metaphorical mine.

“You need a med e-vac,” I barked, reaching again, reflexively, for the comm unit that was not there.

“Not this time.” Atyiru pulled herself up the rocky wall a little further. “Here’s the thing, Monts: I’m not making it out of this cave. I’m already healing myself as fast as the toxins are killing me, and I can’t keep that up much longer. Nobody knows I’m here--I, uh, kinda went a little rogue on this one--and any help we do contact will be too busy shooting at each other to get here in time.”

She cleared her throat, coughing a little. “But the real rancor of it? It’s that I wanted this to mean something, y’know? When I finally kicked it. I always thought I’d be saving people, or at least dying *for* somebody, something. Not...not drowning in my own lungs and vomit on a cave floor because I karked up,” her hoarse voice cracked. “I wanted this to mean something, dammit!”

“Atty, I…”

“So if you please,” she continued. “I’d like to talk to you, while I still can. No *shavit*. I hope that’s acceptable.”

Acceptable. One of my old buddies has just informed me she wants to spend her last day--her last hour, maybe--in the world with me. There is no part of that which is acceptable.

I exhaled through my teeth and walked back, lowering myself down next to her.

You didn’t leave a brother behind, even one that was being a son of a bantha.

Atyiru coughed, hacking and pained. After a moment of recovery, she smiled at me, a tight smile that pulled at the mottled, reddened skin around her mouth and nose and showed off bleeding gums. Didn’t say anything else, or chatter like normal. Just smiled, all sad. I swallowed and patted her shoulder. The silence thickened until it was just us breathing, me normally, her wheezing badly.

I am deafened by the noise of all that we’re not saying.

“So,” I huff, trying to push back the anger and the sound of dying. It’s too quiet on its own, with no blasters, no shouting or cannonfire to fill it up. “I’ll tell you. What do you want to know?”

“I don’t have a lot of time, sooo...let’s keep this simple, eh?” the woman rasped. “Is Pravus betraying the Brotherhood to the One Sith? Is he working with them?”

I shook my head before she was even done with her question. “Pravus is involved in some bad things, but he isn’t the traitor...not with the One Sith.”

“Who is then? Do you have any idea?”

“Probably someone stronger than he is,” I stated gravely, not wanting to hint any further. It just wasn’t right.

“There must be more than that,” she insisted.

“Pravus had a...group. But they’ve all disbanded now, after recent failings. With Raken stepping down, he is disadvantaged--or better off, in some ways.”

“A group? Who?”

“Are you familiar with the ‘Dread Council?’ If not, ask your Proconsul. He was one of them.”

Atyiru’s expression tightened, though whether it was in pain or at the mention of Legorii, I couldn’t tell. She stewed for a bit, coughing occasionally and spitting a mouthful of blood or two. “You guard Raken. Is that just following orders, or does he have your trust like your former Master?”

“Raken and Pravus are not that same, but they shared a vision. It doesn’t matter anymore though. He did his job, he did what he could, and now he’s moved on.”

“So it’s--” she had to stop to cough. Crimson splattered the front of her helmet, and she removed it and her gloves--they weren’t doing much anyway--revealing bloody fingernails. I patted her back uselessly.

The fit went on for well over a minute. She was pale, sweaty.  Her voice kept breaking as she went on: “I-it’s no-not him e-either?”

“Again, neither of them are involved with the One Sith,” I told her firmly.

“Th-that ju..st l-leaves Aa-ah-aabsdu, D-dacien, Taig, Telaris, an-and M…” she trailed off blankly, swaying in place.

“Atty?” I gripped her shoulder.

Her body twitched, then convulsed as she tipped forward and vomited a fountain of red. The spew had hardly subsided when she fell over, unresponsive, and began seizing.

“Frak!” I shouted, moving to cushion her head from the stone but not touching the rest of her. I called on the Force, focusing it towards her frail body. “Hang on, Atty!”

Just then the back cave wall burst open and a swarm of people in white rushed in. A Neti accompanied them, gesticulating wildly and shouting. “Get my specimen to the medbay NOW, you incompetent fools! WE MUST TEST THE RESULTS OF THIS EXPERIMENT! Now, now, now!” the tree-man demanded.

I blinked, stunned, as Atyiru’s body was pulled from my grasp and whisked away through the...the door?

I stared, heart hammering, at the several people gathered in the new doorway. Marick. Legorii. Timeros. Troutropper.

“Hello,” blubbed the fish, and waved his flipper.

The cave winked out of existence around me. Plain sheet-durasteel replaced them. Four walls. A floor and ceiling. The single door.

I yanked off my helmet and threw it aside. It bounced away as I leapt to my feet, fists clenched.

“WHAT IS THIS?” I screamed at them. More lies, more tricks, more nonsense. “What is this? There is a war out there! Why are you doing all of this to me, dammit?!”

The face of Arcona’s Consul was impassive ice. Legorii stared daggers, and Timeros merely walked away with a nod to his fellows. Trouty gurgled and shrugged, almost apologetically.

“A set-up, of course,” he announced in his watery voice, flaring his robes dramatically. I glared. “I do love revealing big plans, don’t you? So much fun. Anyways,” he waved a flipper again. “It was a joint effort. Young Atyiru was bait, and used her abilities to make you less suspicious. *I* made the illusion and aided in...convincing you of its actuality, while Timeros threw in a dash of fear. Marick and Legorii sanctioned and planned and other boring things. Oh, interesting tidbit: Ood knocked you out, but he also actually poisoned the girl. He wanted to have ‘realistic special effects.’”

The Mon Calamari Master gestured my way. “Added benefit of you being in an envirosuit with muted senses--smell, touch, whatnot--and you’ve got a perfect recipe for a good play that lasted a matter of minutes. To be fair, it was this or slicing up bits of you until you either bled out or had a chat.”

I just closed my eyes. It was all too much.

“And now?” I asked. “What now that you got what you wanted?”

“For now, you stay here,” Marick Arconae informed me emotionlessly. “You’ll be released within twenty-four hours when the Clan begins moving its troops.

They turned and walked away, tension thick. Troutropper waved cheerily, and then the door slammed shut.

I sunk to my knees and waited in darkness.

**-=x=-**

***Estle City Medcenter, Selen***

***Dajorra System***

***38 ABY***

***Two days before the invasion of Nicht Ka***

She could sense him, all cold sunlight and pale wind. His aura was the perfect mask it always was, but underneath, she could feel him brooding. He was waiting for her.

Atyiru dug her nails into her palms, clenching her teeth.

It felt like she was burning alive. Not just the poison that had been eating her from the inside out the day before, but something sicker, in her soul. In her bones. Under her skin, flowing through every vein, turning her blood to lead.

The Archpriestess swallowed around the lump in her throat, took a breath past the stone in her chest. Pushing herself out of her hospital bed, she wobbled to the door, Ivoshar getting up and loping after her with a whine.

Atyiru opened the door and pushed past the Hapan that stood outside it, limping down the hallway towards her quarters. He ghosted after her.

The Miraluka gave a cry and spun around, but lost her balance with the motion. He was there, quicker than liquid silver, catching her. As soon as she was steady again, he let go and stepped back.

“Atyiru…” Marick prompted.

She snarled at him, ““If you care for me at all, you will never ask me to do something that despicable ever again, Lord Consul!”

An emotion almost like regret, deep and quiet under his armor, resonated in her Force-sight, then disappeared. His posture hardened to beskar.

“Atyiru, stop it.”

“You made me choose between one friend and another. Between one hurt or another. How could you?” she cried. “Marick, *how could you?!”*

“We make the sacrifices we have to, Atyiru. Otherwise, none of the other lives laid down before have any meaning.”

She let out a single sob, turning away from him. He took a step after her.

“GO AWAY!” the woman screamed, hugging herself. Her Cythraul turned and bared his fangs at the Consul, snarling.

Marick’s eye flickered from his Aedile to her companion, the walls in his mind cracking a little before they solidified into an impenetrable fortress. Silence stretched.

This time, when Atyiru walked away, he did not follow.

***Arconan Forward Camp, Nicht Ka’s surface***

***38 ABY***

***One week later***

Her head pounded in time with her heartbeat, each lifegiving press of ventricles pumping blood through her veins and pain down her nerve endings. The headache was typical, brought on by just a *little* too many fumes inhaled from strong disinfectants.

It was worth it though. When her nostrils were nearly burnt out, she almost couldn’t smell the blood.

*Same old, same old these days,* the chief medic thought, more tired than sad. She pulled another set of clamps out of its bleaching bath, wiping it down with a clean cloth. The quiet of the tent surrounded her without any of the other workers there, and the hush of the night outside almost gave an illusion of peace.

Wrapping the instrument up in the towel and tucking it away, she picked up another, speaking softly.

“I expected you sooner.”

“We both expected a lot of things,” Montresor’s voice said from from the tent’s entrance behind her.

Atyiru turned to face the Human, her face free of smile or frown. Her expression was placid. She folded her hands in front of her.

“I tried to warn you, you know. The whole time we were talking on Gethsemane.”

“Too little too late, don’t you think?” the man grunted.

“Evidently,” the Miraluka murmured in agreement. She set aside her cleaning and wrapped her arms around herself as the moment stretched on. “Will you go without hurting any of the men?”

“I’ve got no problem with them. Just you and what you’ve done.”

The Aedile nodded, digging her fingers into her arms. *Basic science...every action has an equal and opposing reaction...*

“It’s funny. You went looking for traitors, but one was right here already,” he went on, his words punctuated by the distinct, unmistakable sound of a detonator activating.

“For the love of the gods, Monty,” she whispered.

*Click, click, click, thunk--*

**-x-**

***BOOM!***

“Holy frakking--” Captain Stefek gasped, spinning around to see fire roaring into the night sky at the edge of camp, the sound of an explosion ringing in his ears. “Kark, kark, kark! Men! move! Get the fire team! Medics! Go, go, go!”

Soldiers swarmed, and a few Dark Jedi poked their heads out of their tents, startled from sleep or meditation.

Nearby, a lone, suited figure backlit by tongues of orange flame scrambled across the craggy, lifeless terrain and off into the night.