

“–How do you explain all the disappearances then?!” K’tana exclaimed excitedly.

“Everything can be explained, dearest,” Atyiru replied with an easy smile that was more comforting than patronizing. “The Force works in strange ways, sometimes. It could very well be true...”

“Everyone knows that there is no such thing as haunted houses,” Legorii cut in sharply, not bothering to express the same subtly as the Shadow Lady.

“Your face is a haunted a house,” K’tana replied, sticking her tongue out and folding her arms over her chest.

“Be that as it may,” the Proconsul replied, never breaking the group’s forward progress as they walked through the Arcona Citadel halls. “I still think that you’re just fishing for attention and this is all nonsense.”

“I’ll show you nonsense....” the fiery Twi’lek’s grumble trailed off as a gloved hand clasped her shoulder. She turned to look back over her shoulder at the fourth member of the group, who had been surprisingly mute throughout the “discussion.”

Atyiru and Legorii both turned as well, somehow having forgotten that the Consul Emeritus had been trailing. Marick Arconae had been distant as of late, and seemed to be hanging around the Citadel far less than he had prior to the end of the War. Whispers hinted of him being considered for Voice of the Brotherhood or Combat Master. No word had come as of yet, so the Arcona Summit were left with the awkward silences trailing the wake of the Hapan stepping down from Shadow Lord.

“While I agree with Legorii, these reports are still concerning.” Marick came to a stop, his usually stoic features becoming pensive as he tapped a few buttons on his datapad. His too-blue eyes scanned the contents mechanically before he nodded once, looking back up at the group who were waiting on him to continue.

“If one person came to you and told you that there were ghosts in the Felurigade, would you believe them?”

“Well, no,” Atyiru replied. She opened her mouth to speak again, but was cut off.

“What about two people. Three? A fourth?” Marick continued.

“Still, no,” Legorii responded curtly.

“Fair enough. But do you go into the Felurigade at night, on your own?” Marick asked, letting the question hang in the air.

Silence. Even K’tana seemed to ponder the Arconae’s words, but quickly found interest in some unique structural design of the Citadel she hadn’t noticed prior. Her monkey-lizard chattered excitedly as well, and the two ran off to investigate the “shiny”.

“Fair point. It pays to be cautious. You are still suggesting, however, that we don’t investigate the matter?” Legorii asked.

“Indeed. Fortunately, you have someone you can send to investigate for you, without diverting any of Arcona’s resources.

“And that would be...?” Atyiru tilted her head quizzically.

The corner of Marick’s lip quirked upward, and while the gesture was slight, it seemed much larger on his usually impassive face.

“Me.”

“Alone?”

“Yea.”

“What was the whole point of your little philosophy thing then?!” Atyiru waved an exasperated hand in the air.

Marick shrugged. “I’m not just anyone. And besides, I won’t be alone.” The Arconae turned to gesture down at his right hip.

Atyiru and Legorii noticed first, their eyes going to the Emeritus’ side. Something that had always been there simply was not. Legorii steeled himself, but his eyes actually showed remorse. Atyiru actually frowned, and felt a small piece of her heart crack.

“Kira will—” Marick started to say as his eyes flicked to the blank space at his side. Realization caught up with him. “Oh,” he said simply. His faint smile dropped into a frown for but a moment before seamlessly dissolving entirely into an impassive mask.

“Marry—” Atyiru started to say as she took a step towards him. The Arconae raised a hand and waved it away.

“I’ll look into the matter personally. You two have more important things to be doing. I’ll report back with what I find.”

Atyiru started to protest, but Marick was already moving towards the exit. Alone.

-=x=-

Where Demons Hide

Lights flickered around me. My vision blurred, but only for a moment. I pushed myself back to my feet and gingerly touched the side of my head. I could taste copper in my mouth, so I already knew that my fingers would come away with blood. Sure enough, they do. Minor. My body was already addressing the issue for me, knitting the shallow wound back together. When you've spent the better part of your adult life fighting in wars, you learn a few tricks. Accordingly, I assessed my situation.

I was trapped. That much was evident. In my attempt to probe the mysterious barrier with one of my lightsabers, I had somehow triggered a failsafe. Now the barrier was stronger. I could sense it. Terrific.

I was able to draw on the Force, but my lightsabers no longer seemed to function. I looked around, and realized there was only one direction for me to go. The hallway leading away from me was lit along the edges of its rich, velvet carpet. I remember it being a true color. Too purple. Prevalent. In fact, it was the only color. Everything else about the hallway was muted greys, highlighted by the flickering lights along the carpet. Their sporadic patterns threw awkward shadows at ominous angles.

A door up ahead swung open and then closed. Once. Twice. Each time, a blast of amethyst light spiked through the shadows like a streak of lightning across the night sky. Portrait paintings on the walls had somehow become animated with expressions: ghastly and gritty, pompous and prim. Their eyes tracked me as I started forward, while their faces continued to warp through their range of emotions.

Each time the lightning flashed, the ghastly image of a young girl appeared. Each time the lightning lit up her face, and while her elfin features were sharp and angular, it was her eyes that stood out. Heterochromia. One was violet, the other cerulean.

The air had gotten stale. I could taste and smell it. Acrid. Arid. As I started forward, my boots made no sound on the carpet. Odd. You see, most people don't realize how much of your perception is affected by sound. I am of the *Shadesworn*, and know how to walk in the shadows. There is a distinct difference, however, between walking *quietly* and walking *silently*.

And it was silent. Unnaturally silent. Eerily silent, like the first time you step out of an airlock and into the emptiness of space. Even in the protection of a space suit, you can tell. You know the truth. I let out an experimental, "Ah," through my lips, but no sound came out.

Creepy. Still, there was no where else to go but forward. The young girl had ceased progress towards me. I tensed, knowing I needed to keep my senses tuned: so I cleared my mind and focused. She came closer each time. Warning klaxons flared at the edges of my conscious, but I tuned them out.

Deadheart welcomed me like an old friend. An old friend that had, over the years, gradually sapped away at my ability to perceive basic human emotions, like fear and pain.

Fear and pain are powerful tools, true. These, among others, are genetically wired into each of us at birth. Both feelings are specifically designed to protect us from danger. But to me they were crutches. My teacher had long ago taught me that they only got in the way. Your mind was the true weapon, so long as the mind remained in control. So I let them go with the rest of emotion, leaving only *me*. A stone in the face of a storm. Killer. Predator. Hunter

Hunters do not fear. And so, I moved.

Once I had my focus, the young girl had ceased to apparate. I approached the door and timed the opening and closing. Just as it started to swing open, I darted forward, dropping my shoulder and betting that the lightning was just a trick of light and not material. I was half right. I phased right through the bolt, but when I was partially through it solidified like a solid lance, piercing through my heart. There was no blood or physical pain. But I felt something deeper. Down in my core. Something had been taken from me.

I fell down into the darkness. Sound suddenly flooded back to my senses, a high pitched caterwaul screeching through my ears. When I landed, the stone floor was surprisingly malleable, like softened clay. I sunk into it, bounced up once, then landed in the same spot. Only this time when I landed, the ground solidified.

I felt dizzy, and it took me a few heartbeats to level myself out. The room was white. Stark, immaculate white like the first layer of snow. I tried to stretch my senses out, but oddly, the Force did not whisper any secrets to me. I extended a hand and focused my will into my palm, intent on letting out a short *puff* of telekinetic energy. Nothing happened. Frak.

Looking around, I saw that the only notable feature of the blank white room was a puddle of melted ice, and in it I saw an image take form. The water rippled until it revealed a mansion surrounded by lush green gardens. The image dissolves into a small room, with a closet door left open barely a jar. I knew the sight instantly. Hapes. My tiny little room. Home.

A scene began to play out before me.

~ A young boy sits on the floor, playing with a wooden model of a starfighter. Dressed in homespun, secondhand rags, his black hair comes down to his ears in varying lengths. It

looks as if it has been hacked away crudely with a jagged knife instead of sheers. He is small for a boy of ten, thin and pale.

“Pew pew!” he exclaims quietly, casting nervous glances over his shoulders as he makes the wooden ship twist and turn through the air.

Footsteps sound, and the boy nearly jumps a foot in the air, hitting his head on the top of the shelf. “Ow!” he cries, but then quickly cups a hand over his mouth. His eyes go wide with fear and he tries to hold his breath and become as small as possible.

“Oh brother, my brother!” a female voice called out. “Brother, where are you?” The door opened, and a young woman with bright blue eyes and blonde hair smirks down at me.

“What’s this? A toy we missed? You should know better than that, weakling.” The woman, his older sister, laughs. It’s bright and wicked and sharp as glass. She reaches over and grabs the wooden starship from his grip. The boy tries to fight back, but is overpowered. Her open palm catches him in the jaw, snapping his head sideways and leaving a faint mark.

“Bastards don’t have any use for toys. You are nothing, Marick. Remember that.” And with that she left, and the boy was alone in his closet. He grabbed his blanket and hugged it around himself.

And if the boy happened to start weeping at the loss of his favorite toy? Forgive him. He was young and did not know what true loss really was. ~

I blinked, and the room shifted again. I could see it spinning, like it had been powered by some archaic, gear-powered mechanism. The room was now red.

The young girl appeared again. She had the body of a young woman now, graceful and athletic, lean and lithe. Her head, however, adapted into a cross between a human and a wolf. Her eyes stayed the same, and combined with the white fur now growing in around her lupine features, I recognized her instantly. Something within *Deadhart* tugged on a forgotten cord in my heart.

“Kira?” I said, knowing that this had to be some trick of the mind. Without the Force, it was hard for me to check. I could smell her then, remembering how I felt the first time I had picked her up and held her to my chest. Small and warm and fierce. *Deadheart* started to fray at the edges, but I pushed back with my will.

“Marick,” she said easily. “I missed you. Why did you leave me?”

I blinked a few times and shook my head. “I didn’t leave you, I...”

“You what, *Master?*” she said a bit more coldly, walking towards me slowly. I tried to move, but felt my body frozen in place. Paralyzed. I fought back against whatever binding had been placed on me, but found nothing to fight. It was always the enemy you could not see that was the hardest to face. You would have thought I’d learn that by now, huh?

Kira, or the apparition of her, moved towards me and put a finger on my jaw. She looked right into my eyes, and licked my cheek. It felt just the way I had remembered. A shiver went through me as she pressed her body to mine. I went cold suddenly, cold as ice.

“You left me...” she whispered into my ear. “Left me to die. You buried me in the sand and moved on.”

“That’s not true...I didn’t. You know what was at stake. The mission...”

“Always the mission with you, wasn’t it? I guess I just wasn’t worth it to you.”

Deadheart shattered around me. I tried to move my hands around her. To hold her again. To tell her I was sorry, and that my folly had burned me. I had to go on, though, for her.

I stood there, mute though. Unable to say anything on my mind. She grinned then, and it was all wicked and filled with canine teeth. She licked my chin, and then sunk her teeth into my neck. Blood gushed out and my vision went white.

I remember falling again. I lost track of time. When my focus came back to me, I was standing in a dark, damp chamber. It looked like a dungeon of some kind, one of the archaic ones with steel doors and various devices for torture. A sea of bodies hung limp from ropes from the ceiling, their skin flayed and exposed and decaying. The smell of decomposing flesh flooded my senses and nearly caused me to wretch.

I forced myself back to my feet. I felt weak. My arms were like gelatin, but I managed to raise them. Before me, Kira sat cross legged on a throne of skulls. Somehow, I could tell that I knew each of the skulls. People I’d killed. Lives I’d taken. The weight of that burden didn’t bother me: I had long ago come to cope with who I am and what I do. It is simply the way of things. The way of the *Shadesworn*.

For some reason, however, I felt each of them in a different part of my mind, at the same time, prodding, prying, piercing. Together, their wails became a cacophony. A haunting reminder of all my hands had reaped.

Kira sat at the heart of it, and I felt myself drop to one knee as weight pushed down on my shoulders. She wore a gown of white silk that showed off her humanoid, feminine features. Her discolored eyes were bright and she still wore the exotic mixture of wolf and woman. I looked up at her. I felt every year of my life threefold.

“Consequences, Marick. We all face them,” her voice was smooth as velvet. Her eyes bore into mine like daggers. Her hand gestured to the side and a veil of shadow I hadn’t noticed until that very moment lifted to reveal a tan-skinned woman bound by hands and knees. Her long white hair cascaded freely behind her like a cape. That was all she wore, her breast bare, smooth legs spread. She was beautiful in so many ways. Beautiful and broken, just like me. Together we had tackled mountains and won wars. And there she was, naked and open for me and me alone.

No lust or longing came to me, though. Only anger. It was irrational, but my mind was being tugged in multiple directions. When focused, there is hardly a being, man or creature, that can distract me. With so many things happening at once, even my mind of iron had its limits. I was stretched too far.

“Marry?” the woman spoke, tilting her head up. She had no eyes, of course. The Miraluka flashed a smile that made my stomach do a tight cartwheel.

I tried to yell, but no sound emitted. Silent sneers barked from my lips. My lips formed a single name: “Atyiru.”

“What’s wrong, Master? Wolf got your tongue?”

My eyes narrowed dangerously. I felt something tug at my chest and suddenly my voice came back to me.

“Let her go, Kira,” I growled. “Now.”

“But I’m having so much fun with her,” Kira said with a purr. She ran a clawed finger down the center of Atyiru’s chest, right between the breasts. A thin line of blood followed, and Atyiru moaned. Her nipples perked and she wriggled in place against her restraints.

“She likes it. The pain you give her, don’t you see?”

Kira ran her tongue up the thin red rail, slowly. Atyiru shuddered and whimpered. I tried to lurch forward, but still could not move. I felt my blood boiling, but for all my power as a Dark Side Adept, I was helpless. I was that same boy in a closet hiding from his sister.

“She’s mine now. You took her for granted. Just as you took me.”

Kira cupped Atyiru’s chin and pressed her bloodied lips against hers. Atyiru squirmed in protest, but then seemed to melt into it, kissing back hungrily, almost greedily, at Kira’s lips.

I realized then that none of this was real. It couldn't be. Somehow, this was all going on in my mind. I had to just focus. If I could focus, I could...

Kira pulled away from Atyiru and laughed a terrifying laugh.

"Spice..." the Miraluka whispered, almost drooling.

"That's right. You forgot about her addiction, didn't you? With me, she can have it all she wants..."

Something snapped inside of me. I took all of my fear and pain and rage. I took all of my regret, balled it up, swallowed it. I choked on my pride, swallowed its rinds, or the lack thereof that was leaving me empty inside. My emotions were a tool, and with my mind, they could indeed be harnessed.

"Enough!" I bellowed out, releasing all of my coalesced emotion. It detonated like a supernova and I could feel it in my bones. The restraints that held me seemed to shatter like fragile glass.

I was sprinting forward then. The souls of the men and woman I'd killed lurched free from the skull throne and hurled themselves at me.

I weaved through them, my body moving on instinct and reflex. I have spent my whole life pushing my body to its peak. Speed and precision have kept me alive this long. There is a reason they called me "Flash" when I was first making my name in Arcona.

I dodged my way through the throng, closed the distance to Kira and held my hand out to the side. Somehow I knew that if I called, something would come to my hand.

And so it did.

A knife appeared, materializing from the shadows. I thrust it forward, and drove the knife into Kira's side. She let out a feral howl as she turned to face me, her eyes boring into mine.

"I'm sorry," was all I was able to say. "You deserved better. I was so focused. I was wrong, I should have seen the truth. You had been trying to tell me. You knew...." Tears streamed from my eyes. The only other time had been when she passed in the deserts of Korriban.

"Let go, Marick," her voice said clearly, despite the blood pouring out of her mouth and spilling onto my robes.

"I..."

“Let go,” she said one more time, quietly, brushing my cheek with her hand. I saw her smile then. She shifted into a large white wolf. A Cythraul. Just as she had been when she had fought by my side. I reached my hand out to pet her behind the ear. She nuzzled my hand, but then faded out.

Everything around me started to collapse. My wrist moved deftly to cut down Atyiru’s restraints. She nearly crumpled to the floor, but I caught her and wrapped my cloak around her. I held her tightly and petted her hair, letting her sob onto my shoulder. I could smell her then. I felt her warmth. Real or not, it was true to me.

I whispered two words to her, and wrapped my arms protectively around her.

“I know,” she said with a weak smile.

The house collapsed around us. I held her close, pressed my lips to hers, and held it.

“Don’t make the same mistake with her that you did with me,” Kira’s voice echoed one last warning as everything white.

--End--