

Korriban
38 ABY

It only took her a few minutes to find an abandoned house. Plenty of residents had fled. This district seemed to have gotten caught up in some skirmish or another, walls caved in and blocks of buildings blackened.

The little place she found could have been an apartment or a small shop. Either way, it was neatly burnt out, pillaged, and generally wrecked. She found a bit of floor that was relatively clear and sat down heavily against the wall, her medical pack crumpling slightly against her shoulders. Lifting up, she brushed the crumbs of rubble out from under her and then thumped back down.

Sitting in the dark of a skeletal house somewhere in the outskirts of Dreshdae, Atyiru put her head on her knees and sobbed quietly.

It's just too much. I can't do all this.

She pulled her hood up over her head, dragging the edges around and out from under her to bundle up as best she could. She quickly grew so hot that it felt like the skin of her face would slough off, but she ignored it in favor the tiny, stubborn comfort.

Ashla and Bogan, I'm stupid. This is...just so stupid. But I can't. I don't want to. I don't know what to do!

Her mission was not hard: track down the writings on the Rite and recover them.

She had not been terribly wounded in the battle yet, just busy healing those that were not so lucky. She had been selected to head here and do whatever it took to accomplish her goal. She had made it to Dreshdae from the Loyalist's Forward Camp at the Sith Academy without incident. She had found some cantinas to chat up locals in. She had been friendly, persuasive, whatever it took. She had heard of several unsavory markets and a man named Connor Grey who just might have what she was looking for, a name that matched those on all the dossiers they had been given. She had decided to find him and get the writings from him, or any information on them...most likely through seduction, the way his profile read.

She had, she had, she had...

But then her mind went blank. There were other options, but none so close. And yet, she knew not the first damned thing about seduction or subterfuge. She had no idea what to do now that she was here. She had nothing. It was like freezing up in the middle of a sentence with absolutely no idea what to say next, despite knowing exactly what needed saying. She could not find the words, the how, the way. It was no caesura, no break at the end of the line, intentionally breathless...it was just...nothing.

I can't do this.

And that little bit of nothing infected her. Her hands shook. Her skin felt thin and tattered. But then, it was not just her, but everything. It was *everything*. She could not see the shape of the world anymore. It was not just one thing that was wrong, it was everything. The stones were strange. The air. The very fabric of the Force. Her breath scraped like a jagged knife against her teeth. Everything, everything was all slantways and askew.

I can't do this.

She could not stand. Her mind plummeted into a spiral until she couldn't even find her name flickering inside her like a cinder. It was just the hollow dark underneath. She clutched at her knees, her elbows, her forehead, her fraying hair. Her thoughts were broken glass mid-shatter, tumbling with all of everything as everything of all went a'tumbling too.

"I won't always be here to protect you, Atyiru."

So long ago, that rooftop battle seemed. So long. Forever on top of ages. But even forever away with reality a'breaking around her, Marick's voice still rang like a brazen bell, a broken gear, a fulcrum to turn the dying world 'round.

"To hesitate is to die, Atyiru!"

"Shouldn't you be working on your training?"

"We fight to protect the ones we care about. That will require you to kill. If you will not act, you let them down."

"You can't be so carefree all the time. This is serious. You have duties. You are a leader in this Clan now. People are counting on you."

"Smiling doesn't fix everything. A smile is just another mask that sentients use to fool one another. It's all part of the ongoing game."

His words cut her palms like a calming knife. She clung to their coldness, her life-line in the storm of everything and nothing. The waves broke her.

“Atyiru, I need you to realize that you will come to lead this Clan as Consul one day soon. I won't remain Shadow Lord forever, and neither will Legorii.”

She tried to breathe and could not nearly, not by half, not by a quarter.

I can't do this. I can't do this, I can't, I need I need—

“Hey, hey now, love, what's this? We can't have a pretty girl crying. C'mon, now, what's wrong? Let me see,” a new voice came suddenly, smooth and smoky.

The world clicked. Crashed. Tumble-clatter-snapped to a stop. Everything slammed back into place and locked up tight in its altogether self.

Atyiru startled, lifting her head, sniffing. She had not felt or heard the newcomer approach.

Boots crunched across the gravel, the sweep of fabric rustling as whoever it was knelt near her. The pungent scent of cigarette smoke stung her nostrils and she coughed, whipping her snotty face on her sleeve.

“Oh, look at that! No eyes to dry. That's good. You're far too lovely to be desecrating that gorgeous face with tears,” the voice went on. She identified a few things at once: male, Human, Force-sensitive, obvious smoker. His presence was all dirty, wicked light.

Atyiru took a few deep breaths, waiting for her hands to stop trembling. The man reached out and brushed her messy hair out of her face. She stiffened a bit but did not recoil.

“Y-you are a horrid liar,” she managed eventually.

The man's voice held a devil-smile. “Not the first time I've been called that, love, not by a long shot. But I'd prefer you called me sweeter things...”

“Your name m-might be a good start.”

He did a little half-bow. “Connor Grey, at your service. Might I have the pleasure of hearing yours?”

“Atyiru. Atyiru Caesus Entar. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Grey.” She found the pieces of a thin, watery smile and patched them together. “You're actually just the man I was looking for.”

“You and every other one of the Brotherhood's fine ladies, my dear. And some of its lads, too. I haven't been propositioned this much in...well, no, that's not true. I'm a popular fellow.”

She sputtered a tiny laugh that slowly grew bigger.

“Ahh, that’s a beautiful sound. I’d give anything to hear it again.”

“Hand over those writings and you can hear it as much as you want.”

He actually chuckled. “Nice try, sweetling.”

“It was worth a shot. I thought I’d come trick you with my womanly wiles. I guess being a crying mess works too.”

“I couldn’t possibly leave a damsel in distress. But you are wrong about one thing, there...” One of his fingers trailed down to her chin. “You’re no mess.”

“You’re still a terrible liar, Mister Connor Grey. Charming, but terrible,” she replied primly.

The con-man smirked at her. “But you do find me charming.”

She snorted, at a loss for words, and then he leaned close and kissed her.

*No. I **can**. I can, but this...*

Lifting a hand to his chest, she gently pushed him back, shaking her head. She breathed.

“I won’t,” Atyiru whispered. “I won’t do this.”

She stood, legs aching from stiffness. Connor stood too, close, so close their chests brushed.

“That’s no fun, love,” he quipped.

“Still,” she murmured.

With a slight shrug, the Human stepped back, pulling out a smoke from his coat. “Alright then, sweetling. I don’t suppose you could give me a light, at least? I’ve displaced mine with all these lovely Sith girls trying to take my clothes off.”

“...certainly,” Atyiru said slowly, reaching down to her belt with steady hands. Her fingers hovered between her belt pouch and the clip of her lightsaber.

Marick’s voice in her head again: *“It’s our responsibility to give meaning to our actions. When you kill, when you do not, when you make mistakes...don’t hesitate. Choose. Act. Fight!”*

She made her choice.