**The Search for Power**

As the imperial interceptor descended through the clouds, the black sheen of the hull reflected the sunlight, making it seem as though a star was falling in daytime. The flaps twitched as Its pilot made adjustments to the trajectory of the ship, guiding it steadily towards the outskirts of the capital city of Korriban, named Dreshdae. The pilot made sure to keep as far away as possible to avoid being too conspicuous, but close enough that the ensuing journey on foot to the city limits would not tax her too much. Her quarry would be in good health and fit; the last thing she needed was to be out of breath and footsore when she finally tracked him down.

The ship flared slightly as it reached the surface to allow the rear supports to touch the ground first as it landed behind the dune. The pilot had selected it to keep the ship from view of the city. It could not be seen with the naked eye, even though she knew her descent would have been detected by scanners. But here, in the barren wastes, no-one would really care as long as it remained there and not closer to the capital. The heat haze rose from the dunes all around and small animals scurried to find shelter from the sun, and to escape the proximity of the ship. The front landing support of the interceptor touched the sand, and the hydraulics made the ship bounce slightly as it came to rest, sinking ever so slightly into the sand. The engine noise abruptly ceased and there was a hiss as the systems shut down.

Inside, Taranae stood up from her position in the pilot’s seat and walked into the main body of the craft. She stood before the central console which housed the holocommunicator on the ship. The device filled a quarter of the central room, and its circular surface buzzed slightly as a figure materialised in front of her.

“My Lord.” She said as she bowed, her hand clenched into a fist and placed across her chest in greeting.

“Have you arrived on Korriban, Warrior?” asked the figure.

“Yes my Lord,” she replied, “I have landed in the dunes near the outskirts of Dreshdae as instructed.”

“Good. You have your task. I require the writings recently stolen from the Sith Academy. My informants tell me they are in Dreshdae right now.”

“Yes my Lord, and I have an idea who may possess them. I intend to track him down with the information I have received. I am concerned that my arrival was noticed, but I am of the belief that I will not be considered an important threat this far from the city.”

“Agreed, Warrior. Just remember that you are not the only one searching for these writings. Grand Master Muz, Jac Cotelin and others are also actively involved in the acquisition of the artefacts. You know who your target is?”

“Yes my lord, and I have a hunch as to where he can be found. But I will first look around for clues without raising any suspicion if possible.”

The figure nodded, a smile slowly spreading across his face. “If you encounter any resistance, you know what to do.”

Taranae bowed with the formal gesture once again. “Yes, my Lord. No-one will stand in my way.”

The hologram disappeared and Taranae smiled wickedly. She knew the importance of the writings, and Grand Master Muz could no longer be allowed to perform the rite. She would do anything in her power to take those writings, even if she had to prise them from the hands of a cold, dead corpse. Her black robes trailing the floor behind her, she swept across the room with purpose, heading for the exit hatch. Her current attire would shield her from the hot sun of the planet and if she became too warm, she could drop her hood and release her fiery red hair although that would likely draw some unwanted attention in her direction. Her red bladed lightsaber hung by her hip alongside one of a pair of DL-44 heavy blasters; the matching one holstered on her opposite hip. She gestured as she reached the exit, and the ramp dropped slowly with a hissing sound. She squinted as she walked down the metal surface of the ramp and could feel the heat already through her clothes. The sun was at its highest point at this time of the day, and she decided to discard her cloak fully, allowing her hair to cascade freely around her shoulders. She basked in the sunlight for a moment, face turned upwards as she caught the rays across her cheeks. Her mind strayed back to the days of her first encounter with Sith on the planet of Ziost. She had been pulled by the Force to that barren place and had been captured, then had been given a choice by her Master, Brimstone, to become a Sith or to die at his hands. The fact that she was here now showed the path she had chosen that day. The harsh climate of Ziost was a far cry from the lush tropical climate of Naboo where she had been born, and this planet brought back memories of her home world with its heat.

Shielding her eyes, she gazed into the distance towards the bustling city of Dreshdae. She could see columns of smoke rising from numerous establishments behind the walls, which she assumed was some kind of bazaar. No-one in their correct frame of mind would be clamouring around a fire in this heat. Bracing herself, she set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the buildings she could see on the horizon, glancing cautiously around her as she went. Who knew what or who could be lurking in the area; she didn’t even know if she had been followed. She could sense nothing, but decided to keep her senses on high alert at all times. The war had come to this place, and she knew that fighting was still ongoing. Stumbling upon a battle in progress would not be a good omen; her mission right now was of utmost priority.

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*The Drunk Side*; a notorious tavern in the midst of the bustling buildings of Dreshdae. A thick smoke permeated the air, and clouds rose from numerous tables as the occupants of the seating around them inhaled whatever exotic flavours their smokes contained. A sure bet was that at least one of the ingredients was jeopardising their health, and another was illegal. Dancers of various race and dressed in various amounts of attire who were gyrating and dancing on tables, as sentients waved credits at them to see if they would reveal more and more skin for them. The tavern had a reputation for its dancers, its illegal smuggling rings and used to occasionally host trainees from the Sith Academy. This was no longer the case, as the Academy had been taken during the fighting and ransacked by its occupiers. It was still a known haven for bounty hunters, and today was no exception. Anyone with street knowledge could simply walk into the tavern and pick out every bounty hunter in there; they all had their trademarks.

One man seemed to exude an air of indifference. He acted as though the other beings in the tavern were below him. Removing the cigarette from the corner of his mouth, he motioned to the barkeep as he entered, ordering a drink, and sat on a stool in front of the bar. The drink appeared in his hand as it was slid along the smooth surface and he grabbed it without actually seeming to move.

Raising his arm, he threw back the drink and grimaced as it hit the back of his throat. It burned slightly, but it was the best beverage of a bad stock. He slammed his glass back onto the bar and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coat, staining the brown finish an even darker colour as he surveyed the tavern’s occupants. The usual motley crew was gathered here; either drinking, in a drunken stupor, gambling, or waiting for their next bounty.

Connor smirked as he gazed at them. Only he knew what was going down in the areas surrounding the capital and what riches and knowledge could be gained by becoming a part of it. He inwardly knew that if he stepped in to try and grab the items he had heard about, people would come looking or at the least asking questions. But he knew the risks and he was willing to accept them for the potential profits he could gain from the items being in his possession. They would be fantastic bargaining chips, and would allow him to curry favour with the strongest forces on the planet, be they Jedi or Sith, If he offered them for the correct price; or they could mean his demise if other people had the same idea and either tried to reach them before him, or worse, take them from him after he ‘acquired’ them. He rose and smiled as he noticed a small number of blasters suddenly meeting their owners’ hands beneath several tables. They wouldn’t stand a chance against him if they decided he was a threat to them. He would kill them before they even had a chance to react. He may have only been a relic hunter first and foremost, but with all his experience came the knowledge he needed to take on most adversaries who would try to defeat him and take his treasures. Right now, he needed air and strode with purpose to the door, grasping the handle and yanking it open as he stepped into the street and blazing sunshine beyond.

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Taranae sweated under the afternoon sun as she entered the city after her trek across the sand. Her red hair stuck wetly to her forehead and she brushed it out of her eyes with the back of her hand as she looked around and tried to get her bearings. She had never been to Korriban before, and she felt a little lost in this alien place. She knew her destination was the tavern called The Drunk Side, and it was where her contacts had told her Connor Grey could be found. Pulling out her datapad, she thumbed through the intelligence she had on the relic hunter. Hmm, it seemed he was force sensitive, so that was something to watch out for. She had her work cut out for her with this target as she had no idea what level of training he may have received. The one item on her pad that stood out was one marking him as being able to change his appearance at will. *This may be a problem*, she thought, until she read on and realised he was never without his trademark white shirt, tie and long brown coat. The cigarette that constantly hung from his mouth would also be a dead giveaway. She placed her datapad back in her robes and set off at a brisk pace in the general direction of the main area of the city. If she couldn’t find the tavern on her own, she knew the merchants scattered around there would know its whereabouts.

As she strode purposefully onwards, she noticed some of the looks she had been receiving from passers-by had gradually become more worried and in some cases, scared. Obviously her presence in the city was unnerving some people and she hid her lightsaber the best she could by draping some of the cloth from her robes over it, concealing it from sight. Now all that could be seen were her blasters; not an uncommon sight in cities such as this. People around her began to take less notice as she walked along the streets on Dreshdae, and she relaxed a little. Reaching what seemed to be the main merchant area of the city, she paused briefly to take in her surroundings. A firefight had occurred here, but by the appearance of the buildings and the peace that seemed to encompass the area and its inhabitants right now, it was some time ago. Yes, the war had also visited Dreshdae, but it was recovering quickly which surprised even Taranae. Her gaze stopped as it passed across a sign, slightly leaning to the left and quite battered. The sign read ‘*The Drunk Side*’, and as she watched, a lone figure exited the establishment through the door and looked around.

Taranae reflexively ducked behind a stack of crates, which seemed to be waiting for pickup from the speeder in front of them. The owner of the speeder was just hooking a grav sled up to the rear of the speeder and Taranae sidled along the side of the vehicle as she kept an eye on the stranger. As she moved along, she grabbed her datapad from inside her robes and brought up the description of Connor again. Her watchful gaze flicked from the description to the man and back again several times and she smiled. This mission may not be as difficult as she first thought. Here was her target, outside in plain view and oblivious to her presence. Now she had to come up with a plan. Wading in with her blasters and lightsaber was foolhardy. There were too many witnesses around that could spoil the surprise too easily and her mark would escape. No, she had to plan this carefully and with precision. Putting away her datapad again, she glanced around at the buildings surrounding her. It was a start and would at least get her into a position to watch him closely. She noticed Connor stop suddenly, as he took a holopad from his coat. He ran his right hand through his dyed blond hair before flicking on the device. Taranae smiled. She loved the arrogant, vain ones. She relished making sure they were never vain again. Such a nice, rugged face; she would have to cure that to begin with. With a glance behind, she vaulted up the nearest building, calling on the Force and a well-placed overhang to aid her. Once above street level, she checked the position of her target once more and disappeared over the rooftops at speed.

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Connor smiled as his holopad made a sound he knew all too well. Reaching into his pocket with his left hand, he took out the device and used his other hand to smooth back his hair. He needed to look good when he talked business. As he flicked the switch to turn it on, the figure of a Rhodian leaped into view, the hologram flickering gently.

“I presume this means you have the goods?” Connor asked.

The figure nodded. “I was able to acquire the scrolls you requested, Mr Grey,” he returned, “but the price has risen.”

Connor had expected this. He knew that the scrolls he was after were indeed extremely valuable, and whoever retrieved them must have surely gone through hell to remove them from their place in the tombs. Luckily for him, this particular Rhodian had no idea what the item in his possession was worth.

“Xil’quar!” he whispered, but at the same time trying to give the impression of desperation. “They’re after me and know you’re involved! Right now you’re being tracked and they’ll soon be so close you’ll never shake them off!”

“What did you get me into, Connor?” he squeaked in return, his panic obviously flaring. “What the sithspit is this scroll you made me procure for you?”

“Enough that you’d lose your life if you got caught with it!” he replied. He smiled as he heard a frightened squeak and saw the Rhodian’s face drop in dismay. “Look, I’m willing to take it off your hands and get rid of it before they find either of us,” he stated, “but neither of us are gonna profit from this, Xil, I swear it. If they even get within sniffing distance of that scroll we’ll both be eating dirt.”

“What do we do?” squealed Xil. “ What do I need to do?”

“Ok, calm down,” replied Connor, “we need to keep calm and think about this.”

Once again he smiled. His little friend had fallen for it. He had known that Xil was only small-time and wouldn’t want to get mixed up in the politics of the war now playing out in the tombs and on the open ground of Korriban.

“Ok, here’s the deal. We’ll meet behind the bazaar. Make sure you’re not followed and I’ll take the scroll and destroy it out in the dunes.”

“When do we meet?” The Rhodian squeaked. “How soon can I be rid of this?”

“Meet me right now. I’ll make my way there immediately and we’ll both be rid of the scroll and be able to keep ourselves out of this war, ok?”

“Understood, Connor. I’ll be there shortly. But please, *hurry*!”

The connection closed and Connor placed the pad in his pocket. Yes, it felt good to be sneaky. So many times he had secured artefacts and the like by just making people think they were being followed to be marched off to some cell, only for them to find that he had instead struck another deal after conning the items from them and making up stories. Most of his stories were extremely convincing, and he prided himself on being able to con *anybody*. After a cursory glimpse around the area, Connor was sure he was not being followed and headed off to find Xil’quar before he realised he was being duped.

At the rear of the bazaar, the small Rhodian was waiting for Connor. As he approached, Xil’quar raced up to Connor and thrust a scroll towards him, sweating profusely. His puckered mouth twitched and he licked his lips nervously as he cast glances all around, watching for signs of movement or anything that may give a sign that whoever may follow him was just waiting for an opportune moment to strike.

“Get this thing away from me!” he squeaked. “If you knew it was this dangerous, why did you have me get it in the first place?”

“Xil, you know you’re the only person I trust to get these kinds of things.” he whispered back.

“No, Mr Grey,” he muttered, “I’m the only person who will listen to you! That ends now!” Xil’quar replied.

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Taranae watched with interest as the scene played out. Mr. Grey was *good.* She marvelled at how easily he could deceive others; either that, or this Rhodian was particularly stupid. *Good choice to never trust him again though,* she thought to herself. After the Rhodian’s last rant, he turned and began to walk away as Connor watched him go. Taranae decided it was time to show herself. This was the perfect place for an ambush, and it appeared that her target had no idea she was following him. She dropped down behind Connor and she saw him twitch. At that precise moment, Xil’quar turned to say something else to Connor and his face was a mask of pure shock. His mouth dropped open as he saw the Sith Warrior land behind Connor and the Rhodian turned a pale green. He turned and ran, trying to escape the scene, foolishly thinking he could outrun his fate. Gesturing, Taranae called on the Force, and the Rhodian stopped dead in his tracks as he hit an invisible wall of force. He teetered slightly on his heels then fell backwards as he passed out from the impact. By this time, Connor had sensed who he was up against and what was happening. He turned slowly to face Taranae and attached the scroll to a belt on his hip to the rear.

“Clever, I never even knew you were there.” He lied.

“Give me the scroll and you live. Or don’t, and you die here.” said Taranae.

Connor motioned with his hand as he leaned against one of the bazaar walls and Taranae, with a blank expression, unclipped her lightsaber and placed it on the ground.

“Good. Obviously you’re not that well trained.” he returned. “A simple trick, but quite effective. I see the safety catches are still on your blasters. No matter, I’d outgun you with a blaster any time. But just to be safe....”

Another gesture, and Taranae took both her blasters, placing them on the ground.

“So while you’re still dallying about, I’ll be off.” he commented with an air of confidence. He stood from his reclining position against the wall, bowed, and began to walk away.

Taranae waited, her eyes twitching and saying nothing until he was a number of feet away, then she called upon the Force. “Oh Mr. grey?” she asked.

“Yes sugar?” he retorted over his shoulder as he walked.

“Give me the scroll.”

Connor came to an abrupt halt as he heard the click of a loading blaster behind him. Now he was confused. The Sith’s voice came from the area he had left her standing in, but now there was a gun right behind him. As he pondered, he felt a jab in the back of his head and realised with horror that the weapon was actually aimed at his head at point blank range. He gulped as his hand strayed to his hip, searching for his holster so he could retrieve his own pistol. To his dismay, the weapon was missing.

“Yes Connor.Your own pistol is pressing against the back of your head right now.” Taranae commented coldly. “One false move and it will be rather difficult to think of your next action considering the fact that I shall remove any methods of thinking from your head. Now turn around slowly and face me.”

Connor did as he was told and faced her, mock fear playing across his face.

“It’s not loaded, sweetheart.” he smiled.

“Shall we test that fact?” she replied. There was a click as the rounds engaged with the barrel. Now Connor stiffened. He had tried to bluff, but the Sith was calling that bluff. He thought it a shame that someone so attractive could be so cold. “I’m not going to ask you for the scroll again,” she said,” I’m just going to take it.”

As Connor stared at the gun pointed at his forehead, a struggle ensued in the minds of both opponents as they both vied for control over the weapon that was held in front of Connor’s face. The battle was brief, as Taranae managed to twist the pistol in the air and Connor’s concentration broke. The gun quickly spun around and the butt struck him across the temple, knocking him unconscious. He was just able to launch an attack before sinking into oblivion as a blinding flash of light erupted in front of Taranae’s eyes and she shielded them with her arm. Her eyes streaming with the pain, she blinked several times to try and clear the dancing lights in front of her. She began to panic, as she wondered if the blow from the weapon had been strong enough to knock her foe out cold, or if he would be fast in his recovery. Calling on the Force, she decided the best tactic was to disappear, so she willed herself to be invisible to the naked eye. As her trick took effect, the lights began to fade and she was able to see a little more clearly, though her vision was still blurred. Connor still lay on his back in the spot she had hit him with his own pistol. She dropped her protection and walked forward, picking up her lightsaber and DL-44 blasters and made her way over to Connor’s prone body. She looked at the place where the butt of the weapon had hit him and grinned. Good looks; scarred. Score one for the females. That should wipe the vain smirk from his face. She rubbed her eyes again, clearing the last of the flashing pain from them and flipped him over, retrieving the scroll from the belt holster on his hip and unfurled it. She frowned as images and words swam in front of her eyes. Understanding the writings would be a nightmare, but she was sure that Esoteric had his own methods and ways to do that. She rolled it back up and placed it inside her own robes. Standing, she walked over to the Rhodian who was still unconscious on the floor close to the end of the building. Upon close inspection, she realised that he would come around eventually but had sustained a nasty bruise on his forehead where he had hit the barrier she had erected. Leaving them both alive would keep the people of Korriban on their toes, not knowing where or when the Sith would strike next as the stories of the attack circulated. It would also feed her notoriety. Fear; such a great motivator.

Glancing around again, she leapt to the roof once more and made her way to the city outskirts. Up here, she could be as conspicuous as she wished. The city stretched out in all directions, and Taranae once again marvelled at how much of the city still stood. Here and there were the husks of buildings, some still smoking after being reduced to shells. The city still persevered, even as intense battles were fought on the outskirts and even further away in the Valley of the Dark Lords and the tombs scattered around the area. She looked across the rooftops and smiled darkly. She was adept at using any route she could to reach targets, and was not averse to creating some of her own. Everyone seemed to think that threats would come to them on their level, not from above. Connor made that mistake and now she had in her possession the one thing she was sent here to recover. Esoteric would be pleased.

She set off, nimbly leaping from building to building, leaving the scene of her attack far behind. There was no chance Connor would be able to trace her, and once on board her ship again, she would be safe. As she reached the outer wall she glanced over her shoulder. She sensed that something was happening in the area around the bazaar and realised that someone had obviously found Connor and the Rhodian. A lot of questions would be asked of both people found at the scene, leaving lots of puzzles to be solved by the authorities. Taranae knew that neither of her victims would tell the truth and smiled as she realised that Connor would be kept off her back until she was too far away from Dreshdae to be found by the relic hunter a former Jedi, now gone rogue for the additional wealth it brought him. Leaping from the outer wall, she landed softly in the sand outside the city, where a sandstorm had whipped up during her time inside the walls. Bracing herself against the buffeting wind and harsh sand, she pulled a little of her robe up over her mouth and nose and set off towards her concealed ship. The going was slow at first, but after a few minutes, the storm cleared slightly and her trek became easier. She reached the interceptor to find it just as she had left it. Obviously her idea that it would not be found if she left it there was a good one, and she climbed the ramp into the body of the ship, closing the hatch behind her.

She headed directly for the central room and the holocommunicator. She flicked the switch on the glowing panel and waited. An image flickered to life above the console and spoke.

“Were you successful in your task, Warrior?” it demanded of her.

“Yes, My Lord. I have the writings in my possession. Mr. Grey was persuaded to hand them over.” Taranae replied. Esoteric smiled nastily.

“Did it take much ‘persuasion’?” he asked.

“Oh yes, My Lord,” she grinned back. “I believe that right now he is being interrogated by the authorities as to why he attacked a Rhodian and rendered him unconscious, and thereafter hitting himself over the head with his own gun to make it look as though the Rhodian was the culprit all along.” Esoteric’s smile faltered slightly.

“I would have preferred that Mr. Grey’s life essence was, shall we say, ‘all over Korriban’, but I presume you have your own reasons for him still being alive, Warrior?”

Taranae nodded, realising she was being berated for not following the exact mission briefing.

“It will sow the seeds of fear among the inhabitants of Korriban, My Lord. They will never know when or where the Sith will strike next.”

Esoteric nodded. “Yes. It will also make sure that your notoriety travels before you, will it not?

Taranae realised that her plans had been worked out by the One Sith leader and she gulped. “Yes, My Lord. If we are feared, we will have more leverage.”

Esoteric seemed to contemplate this. “Agreed. You may have your notoriety, Warrior. But I warn you; do *not go* against my wishes and carefully laid plans again. I wanted Connor out of the equation, yet he still lives. And while he does live, he can always be a thorn in my side. I will not tolerate another failure. Now, bring the writings to me immediately.”

The image disappeared and Taranae let out a sigh of relief. She hadn’t realised that letting Connor live would have so many implications. She walked back to the cockpit of the interceptor and set a course for orbit. The writings needed delivering as soon as possible to her Master and she intended to follow the order through to the letter. She just hoped that getting them to him from the planet’s surface and through the constant battling going on around the planet would not cause her more problems.

She powered up the engines and the ship slowly lifted from the ground, blowing up sand in its wake. The flaps twitched as she tested them, then she hit the throttle and the ship moved forward and up, picking up speed and becoming a small shape in the sky, decreasing in size until it disappeared completely.