

Private quarters
MJHC Retribution
Orian System

Nothing like a cold shower and my good old bed, Aexod thought, laying down in it for the first time in more than two weeks. He'd just returned from an endurance exercise on Prakith, and was hoping never to have to return to that hellhole of a planet. Infinite waves of mountains and caverns made it impossible for any non-Force user to travel by foot, which is exactly why it was so suitable for Sith training.

Aexod was mostly a loner. The rest of his fellow Sith were probably in the lounge, talking about their latest petty triumphs and accomplishments, but the Neophyte wasn't really in the mood for chit-chat. He reached out for his glass of snillik, knowing full well alcohol was prohibited on the Retribution, but smuggling a bit of his favorite drink wasn't a problem for a trickster like him. Who were they to tell him he couldn't relax after what they sent him off to do? He took a sip, feeling the thick, cold beverage slide down his throat. *This is the life*, he exhaled, and headed back to bed. Just as he was about to drift off to sleep, his comlink beeped.

"Oh come on," he murmured angrily, getting up to answer. While the relationship between him and Darkblade was far more laid back than most Master-Apprentice duos, he wouldn't dare go as far as not answer. "You rang, Master?"

"Get your ass to my quarters, we're heading back to Tarthos," Darkblade demanded. "Seems that's all the rest you're gonna get for now."

Aexod was already used to being on the move at all times, but he was never summoned so soon after endurance training. Something must have happened. If those crystal mongering scumbags were up to something again, they're going to pay dearly. Burgoo threw over his robes, attached his Akk-dog necklace, and headed toward Darkblade's quarters.

Local authority briefing room
Kar Alabrek, Planet Tarthos
Orian System

"...leading the investigation. Anything you find will be reported to him directly. Dismissed."

"It's probably nothing, but I have a strange feeling there's more to these disappearances than a simple local authority issue," Darkblade whispered, and Aexod knew what was coming next. "Investigate what happened here, these people can't clap their hands without messing something up, so I expect you to guide them."

“Awesome. Another waste of time on some dumb police issue.” A smile formed on both their faces. “At least I get to dance with Zyra on our breaks.”

“Just don’t get too caught up thinking about ways to lower those leather pants, and keep focused on the mission.”

“You know, I think I might have just thought of a way.” Both of them burst into laughter.

**Central Marketplace,
Kar Alabrek, Planet Tarthos
Orion System**

The smell of the thick, smoggy air surrounding the central marketplace was repulsive. Aexod has spent the last week trying to find a single clue to the disappearances of the local authorities, but to no avail. Someone was doing a great job covering his tracks.

“Sector one, all clear,” Sergeant Zyra reported over the comlink, “Over and out.”

Zyra had that something, that spark that most humans didn’t. She was a beautiful woman, but only on the outside. She was highly practiced at seduction. With her stunning looks, figure a perfect hour glass and high cheek bones it was all too simple. Nothing so pretty could possibly harm you, right? Mostly she just let them feel in charge, guiding the conversation with unnoticed prompts. It was only seconds before her new target was jumping through hoops to please her. Her face and some cleavage could get her anything and anyone. No-one knew how she’d take a rejection because it had never happened.

“So, Sergeant, how ‘bout you and I take a break and grab a drink?” Aexod said casually, trying to remain cool headed. The Force was a powerful ally, but was of no use in interaction with a woman. He was just as dumb as any other male in the galaxy when it came to seduction.

“I’m on duty, Sir,” Zyra responded, clearly uninterested. “Besides, I’m not sure how appropriate that would be.”

That woman will be the end of me, thought Aexod with a grim smile on his face. *Oh well, worth a try.*

“Sergeant Zyra, report of another missing officer just in!” a voice erupted from the comlink. “Last seen in the vicinity of the cantina in sector 4.”

“Roger that, on my way,” she said, attaching her comlink to her belt and walking directly away from Aexod. “Seems that drink will have to wait,” she remarked with a satisfied smirk on her face.

The Neophyte just stood there, dumbstruck for a moment, pondering how he could get brainwashed so easily by a mere human with no knowledge of the Force. But the thought was quickly cut off by a strange feeling, a slight disturbance in the Force. He couldn't pinpoint the location, as his grasp of the Force was not nearly strong enough yet. He looked around, trying to find anything suspicious. His eyes stopped on a certain Zeltron he was sure he had seen somewhere before. There was something odd about his presence, as if he was trying his best not to be noticed by anyone. Taking a closer look, he realized it was that Neophyte from Shar Dakhan that everyone was rumbling about, saying he's the new Bentre Stahoes of soaring through ranks, comparing the pink skinned Sith wannabe to himself. Aexod never did have tolerance for anyone he was being compared to, as he always considered himself the better candidate for any mission, position or a promotion than any others that shared his rank. Maru was his name, he now remembered.

Aexod started pacing toward Maru, making sure not to be seen. If the Zeltron was up to something, he wanted to know what that was. Maru made his way past the busy marketplace and took a left turn, into an empty alleyway with just a few entrances to abandoned buildings that were planned for renovation after being destroyed in the recent battles. By the time Burgoo reached the corner, Maru was gone. Aexod looked around for any sign of where he might have disappeared to. He noticed a handprint on the edge of the door leading to a building that once represented the headquarters of the entire mining operation of Tarthos. Confident that something fishy was going on, he opened the door and stepped inside.

***Abandoned building
Kar Alabrek, Planet Tarthos
Orian System***

The air in the building was heavy, full of dust and lacking oxygen. A set of footprints imprinted on the dust covered floor led from the entrance to a staircase, leading to some sort of basement. Aexod slowly walked down the stairs, making sure not to make any noise while doing so. A sense of uncertainty hit him, as if something was telling him he shouldn't be here. Reluctantly, he opened the door at the bottom of the stairs, and stepped into a vast room that reminded him of an ancient torture chamber. Chains and clamps were everywhere, hanging from the ceiling, attached to the walls. He saw a metal door across the room, and was sure he could hear voices begging for help.

“You're not supposed to be here, Burgoo,” Maru said, appearing out of nowhere. “Your snooping is going to cause you a lot of trouble.”

"I like what you've done with the place," Aexod replied in a mocking tone. "Too bad the charade is over now, release them."

"I don't think so," and with the speed of a bullet, Maru took out his blaster and pointed it at his rival. "Sorry to have to do this. No, actually I'm not, I'm going to enjoy it quite a bit."

Aexod realized what was about to happen, and leapt to the side right as Maru fired a shot in his direction. He unfastened the armory lightsaber off his belt and ignited it. He'd used it before to deflect blaster shots, but it was only against practice drones, never against a real adversary.

"Missed me!" Aexod taunted, a smirk appearing on his face. "Your master know you're here? I'm sure he'll be happy to find out."

"That fool couldn't see what was happening under his very nose this whole time," Maru replied, holstering his blaster. "See ya Burgoo, I have no time for these shenanigans."

In the blink of an eye, Maru raised his hands and the whole room went dark, apart from the dim glow of Aexod's ignited lightsaber, which was emitting an oddly low amount of light compared to the usual. He closed his eyes, trying to use the Force to track the location of his foe, but he sensed nothing. Shortly, the light came back up, and the room was once again empty. The coward had escaped.

Aexod powered off his lightsaber and headed for the metal door across the room. Opening it, he saw all of the missing personnel tied up to the walls, silenced by iron jaw bracers disallowing them to open their mouths. Using his lightsaber, he quickly cut the shackles binding their hands and feet, and opened the jaw bracers, allowing the men to breathe and speak normally once again.

"Thank you, Sir," one of the men exhaled, "We thought we were goners."

"Let's get out of here, you're gonna have to report what happened to Sergeant Zyra and myself once we're out to safety."

***Local authority interrogation room
Kar Alabrek, Planet Tarthos
Orian System***

Each of the captives had the same story.

“I was on patrol duty when I heard something resembling a blaster shot in one of the nearby alleyways. When I went to investigate, there was nobody there. No signs of blaster fire, no signs of struggle, nothing. When I turned around, I saw a figure with light red skin, and that’s the last thing I remember before waking up in that chamber. But that wasn’t even the worst of it. Every time he came back, he did something to us, something terrible. I felt as if the my life energy, my will, determination, everything was being sucked out of me. He had some sort of amulet around his neck which he used while performing some sick blood ritual in the room before our prison. James was the only one of us to get killed, but I’m sure he wasn’t the only one planned for death. If it weren’t for this guy right here, we’d all be dead. Thank you.”

As they left the room, Aexod walked away from Darkblade, who was yelling at Battlemaster Maelous Ascarend, Maru’s master, about treason and incompetence in the traitor’s training as well as not recognizing the threat of this happening before it did. One thing was certain; Maru was gone, disappeared completely from the city, and the matter was, at least for now, resolved. This was now a case much bigger than Aexod’s current training prepared him for.