**“All Who Wander Are Not Lost”**

By Braecen Kaeth (4520)

*A Dark Jedi Brotherhood Competition: Road to Damascus*

**Super Star Destroyer *Suffering***

**Unknown Location**

**38 ABY**

Lord Esoteric marched dutifully towards the command bridge of the ship. His heavy, measured footfalls rang out against the metallic surface underneath. Flanked on both sides by the Nephilim, he answered the summons of his Master, the Dark Lord of the Sith. As he approached the bridge, the hiss of hydraulic pumps were barely audible as the doors opened before him.

 The command center of the super structure was vast. Workstations outnumbered by the support personnel necessary to operate them. Unlike the quiet, demur atmosphere of the Galactic Empire, this bridge was full of boisterous communication. Officers less concerned with offending their Masters than achieving perfection in their duties. This was not the Empire. And the man standing before the viewport was neither Lord Vader nor Darth Sidious.

 The Lord Marshall stopped before the Grand Master of the Brotherhood. “My Lord,” he inquired. He would wait patiently until the man elected to respond. The every loyal lieutenant.

 Pravus collected his thoughts. He had seen a multitude of futures during his walks through the essence of the Force. No matter his machinations, one individual continued to be a convergence of separate paths: Rhiaen Ust’essi.

 The Twi’lek had been a minor player – a pawn – in his game to wrestle control of the Iron Throne from the grasp of Muz Ashen. It appeared the galaxy did not defer to his will… yet. He would either be forced to enlist her aide in his grand scheme or simply dispatch of her. While the Nephilim were an adequate tool, he would not divulge her true nature – a roadblock – to his Shadow Hand. He could show no signs of weakness. No cracks in his iron grasp could be detected.

 “Dispatch one of your skilled Agents, Lord Esoteric.” Darth Pravus had decided on compartmentalizing his course of action. “I want Braecen Kaeth found. He has been too far long removed from my reach.”

 Pravus read the face of his subordinate, “You do not approve?”

 “My Lord,” Esoteric began, “the man is a shell of his former self. Our last report on his whereabouts showed him to be a drunkard at best. Surely we have better resources available to execute your will.”

 “But none as expendable as the Krath.” The debate was at an end. An Agent of the Nephilim would be dispatched to secure the Krath. And should he be unwilling, he would simply be put down like a rabid, unkempt dog.

**The Brokeback Dewback**

**Coronet, Corellia**

**Corellian System**

**38 ABY**

The room smelled of stale vomit and cheap liquor. Despite the early morning sun peeking through the windows, several of the inhabitants remained inert in chairs or sprawled across the floor. Her target spotted, Agent Maldonado worked towards the rear of the room. A ball of black cloth and robes was lumped in a booth, spread over the table.

 Carefully, she drew her weapon and nudged the lump with the nozzle of the blaster. It stirred for only a moment before returning to its dormant state. “By the order of the Lord Marshall,” she barked in a harsh, demanding tone, “you are summoned to do the bidding of the Iron Throne.”

 Nothing. Maldonado blinked in rapid succession. Never had she uttered those words and received no response. She had seen it elicit a myriad of emotion – fear, pride, disappointment, and even acceptance. Never had she seen someone simply ignore her.

 To become an Agent required a lifetime of perfection in service to the Lord Marshall. The standards had been high, the tasks requiring both physical and mental demands on her body, and the threshold for failure had been small. As the first female Agent employed by the Imperial natured Brotherhood, it only heightened the demands further.

 Spinning on her heel, she walked towards the barkeep. He enjoyed the morning quiet as he wiped down the glasses from the previous night. He raised one eyebrow as the diminutive woman approached his counter. “Water,” she demanded. “Lots of it.” When he made no motion to fulfill her request, she slipped a handful of credits onto the counter and spurred him into action.

 She walked back across the room with a flagon of water in hand. Deposited the contents onto the robed figure and stood back to take in her work. A smile of both approval and satisfaction danced on her lips as the man flailed blindly before her. He attempted to stand in the booth, but his legs were blocked by the table. His knees slapped the bottom of the table before gravity forced them back down. The suddenness of the reversal drew the rest of his body down. His head slapped the table and then rolled to the side.

 Exasperated with the ‘snatch and grab’ personnel mission assignment, she reached for the unconscious body of the Elder. Her job had been to locate, acquire, and deploy the asset. *To what end he will come to,* she thought, *I do not want to know.* She withdrew him from the booth, wrapped one arm around her neck and began to frog hop him towards the spaceport.

 As she struggled through the door of the bar, she heard him groan in protest. “I hope you are worth the hassle.”

 His response was concise, “Doubtful.”

**Felucia**

**Outer Rim**

**38 ABY**

Braecen rubbed his temples with both hands. Withdraw from severe alcoholism would not ensue for several more hours. With one hand he reached into the folds of his robes and tapped his flask twice. Not only did it provide reassurance a drink would be at hand, but it acted as a security measure against his past. An escape from realities that were far too vast to bottle up.

 The shuttle rocked back and forth as it entered the planet’s atmosphere. He felt the heat of the entry clawing at the exterior of the ship. The powerful whine of the repulsor lifts came a moment before the heavy force of their exertion pushed down on his body. The Elder could feel the controls bucking in the hands of his pilot as they performed an elaborate dance. And the final, sudden, touchdown as the shocks absorbed the blow.

 A crack and a hiss signified the opening of the shuttle bay. Braecen shoved himself up and began a slow decent down the shuttle ramp. Oppressive humidity engulfed the Elder as he stepped onto the jungle world’s surface. The sun baking the pale skinned Dark Jedi as he rejoiced at having solid footing underneath.

 He withdrew a navigation device and input the coordinates provided by the Nephilim. He would have to walk towards his destination as the jungle was too wild and dense to use any other form of transportation. Braecen drew his flask and took one long draw on its contents. “Today is going to be a long day,” he stated aloud to the jungle foliage.

 Several hours later, he arrived at the last known coordinates of Rhiaen Ust’essi. The remnants of a simple camp were abandoned. As Braecen inspected the area, he found that most of the equipment had not been used in some time. He squatted down and reviewed the footsteps dotted around the camp. It confirmed that only one person had been here. The footprints were shallow and dainty; further proof that he was onto the right path.

 The Elder opened the wall between himself and the Dark Side of the Force. A flood of unease came over the Krath as the power welled up inside him. With it, he could move mountains, dam rivers, and level forests. *Or so it would have me believe,* he thought. He worked the molten, dark power to his will as only an Elder of the Dark Brotherhood could. As he expanded his sphere of responsibility, he warped it from an encompassing orb into a far projecting cone. Carefully, he swept outward in every direction until he felt the presence of another Force user.

 Fueled by the Force, the Dark Jedi accelerated to maximum velocity. With the flip of a switch, the Dark Side of the Force took him from a mere mortal to something far scarier. He was able to sense rather than see where to place his feet. His body bending to the will of the Force as he launched himself over fallen debris or through the brush.

 With frightening haste, he closed the distance between himself and Rhiaen. Her fear and uncertainty bleeding through the Force. She had become familiar with her surroundings, translating into the ability to continually evade his grasp with rapid turns through the terrain. Tiring from the exertion, Braecen funneled his frustration and adrenaline into a single bolt of lightning. The arc tore through the foliage and landed upon its intended victim.

 As the Krath closed the distance, he noted the charred vegetation in the surrounding area. *I forgot just how destructive that power is.* Rhiaen rolled over and drew her lightsaber. Braecen shook his head in disapproval. “Let’s not and say we did,” he assured her. A momentary pause stretched into a proper stalemate.

 “Have you come to finish the work of Darth Necren?” she spat. Her eyes were filled with vehemence and tears. Her anguish palpable in the Force now that her fight or flight mentality had dissipated. Braecen could feel how bare, how exposed her mental psyche had become in the aftermath of her ordeal.

 “Great loss creates a void,” he comforted her. Her guard was still high, but Braecen needed her trust. This woman, however insignificant she felt, had drawn the attention of the Dark Brotherhood. Somewhere in her mind rested a secret he could use to either insulate himself or escape the Grand Master’s grasp. Simply killing her would only lead him back into the Brotherhood. He could not face the retribution of the Iron Throne.

 “I can see you are troubled,” he started, “I do not need the Force for that.” She blinked several times in rapid succession. She was unclear on his motivation. Unwilling to trust a complete stranger. He would be forced to forge common ground. And that would take time.

 Time he did not have or was willing to commit. Tentatively, he began to probe the exterior of her mind seeking a crack. He began to share his own story about loss and grieving. Her thoughts dwelled on the loss of her twin sister. Several times her defenses lapsed, but they would quickly close. He had to wait for the right moment when she would be most vulnerable.

 Timing was critical. “Tell me about your sister,” he cooed. Uncontrollably, she gushed the details. Her self-imposed isolation had bottled up her grief. Despite the fact a sworn enemy sat before her, it demanded to be released. Through her sobs, Braecen learned that she had come to Felucia on a mission, but had abandoned it for the solace retreat it could provide. A place for her to lick her wounds and collect her thoughts in a new reality; one without her sister.

 Their conversation turned towards the day her sister had died. An event in a sequence of perplexing puzzle pieces that the Krath Elder could not fit together. He had missed much in ways of Brotherhood politics, so the landscape was unclear to him. He continued to harvest and mine the details of her tail until they arrived at the vital moment – the moment her sister had died.

 Grief, raw and unabated, ripped apart her mental defenses. Instantly, Braecen used the Dark Side to drive into her mind. A mental spike he drove home without reluctance or hesitation. He enhanced her fear of being alone – insignificant in a large, unforgiving galaxy. Her thoughts lay bare before him. Her mind frozen in the terror he had used to fuel her own fears.

 Without regard for her mental stability, he raped and pillaged her thoughts. He took everything, left nothing. She attempted to close him out, but he batted aside her feeble defenses and continued to harvest at his leisure. She ignited her lightsaber and took a clumsy swing at the Dark Adept.

 His twin sabers drawn, the white pillars of flame leapt from the emitters with the familiar *snap-hiss!* He crossed his blades in defense, then slid to her left flank on the offensive. Her mind was now wild and her forthcoming assault had no discernable pattern, but came with unexpected ferocity. With precision, he worked through her onslaught. His feet shuffling and striding with precognition of her attacks; moving in advance of the attacks to vacate the space where harmful intent was focused.

 His blades wove in defensive velocities until exhaustion began to grip the young Twi’lek before him. She faltered once, then twice in rapid succession. Weary of his prey, Braecen did not pounce on the potential opening. He continued to work her through the paces, his commitment to a strong defense prevalent in his technique.

 They continued to exchange blows. Offensive and defensive velocities blending together with the continued *crack* of their blades intersecting. Finally, the Twi’lek over extended a lunge too far to recover. Her blade ate into the side of the Elder, but his twin blades were committed. They ripped her apart from shoulder to hip.

 Rhiaen was no longer a threat to the Iron Throne. Braecen was no longer a forgotten pawn. Her death was not unlike her sisters – another piece of the Grand Master’s puzzle.

**Super Star Destroyer *Suffering***

**Unknown Location**

**38 ABY**

“Agent Maldonado confirms the success of the mission, My Lord.” Esoteric stated without giving away anything. “Curious, though, her debrief mentioned not only collecting the asset, Braecen Kaeth, but the assassination of a Twi’lek Jedi.”

 Darth Pravus continued to stare out the viewport. His thoughts no longer distracted by the annoyance of Rhiaen as a shatterpoint. Her disposal had removed an obstacle only to be replaced with another. Rarely had the Grand Master seen a convergence in the timeline shift onto another individual – a substitution in the greater scheme of things. *Braecen is far too curious for his own good,* Pravus reflected.

 “Bring Braecen Kaeth to me, Lord Esoteric. He must either submit to the will of the Iron Throne or-“

 Esoteric interrupted, “die.” The Grand Master nodded in confirmation. He would allow the Lord Marshall to bring his will to fruition.