

Savant Eiko (#11286)

Eaten Alive

The shriek echoed along the duracrete hallways, the catacombs of the Anchorage. It wasn't the first unsettling noise to rain down on the expedition, but it was certainly the loudest so far. Subjugates in dusty, battered armor worked their way methodically around their robed leaders. They swept the perimeter of the room and posted up on the opposite doorway.

"Resh and Trill, on me."

Eiko listened to the footfalls of the soldiers forming around a newly-minted equite, still flush with dreams of glory. It should have concerned him more that his peer was more a face than a name, but bravado rarely won battles and often won blaster holes. It left him the company of Usk squad, and the right-most passage deeper into the Anchorage's belly.

"Rendezvous here in an hour," Eiko grumbled into the open comm channel. There was no rest for the weary, not in Plagueis. Not when wars cascaded into conflicts, which cascaded into backbiting and suicidal spirals.

The subjugates behind him knew too little to make conversation, and Eiko convinced himself that he was better off without it anyways. His years in exile hadn't been silent, but they had been significantly more peaceful than these weeks back in the cluttered debris of the Anchorage's lower levels. *But, then again*, he reminded himself dourly, *peace is a lie, isn't it?*

The hallway had been picked clean of most relevant scrap, leaving the carcasses of last month's battle against Drax laying over a millennia of unmanaged filth and dead bodies since reduced to their component elements. The doors that still would open were bashed in, broken, or askew from any number of causes – looters, explosions, carelessness. The further away the expeditionary force got from the recent battlefields a floor or two above them, the older the remains became and the more damage was hidden under a layer of dust.

Then there was the shriek again, significantly louder and directly ahead of Eiko and his team. It echoed inside of a large room somewhere ahead, then jumped down every adjacent hall and clamored to get out of the maze. The subjugates barely shifted. Fear wasn't a part of their minds any more. Eiko gently reached out to lay his hand on the Force, to feel its rhythms along the wisps of energy that ran across the Anchorage.

When he finally reached it, the vibrations of the shriek still hummed along in the air. The tendrils of energy that led further down into the hallway, into the shrieking room, were darker and thicker than he could have expected. They tangled in his fingers, eating into his thoughts as each reverberation tried to pry deeper into his patient breathing.

And then, with one step further towards the sound, there was nothing. The darkness of the Anchorage was replaced with clouds of ink, choking smoke, and silence. Eiko instinctively pulled for the saber at his belt, and ignited its blade to offer some kind of light. His mask flipped from vision mode to vision mode fruitlessly, searching for anything other than the ice-blue bar of light humming in front of him. Nothing. No heat, no light, nothing.

"It has been a long time, hasn't it?" A dry voice called out gently from the dark.

Eiko didn't answer. He stepped forward tentatively.

"You never thought you'd hear another word from me. You thought I had succumbed to my wounds—wounds you had given me, to prove to these beasts that you were worthy of being a man." The face that matched the voice stepped forward into the lightsaber's glow. "You insisted on proving that to yourself over and over. That you could choose for yourself. That you were free and powerful."

"Tonor," Eiko replied. "Aran Tonor."

"Good," the man smiled. "You remember me."

Eiko lunged with his saber slashing at Tonor's throat. With Tonor stepping back to raise a weapon of his own, the cut caught Tonor across the mouth, severing the skin at his cheeks.

"Ah," Tonor smirked, the loose skin falling away to expose their burned edges. "They have taught you quite well, but you refused to take the red of your forbearers. Weak."

"You are nothing like my instructor."

"Truly? Well, then perhaps it's time for another appearance. You seemed to care for this one even more..."

The haze around the two figures contracted and solidified until Eiko could see nothing of Tonor's figure. A swirling blaze of light cut the curtain away from where Tonor had stood, stopped by Eiko's own saber as the two settled into another lock—this time between Eiko and a thing that looked almost like Jaina, but perhaps better carved from shadow than from Eiko's memory.

"You're a liar," Eiko growled. "And I will cut you to bits."

"Oh," Jaina smiled back. "I would truly like that—I would. But there are things that I need from you, *lover*. You abandoned me and never even had the grace to finish off that pain the way that you did for Aran. You left me to die alone like you never even cared."

Eiko shoved his opponent's saber out of the way and ducked underneath it, dragging his blade across Jaina's gut as he strode past her and turned to reestablish his guard. "I cared. I cared too much."

"Then perhaps I can ease your pain instead."

The glare that Jaina wore was inhuman, a facsimile of hatred blended with rapturous glee. Her stomach had been cut to the bone, but where there would have been blood and charred fabric, there were rivers of miasma and ink slipping out from the wound.

Jaina stood straight up and lowered her saber. "Well done. You have earned a reward, I think." The illusion stretched back over the wound so that the ink was stopped, though it still stained the fabric. "You will be my messenger, child of exile. You will return to your masters and tell them to remember the name of this station—of my foothold in the galaxy. If you wish to live, and not join your old masters and lost lovers, then you should go—now."

The haze disintegrated. Eiko's grip on the Force faltered as it crumbled away beneath him, as quickly gone as it had arrived. The subjugates continued forward without hesitation, continuing to do what they'd been ordered without any sense of the entities in their midst.

And deeper below, further away in the catacombs of the Anchorage, a fierce, feminine laughter surfaced and echoed and echoed and echoed.