

Never Easy As It Looks In the HoloVIDs

He couldn't lie about it. These were the kinds of missions he absolutely loved. Getting the opportunity. As he crouched beside the wall, the Corellian smiled to himself. When Mactire had said that nobody in their right mind would barge into the Jedi Temple, Bentre knew he couldn't back down. While Chemel may not have necessarily viewed it as an overt challenge, the Sith took it as a challenge on his ability. The smugglers egging him on hadn't help matters either.

As he stood outside of the former Imperial Palace, Bentre found himself having to admit he was more than a little bit disappointed. While it was far from desolate, Coruscant had seen far better days. He had taken the time to do his homework. After the New Republic relocated from the historic capital of its predecessor, the ancient Temple had fallen into a state of disrepair for several years. He smoothed off the loose brown robes he wore over his normal clothes.

For a long time the lower levels of the structure were now being studied by historians. In recent months, the top levels serving as a museum of recovered relics of the pre-Clone Wars Republic. Fears over the loss of these newfound artifacts meant the security detail would assuredly be on alert for any shifty figures. As much as it annoyed him, Bentre would have to be on his best behavior to pull this off.

Drawing himself up in a standing position, the Corellian brushed himself off before taking a moment to stretch. Placing a hand to his face he took a moment to focus. His features slowly altered as he concentrated: his jawline softening and his facial scars fading. It wouldn't do any good against the security cameras, but if all went as planned, the misdirection might give Stahoes the time he needed to slip in and out. As he approached the door, Bentre smiled widely. It was time to put his infiltration skills to work.

As he passed through the door, the Sadowan took note of a few things. Small crowds of people were assembled around a number of display cases. A few feet away, a tall man was telling a trio of Twi'leks something about a simple lightsaber encased in a display. Against one of the walls, a uniformed Falleen was standing, arms crossed over his chest and a weapon clearly holstered at his side. His gaze passed over the room, briefly locking gazes with the observant Sith, before continuing to scan over the rest of the room. As Stahoes looked away, he noticed another uniformed humanoid, a limber female was stationed along another wall.

Walking toward one of the displays, Bentre saw a holographic projector had been mounted in the case. He pretended to examine it closely, taking a moment to consider the situation. Two security guards were not a lot to deal with. It was certainly far less than he had expected. Perhaps these smugglers were just a little too jumpy about getting in and out.

Then again, what would those spice-heads know about this kind of work?

He waited for about two minutes, and then began to walk across the room, looking at each display in turn. Pulling his worn, familiar datapad, Bentre began to thumb through some historical files he had gathered together to prepare for this day. As he flipped through the files, he found the historical floorplan of the building. According to the file, there was a maintenance door leading to one of the underlevels just off this main room. Looking up, he saw the passage just past the second security guard.

Drawing himself up, Stahoes began to walk slowly toward the guard. As he approached, the guard looked him over and unconsciously placed a loose hand on her sidearm. Suppressing a scowl of derision, the Shadow raised a hand, and smiled widely at her. "Hi, my name is Roybal Stargargler. Do you think you might be able to assist me?"

The woman proceeded to blink for a moment, before her fingers left her weapon. "What is it you need help with?"

"Well, you see I come from the Jedi Developmental Enclave on Naboo. We have been gathering some data and artifacts on the pre-Imperial era, specifically as it relates to the Jedi Order. As such, I was hoping that the historians and archeologists investigating the lower levels would be willing to share any pertinent data they have gathered concerning this period so that our Historical department could give our students a more thorough education."

The woman pursed her lips together as she considered his words. "I have never heard of any enclave on Naboo."

"We are very new, very fresh, but quickly growing, I assure you. I have already talked with your boss, Barcell. He told me that your team would be glad to give me entrance in the interest of furthering collective knowledge."

The woman stopped for a moment, her face scrunched up in confusion. "Don't you mean Barnas?"

She knows you are a fake, the irritable hissing of the Dark Side whispered in Stahoes' ear.

"Y-yeah. Yes, that's what I said, right? Barnaby." The Shadow shifted his weight uncomfortably as he flashed another empty smile. Even as he felt the weight of the dark presence in the back of his mind, the Sith struggled to keep his composure.

The woman returned the expression with an uneasy wince. "Just give me a moment to confirm your appointment with Barnas then, sir." The last word was spoken with a note of disdain. "I am sure you understand."

Just strike her down. It will be easy, and so very fun, the voice chortled.

“No,” Bentre raised a hand, flashing his same cold smile, “that is quite alright. You **don’t need** to seek confirmation. I look like a **trustworthy** gentleman. You can take me at my word.” He tried to apply pressure behind the words, and exert his will through the Force.

At first, he was not sure if he had succeeded. The woman looked from him, to the commlink she had lifted from her pocket, and back again. Several moments passed before she shook her head. “You know what, you seem like a pretty upstanding guy. I don’t think I need to confirm. What can I say? You have a trustworthy face.” The guard motioned her head toward the hallway. “ You go down this way, take the first left and go down a long staircase. That should take you straight to main chamber where the archeologists have been working. The Head of Historical Research down there should be able to tell you everything you need to know.” Looking back to the rest of the room, the guard nodded.

With a low chuckle, Bentre slowly walked down the hallway. As turned off to the left, and began to descend the stairway with a renewed sense of purpose. He smiled to himself as he imagined holding the artifacts in his grasp. With such treasures in hand, he might be able to plumb the depths of knowledge they provided a bit before he handed them over to the smugglers to sell. The draw of power was stronger than he would admit to the two-credit cargo jockey who had first proposed this little heist.

Just imagine. Just take a moment to imagine, Benny, the thoughts curled in the back of his head. You have already tasted such power after interacting with the Shards. As your power was augmented by the Shard, so your own knowledge could be augmented. Unlike Dentavii, it would not be a passing moment. Tales speak of even ancient Sith holocrons being held in “protection” by the Order in their libraries. Why would the Emperor have destroyed such treasures? With the manner of artifacts he may have kept, you may even one day be able to challenge and destroy the likes of Kiriyu and Cethgus. Can you really ignore the siren’s call of such opportunities? The smugglers wouldn’t miss what they never saw.

The stairs opened up into a large chamber as he reached their end, and Bentre was immediately met with the smell of dust and stale air. Several items were arranged throughout the chamber, with clusters of plain-clothed researchers. A few were even clothed in robes, akin to the Jedi of old. The Shadow smoothed his own robes off a bit, feeling slightly self-conscious.

One of the historians, a Rodian, looked up as the Sith approached, a curious look in her eyes. She tilted her head sideways, opening her mouth slightly before she spoke. “There are only authorized researchers permitted beyond this point, sir. I am going to have to ask you to leave.”

“You misunderstand, mam. My name is Gora Mas, and I am with the Corellian Historical Society. See my head of Jedi Studies had heard about your work in the recovery of former pre-Empire artifacts. We hoped you might be willing to share some of your research with us.”

“Ah,” the Rodian nodded slowly before turning toward the artifact at her feet. “Well, here we have a holocron that was pulled from one of the ruined levels below. We also pulled out a number of other similar artifacts, but some of them seem too damaged to activate.”

“No worries,” Bentre waved a hand in the air. “I have lots of experience with the recovery and restoration of artifacts. Some really exciting and dangerous stuff, let me tell you.” He tried to stress the words exciting and dangerous.

“Oh, is that where you got the odd scars?” the Rodian motioned with a finger at his eyes.

“What?” Stahoes traced a finger along the scars below his eyes, and his mind froze. He had gotten distracted with the thoughts of what he could find, and let his concentration falter too much. The illusion over his face must have dropped.

Take what you need. Don't worry for these fools. Seize the opportunity, the voice growled.

“You look like you ended up on the wrong side of a manka cat or something,” the woman seemed uncomfortable.

“Yeah, I will have to tell you the story sometime.” Bentre looked away, feeling very exposed now. “So I was told that Barnas would be able to tell me more about your findings. My boss is very intrigued by your work.”

“Well, Barnas has been leading the project for only a few weeks. It wasn't until we started to pull out some of the more sensitive pieces that he really got involved. Before that he worked with an enclave of Jedi from Naboo gathering historical data relevant to helping to try and rebuild their little group. If you will just follow me I can show you what we uncovered.”

As he followed, Bentre tried to maintain his professional bearing. He felt like the cold talons of circumstance slowly began to close upon him. Nothing about the situation felt quite right. It was like every fiber in his being was screaming that he needed to remove himself from the situation.

Still, it was almost as though something even greater was pulling him into the jaws of the beast. He could sense some great power pulsing below the surface, calling to him through the Force. It was like a warm current flowing through a cold stream. Whatever it was, it was almost as though it refused to be left alone amongst these scraps. Stahoes could not bring it to himself to walk away. Power seemed to pulsate more powerfully as he continued to follow.

Besides, to get caught in a trap, I would have to let myself get caught by these fools. His heart dropped to his knees for a moment when a tall Twi'lek turned from a crimson holocron. Dressed in traditional robes, with the lightsaber brazenly displayed on his side, there was no question. He didn't even have to probe in the Force, it was obvious he was face to face with a Jedi. The dark presence in his mind let out a loud hiss.

“Can I help you?” The Twi’lek cast a suspicious glance at the Sith.

“This is Gora Mas,” the Rodian historian spoke for Bentre, “and he is here to see what we pulled from the lower levels.”

“Gora Mas?” The Jedi tilted his head at the name. “I don’t think I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. It doesn’t matter though. Go ahead and show him the artifact Jeela,” he motioned to the Rodian. “I am going to go and grab a bite to eat if you don’t mind.” Without another word, the Jedi turned and walked away.

Weird bugger, Bentre thought. Just be glad I am on an errand, Jedi. You wouldn’t just be walking away so easily otherwise.

“This appears to be an artifact from the Jedi Archives. We had to use a controlled explosion to get in. This isn’t like any of the pieces we pulled out before. We believe this might have been a restricted item.” Her volume dropped, the tone becoming almost a whisper. “We believe this might have been a Dark Jedi artifact that was locked away by the Jedi elders.”

You see, the item called to you and you have been rewarded!

“Quite interesting,” Bentre’s voice became hushed as he examined the glowing red pyramid. “Do you mind if I take a closer look?”

“Go ahead,” the Rodian motioned. “I doubt you will find much interesting about this piece.”

“Wait,” a shout echoed through the chamber, causing the Sith to stiffen up. All the heads in the room turned to see the Twi’lek Jedi seething as he trudged back to the group, “can you tell me, *Gora* what the Corellians want with our dig?” His tone was demanding, barely contained rage in his eyes. “Or perhaps I should ask you what the *Jedi Development Enclave of Naboo* want, Mister Stargargler?”

Bentre froze, realizing he had been exposed. *Kill him, take what you want, and make this place their grave!* The darkness weighed more heavily upon his consciousness, threatening to overcome him. *He is a Jedi, and you are a Sith! You are powerful, and he is nothing! You are a predator. You are a monster. He is nothing but your prey!*

As the Jedi ignited his weapon, Bentre felt his throat tighten. Through gritted teeth, the Jedi spoke slowly, “I will give you an opportunity, interloper. Turn around, go out the doorway and don’t return. Do this and you will leave unharmed. I give you my word. If not, I will remove you myself.” To punctuate his threat, the Jedi lifted his lightsaber to bear, activating its emerald beam.

“No,” Bentre let out a growl, calling his own lightsaber to hand from his belt. The sapphire-colored blade came to life with a snap-hiss, illuminating his twisted features. For a moment, he could feel the rage pulsing through his body as he prepared to cut down the Twi’lek. The sound of three lightsabers igniting cut through the fog, dragging the Corellian back to reality. Turning his head slightly, Bentre saw the Rodian and two others had lifted their own weapons, holding them warningly. There was no time to waste.

Drawing a breath, Bentre threw out a hand, drawing the glowing, red holocron to himself. Without a second thought, he drew it close and ran toward the exit. As he passed the first artifact, he reached down to swoop it up and cradle it with the other. The two seemed to glow more brilliantly than before, but he wasn’t paying attention to that.

The world seemed to become a blur as Bentre ran. He heard the sounds of yelling. He didn’t see the looks of confusion as he burst into the display room at the top of the stairs. He didn’t see the determined glares of the security personnel as they raised their weapons, and fired. The Force seemed to guide his steps, and drive him harder than he thought possible. The discharge of their weapons was an afterthought in the confusion.

As he made his way down the stairs outside of the former Imperial palace, away from the former Jedi Temple, the world seemed to reassert itself. His breath came in heaves, and his body protested as he sprinted down the stairs. The only thing in his mind was the cargofreighter that descended into the plaza at the bottom of the stairs.

It was his ride. The smuggler had been good to his word, but the Sith did not expect he would be this good to his word. With a cry, Bentre tried to summon a bit more energy, drawing from the Force to will his body to move faster. With a cry, he jumped up and the world seemed to move in slow motion.

For a moment, he didn’t dare to think he had made it. *You really thought you were something*, the dark presence muttered in his ear. *You had the opportunity to prove yourself and you turned tail*. The voice trailed off in a growl.

All at once, the world seemed to reassert itself, as Stahoes hit the metal plating of the shuttles landing pad. A man bound up in something akin to leather armor nodded at the Shadow, grabbing his arm and pulling him up into the back of the freighter. As Jedi and guards approached the freighter, the man waved. As though on cue, the freighter began to lift into the ground. Bentre could hear something like the sound of blasters being fired, but it sounded as though it came from far away.

At least I managed to escape with my hide, the Corellian thought as he struggled to lift himself from the floor plating, *or else I might have seen one of those Corellian Hells*. He knew the job wasn’t even over yet. Hopefully he would have a little time to catch his breath before they arrived at their next destination. Technically he hadn’t been caught, even if he had been

detected. He would be less sloppy next time. He would be more careful when he took his choice holocron from the smugglers.

Bentre Stahoes (Pin #14185)