

## Jedi Citadel

### Seher

### New Tython

### 34 ABY

The silver blade passed over silver hair with a searing hum, cutting only the air. They had been at this for an hour, but Alethia was getting the hang of it. Her vibrosword wove deftly around her opponent's blade, seeking his wrist and forcing him to withdraw his offensive without any contact between the two weapons. Archenksova was no stranger to vibroblade combat, but all of her training and experience leaned towards intercepting and blocking her opponent's weapon. The flaw in this tactic was abundantly obvious after the first time she had tried it against Mar Sûl, who had only just kept himself from taking her arm off as his lightsaber easily cleaved through her first blade. Alethia was learning to compensate, but old habits died hard. The dozen mangled vibroswords scattered across the training room could attest to that.

"Don't just stand there," the Jedi chided, his tone more contemptuous than he probably intended. Alethia didn't take it personally anymore. "Every second you give a Sith is a second he will use against you."

*Well, if you insist,* Alethia thought, probing his defenses with several quick, choppy strikes, pulling her blade back each time before Mar could chip away at it with his lightsaber.

"That's *something*, I suppose, but be more aggres-" Mar began before abruptly pulling his blade up at the Force's bidding before his conscious mind was even aware of it. Alethia's tentative feints had given way to a brutal overhead strike, and Mar's blade reached out to intercept it - and before Mar could stop himself, the vibrosword had made contact with his saber. With a flash and a hiss, the metal churned its way through the silver plasma and the upper third of Alethia's blade was free, careening along its trajectory without concern for the broken shaft still in her hands.

Mar scrambled backwards, ducking his head to side and instinctively pulling his left arm up to shield his face. The shrapnel took a few centimeters off his beard before slamming down into the bronze cuirass above his collarbone. It left a nasty divot in the bronze, but the

Seherob armor kept his skin intact.

The armor wasn't enough to protect him for long. Alethia had seen her opportunity the moment her Jedi opponent had taking a hand off his weapon. The rest of her ruined vibrosword slipped from her grasp as she lashed out and seized the end of Mar's lightsaber handle. Tugging the bottom of the hilt back towards her and using Mar's gripping hand as a fulcrum, she lurched the silver blade back towards the former Quaestor's face. A deft flick of the Jedi's thumb deactivated the saber and saved his face from the blade, but it did nothing to shield him from the left hook his sparring partner threw at him simultaneously. It wasn't a particularly powerful blow, but it was enough to keep him stumbling back, off balance and out of touch with the offensive rhythm he relied on.

The Loyalist had all the momentum now, and with it she unleashed an hour's worth of frustration and humiliation. A series of punches fell on Mar Sûl like a heavy rain, the attacks' speed and ferocity deterring any counterattack more than any risk of harm. Without any more potentially deadly weapons flying towards his head, the Jedi brought his breathing back under control and sought out his center. Drawing on the Force, he willed his muscles into quicker action. Where he had been struggling to intercept the woman's strikes, Mar found his arms anticipating them. They did not anticipate the swift kick to the side of his knee that forced him off balance yet again. They certainly did not expect the 55 kilos of irate Aedile that slammed shoulder-first into his chest and brought him to the ground.

Before he could recover, the former ISB agent was straddling him, one hand pinning his saber-arm to the mat while the other held a small vibroblade - *where did that come from?* - to his throat.

"Yield," she hissed, her eyes fixed on his, deep blue as the sea and every bit as impenetrable. If she felt any satisfaction at her victory, she didn't yet show it.

"Impressive," the Councilor murmured behind what passed for the dour Jedi's smile. "Most impressive, Major," he continued, flicking his free wrist and wrench the vibroblade out of Archenksova's grasp and across the room. A thin bloody line arose from where the blade slipped across his flesh, but the wound wasn't deep enough to be of any consequence.

With little more than a grunt and a twist, the Jedi overpowered the Loyalist perched on top of

him, flipping her over onto her back and pinning *both* of her hands to the floor. Alethia squirmed and struggled, biting her lip slightly with the effort, but Mar's powerful hands held her delicate wrists in place.

She gave up with a small sigh. "Well, Councilor," she almost purred, "it appears that you have me *exactly* where you want me." She gave a quick squeeze of her thighs for emphasis. In the heat of battle, Mar had forgotten that they were still wrapped around his waist.

"That's... not - I mean," the warlord of Seher stammered. It had to be a trick of the light, or perhaps the exertion of the fight, but if Alethia didn't know better, she would have sworn that Mar Sûl was *blushing*.

She laughed softly to herself and slid her legs back to the floor as Mar rolled off of her. *So he's human after all.*

"Major," he began, clearing his throat. "I certainly hope this exercise has been instructive."

"Indeed it has, Master Jedi," Archenksova answered with a slight curtsy. Two shrill calls rang out in answer, as an all-hands red alert went out over their comlinks. V'yr Vorsa had returned to New Tython.

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Mar was in the Sherob council chamber, just as she'd predicted. It wasn't a pretty sight. The Jedi was at the speaker's rostrum and clearly growing more frustrated by the second the handful of bored Harakoans shrugged off his pleas to prepare for invasion.

Perhaps it was the Odanites' own fault. Mar had largely turned his back on the Seherob after the massacre of the Force Ascendant, and Seridan had retreated to his studies of the Force. Their replacements as Jedi representatives to the Seherob, including Alethia as the latest of several, had treated the locals with benign neglect at best. Archenksova hadn't realized the degree to which the House had squandered their goodwill, but in the end it was the Harakoans who would be paying the price. *Guilt*, as Alethia's father had told her once during her childhood, *is a useless emotion*. No degree of warning would have been enough.

"Councilor!" All eyes turned to the normally soft-spoken woman. "Pravus' landing ships have already made landfall at the Praxeum. We're down to mere minutes."

"Arca Praxeum does not concern me," Mar replied, his voice barely audible across the chamber. He wouldn't look her in the eyes as he continued, "My place is here."

"By the authority of High Councilor A'lora Kituri, I am *ordering* you to come with me." *You stubborn ass*, she added silently.

The Harakoans started in surprise when Mar abruptly slammed his hands down on the lectern, which seemed barely able to contain the force. Alethia, however, stood stone still as she met his gaze.

"I will **not** abandon my people, Major. Not to these heretics. Not again." His eyes met hers for a moment before he looked away.

"*They*," Archenksova began through gritted teeth, sweeping her hand out towards the Seherob, "are not 'your people.' They don't want your help, and you'd just be a target on their backs anyway." She sighed, hating that it was coming to this. "We need you. *I* need you."

Mar Sûl's face was impassive and inscrutable. The silence was tense and unbearable, at least until Mako Henymory's voice came unbidden from Alethia's comlink. "Woman, what are you *doing*? Get to the transport!"

"Yes, sir," she answered coolly, turning to leave.

"Solari." The word was but a whisper from the lectern.

"What?" Alethia looked over her shoulder, her annoyance and frustration evaporating away as she saw the horror on the Jedi's pale face.

"*Disgusting thing, creature, abomination*," Mar felt more than heard the words ringing in his mind like sharpened durasteel against glass. And then, as if in counterpoint, there was a familiar warmth. *There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

"*Today you will die, your temples will burn, and the Dark Brotherhood will rise emergent once again.*"

*There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death -*

Mar Sûl, the crusader, veteran of a dozen wars, shook like a leaf being pried loose by the wind. He barely felt it when his body struck the floor, barely heard it when Alethia called out his name. His legs moved as she forced herself under his arm and lead him towards the exit, but Mar did not will them so.

The shuttle nearly took off a corner of the citadel as it roared down the street and stopped to hover above them. A blue head peeked out as the ramp lowered. "My lady," Turr Darvesh called out, "your chariot awaits!"

*First they come to kill us, Alethia thought to herself as Turr reached a hand out to help haul Mar up into the shuttle. And then Turr rescues me. If I never think of this day again it'll be too soon.*

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Turr flying was unorthodox, to say the least, but he kept them alive until they were out of orbit. Alethia at that, at least, to be thankful for. That, and the fact that Mar was staring at the bulkhead instead of out the viewport Pravus' war machines put the planet to flame. Even Turr was shocked into silence, staying quiet for perhaps the first time in his life as he fiddled with the navicomputer.

"Mar," she said softly, laying her hand on his. Nothing. "Mar. Mar, you ill-bred heretical swine." That at least got his eyes to cut over to meet hers. "Do you know why I asked you to train me instead of Kah, or Seridan?"

The Jedi didn't answer, but he didn't look away, either. It was something. "It's because you weren't one of them. You didn't belong, not with the Jedi, nor the Seherob, nor even the Force Ascendant. But you made it work, somehow. I didn't belong, either."

Alethia leaned back, rubbed absentmindedly at her temple. "This isn't the first homeworld I've lost, you know. I can't go back to Coruscant. My family's all dead - not that I would have gone back to them anyway. And Alderaan, well," she smiled, attempting warmth or at least wistfulness, but not quite achieving either. "You know how that worked out."

Mar closed his eyes, leaning his head back. "I should have known you were bad luck." He smiled, almost imperceptibly.

Alethia stared at him for a moment, her mouth slightly agape. Finally she burst out laughing just as Turr walked in out of the cabin. He opened his mouth to ask, but seemed to think better of it.

"How long until we reach the rendezvous point?" Mar asked him quietly.

"Huh? Oh, no idea. We're heading to Nar Shaddaa."

"Turr?"

"Yes, my dear Major?"

"Do I need to cut your feet off?"

"Oh come on, Alethia," Turr answered, holding his hands up defensively. "It's not like that. It was just the only system I could figure out how to find in that kiffing navicomputer."

Mar Sûl chuckled quietly to himself as Archenksova sighed.

"Well," she said at last. "I suppose I do need to do some shopping."