

X marks the spot

by: Ryan Neale, #10609

A clicking, hollow echo sounded mournfully down the polished, durasteel corridors; abandoned mainframes in side rooms breathing their last like whirring tombstones where the military knowledge of the old Empire was laid to rest: a research facility turned mausoleum. An appropriate place for what had become a black site for the Iron Throne. The floor was a creamy white, marred only by the occasional scuff from careless boots and bright and urgent markings of various shades indicating where one was supposed to go. Directions to places like cantinas and dead mainframes did little to point Ryan to his objective. This place was sterile and dead, and was the sort of monolithic, emotionless-chic beloved by despots and totalitarian states who do their damndest to crush the humanity out of their subjects.

Ryan had come to believe, as he had grown and come to the light with Clan Odan-Urr, that the way of the dark side was ultimately the way of death, masquerading as life while slowly rotting away a man's body and taking all he loved from him. He was slowly starting to forget *her* face every day he spent in Arcona learning the ways of the dark side. Power became an end, and each lightsaber velocity while in the grip of the dark side was a humming requiem to *her* memory and the man he was before all of this. But now, amid the dull sickly white of the fading illumination of the former Imperial research facility, bathing the floor like a sputtering candle, his pure white robes shone resplendently.

His dark blonde hair, parted in the middle, framed searching deep blue eyes, his breath hitching slightly as he searched carefully along each corridor, probing and peering. He knew that others were here. Common sense told him that as much as the Force did. Legwork had led Ryan to this point. Hours in bars and spaceports had led him to a researcher for Incom who had worked on a starfighter which could even the odds. A starfighter which improved on a reliable workhorse of the fight against tyranny. A researcher who was likely being tormented right now in a darkened room until he gave up all of his precious knowledge to the Sith. Ryan would save him. He hoped.

Ryan peered around a corner, passing a room which contained an overturned mainframe with a few blinking red lights flickering like eyes in the darkness. Amid the flickering, sterile lights of the corridor, he observed a rather youthful looking man, heavily muscled under the loose, black robes that made the sinister, silvery vibrosword by his side all the more striking. His brown hair hung in a loose

ponytail framing a boxy, solid looking head. He looked every bit the part of a roaring barbarian from some primal planet. The dark side flowed through his sinews as he stretched, but he lacked a visible lightsaber. He paced steadily along the corridor, stopping now and again to listlessly rock back and forth.

Ryan had never truly overcome his rashness and aggression, and given the pressure he was under to liberate the Incom researcher from Brotherhood hands before he gave up valuable research or worse, was killed or tortured to death, his emotions were running high. The time for aggression and seizing the initiative was now. Ryan reached his left hand down to his right side to find the cross guard of his vibrosword. Slowly drawing it out till its full, meter-long blade exited the scabbard. Its long crossguard and cruciform, double edged shape was reminiscent of the longswords used in more ancient times and on primitive worlds. The addition of a vibration cell took a deadly weapon and made its wounds more horrific and lethal. Folding both hands around its agile hilt, he sprang around the corner with speed brought on by the Force surging through his muscles, he raised his sword over his left shoulder and drove it downward with a step and a twist of the hips as if to cleave the dark Jedi from shoulder to hip. This was met with the dark-clad brute's own blade as he quickly drew his weapon and cut upwards, intercepting Ryan's shining blade with a rising deflection. Reacting to the change in pressure on his weapon, Ryan withdrew slightly with a half-step, circling his tip under his opponent's guard and between his arms to deliver a thrust to the face of his foe.

With speed enhanced by the Force and the raw rage of the dark side, the dark Jedi, stepped just out of the way of the thrust and with a wiping motion of his own sword smashed the point of Ryan's sword to the ground. His strength was incredible for a journeyman, and Ryan barely managed to spring backwards like a lion at bay as his opponent sliced upwards with the back edge in an attempt to wound the padawan in the neck. Ryan sprang backwards like a hind and returned his weapon at the ready, angled back above his left shoulder, ready to deliver another powerful stroke from his strong side. The dark-clad guard adopted the same posture, mirroring Ryan and leaning forward in ferocious intensity.

It seemed like they would wait in silent posturing forever. Ryan remembered back to his time as a saber rake and the countless sword lessons on countless worlds. The left-hander frequently has an advantage against the right-hander in swordfighting and combat in general. The left-handed see ten right-handed opponents for every one left-hander the right-handed face, and the new angles of attack confound the inexperienced and unwary. It was this that Ryan hoped would allow him to finish

this fight quickly. That, and the lessons of his sword teacher as a youth: “whatever comes from the roof, the Thwart Stroke takes.” A poetic phrase for a poetic action.

The dark journeyman, eager in rage and lust for battle did not disappoint. A powerful downward hew from black-clad, monstrous arms accompanied by an animalistic, raging roar was met by Ryan whipping his sword in a horizontal slash at the level of his adversary's eyes. A clash, a crunch, and silence. His opponent's weapon had stopped dead by Ryan's, now horizontal, crossguard while Ryan's own blade found home in the temple of his opponent, hewing skull and tissue viciously. His opponent only had time to let his roar die in his throat as he fell to the ground, dead. Attack and defense as one. This was the pure Art.

Having gently slid his vibro blade from his fallen foe he bowed slightly to his opponent, hoping that perhaps he would find release in peace in the Force, rather than the endless madness of Chaos. The dark side, at least to Ryan, was a screaming maelstrom; a hungry abyss that drew one into madness. The reformed Padawan had tried to avoid using the Force as much as possible when he was a dark Jedi. He didn't want to rot and lose sight of why he fought his battles. He wondered each time he killed or hurt in the line of duty if that would be the one, terminal sin, that cast him into the void. Right now, he didn't have the time to think and fear. It was not the Jedi way, to fear and regret.

Ryan kept his sword drawn and held low and at the ready. The noise and tumult of battle had likely alerted anyone nearby that something was amiss. He jogged forward, listening alertly for activity. Wherever reinforcements came from was likely the most heavily guarded area, and Ryan would be led right to the target.

Ryan's answer came soon enough as he heard the quick, hustling movement of boots reverberate down the corridor and shouted commands echoing as teams sought to head the Jedi off.

“Cover me while I move!”

“Covering!”

“The damn Jedi are here!”

Voices crackled through helmets and the rattle of gear seemed to ring like air through an organ

in the polished corridors. Ryan knew he would quickly be outmaneuvered unless he managed to drive through and not get overwhelmed by numbers and superior firepower. Calling upon the Force, he broke into an inhumanly fast sprint and whipped around a corner just as a completely armored trooper, his garb the stark faceless white favored by those Loyalists who aped the aesthetic of the late Galactic Empire, rushed to meet him. The soldier peered around the corner to train his blaster on the area. Ryan drove his sword upwards with a powerful, rising hew and with a thunk bit deep into the armor on the trooper's wrist, sending a reflexive blaster shot from the struck soldier's E-11 into the ceiling. The armor prevented a complete severing or deep wound to the trooper's wrists, crumpling and only beginning to show a trickle of blood through the damaged bracers. Following up quickly, Ryan whipped his blade down in an arc, whirling it just shy of the floor as he cut again, dropping the edge with Force-enhanced might on top of the wounded soldier's wrists, breaking into the arm again, but only enough to force his hands to send his blaster skittering to the floor.

Calling on his reflexes, Ryan dove clear of the corridor as the trooper's squad mates opened fire to suppress the sword-wielding Jedi and reach their, now disarmed, comrade. It was difficult defeating their armor, even with the Force and something with the cutting power of a vibroblade. A different tactic would be required.

Ryan bolted down a corridor towards a T-intersection, whipping around as if to move behind the unit now tending to the wounded soldier and laying down active, deadly suppressing fire. Deactivating the vibration cell of his blade, Ryan rounded the corner then leaped with superhuman grace and speed as the Force roared through him. The rear guard of the unit attempted to train his weapon on the fast moving target as Ryan took his blade in both hands and brought the crossguard down squarely onto the trooper's helmet like a makeshift warhammer. The technique required careful gripping, and the vibration normally inherent in a vibroblade made such grabbing impossible, but few techniques were better against the armored foe when lacking a superior weapon for the task.

The concussive force from the blow sent the trooper reeling against the wall and he slumped unconscious, his armor merely scuffed but his head jolted backward like a slingshot. Ryan then sprinted onward in an attempt to lose the rest of the squad as vicious blaster bolts came near enough to cause him to realize winning a straightforward fight here today was nothing more than holoivid fantasy. The fact that his muscles and lungs were beginning to feel heavy under the weight of the Force enhancing his physical abilities did not help matters.

Ryan wound his way along the corridors, slowing his pace somewhat to catch his breath and discern where most of the noise and chaos appeared to be coming from. He reactivated his vibration cell and peered around a corner, pressed tight against the durasteel walls and attempting to slow his heavy, long, breathing.

The corridor ahead was lined on one side with the same unadorned steel. The other side was a clear transparisteel wall allowing viewing into the area beyond. What appeared to be some sort of brightly lit “clean room” sat radiant and silent, its white lights shining on more broken and discarded remnants of Imperial droids, computers and lab equipment, their hulks still unrusting due to the sterility and dryness of the area beyond. What secrets they once held was difficult to say. The facility had primarily been involved with hyperdrive and spacecraft research before equipment was destroyed in a hasty “scorched earth” in the wake of the slow collapse of Imperial governance.

Ryan bounced from ball of his foot to ball of his foot. He was not a subtle man, and violence of action would hopefully win as a replacement for guile. Racing quickly, he flicked his lightsaber into his left hand, letting his vibroword drop to the ground as his still relatively inexperienced hands whipped the saber inartfully before him, its blue blade jumping to life. He cut a poorly shaped ellipsoid as urgently as he could muster, his Banlanth training still providing the barest control of his weapon. Returning the saber to his side with a hiss, he hefted his long sword and smashed his pommel, driving his way into the room beyond and stumbling into a roll before springing to his feet.

His eyes fixed ahead quickly on a shrouded figure, its robes a stormy gray, frayed from hard use. The stranger turned with an almost ephemeral grace, his hooded face turning to regard the Padawan. He was human. His face, young, a faded tan and olive beginning to show the rot of the dark side through cracking lips and black veins weaving like corrupt thread through what once was probably a handsome tapestry. His athletic frame was clad in this gray nimbus, making him seem like a ghost as his yellowing eyes looked disdainful, almost bored at the young Jedi before him. Beside him hovered a glossy black sphere, sinister in aspect and bristling with steel probes and a projecting, rapier like needle leading to a syringe of unknown contents. A single red eye stared balefully, silently, from the sphere, regarding Ryan with almost the same disdain as his controller. Behind them lay a twisted frame of an elderly man, his body heaving in labored breaths while twisted, broken limbs shook uselessly and feebly. The blood staining his civilian clothes and his obvious pain tore at Ryan's soul. How could he have ever been a part of this? The now-Padawan had butchered a man for no other reason than he had betrayed the secrets of Arcona to outside interests. Because he had been told to.

She probably had seen it in what afterlife she now dwelled in. She had watched him and wept. A look of pain grew across Ryan's face and was matched by a growing smile by the storm-robed man before him.

“Squeamish? Weak? Tired? Don't worry, I would have already killed this man if I felt he had no more information for me. Who could have known how many projects Incom has in the works if not for such a wonderful source. The Iron Throne will certainly take advantage of what they can, and you... are too late to get what you're after.”

Ryan raised his sword to his left shoulder, ready to surge forward and strike a powerful cut from above. The pain on his face turned to a dark rage and he readied himself to call on the Force in his anger, to cut the man before him piece-by-piece. The man widened from a disdainful smirk to a mad, full-toothed smile with cracking lips and bleeding gums as he whipped his hand back and the crimson blade of his lightsaber cracked to life, its menacing hiss and hum adding an even more sinister cast to his lunatic eyes and now maddened countenance.

“Come and get it,” he whispered throatily, as if here were about to dig in to a banquet.

Ryan stalked forward like a predator, his eyes wide and focused on keeping the dark Jedi, the spherical droid, and the Incom researcher all in view. His blade remained high and his blood boiled as his fingers tightened around his hilt.

Ryan was a being of emotion. He wore his heart on his sleeve and tended to extremes of passion. He loved his friends and hated his enemies and this was his greatest struggle as a Jedi. As a young saber rake, his temperament embroiled him in more duels than even some of his rasher contemporaries, whether over an insult or a woman. Master Vorsa was the strict master he needed. The kind master he needed as well. She brought the spitefulness out of him, drove it out of him, and she understood. He wished she was here right now.

Ryan stood just out of measure, sword high, his heart pounding in his ears and his breathing sounding like a TIE engine to him. Was he afraid? Not of the fight, but of failing... falling?

“I used to be like you. You don't have to remain in the grip of...” Ryan began, hesitatingly, trying to drive out his desire to kill the dark Jedi for every soul on New Tython. For the pain inflicted on

Master Vorsa. For *her*.

Ryan was cut off as he stepped backwards swiftly to avoid the hissing death of the Dark Jedi's lightsaber slashing down at him in a quick, whipping circle. It was Form 0, nothing particularly technical, but it was powered by the dark Jedi's physique and maddened rage. Ryan countered quickly with a downward cut to the hands to end the fight with minimal injury, but the dark Jedi took his own retreat, causing Ryan's point to glance off the ground. No control and poor technique. Ryan's anger was wielding the blade much to his internal horror but he had little time to react as red hot needles seemed to stab through him.

The sphere had outflanked the Jedi and only his quick reflexes prevented a dead-on stroke of electricity from its electrical torture-probe. Ryan's knee slammed into the ground and he called on the Force to steel himself, to stand his ground. He wouldn't die here today. He would kill his enemy and save...

His mind turned to killing again but all he could see in his mind was Master Vorsa. This wasn't the damned way. Neither his love nor Vorsa would bear his fall. Ryan tried to focus on this as he called on the Force to give him the endurance and will he needed to finish this fight; to save a scarred soul from death and bring darkness into the light.

Ryan brought his vibroblade down into a quick cut and parry as one motion, severing the syringe from the sphere as it tried to jab him. His following with a quick upwards cut met only by air as the sphere hovered quickly backwards, making panicked beeps. The Jedi quickly circled with a martial artist's grace to evade the renewed, powerful slash of his opponent. Ryan circled his point around to menace the face of the gray, swirling and whirling fury in the hope of forcing him back. Thankfully, instinct won out over berserker madness and the dark Jedi quickly backpedaled, his lightsaber now raised high over his head as if to bring it down savagely on the Padawan's skull.

Ryan sprang sideways to avoid another shock from the sphere and delivered a powerful cut, slicing off a clean chunk off the top, exposing sparking electronics and whirring, panicked beeping and garbled Basic in a frantically paced monotone. It formed one more electric discharge, and soon a focused glance from the dark Jedi sent it hurtling at Ryan with uncanny speed. Ryan sliced with a powerful hew sending parts of the dark sphere hurtling every which way as the two halves whizzed by him.

Suddenly Ryan felt a thrust by telekinetic force, sending him airborne and smashing against a durasteel door, which slowly opened as he braced against it to keep his feet, taking advantage of his great stability and rooting. Ryan backed up to get more breathing room and tactically appraise the situation, but the dark Jedi leaped at him with a screaming fury swinging with strong strikes guided by rage and the rudimentary motions of Form 0. Ryan weaved his vibrosword carefully around the strikes to avoid its severing by the flashing red death before him and returned jabs of his own from a mobile and active guard.

The room they now found themselves in seemed like the inside of a barely lit tube with a wall on the end nearest them and the other end disappearing into darkness the two combatants working their way up to a huge, flat, platform on which rested an aged but still menacing looking TIE Fighter from the Galactic Civil War. The sides of the tube had transparisteel windows for some manner of observation. Ryan found himself back against one of the solar panels, only to slip aside as his opponent hacked a crooked and unskilled hew into the aging starfighter.

“You don't have to do this...”

“THE JEDI TOOK EVERYTHING FROM ME!” the marauder roared and reached out powerfully through the Force to the viewing area beyond. The sound of a generator rapidly rose and grey robes leaped behind the body of the TIE.

Suddenly, a powerful surge of gale Force winds roared down the corridor and Ryan was swiftly carried off his feet. A wind tunnel: most likely to test the atmospheric capabilities of craft primarily designed as starfighters. The air was knocked out of him as he slammed against the nearby end of the tube, his vibrosword clattering to the ground and then swept up and impaled into the wall beneath him. His Dulon breakfalling skills, at least, allowed him to not be stunned or struck in the head. His foe apparently didn't realize this as he quickly leaped into the path of the wind, allowing it to drive him towards Ryan with a powerful thrust to finish him off. Mustering his strength, Ryan raised a shoulder, halfway rolling against the wall to cause the saber to find only durasteel.

“JEDI KNOW NOTHING OF LOVE! AND NOW I'M SENDING YOU WHERE SHE CAN TORTURE YOU TOO! DIE! DIE! DIE!” he screamed manically and loud enough to be heard even over the wind tunnel. His muscles roared with the dark side as Ryan frantically rolled and slipped with his

back pressed to the wall, narrowly avoiding humming and hissing death.

The insinuation that he knew nothing of love made his choler rise and Ryan looked up at him in blackest anger. The Jedi lashed out and seized his opponent's sleeve with a powerful Dulong grip and slammed his foot into the dark Jedi's hip to reverse their positions. Ryan was now on top of him controlling his saber arm and delivered a powerful elbow to the forehead of his downed foe straight out of Jakelian, slicing him open as his face slowly became as crimson as his blade. Ryan reared back for another strike only to hear a crunching groan.

Looking down he observed that the missed lightsaber strikes had gouged out enough of the wall that it was slowly sinking in. Before either of the combatants could catch themselves, the breaking and screeching of failing metal launched them into the darkness beyond.

Ryan smashed forward and with another Dulong breakfall rolled out of the fall. A grey-robed mass slid gracelessly across the floor. The Jedi reached and grabbed his lightsaber, its blue blade humming to life again, and rushed forward.

"ALRIGHT LET'S TALK ABOUT WHAT JEDI KNOW!" he roared only to be met by a crimson blur which nearly bisected him had he not bent backwards with his lightning reflexes. The dark Jedi rolled to his feet and readied his lightsaber in return.

The blood rolled into his tanned, corrupted, once handsome face and mixture with sweat and tears. "She was an apprentice and died for what she believed in. Had I been there, those Jedi would have been dead instead. Hypocrites. All of you. There is no reason to wield a lightsaber rather than a blaster, other than as a weapon of terror and to announce your menace to the world... we're just honest about it, we Sith. About being killers." his voice was polite and intellectual, a stark contrast to his earlier madness. He raised his blade in half salute as he wiped the blood from his eyes with the back of his hand before placing both hands on the hilt slowly. The fingers spidering around it methodically one by one. "Jedi, you better kill me today, or I certainly will kill *you*."

"Please, I know from experience how this will go. This will rot and consume you. You'll be lost in the madness of the Dark Side. When you are one with the Force... don't you want her to maybe recognize that little bit of you in it all?"

“SHUT UP!” the dark Jedi roared, surging forward again, only to be met by Ryan's blade cutting to knock it aside with a deliberate and unpolished stroke only to return a grazing shim to the top of his hands, pressing downwards but being evaded with only light burns. The marauder roared and backpedaled assessing the damage to his hands as his grip faltered on his weapon. Ryan slowed his breathing as he tried to find himself, to lose the anger and to win this fight without killing the both of them. For all he knew, his Master was watching in her own way, despite the distance. She believed in him. He didn't know why, but she believed in him. She was a home to him. He had to not let her down or let himself be consumed. He had to win, but not kill.

The room around the two combatants contained the assembled, or half assembled engines of various Imperial starfighters, some raised on powerful skyhooks, their sinister hulks shadowed and swinging on durasteel chains. Their strange shadows danced as they swayed in time to the music of their jingling chimes. This battleground of lost love and the suspended metal with its sounds echoing through the room, provided a chorus as the two lightsaber wielders clashed again, a belfry of ruin.

Ryan pressed conservatively and carefully, a demand of the style but also a desire to snipe at the dark Jedi's hands. Their lives were intertwined and if he took this man's, it would be the death of him as well. The gray clothed dark Jedi's swing's became wilder as his rage pushed to the limit and blood continued to flow in his eyes. Jet black hair, soaked in sweat whipped from under his hood in frenzy until at last the hood fell completely, apparently secured somehow by a brooch to maintain a shrouded appearance even in the heat of activity.

When the sabers clashed chains would rattle as the Force powered blows of the Sith met the Force powered sturdiness of the Jedi. When they would bind, Ryan attempted to use skillful winding adapted from longsword to find home on the arms or body, but the sabers were too strongly locked and his training too limited to take advantage. Blows flashed and powerful attack met conservative counter.

Ryan was tiring and knew it had to end soon or one or the other of the two would be overwhelmed and killed just from exhaustion. Ryan looked up and saw an engine poised where one strong pull from the Force could bring it down, it hung precariously from a looped chain on a skyhook, and just one last burst would bring a TIE engine down on this insolent...

No. He wasn't going to die. Neither of them were.

The dark Jedi gave a powerful strike as if to blast straight through Ryan's guard, only to be met by the Jedi charging forward and stuffing the blow while punching with his saber hand and mustering Force-enhanced strength right into the bicep of his foe. School children of the Tapani Federation called it a "dead arm." Jakelian masters called it "Defanging the Crystal Snake." The blow caused the blood-blinded eyes of the dark Jedi to widen in pain, only to be exacerbated as Ryan smoothly flowed into an elbow which made a horrific snapping as the bicep separated from the bone beneath. The crimson saber crackled to the ground and deactivated. In raging instinct the gray-clad marauder made one last swing from his only good arm. Ryan deactivated his saber and dropped to his knees while seizing the swinging arm. Rising up with the powerful marauder in a fireman's carry, he wheeled him over and slammed him forcefully into the durasteel floor, his skull bouncing with a thud against the floor. Then silence.

After a moment Ryan's arms began to tremble in exhaustion and worry and he reached out through the Force. Still alive, just very much knocked out cold. He gathered his breath for a moment, then, picking up both the fallen lightsabers, he hooked them onto his belt while grabbing some strong cables to tie his new captive with. A long, steady, exhausted drag brought him back to the wounded Incom researcher, his eyes at first terrified then tearing up in relief.

"Everything's going to be okay. I came for info but..." the researcher looked afraid for a moment and seemed as if he was about to croak out a response only for Ryan to raise a hand. "All I care about right now is getting both of you out of here and to a bacta tank."

The researcher looked shocked at the Jedi's carrying of his tormentor, but a resigned look came over his face along with a simple nod. Ryan drew his comlink. "I'm ready for extraction but there's still plenty of firepower down here so it will definitely be hot. I have two casualties to evacuate, no fatalities. Just bring firepower and get me out of here."

Ryan grabbed the chair the executive was strapped to and the dark Jedi and dragged them both at a slow pace, carefully avoiding making too much noise and taking the long way back to the hangar. It was grueling and slow and just when he felt he couldn't go any further, he saw Master Vorsa's face. The cute girl in the village on New Tython's face. His love's face. Everyone who believed in him. He had to take one more step.

Just one more. Just one more.

After what seemed like forever, as trooper's came precariously close enough that he had to pull both casualties into a shadowy side room and wait, Ryan at last stepped into the hangar. Destiny was on his side as an Odan-Urr chartered drop ship with those loyalists still faithful to Odan-Urr swept into the hangar at high speed. Not a moment too soon as Iron Throne Loyalists stormed down the corridor towards the sound of the roaring ship's engines. Suppressive fire from the door gun quickly left the Loyalists diving for cover as Ryan plodded his way toward the ship like his feet were made of lead. A squad of loyalists disembarked to cover him and to provide assistance, but Ryan's vision was fixed ahead like a tunnel.

Just one more. Just one more.

Ryan felt the chair leave his hands as two Odan-Urr troops lifted it into the ship as blaster fire soared through the air. The second burden was lifted as the dark Jedi was piled in as well. Just one...

Then it was black.

Ryan awoke intermittently throughout the flight, noting an IV in his arm here or a monitor there. But he found rest again and again. He whispered through the air "Master, I need you now more than ever. Just see how well you trained me..." Troopers looked at him curiously but shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads. They were going home to a Clan on the run. But with the information gained, they would not run forever.