

STAR WARS DREADBORNE

By Jack Freeman

(Cyrus Oscura #826)

Competition: [INQ] Imagine Me and You

Prologue

She had planned for every single outcome. Countless days and long, sleepless nights had been spent pouring over every detail. In the name of information, and in a bid to finally gain the upper hand over the Inquisitorius, Arcia Cortel had flung herself into the Rancor's pit. But what she found lurking in the shadows had not been a Rancor. No. She had planned for every contingency... except for *him*.

Her throat was on fire. Her heart thumped in her chest as she barreled through the alleys of Hutta Town at breakneck speed. No matter how exhausted and starving she was, she could not afford to slow down. She knew all too well what would happen if she faltered, if *he* caught her. The air was so thick with dust that she could barely make out the silhouette of her rescuer up ahead. She slapped a tarp out of her way

and ducked beneath a cluster of low-hanging wires. She pushed harder even as her knees threatened to buckle beneath her. Elequin, her rescuer, disappeared around a corner ahead. Arcia followed, but took the bend far too quickly. Momentum carried her straight into the wall. Her shoulder smashed into the concrete structure with an audible crack, tearing an agonizing shriek from her. One knee fell to the ground momentarily but she pushed onward.

“Come on, come on, COME ON!” she screamed.

She could not stop. She *would* not stop. Her head was swimming and instinct alone steered her on. Her vision grew foggier with each passing moment. The sound of her own breathing was thunder in her ears. Again, she missed a step, and this time her legs betrayed her. She went down, sharp stones slicing into her palms. The world heaved before her, spinning out of control like a vortex that threatened to swallow her. Her stomach lurched. She saw him then, in the distance, his dark, fluttering cape sweeping through the alley.

What followed was a blur, a faint series of events on the edge of her consciousness. A pair of hands grabbed her and lifted her up off the ground with abrupt force. Someone’s arm wrapped around her waist and carried her forward, her feet dragging over the pavement.

“We’re not far now!” Elequin’s voice sounded hollow, as if the Mandalorian was speaking from a great distance.

It must have been true. The next thing Arcia was aware of was the tough, uncomfortable leather of a cockpit chair. Hands propped her up and seatbelts were passed over her. She was so weak that she couldn’t move. She could not even look up to Elequin to thank her. But she realized that all she truly wanted, even as the noose tightened around her neck, was a big fat Balthros steak and a cheap bottle of Corellian

brandy. There was a click as her buckles locked, and the cockpit bounced slightly as the Mandalorian bodyguard threw herself into the pilot's seat.

"An astromech droid would have been mighty useful right about now," Elequin muttered as her hands darted from one switch to the next and the spaceship shuttered to life.

A loud, reverberating hum filled the cockpit as the reactors fired up. There was hope. Maybe, just maybe, they were going to make it after all.

"A few more minutes and we are in the air..."

On the edge of consciousness, Arcia felt the craft rise beneath her. Then it lingered. Why were they not launching? She tried in vain to push herself upright. Her stomach once again lurched. She promised herself she would not spill its contents over the console.

"Is everything alright?" she asked with an exhausted slur.

A faint, strained gasp for air ripped her from her torpor. She was about to call out for Elequin when her eyes settled on *him*. The Black Hand, they called him. The towering Dark Jedi stood on the walkway below them in all his sinister glory. The sun gleamed off the bronze sheen of the prosthetic arm aimed towards them. He clutched his fist. Another gasp pulled Arcia's attention to the pilot. Elequin was twisting back in her seat, her hands clawing at her throat. Her eyes were wide and her skin was taking on a bluish tint. Only squeaks and gurgles escaped from her mouth.

"El!" Arcia screamed. She wasn't sure what gave her strength then, but she felt it, the second wind, as if her inner hyperdrive had just kicked in. Suddenly alert and lucid, Arcia punched a command into the control panel. A rising chime emanated from the cockpit and a mechanical sound emanated from the hull underneath. Clenching

her teeth, she engaged the ship's automated defense system. Another command ensured the sensors targeted their attacker.

The ship's cannon belched blaster fire at him. She watched the Black Hand disappear in cloud of black smoke.

Chapter 1

The cuff tugged on Cyris Oscura's wrist for what seemed like the hundredth time in the span of an hour. Whenever the woman shifted, whenever she stood up to stretch her legs, the chains that bound them together were stretched to their last link. He had awoken first and chose to sit cross-legged at the center of the cramped chamber, establishing his dominion. She had taken up residence in the corner nearest to the blast door.

He was a statue, ever unmoving. His chest rose with slow, rhythmic breaths. His one good eye was closed and had been so for the better part of the day. Neither had spoken yet, and he was in no hurry to do so. The opportune moment would present

itself. The rattling of chains announced that she was adjusting her posture yet again. Again, the motion tugged on his arm.

In truth, he needed neither audible or physical cues to know that tell when she would move. She was a vivid image in the Force, one not of flesh but of emotion; a presence comprised by fear, hatred, discomfort, and a tinge of confidence he had not expected to find. What impressed him most was the ironclad determination that formed a fortress around these emotions. He had to admit, rarely had he witnessed such willpower in a mundane peasant such as her.

He turned his attention to the cuff that had begun to chafe his wrist. He kept his eye closed, and instead focused his consciousness upon the metal device. He could picture the locking mechanism in his mind. When he willed the Force to pry it open, as he had done with such devices in the past, nothing would happen. The unassuming device proved resilient even against the Force. She too tried several times. Where he employed finesse and mental acuity, she employed crude force, yielding only grunts and metal pangs.

He felt her anger and discomfort flare up before she shifted again. He took one deep, controlled breath and finally opened his eye. She too was staring at him with her cold, unnatural olive stare. In fact, she had never taken her eyes off of him. She was a pretty enough girl, with soft features sharpened somewhat by her stern demeanor. The way she sat, with her back parallel to the wall told a tale of discipline and focus. It was her expression that concerned him most. The flaring nostrils, the narrowed stare, the coiled upper lip, all the signs were there: she loathed him. He did not need the Force to tell him this. He smiled then. At least, he hoped that she perceived the expression a warm smile. He did not think it possible, but her eyes narrowed further. She was not buying his act. That much was obvious. He wondered if anyone ever

would, with a face like his. If the scar tissue and drooping, empty eye socket did not put her off, his piercing, yellow stare just might.

"Calm yourself, young one," he said finally. He had intended his voice to be soft, soothing even, but it came out more like a bellow.

"Keep to yourself and I will do the same, old man," she said in an authoritative tone.

"Now, is this a way to treat one with whom you share a cell?"

"I have no interest in you or your words," she was not overtly hostile, but he could sense her disdain for him.

"Do you not wonder why we are here, bound like this to one another?" He shook his cuffed forearm for emphasis. His wrist had grown quite tender. Without his prosthetic arm, he could not even readjust the device. It was a hopeless cause with the pathetic stump that remained of his right arm.

Still, it seemed he had pricked her interest.

He offered a smile and another shrug of his shoulder, "Alas, I'm not certain myself. I've yet to hear a peep from our would-be captors. Whichever predicament we find ourselves in, well, we are in this together."

"You say this, but I do not believe you. I know what you are," she did not hold back on her hate this time.

He could not contain his amusement and a chuckle escaped from his lips. He stroked his beard as he studied her, weighed her. His curiosity was peaked.

"Hmm, I wonder... what *am* I?" he mused.

She did not answer, and instead shifted her gaze to the transparisteel window and the void beyond. He was about to speak again when a wracking cough overtook him. Hacking violently, he doubled on himself. Flecks of blood sprayed down on the

floor. Again and again he coughed, deep, dragging coughs that burned his lungs. He pushed himself up to his feet hoping he might better regain his composure, but he regretted doing so almost instantly. He was far too weak. By the time the coughs subsided, he was swaying precariously on his feet.

He dragged his feet towards the nearest wall. Startled, or perhaps repelled by his sickness, the woman darted away, nearly yanking him off his feet as their bindings reached their limit. He propped himself up with his one hand and pressed his scalp to the cool wall paneling. Perhaps he had grown too dependent of the medical system integrated in his imperial robes. He could nearly forget his affliction. Without those robes, he was at a disadvantage before that woman. At least, he would have been were it not for the power of the Dark Side that coursed through his veins.

"In truth... it matters little what I may or may not be. I am your ally here and now. I'm old, and I'm dying, a fate accelerated by my being here. I have but one goal at this time," he explained, his voice raspier than before, "But I do wonder who you are, so full of life and confidence?"

She said nothing. She was still facing the window, standing tall with her hands crossed behind her back: the posture of a military officer. It was not stretch to picture her strutting about the command bridge of a Star Destroyer in the grey, ill-fitting uniforms of the Empire.

The silence lingered a while longer before she finally answered, "Arcia Cortel."

Oscura turned to press his back against the wall. Slowly—awkwardly—he slid down the wall to sit at its base. He gave one long, strained sigh on the way down.

"Yes... That makes sense. I thought I recognized you from the holofeeds."

"You know who I am?" the woman asked as she turned to face him.

"No... not truly," he answered with an amused smirk on his gnarled lips, "At least, I know little. You are a military officer, are you not?"

In truth, he knew exactly who she was, and what her credentials were. She was known to be an outstanding fleet admiral with a short but fruitful career behind her. But most importantly, he knew of her ties to Clan Arcona, Odan Urr and their pathetic resistance.

Her suspicion returned as quickly as it had left. Had his playfulness tipped his hand? Before he could say anything else, he was overwhelmed by more coughs. He hacked so hard that he began to tip sideways. He tried to catch himself, but without his prosthesis, his stump swung through the air and he found himself with his face pressed against the steel floor. He snarled in frustration. In the Force, he felt a hint of compassion flare in her, the minuscule, telltale sign of a caring individual. *Of a weak individual*, he thought. The chains chimed as she approached him. She knelt down and grabbed him by the shoulders. Heaving, she propped him back up against the wall as he tried to hold back another cough.

"My savior," he croaked.

"You are a strange man," she said.

"Like you would not believe."

She stepped away to sit, cross-legged, where he had been sitting moments early at the center of the room. He could sense her satisfaction. Where they sat was meaningless, and yet it meant everything. She had staked her superiority. He chuckled ever so softly in his beard. This Arcia could think whatever pleased her so.

"Tell me, old man, what do I call you?"

"Old man is fitting enough. Alternatively, you may call me Cyris," he dropped nonchalantly. He feigned disinterest, but he watched her from the corner of his eye.

"Wait... Cyris? As in Cyris Oscura?" Her composed, militaristic façade dropped for a split-second as curiosity and surprise got the better of her.

As he had expected, she knew who he was.

"Yes."

The way she recoiled at his answer told him that this young officer knew a whole lot more than his name. Fear, hate and apprehension spiked within her heart at his singular confirmation.

"The Black Hand... I thought... Hmm. I've read the reports. I even went over your files in the Dark Brotherhood's database when they discovered you. After all that I read, well, simply put this is not how I pictured you."

"And yet this is how you find me." Anger suddenly stirred within him. It surprised him, caught him off guard. He had long made peace with his pathetic state, but it seemed he was not yet used to other people's reactions.

"I remember the picture of you standing over the Combat Center. A proud, dark warrior with a face that..." She stopped herself and swallowed hard.

"Yes. I had a face," he spat.

"And two arms."

She was like a child poking a dormant beast with a stick, without realizing it. Or did she realize it? She had usurped his seat at the center of the cell. Now, was she actively working to diminish him? Was that a smirk on her face? It disappeared before long, as the weight of his revelation dawned on her.

She was up on her feet in no time, facing him down with clenched fist. Her emotions were a whirlwind in the Force. The rising storm enticed him. She might have had iron control over her composure, but she could not hide her emotions from him.

"I will NEVER be your ally!" she snapped.

He unleashed the full breadth of his powers on her. He channeled the Force into her. Like a battering ram, the darkness broke through her fortress, and stoked her deepest fears. Her shrill, terrorized scream ripped through the chamber as she stumbled backwards. He was laughing: a deep, cackling, vicious laughter that reverberated off the walls of their small cell. He pressed on, tightening the dark side's claws around her mind. He knew not what she saw then and it mattered little to him. He reveled in the maddening fear that consumed her. She fell backwards, and crawled away from him. He released her.

"What... what are you doing to me?" she whimpered.

She wasn't done speaking that she had already recovered, staving off the after effects of his powers. It amazed him just how resilient this mundane woman was to the effects of the Force. He would enjoy breaking her.

"I will never be your ally," she repeated with a growl.

Oscura pushed to his feet, unfolding to tower above her. His physique may have been a mere shadow of its former glory, he had to admit that he missed his toned muscles, but he still knew how to leverage his height against others. As he unfolded, he blocked the nearest spotlights, drenching Arcia in shadow.

"You need not be my ally," he mused in a near mocking tone.

Before he continued his train of thought, he brought up his left hand and once more called upon the Force to do his bidding. The darkness wrapped around her neck and heaved her off the ground. Her eyes went wide as she realized what was happening, and squeaked as her throat was clamped shut. He shoved her back, slamming her into the wall opposite to him. He moved swiftly, far faster than one might expect from his frail form, and pressed his disfigured face mere inches from her.

"You are a fool to think you can survive this place without my help," he hissed, dribbling spit onto her face, "We have a common goal, and you will need ME."

He stepped away as he released her, retracting the Force from around her neck. Arcia fell to the ground to her hands and knees. She breathed in hard. He felt silent for a few seconds, to let his words sink in through the fear.

"And I will need you," he finally admitted with a long, drawn out sigh.

He would not make a friend out of her, nor would he gain her trust but then, that had never been the plan. What he needed was an ally if they were to make it out of there. He closed his eye once more and with one long, drawn out breath, called the Force back to him. There it was, the seething star that was her rancor, on the brink of supernova. Again he marveled at her self-control. After what he had done, any lesser being would have caved. Their base instincts would have overwhelmed them and, like a cornered beast, they would have struck out. But she didn't. And she wouldn't. She simply wasn't wired that way.

He had no choice.

"Unfortunate that I will have to drag your lifeless corpse behind me," he sighed. His left arm—his one good arm—shot up and with clutched, bony fingers.

Va'ars Rend realized he'd been holding his breath as he watched the entire scene play out before him on the holovids. When they first wheeled in the old man, the Harch captain had been gripped by inexplicable fear, one that had yet to subside completely. He had seen the same terror in his men and could hardly believe his eyes at the time. These were hardened grunts, killers. To find the lot of them frightened like tauntauns

by some scrawny, disabled old man, well, it was more than a little disconcerting. All of them had been jittery and quiet ever since, and for good reason. Rend had never seen anything like it before. He'd looked on in disbelief as that old, scarred sack of bones lifted his cellmate with little more than... his mind? All it took as a jagged arm extended towards the girl and up she went, defying the freighter's artificial gravity. What magic was this? The Harch had never once believed those old tales about the so-called Force and its supposed Jedi Knights. He had always dismissed it as utter nonsense, nothing more than children's stories.

He wrung his thick hands, all six of them, as he watched on. The Harch and his crew had been hired days past to guard these two. He did not know who had hired him nor did he know the purpose. They had been clear, no questions asked, and they paid accordingly. With the promised sum, he could retire, return home to Secundus Ando and live out his last days in peace. The task was a simple one. All they had to do was guard an old man and a pretty little woman. Easy. Harmless. His boys could handle two snots like them in their sleep. Or so he thought.

The woman was going limp. She was still fighting, kicking thin air, but her movements were growing increasingly sluggish. They wanted the prisoners alive, those who had hired him. He was looking at a hefty loss if that sprat of a girl died. The Harch's pedipalps, or mandibles as his ignorant men called them, quivered in frustration. The gray-brown hair that covered his limbs bristled. No way was he going to miss out on his retirement.

"Blast it," he muttered. He meant to look at the astromech droid at his side, but he could not tear his eyes away from the monitor.

There was an acknowledging chirp and he heard the droid, H8-R8, connect itself to the *Arach's* mainframe. A quizzical whistle came from the rust-bucket's emitter. It was asking for confirmation.

"Do it!" Impatient, the Harch rapped H8's dome with one three-fingered fist.

Static flared up on the holoivid monitor. It flashed once, twice and by the third time, both the old man and woman were sprawling on the ground, twitching unceremoniously though they were unconscious. Whistling his satisfaction, Rend activated the commlink. His six eyes never left the screen.

"Huot, Ky'ree, get in there and separate the prisoners," he ordered, the grey-brown hair that covered his limbs bristling in anticipation, "See that the woman is breathing."

The blast door slid open and the Gran, Ky'ree, slipped one clunky combat boot inside, tentatively tapping his foot against the durasteel floor. Nothing happened.

Rend rolled his eyes as he spat into the comm, "Get in there, Brains! I told you, that floor glows when activated! Is it glowing?"

Grunting, the big alien stepped in. Va'ars had told them time and again about that shock floor. A blue force field covered the durasteel tiles when it was activated. How hard was it to understand? He scrubbed at his chin fuzz as a touch of shame tickled him. He was being a little unfair. One discharge from that thing was enough to incapacitate a Wookiee. Recurring charges could kill a man. He could not fault them for being extra careful.

A scrawny Bothan stepped in next, brandishing an electrostaff. This one was Huot, a sketchy little fellow that moved about like a skittering insect. The Harch liked to call the pair Brains and Brawn, it got a good laugh from the rest of the crew.

They moved with speed and efficiency, something their captain rarely witnessed. They had likely been watching the sorcerer mistreat his cellmate. There was a monitor just outside the cell, after all. Va'ars Rend shook his head as the bigger of the two went for the tiny woman. *Coward*, he thought. It fell to the Bothan to prod the old man with his staff. There was no reaction. The man was down for the count. Hurot gave a shrug, propped his staff against the wall, and grabbed the prisoner's ankles. They dragged the prisoners apart as far as they could, but there was little more they could do so long as that chain bound them together. They were brought onboard with that thing around their wrists, and despite Va'ars' concerns, his employers had not deemed it necessary to leave the key code with him. In fact, they had warned against attempts to slice into the device. The hefty sum they dangled before his eyes kept Rend's lips sealed.

Ky'ree pressed one of his floppy ears over the woman's thorax. It took a moment but the Gran finally gave a satisfactory nod. She was breathing. Grabbing her by the shoulders, positioned her in a sitting position against the nearby wall.

The task done, the Harch urged them, "Now, get out of there. If they wake up, I'm locking you inside with *him*."

Ky'ree was straightening himself when the old man stirred. There was a yelp and the Bothan darted across the room at a sprint. He'd made it three steps when he tripped over the prisoners' taut chain. Va'ars slapped a palm across his forehead as he watched the ridiculous creature flail on the ground. The Gran, better composed, trotted over the chain, grabbed Hurot by one leg and dragged him out of the cell. The Harch captain nodded and the droid at his side punched into the mainframe, shutting the blast door behind the goons.

Relieved, Rend let out one long, drawn out sigh. Oh, how he longed to be free of this life. Mercenary work was for the young and reckless. After all these years cheating death, it was just about time he got what was coming to him. Retirement would be a sweet release. No more contraband. No more slaves. No more dealings with brainless grunts. His last years would be comprised of booze, games, women and time well spent with his grandchildren.

Chapter 2

Do not speak. Do not react. Listen.

Arcia gave a start as she heard the voice, amorphous, and sinister in her mind, its words reverberating across the eons of her consciousness. Her eyes were locked with the Black Hand's cruel yellow gaze, the gaze of a predator. She felt a lot of things staring at this frail, skeletal man, all of them negative emotions, but she no longer feared for her life. The Dark Jedi was playing a game, one she did not quite yet understand, but they both understood that her demise would work against him. He was a mad man, there was no questioning that, but it was clear that he grasped the situation better than she did. He knew something that yet eluded her. Compelled to keep her stare locked on his, she waited for him to speak again.

As suspected, our lives matter, he explained, a rumble in her mind. *They will not risk me killing you. You and I both represent precious cargo.*

"You are sick," she hissed through clenched teeth. She had known it all along, but the confirmation still angered her. To be used like a tool, like a toy flung about by a petulant child, it was a disgrace. She had accomplished far too much, and worked far too hard in her life to find herself a Jedi's plaything. She caressed her sore neck anxiously as she thought back on his attack. The irony was not lost on her. She had volunteered for this assignment. No. More than that, this assignment was her initiative, her idea from the get-go.

He was not what she had expected to find. It was true what they said: he truly was insane. Cyris Oscura, the so-called Black Hand, had been a key figure of the Dark Brotherhood long ago. Abandoning his duties as Herald, this mysterious man had disappeared some 19 years before. He'd become a legend in the years that followed, only to be promptly forgotten, relinquished to the annals of history. It was not yet a year since he had resurfaced on some uncharted, backwater moon deep in Wild Space. She did not know the whole story. Like many things in the Dark Brotherhood, the events that followed were buried beneath a web of lies and deceit. She could not begin to fathom how this man, this forgotten legend, had ended up in a cell opposite to her.

She had to give it to him though. Mad as he was, as appalling as his techniques were, he got results. They were one step closer to escape because of him. What had she done? What could she do? Again, she wondered if she he could be trusted enough so that she could escape with him. The answer was no. It had always been no. But did she have a choice?

Remain calm. Hold your tongue. If you speak out, they will know that something is off. Get up. Pace the cell. Keep your eyes locked on mine.

Biting down on her pride, Arcia did as she was told. Her curiosity was peaked. Clearly the old man had a plan. There were no two ways about it. She was better off cooperating of her own volition rather than being thrown about like a doll, or worse. She nearly broke down as she recalled the surreal terror that had engulfed her before; terror that he had somehow inflicted upon her. Whatever he had done to her, it was no regular Jedi Mind Trick. She had seen New Tython again, felt its cool breeze on her skin, the feel of its long grass on her fingertips, only to watch it burn again before her. To find herself sitting by her dead friends, sharing a good, hardy laugh with them only to witness the Iron Legions murder them, it had been too much. The sight of her new home destroyed in turn, only to realize that she was the one who betrayed Clan Odan Urr to the Inquisitorius, threatened to drive her mad. A single tear formed against her eyelid. She wiped it away.

Focus, you fool of a girl. He remained unmoving as he spoke through her through the Force. To think she was connected to him in any way made her skin crawl. He sat on the ground, cross-legged, his narrow chest heaving slowly. His coughs seemed to have subsided. He never took his vulture's gaze off of her. *If you wish to live beyond the next few hours, your mind must be on the present.*

What would you have of me? Who knew if he could actually hear her thoughts? Either way, she did not have to wait long for an answer.

Kill me.

She froze. Had she truly heard that? Fists clenched, mouth slightly ajar she stared at him with a blank stare that betrayed her shock. He stared back at her with

that insufferable eye and its eerie glow. Her fingers twitched. Of all the things she thought he might say...

Kill me.

She could not believe what he was asking her to do. He had a plan. He had to have a plan! Was he truly as mad as they said? Arcia Cortel was many a thing, but she was no killer.

You hesitate.

"I am not like you," she whispered.

You are a coward.

"I have no reason to kill you."

"You are pathetic," the Black Hand growled.

With two strides, Arcia was standing over Oscura. He snarled when she slung the chain once, twice around his neck and pulled back on it. If that was what he wanted, who was she to refuse him? Cyris was wheezing, desperately sucking air through his gaping mouth. He kicked his legs and arched his back as he tried to wrestle free. Her knuckles were white as she dug the chain back in his neck. *It's what you want*, she thought, *your kind deserves no better!* Her heart was racing. A whirlwind of emotions tore through her mind; panic, hatred, disgust, guilt, self-loathing, yet somehow, she was of ice. She was calm. And she remarked something. Oscura's struggling had slowed, as if he were going limp, yet his hand, pointed straight at the door, was suspiciously steady... focused even.

There was a metallic thud followed by a pneumatic release. Against all expectations, the blast door slid open. Beyond was a narrow hallway not unlike their chamber, equally non-descript and lit only by dim skylights. Dumbfounded, she was about to release Oscura when a big three-eyed Gran poked his head through the

opening. She had rarely interacted with the Gran species, but that had to be confusion on that ugly, elongated face. His three beady eyes were as round as marbles. With a baying moan, he ran into the cell straight at her. A Bothan followed suit with an electrostaff pointed forward like a lance.

A comm crackled off one of the two guards. A raspy, inhuman voice was screaming, "What are you bantha-brains doing?"

The bigger alien was on Arcia with two stomps, big, meaty fists swinging like hammers. She dropped her grip on the chain and in one swift motion slipped beneath the Gran's arm. She reposted with an elbow to the ribs. The three-eyed goon barely flinched and swung again. She brought up both her arms at an angle using the momentum of his swing to deflect it into the oncoming Bothan. The scrawny alien caught the Gran's fist mid-chest with a yelp. It was a good thing these were untrained brawlers. She was no martial artist, but the Mandalorian Core she had picked up from her bodyguard Elequin would be enough to take care of these two. The air crackled suddenly as the downed Bothan activated his electrostaff. At least, she hoped it would be enough.

She spun around the Gran's next blow, mindful of the chain that still connected her to Oscura. She shot the old man a glance as he was pushing himself up to his feet, the chain still around his neck. She dodged again, yanking Cyris around. The Bothan prodded at her with the staff. She grabbed the long hilt and drove it into the Gran's groin. The alien wailed.

"Get out of there!" the voice on the comm howled.

Her eyes found Oscura at that moment. He wore a vicious smile that sent chill down her spine. It was then, staring in his eyes that she finally understood his ruse.

Her heart soared. *Not bad, old man, not bad!* Appear vulnerable. Cause confusion. Lure the enemy into the trap.

"To hell with you!" the comm snapped.

Into the trap...

Oh no!

The Bothan was about to jab Oscura when the world exploded around them. Pain shot up her legs and through her body, paralyzing her. Her body shuddered violently against the shock. She heard their screams, the Gran's, the Bothan's, but none louder than Oscura's; and amalgamation of pain and... laughter? That mad man was laughing!

Darkness took her.

He had been laughing. Va'ars Rend shook his head in disbelief. The Harch captain couldn't be sure, but he could have sworn he had heard the old man laughing over the others' agonizing shrieks. It took longer for the sorcerer to go down, even longer than a tough brute like Ky'ree, but down he'd gone in the end.

Now all four of them lay on the ground, twitching and unconscious. Reinforcements was on the way, but it would take a moment. Rend had kept most of his crew off of the makeshift detention level on account of the old man's unnatural influence, his aura for lack of a better word. Crowding up a level with bunch of trigger-happy, restless thugs had seemed like a bad idea at the time. Had he known what the man was apparently capable of, he would have had all of his crew lined up with blasters trained on that blast door.

He replayed the disaster in his mind's eye over and over again. He could not not figure out what happened, why the blast door had suddenly disengaged. Had Ky'ree opened it in a fool attempt to get inside and stop that brave girl from choking the old man? It was highly unlikely. The Gran was an idiot, but even he would remember there were failsafes in the cell for just such situations. They had been put in effect mere hours before, afterall.

H8 chirped, confirming what the Harch suspected: there had been no software or hardware malfunctions. The droid whirred and beeped as it explained that the ship's event logs noted only that the door's locking mechanism was deactivated.

Pent up fury exploded in the captain and six of his fists slammed down on the command console. The monitor shimmered and buzzed, its image distorted for but a second.

That's when something caught the corner of his eyes. Breath caught in his throat as he leaned into the monitor. He saw it again. The old man had moved; not a twitch like the others but actual, deliberate movement. It was his arm. The Harch captain cursed when he saw the sorcerer's fingers clench and unclench. Before long, the prisoner began to push himself up. It was a slow, laborious affair, but up he went.

"Blast it again!" The Harch snarled, slamming his fists down again and again.

The droid whistled a downward note that reeked of negativity. That was not going to happen. The shock floor needed at least another hour as it cooled down and the power was rerouted through its circuits. The old man staggered back as he straightened himself up. He was swaying like a tree in the wind. *There may be hope yet*, Va'ars thought. Alas, the prisoner seemed to quickly regain his composure. He dusted his long black tunic nonchalantly before turning to the other three lying together in a pile.

The old man could not get far with that chain linking him to the girl, especially buried as she was beneath Ky'ree.

The Harch captain clicked his tongue. His employers were to send an emissary to retrieve the prisoners and wire the credits to his account. There had been no timeline given, but the information had led Rend to believe it would not take more than a few days.

This emissary could not come too soon.

Chapter 3

The splitting headache and the dulled senses were a meager setback for Cyris Oscura, for the dark side of the Force was his ally. He had endured far worse in the decades when he was stranded on the festering moon of Vanir II. Life-threatening wounds and the moon-world's perpetual mind-numbing stench had wrecked havoc on him. It was during that sojourn in hell that he learned to erect a wall separating consciousness from his senses. In doing so, he was capable of maintaining his command of the Force through overwhelming pain. A trait that had served him well in his current predicament. Despite catching a full, agonizing discharge from the cell's rigged floor, he had maintained focus and called upon the Force. It was the only way to sustain his consciousness through such an ordeal. Oh, how he loved the sweet embrace of pain,

for it was in those crucial moments that he lived. He coughed lightly, and he sucked air through clenched teeth.

It was a shame that he could not conjure up a way to protect the lady Cortel. It would have been far easier to make their escape had she been capable of walking. Instead, she lay senseless and paralyzed, buried beneath the burly Gran creature. *Such a shame*, he mused.

Cyris held his hand out. Part of him itched to unleash the full power of the dark side, to feel its dark tendrils of electricity course through him as he killed the two pathetic guards, but he knew he could not afford such frivolities. Not yet. What he had to do was get Arcia out of that cell and moving towards freedom and the freighter's bridge. First, that meant getting the heap of muscles that was the Gran off the girl. Oscura repressed the desire to kill and instead called upon his powers to raise the alien in the air. With a flick of his wrist, the brute was flung aside.

Cyris then turned his palm upwards and clutched his fingers slightly. Arcia began to levitate in turn. She floated up high enough that her limp arms, drawn back towards the floor would not graze the durasteel tiles as the Dark Jedi began to move. Carefully and with the unconscious girl in tow, the Black Hand slipped out of the cell.

"And so it begins," he muttered.

He studied the hall. He was unfamiliar with the layout of the ship. In another life, a much younger Cyris Oscura would have known such information like the back of his hand. Time had stripped such knowledge from his mind and replaced it with something far greater. Knowing a ship's schematics paled before the knowledge to make a man suffer. Knowing how to bring his deepest fears to the front of their mind, on the other hand, was far more enthralling. Only in doing so could he bring about a new age of darkness throughout the galaxy.

Yet, in that moment, he did wonder where to go. Only the buzz and chirp of electronics could be heard in the hallway. Half a thought was spent wondering where the other guards were—surely those two lying face down in the cell were not the only two—but he pushed the question out of his mind. He would encounter them soon enough. When, was of no concern to him, but he wondered if they might show him the way. He lowered his hand and Arcia lowered to the ground.

He turned his mind to the ship itself. He closed his eye and reached out with the Force. The mystical power seeped out of his every pore and, like a cancer, spread through the ship probing it in search of life. He sensed them, the freighter's crewmen. It shocked him to find that there were so few of them. There had to be no more than twenty. Four of them were on the level directly above them, running towards the starboard side of the ship. He sensed their fear, a fear he had instilled in them from the moment he had come aboard. Beyond the fear was counterintuitive mixture of reluctant and aggressivity. They were coming to intercept the prisoners. The elevator shafts, that's where they were going. That is where he would meet them.

He levitated his companion again. It would be a while yet before the lady Cortel awoke, and they could spare no time. Quickly, he turned down the corridor in the same direction as his attackers above.

"Oh my!" A protocol droid squealed as it scurried out of the Black Hand's path with its stiff, mechanical gait. It pressed itself against the wall as if it were trying to meld with it.

Oscura ignored the robot and carried on, taking care to direct the unconscious girl behind him. The chain binding them helped pull her along as they delved deeper into the ship. At first, his movements were sluggish, disjointed and awkward, his body not yet cooperating fully after that electromagnetic blast it had endured. They were

moving at a steady but a pace far too casual for an escaping prisoner. There was simply no need to exert himself, certainly no more than necessary. He needed to conserve his energy. He could not afford to be wasteful with his head swimming and his ears still ringing. His path was a straight one. His enemies would stand before him soon enough. He had to be ready. His movements grew progressively smoother with every step. Before long, he was striding down the hallway in straight-backed, towering fashion.

They reached the bottom of the elevator before he and Arcia did. They were insects to him, worthless, unthreatening critters to be crushed beneath his heels. He sensed the four of them before he saw them, spread out in a line before the elevator shaft. It was likely that their captain had been watching the prisoners progress, and cued the guards on their whereabouts. Unphased, Oscura activated the door between him and this would-be threat. The door slid open. He pressed on as blasters were trained on him.

"Stop!" commanded what appeared to be the leader. There was no way of telling who or what it was. It wore a unisex armor and its helmet hid its face. It spoke through the helmet's synthesizer. Oscura did not bother looking at his companions.

The Dark Jedi complied.

"Drop...er... lower the girl!"

Again, Oscura obeyed, lowering his hand and, in turn, Arcia. The woman stirred ever slightly as she landed. The Black Hand felt no fear, no tension. In fact, he was amused. It had been a long time since he had been confronted in such barbaric manner. To be faced down by blasters, how exciting! He took one deep breath.

A wave of his hand was all it took. The dark side gripped them and, like a parasite, burrowed itself within them. Through the Force, Oscura sensed their fear devour

them. All four guards collapsed to their knees at once, clenching their heads between their gloves. They screamed in unison; a sinister melody reverberating through the freighter's durasteel halls. Oscura cackled as he revelled in their terror.

The masked leader's blaster rifle clattered to the floor. Inspired, the Dark Jedi strode towards the weapon. The chain extended behind him and he had to drag the woman several paces. There was little resistance between the woman's light weight and the floor's soft, metallic surface. He held his hand out, palm downward. The blaster floated into his grip.

He could not remember ever wielding such devices, at least, not since his awakening nearly forty years past. The hint of a memory from an age long gone suggested he may have done so in the ancient days of the Dread Cult. The elongated weapon, with its bulky barrel and short stock felt heavy, unbalanced in his hand. He did not know the make, nor did he care, but he suspected it was his lack of experience at fault, and not the weapon's quality.

The leader was recuperating faster than his companions. It dared look up at the Black Hand through the slit in his helmet. The light reflected in its human eyes. Oscura longed for nothing more than to extinguish this light. He brought the blaster up and pressed the nozzle against the helmet. He pulled the trigger. A shrill detonation followed, a flash of red, and the rifle bucked. The leader dropped to the ground with a resounding thud.

Oscura shrugged his sore shoulder. Those things had a surprising kick to them. He'd wasted enough time. Striding from one kneeling thug to the next, he repeated the motion. Barrel was pressed against head. He pulled the trigger. The gun bucked. All guards lay dead before long. With a sneer, the Dark Jedi tossed the weapon aside.

Crude, he thought. Someway, somehow, he felt diminished for using the barbaric weapon. It paled greatly in comparison to the power of the dark side.

A crackle commandeered the Dark Jedi's attention. The comm hanging from the leader's belt spat static. A voice—the same gravelly voice Oscura had heard in the cell—spoke through, "You will pay for this, old man!"

Oscura scanned the room for a camera. When he found it, he offered a wicked smile. He would soon meet whoever the voice belonged to, and when he did, suffice to say he had plans for his captor.

"It was a grave mistake, captain, to lock the Black Hand in a cell," Oscura said towards the camera, "Graver yet to send this insignificant rabble to intercept me."

"Taking you aboard the *Arach* was my first mistake. Letting you live, my second. Worry not, Black Hand. I am quite done making mistakes." There was a click. The communication link cut off.

"We shall meet before long," promised the Dark Jedi.

Lifting his hand up abruptly, Cyris yanked the lady Cortel off the ground and swung her around him. He guided her ahead into the elevator and followed suit. Setting her down, he turned his hand to the elevator controls. Following the indications printed on the panel, he set course for the bridge level.

The elevator door swished to a close. There was a jolt and up they went. The sudden upward motion woke Arica with a start. Her glassy eyes darted around the circular cabin before settling on Oscura. She jumped again at the sight of him and pushed herself up to her feet, her back sliding up the elevator's wall.

Confusion, fear and anger blazed in her. To his surprise, she managed to keep a cold, calculated expression on her soft traits.

"Where are we?" she asked, expectation as jagged as a vibroblade in her voice.

"On our way towards freedom," he answered as he tried to sound reassuring.

Her eyes narrowed as his futile attempt.

"I am done playing your games, Black Hand," she announced as she straightened herself. Hands crossed behind her back in true militaristic fashion, she continued, "You have used me as a tool twice now, there will not be a third."

He could not blame her, yet he felt no guilt, no remorse in his actions. She was exactly that: a tool. He would continue to wield her as he saw fit. As a matter of fact, she was worse than a tool. He knew of her role in Clan Odan Urr and their pathetic resistance. He had not remembered quite so well upon awakening in for the first time in their cell, but it had all come back to him in the events that followed. He knew her. He knew her purpose. He knew *his* purpose.

Regardless, he decided to humor her, "You have my most sincere apologies, Lady Cortel. Believe me when I had our best interest at heart. There were few ways to trick these peasants."

"I do not believe you," she snapped, her composure wavering for but a moment, "And you could have opened that door without having them trigger that shock floor."

"Wrong. Opening the door at the wrong time would have tipped our hand." He was planning to elaborate when the elevator drew to a stop.

"The command bridge." Arcia stated before turning her distrustful gaze to her companion, "Aiming straight for the heart?"

The Black Hand gave a nod, but his focus was on the rooms ahead. There they were, more guards. Ten of them had taken cover in the room beyond. He sensed their confidence. These thugs could not possibly grasp the power he wielded. He turned to the woman at his side and motioned to the wall curving away from the sliding doors.

"You may want to take cover," he advised.

She took his advice, but he could sense that she was annoyed with herself for doing so. It was truly an affront for such a strong-willed woman to be at his mercy. *Good. Let anger feed you,* he thought.

The elevator doors parted. As he had sensed, there were indeed ten guards, all with blasters trained on the elevator. What he had not sensed, what had eluded him were to fourteen battle droids standing between him and the guards. The Force warned him just in time to dodge back for cover into the elevator. Stun bolts sparked against the back wall.

"Huh! So you're *not* all-knowing after all!" Arcia mused, a rare smirk on her lips.

"It would appear not," he admitted with more than a little shame.

"Solution?" She asked. He knew she was mocking him, prodding him. He considered using her as a shield but dismissed the idea as pure fantasies. Their assailants' weapons may have been set to stun, he was done dragging her about.

He peered out through the opening. It was some sort of storage chamber. Crates were stacked left and right, offering much in the way of cover. He turned his attention to the nearest battle droid. He was surprised to see such archaic models still in action this long after the Clone Wars, but then it only made sense to find them in such ragtag company. It was a suiting environment for them. They likely sold for cheap, and properly refurbished, they would offer a suitable security force. More importantly, they made great fodder for a Jedi. The droid spotted him and cocked its cylindrical head in his direction.

"T'rget 'quir'd" it spat through its defective vocalizer as it brought its blaster to bare. It fired.

Cyris swung back into cover. When the two shots fizzled, he popped back out and swung his hand. The Force snaked out from his fingertips towards the droid. He

clenched his fist and yanked. The blaster ripped from the robot's grip and flew into the elevator. Oscura ducked back out of the doorway. Another wave of his hand placed the weapon square in Arcia's hands.

"Lady Cortel, I believe it is your turn," he announced, motioning for the open doorway, a smile on his twisted lips.

The woman looked the blaster over, turning it this way and that in her hands. The way she looked at it caused the Dark Jedi to doubt whether she had received training with the weapon or not. He was about to speak when she gripped it firmly with two hands and nestled the stock against her. She shifted, pressing her back to the wall.

"I hope you can keep up, old man," she warned, "If you hang, one of us gets blasted."

"This old man still has some speed in him," the Black Hand assured her. He summoned the Force through him, allowed its essence to flow through him. The power coursed through his veins, into his muscles. For a fleeting moment, he felt young again; the Combat Master, the Herald, the assassin.

She peered once. Twice.

"Now!" She opened fire as she shot out of cover. He followed, gliding behind her as she slipped into cover behind a first stack of crates. There was a clattering of metal and she said, "One down."

"Is that all?" he mocked.

"I'm not marksman, Black Hand."

She poked her head out. He felt her excitement spike in the Force as she dashed across the gap to the opposing crates. He took her place but the length of the chain allowed him to stay on his side. Arcia leaned out of cover and let loose a barrage of red bolts. More falling metal.

"That's four."

"Ten remain."

"Never satisfied," she muttered.

"Hi!" squeaked a battle droid as it popped out from behind Arcia's pile, effectively flanking her.

Oscura launched the droid up through the Force. Before it hit the ceiling, he swung his hand back downwards. It smashed into the ground with such momentum that its limbs were ripped from the body in a shower of sparks.

"Aw! They just put me back together!" moaned the battle droid as it tried to move its limbless body. Arcia disabled it with one shot to the bucket.

"Down center!" Arcia launched straight down the middle. He ran after her. They pushed their way through the cargo hold, downing droids and guards alike. He had to admit, she wasn't so bad. He'd seen better shooters, and it was quite clear that she was used to lead those who did the shooting, but the way she used intuition and tactics to press their advantage was commendable.

"It is a shame you are not sensitive to the Force, Lady Cortel," he said, "You would have made a fine Sith. Or Jedi."

Arcia fired blindly around the cover as she said, "Yeah, yeah. I got plenty of that from my parents growing up! Didn't care then, don't care now."

Each time they quit cover, enemies went down and the unlikely duo progressed through the chamber. Elated, Oscura was reveling in the chaos that was the firefight. It had been so long. As the Grand Marshall of the Cocytus Empire, a nonsensical position he had accepted only to humor the Palatinaen Emperor, he could not have been further removed from the action. When he was directly involved in combat, their enemies fell before them. He giggled at the thought of purposefully handicapping

himself in future encounters. She was caught by surprise and pushed back on her heels when four battle droids counter-charged them. She slipped. Before she even hit the ground, Oscura was stepping over her. They fired into him, but the bolts crashed against his palm only to be deflected by the Force.

"Inconceivable!" cried one of the droids.

"Better believe it," Oscura responded. The air around his outstretched hand crackled in blueish sparks. Lightning forked out from his fingertips and lashed out at the droids. The discharge hit the front line, paralyzing them, their synthetic screams filling the air. Electrical tendrils engulfed their bodies before the power shot through them onto the next two battle droids. The Black Hand laughed as the dark side wrecked havoc on the hapless mechanical beings. As guards and more droids popped out to take shots at him, the lightning chained out to them. Oscura's laughter morphed into a roar as he unleashed all of his hatred and madness. When he finally released the Force and sagged to one knee, nine bodies lay on the ground, still writhing. Arcia was staring up at him with wide, fearful eyes and a gaping mouth.

"Enough..." A voice spoke from one of the comms again.

A wracking cough overtook Oscura then. His lungs heaved with every drawn out, agonizing hacks, squirting blood onto the floor. He tried to breath through his clenched throat. He only managed terse, sharp breaths that needled his lungs mercilessly.

The captain could have taken advantage of this, but any such notion was quelched when a guard stepped out of cover and caught a bolt from Arcia's blaster.

"Enough!"

Oscura nearly keeled over between coughs. He pressed his burning head to the cool durasteel and beat his fist on the ground as he struggled to regain control. He could barely think, let alone summon the Force to his aid.

"Are you ready to let us go free?" Arcia demanded to the unseen speaker. Oscura was grateful that she was willing to take the lead.

"I am ready to talk. Please, join me as guests on the bridge."

It took a moment for Oscura's coughing to subside, and a while longer for him to recover. To his surprise, Arcia helped him to his feet.

"Your aid is n—" he began.

"Stow it. This is your doing. I'm not going in there without you." There was nothing but loathing seething in her green eyes. Up close, Oscura finally realized what seem to be unnatural about them. He had not imagined the faint glow before. These were ocular implants. He wondered if the shock floor's discharges might have damaged them. Unlikely. After all, she had done quite good in the skirmish.

The remaining guards and droids appeared before them with lowered weapons. Togrutas, Gamorreans, Twi'leks, Rodians, there were quite a variety of aliens crewing the ship. One of the battle droids stepped up. Unlike the others, this one had a freshly painted yellow stripe running down its plastron. It motioned one metallic arm to demonstrate the way towards the bridge.

"Captain Rend will see you now," it said.

"Of course he will," acquiesced Cortel as she pushed past the buckethead.

Oscura followed, actively suppressing another cough. He struggled to keep a controlled, fluid gait as they moved to the bridge. Droids and guards escorted them, effectively blocking the way back. They crossed a series of rooms with varying functions before they finally reached the bridge. There, they were greeted by more

guards and a towering, spider-looking creature. It had wide shoulders and six arms, all of them as thick as tree-trunks and covered with greying fur. Its big round head sat low above the chest, as if it possessed no neck, or at least a very short one. It reminded Oscura of a gigantic arachnid beast he had encountered in the depths of Vanir II. Its six red eyes never even looked at the woman at Oscura's side. They were focused on the Dark Jedi, and him alone. As the prisoners approached him, the pedipalps that flanked its mouth quivered. Its clothes were standard fare for a ship captain, if a little undersized.

"And so we finally meet face to face, Black Hand," the creature said. Without the metallic distortion of the comm, its voice sounded much deeper, cavernous even.

"So we do. But let not appearances fool you, mercenary. We may be chain-bound, but we do not come to you as prisoners." Oscura straightened himself as he spoke. The captain was tall, but he was taller. He looked down on the Harch creature with loathing.

"Perhaps you don't, friend. But then I wonder how we will discuss the terms of your release?"

There was movement amongst the guards. Both Arcia and Oscura glanced about the room. There were quite a few of them, as many droids as they had faced in the cargo hold, and more pirates. For all his power, even the Black Hand ran the risk of being overwhelmed. The odds were not in their favor. However, there were no signs that the captain himself knew this.

"My name is Va'ars Rend, Black Hand. From what I understand from your previous cell-locked discussions, you are Cyris Oscura and our brave lady here is Arcia Cortel, yes?"

"That would be correct, pirate," confirmed Arcia with a scything tone.

"That wounds me, miss Cortel. We are not pirates. We are mere mer—" Rend began before Oscura caught him off.

"This is of no consequence to us. You invite us here to discuss our release. We come here to discuss your surrender."

Laughter rippled through the room as countless alien species and droids laughed in unison. The captain was not laughing. Oscura reached out with the Force to connect with him, to spy on his emotions. Va'ars Rend was not a violent, hateful man. In fact, Oscura sense compassion and kindness, clouded only by the fear that gripped his heart. The alien had no wish to see further bloodshed.

Oscura stepped forward as he began to explain, "In truth, my presence here was not random. You, and your crew, were chosen for a reason."

Silence fell on the bridge.

Both Arcia and Rend spoke at once, "What are you talking about?"

The Dark Jedi looked over his shoulder to his chained companion. The shadow of regret danced in his mind as his one eye settled upon Arcia. He cared not for her. He harbored no emotions towards her. Much like these sad creatures that surrounded him, the woman had been caught in the crossfire of war. She had potential which few mundanes could ever dream of having. Alas, her allegiance to the Odan Urr Resistance was waste of her abilities.

"The *Arach* was chosen for a very specific reason, captain Rend. You see, there are few smugglers on Nar Shaddaa—or in Hutt space for that matter—that has a cleaner slate than your crew. No money owed. Never once a bounty on your head. What we needed was a ghost."

There was a tug on the chain around the Black Hand's wrist. Arcia was edging away from him even she stared at him with a thousand questions in her eyes.

"Cyris, what are you talking about?" she asked.

"Who is *we*?" the Harch wondered.

"*We* are of no concern to you."

Arcia knew the answer, "The Inquisitorius."

"The what?" The captain asked before the obvious truth dawned on him. He gazed at Oscura expectantly, "*You* are the envoy I was expecting?"

The Dark Jedi gave a single, methodical nod.

Arcia was whiter than a wampa cub.

Chapter 4

She awoke with a scream, flinching before the darkness that hailed her. The void surrounded Arcia, submersed her, with nary a sign of life beyond. She was nothing. An insignificant proton swirling at the heart of a black hole. She strained in search of a reference point, a landmark, even as she kicked and pushed herself backwards. In a quest to ground herself in reality, she climbed and rolled over something rigid and cold. Nothing registered with her through the panic. Her only anchor, the only telltale sign that she was yet living, was the feeling of dirt and grime smeared against her skin. She clung to that one fleeting reality as she crawled through the shadows. Her back finally found the coarse surface of the concrete wall. She pressed herself into it, pulling her legs into her chest. Her heart was pounding, a hollow, steady thumping in

her temples. She gulped, swallowing the little amount of thickened saliva had built up in her mouth. The collar around her neck made even doing that difficult. She winced as she tried to slip a pair of fingers between metal and flesh. All it managed to accomplished was to reawaken the dull pain cause by her chafed skin.

A single, digital bleep broke the deafening silence and yanked her consciousness to the moment. Her eyes directly went to the elusive blinking red lights she had overlooked; the blinking red lights of *his* diagnostics system. The Black Hand was with her in the room. Realizing it, she also noticed the soft, nearly imperceptible sound of his breathing. For the past two weeks—at least she thought it had been two weeks—he had come to her. He then sat with her in the darkness, seldom uttering a single word. That breathing was the only thing that she heard... until the nightmares came.

What she had endured at his hands back on the *Arach*, had been but a taste of what he could summon within her. Again and again she relived flashes of past, present and future events, each more traumatic than the last. The razing of her homeworld, followed by the utter destruction of that which she now called home. The death of friends and allies, the suffering of countless innocents die of her failure, nay, due to her betrayal. Again and again she saw them. She heard them. She felt them. She *loved* them. In the blink of an eye, they were taken away from her. Again. She lost everything she had known. Everything she fought to build. She knew not why he tormented her so. All that she knew, was that she had to endure his machinations. Someway, somehow, she needed to retain her grasp on sanity. Yet she wondered if perhaps madness had already swallowed her mind. Was this pit of darkness the crumbling remains of her mind; an existence where only he and the chain around her neck existed?

No, Arcia knew that to be false. Her mind returned to the cold, rigid object she had just climbed over: the body of a twi'lek serving girl. The hiss of a lightsaber filled her ears and a crimson blade flashed before her eyes. The servant girl's dying wail echoed in her memory. There had been a sizzling hiss as plasma met flesh. The brave Twi'lek girl collapsed to the ground. The glowing, magma-colored arc where the blade had bisected the alien would forever be etched in Arcia's mind. The girl's crime had been kindness.

But Arcia knew the unforgiving truth: the girl had died because of her.

Fear. Anger. Hatred. Doubt. The intensity of her emotions was peaking. Cyris could sense her feelings more vividly than ever before, almost as if they were his own. But this one was strong. Too strong. Against all expectations, she withstood him. While it was clear that she was deeply affected by his unorthodox tactics, tactics that had turned Jedi to the dark side, the mundane creature somehow clung to sanity. Cyris wondered no longer why the Inquisitorius' more conventional methods had been fruitless. Her will was beskar. Torture and threats would not work on a woman who had lost everything, nor would it work on a woman whose every waking moments were a lie. In truth, the Black Hand was at a loss. What he had uncovered since she was taken off the grid was intriguing and it helped him redirect his efforts, but there was little of real value. The fact the her real name was Destri Corden, that she was born from Force-sensitive parents on the planet of New Tython, or that she had served as Admiral in the Arconan fleet, it was all quite meaningless to him. The whereabouts of the Resistance was all that mattered to Cyris Oscura and the Inquisitorius. Alas, the

lady Cortel was not about to endanger what meager life she had made for herself. He had to find a way around this wall.

The *Arach* initiative had been a risky gamble from its inception. Its results were quite uncertain. Even now, it was slow to bear fruit. However, the endeavour was not entirely devoid of victory. Ceding the captive and himself to mercenaries working outside the influence of the Dark Brotherhood, and the subsequent destruction of said mercenaries, had erased all potential trails leading to the Odan-Urr prisoner. Now holed up in the bowels of Hutta Town on Nar Shaddaa, Arcia and Cyris were, for all intent and purposes, nonexistent. The Resistance would never find Arcia Cortel. Not unless he wanted them too.

A door behind Cyris slid open. Orange light flooded the concrete tomb that was Arcia's prison. Like a spotlight it illuminated the prisoner who curled in a ball against the far wall. She whimpered as she threw her hands up to shield her eyes from the light. She was filthy and emaciated. She had lost considerable amounts of weight during her seventeen days in captivity, and for good reason. On Oscura's orders, she had been fed food unfit even for womp rats. He suspected the chow was hard to swallow and harder to keep down. A foolish servant girl had tried to sneak in a meal scrounged up from his own leftovers, a misguided notion that had cost the alien her life. A vicious grin split Oscura's lips as he looked over the Twi'lek's corpse lying haphazardly between him and the prisoner. He knew that guilt would chip away at Arcia's resolve.

The door had not opened randomly and before long, Rend Va'ars cleared his throat. The hulking Harch was one of three mercenaries to make it off the *Arach* with their lives. Very little effort had been required to coerce the trio into the Black Hand's service.

“Lord Black Hand, as you requested.”

The Dark Jedi pushed himself to his feet and nodded to the former captain. The arachnid-looking creature disappeared from the doorway and before long the overhead lamps came on with a buzz. For the first time in weeks, the chamber was alight, which only panicked the captive. He could sense Arcia’s confusion overtake her other emotions. She seemed to shrink against the wall, but it wasn’t long before the Ky’ree and Hurot, the Gran and Bothan guards from the *Arach*, pulled her up to her feet. She nearly fell again as they stepped away but she caught herself on shaky legs. She moved no further. Her eyes could have bored holes in Oscura’s face the way she glared at him. Not for the first time, the Black Hand was enthralled by the fire that still blazed in her.

“You would have made such a powerful Sith,” he praised with not a hint of sarcasm.

She spat, never once taking her eyes from his. He approached her. She stood her ground even as he came within two strides’ distance. The two guards shifted, ready to pull her back should she attack their new master. She remained unmoving, even as Oscura clutched her pretty face in his reinstalled prosthetic arm. Her expression did not falter, not even slightly, when his clawed fingers drew blood from her chin.

“You are a magnificent specimen,” Cyris explained, “You have the potential to rule worlds. If you would but submit to Darth Pravus and the Iron Throne. You are far worth more than those common peasants you call family.”

There was no response. Her optical implants flared as did the anger in her, but she did not rebuke him. Blood trickled from her chin as he released her. He wondered if perhaps, through the hatred, she might ultimately see the truth in his words. She was a smart woman, smarter than most he had had the displeasure of working with.

"You chose to ally yourself with the rabble of Odan-Urr, an abnormality that should never have been allowed to exist. I wonder if you do so only out of duty for your homeworld of New Tython." Oscura was genuinely intrigued. He himself had never felt attachment to his homeworld of Lothide. Only dark memories of the wretched place survived. "Alas, that world was destroyed. Odan-Urr has taught you to blame Darth Pravus, yet it was the Jedi who brought war to your world."

"Lies," she croaked. It was the first time she had willingly spoken since the *Arach*.

"Even now I sense the doubt in you. Search your feelings. You know it to be true. It is the Jedi who established your world as their base. They ingrained themselves in New Typhon's society and, in the end, they lured the Iron Legion there."

She was a bonfire of fury. A firestorm roared inside her mind, the flames of her ire spiraling on the winds of emotion. She was visibly shaking. Her fists were clenched so tight that her knuckles were white. Fatigue and starvation kept her from fighting on. Her feelings overwhelmed her. Her eyelids fluttered wildly, her optical implants rolled to back of her head and she collapsed. The Bothan was quick to react. Dropping his electrostaff, he dropped to his knees, catching the prisoner before she hit the ground. Compassion emanating from the diminutive alien. The Black Hand would remember this. Cradled in Hurot's arms, Arcia stared at Cyris, her stare glazed and distant.

"You have but to give me the coordinates to the Resistance's new headquarters," Oscura explained as he took one knee to speak to her at eye level, "Arcia, you will find my masters reward valuable information, as do I. Grasp this opportunity!"

The exhausted woman closed her eyes and pulled back. With a shrug of his pauldron, Oscura straightened himself and turned his attention to the Harch still standing by the doorway.

"Captain Rend, see that she is cleaned and properly fed."

The filthy, debris-choked streets of Hutta Town were rife with nightlife. Everywhere the Dark Jedi turned his one eye, creatures of all species cluttered the streets. Revellers and thugs, made up the vast majority of the lower level crowds. Here and there late-night hawkers shouted at uninterested passersby in an attempt to pawn off their trash. One of them, a ridiculous insectoid with bulging compound eyes and dripping mandibles tried to shove an oozing jar of some make into the Black Hand's cavernous hood. The Gran Ky'ree was quick to react, dragging the panicked insect into an alleyway. It took a moment for the Gran to return, closing the march behind his master.

Oscura reveled in the debauchery that filled the streets before him. Greed, lust, gluttony, and no small amount of bloodlust formed a silk web in the Black Hand's mind and for a rare moment, he considered indulging himself. Perhaps he would have Va'ars Rend round up some entertainment once business had been conducted. Cyris looked over his pointed pauldron at the cloaked woman following in tow. Her head was down, hidden in the shadows of her own hood. The hint of a chain glistened in the neon lights, linking her wrist to his as they had on the *Arach* weeks before. He had been reluctant to return the device to his wrist, but it was the safest way to ensure she would not somehow get away from him. His benefactors had been so kind to reveal the keycode in an encrypted transmission. He would not be bound to her longer than necessary. He gave a sharp tug on the chain and she stumbled forward.

"Do not linger, lady Cortel. We are expected!" His lathered his voice with mock excitement.

Va'ars Rend's six-armed shape pushed through the crowd ahead to intercept them. He gave Oscura a somber, acknowledging nod before motioning towards a nearby cantina. It was a rinky-dink building with a large archway for entrance. Inside there were strobing, multi-colored lights and a feverish bass rhythm fit for the young and far too annoying for an ancient being like the Black Hand. Before setting a single foot inside, he was considering just how he would kill those pesky musicians.

"Boss Vrego is at the back in a private room. He is eager to meet the fabled Black Hand," said the Harch with a click of his pedipalps.

"He knows of me?" Oscura wondered, only barely masking the surprise in his voice.

"Fabled were his words. I know nothing, but he seemed to be intrigued when I mentioned the name Cyris Oscura. He made the link."

Oscura stroked his beard as he followed Rend into the cantina through the arch. Va'ars lead the way towards the back, pushing and shoving patrons out of their way. More than a few eyes turned uneasily towards the cloaked figures that were escorted through their midst. Cyris thought back on the name Vrego, curious as to why the criminal was versed in Dark Brotherhood lore. The Brotherhood had long sought to remain hidden, unknown to Galactic politics. His identity being compromised did not bode well for Oscura. Perhaps using his real name had been a mistake, but then, how could he have foreseen this?

They passed a pair of armored Gamorrean guards, stout creatures that resembled green, upright Hapabores, and into a red lit chamber. Incense smoke was so thick inside that Oscura could only make out silhouettes. In the Force, he could sense two beings whose incoherent feelings could only be drug-induced. There was a focused,

no-nonsense humanoid, likely a bodyguard or bounty hunter. One stood out both as a silhouette and a tempest of pleasure and amusement in Oscura's mind.

A deep, rumbling voice the likes of which could only belong to a Hutt greeted them with a hearty, and customary, "Oscura! Die wanna wanga!"

"Greetings, Boss Vrego," Oscura responded with a sweeping bow. As he straightened back up, the Dark Jedi motioned for his bodyguards and Rend to wait outside. They exited without a word. Eager to return the courtesy, motioned one of his short fat arms. The bodyguard was up and urging two thick female Askajian out without delay. Soon, they were three, Vrego, Arcia and Cyris.

"Long time it's been since meeting illustrious member of the Dark Brotherhood," said the Hutt in laboured basic.

"Tell me, Hutt, how have you come by such information, I wonder? We of the Brotherhood make a point of hiding our true allegiance. It should not be known to you."

Vrego laughed before skirting the question, "Yet, Vrego knows. Funny how things work, no, *Pateesa?*"

"I imagine this is why you were so quick to volunteer yourself? Your competitors showed little interest. You, on the other hand, were quick to jump on the occasion when my representatives came to you," Oscura was more than a little suspicious of the Hutt. His kind seldom dealt in frivolities. They were grotesque, larger-than-life creatures, but they were merciless businessmen. They seldom did, or say things without undercurrents and hidden intentions.

"Ho ho! But Vrego does not miss chance to meet Black Hand to face. When you sell slave, I must have!"

Arcia gave a jolt at the mention of slaves. She shied away, skittering back, but Cyris yanked her forward with the chain. She struggled against him. She shoved away, tugged the chain in an attempt to knock Oscura off balance. The dark side was flowing through Cyris. As she rebelled, he let the power flow throw him. She swung for him but he was a blur. Sidestepping, he grabbed hold of her incoming forearm and twisted it behind her back. He kicked the back of her knees. Her arm bent awkwardly as she went down kneeling before the Hutt.

"Oooh! Fiesty one," Vrego mused.

"Untameable," Oscura spat, "She will make a poor slave. She has proven unbreakable."

"You make poor salesmen, Black Hand."

The amusement on Boss Vrego's toad face dropped when a feral smile cut across Oscura's disfigured face. The Dark Jedi could have sworn the Hutt's yellow, leathery hide had even paled. Because of the ambient red light, Cyris could not be sure.

"There is a market for that. You and I both know this, Boss Vrego. I may yet keep her for myself," Oscura admitted as he increased pressure on the kneeling prisoner's arm. Arcia whimpered.

"That true. I know buyers who pleasure breaking rebels like this one." The overgrown slug wagged his tail and heaved its bulk off its pedestal, or however he referred to his seating arrangements. There was a squishy thud as the Hutt settled on the ground. It pushed its great mass forward, stopping inches from the girl. She winced and tried once more to push away when Vrego lowered its humongous face and round wet eyes close to her face.

"Beautiful implants those," the Hutt said as he continued appraising her, "Pretty. Athletic. But malnourished. You're doing Black Hand?"

The Dark Jedi nodded, "And easily remedied."

"Not necessary if buyers want fight they can win."

"Mustafar take you both!" hissed Arcia as she struggled against Oscura.

"How much?" demanded the criminal.

Oscura released the captive. To her credit, the lady Cortel stood her ground before the filthy slug. He paced the room for a moment, stroking his greying beard with his real hand. Credits meant little to the Black Hand, neither could a low-life like Boss Vrego, a petty slaver, actually secure an alliance with the Grand Hutt Council. One thing did interest Oscura.

"I assume, Hutt, that your knowledge of the Brotherhood comes from past dealings with my kind. This information you claim to possess... it comes from a database does it not?"

The Hutt chuckled, a deep rumble, as he spoke, "Ah, so we back to knowledge of brotherhood. Yes. Yes, information come from data trade."

"What I want is this data. In exchange, you keep the troublesome girl free of all expenses. If you agree to this, I expect all data concerning the Dark Brotherhood or its agents to be destroyed."

"That be tricky, Black Hand," Vrego announced as he shrugged his stubby arms. He tapped his head. "Information in here. Hutt have vast memory. Physical data already destroyed. No deal but I offer many credits."

The Dark Jedi felt Arcia's eyes on him. He turned his eye to her. For the first time, he realized just how fatigued and weak she appeared. Gone was the militaristic posture. Gone was the pride. Her cheeks were sunken in, her eyes surrounded by dark circles. Her blond-streaked hair had lost its sheen. How was it possible that this woman still resisted him? Pride was a powerful thing, and the notion of failure did not

sit with with Cyris Oscura. He needed to know about the Resistance. It was no longer a matter of duty. Removed as he was from this Darth Pravus and his acolytes, it had never been about duty to them. No. It was a primal need and it was now stronger than ever before. He needed to break her, or she would die by his hands and his hands alone.

“Well?” the Hutt grumbled expectantly.

“It appears you have not what I desire, Vrego.”

The Hutt stomped his tail as he groaned.

“You come in Vrego’s home and disrespect! I teach you disrespect!” Boss Vrego rose like a tidal wave. Towering above Oscura and his captive, the monstrous slug roared. He came down with two clenched fist. A snap-hiss cut the air as twin plasma blades fanned out, nearly invisible in the red light if not for their white core. An agonizing moan filled the chamber. The Hutt came down belly first with a thunderous thud, bouncing as it wiggled the stumps of his severed arms. Oscura spun. The lightsaber slashed deep into slime and blubber. Vrego reared up again with a moan. His entire body quivered. His thick, lulling tongue slipped from his gaping mouth. The Hutt slaver toppled with but a gurgle, his mass sprawled across the private room’s floor. The sheer force of his fall threw Arcia to her back.

Oscura was standing over her. His prosthetic hand shot out. Through the power of the dark side, he pulled her neck into his clawed grip. He growled, his mechanical hand squeezing her throat.

“You will tell me all that you know concerning the Resistance, Lady Cortel, or you will die by my hand.”

Va'ars Rend set the girl down with as much care as he could manage. Unconscious, Arcia sagged along the wall into an awkward position. The Harch propped her head up with methodical care as he fastened the chain around her neck with a second pair of arms. Her face was still puffed up and caked with blood. The Black Hand had done a number on that poor girl. Rend felt raw, unforgiving guilt for the part he had played in her captivity on the *Arach*, and the part he was forced to play even now. He had no love for the Black Hand or his anonymous benefactors. As a matter of fact, he understood very little about their motives. In truth, he was as much a prisoner as she was. If he did not play the part, the sorcerer would end him.

The former captain thought back on that retirement he longed for. He recalled the scruffy faces of all his grandchildren. There was nothing in the galaxy he wished more than to hold them again. How long had it been? Six years since he had last seen them? All this for the lure of riches, the promise of a better life should he live long enough to see it. It had been in his reach. He could have left smuggling behind and returned home but he had stuck by. He had to have accepted that damnable contract! Never once had he expected to find himself beholden to some sort of Jedi out of children's storybooks.

Rend looked over his shoulders to the Ky'ree and Hurot. The two goons were guarding the entrance to the concrete cell. The Bothan twapped its disabled staff against the Gran's skull. The big guy swatted the stick away and shook a fist. They were bickering again. *Perfect.*

"Arcia," he whispered. He shook her lightly at first. When she did not respond, he shook her harder. "Pssst. Wake up, kid."

She stirred with a faint whimper. She mumbled something unintelligible. Her lips were so swollen that Va'ars could not be certain what she had said was unconscious rambling or if she'd actively responded. With one thick, grubby thumb he pried her eyelid up. Arcia's optical implant flared and she woke up with a start. He reacted quickly, pressing his hand over her mouth to stifle her startled scream.

"We need to get you out of here," the Harch whispered, "If you stay here... he will kill you."

The prisoner attempted to push him away but he was far too big and strong, especially in her current state. One eye was barely visible beneath the swelling in her brow. The other was on him.

"The only reason you are still alive is because Vrego's bodyguard interrupted *him*"

"You can't help me, pirate," snapped Arcia.

"You are wrong. It is clear now that you are of some important. You must have allies. This entire ploy was to get you off grid, untraceable. If I leak coordinates to your allies..."

"I don't trust you, *sleemo*."

"Yeah, yeah. I am not doing this out of the kindness of my own hearts. I am looking after me, and you, sister, are my ticket out of this mess. Once the man is done with you, do you think he will keep me around? I'm a liability. I know too much."

"Hey, everything ok, bossman?" called the Gran from the door. Va'ars looked over his shoulders to find the two guards staring at him.

"Yeah, boys. Just finishing up," he replied. He turned to the prisoner, hoping she would cooperate, "Last chance."

"I heard that before," she responded.

"Don't get cute with me now."

She said nothing. She just stared at him. He'd never been good at reading expressions, and her battered face made it all the more difficult. His heart sank. She wasn't going to cooperate. She had been through too much. He was her enemy. He was a bad guy. With a long, desperate sigh, he pushed up. He took two steps before she finally spoke.

"There is one person. She can get us out."

A wave of relief washed over him. All he had to do was sneak a transmission out to this contact. If he managed, there would be hope for them yet. The faces of his grandchildren seemed all the more vivid now. He might just see them again.

Chapter 5

They were attractive, every single one of them. There were Togrutas, Twi'leks, a Mirialan, a Zabrak, and one human. They danced through the smoke filled room, smelling of corellian wine and cheap perfume. The Black Hand sat straight-backed on his throne, rolling the stem of a crystal wine cup between two mechanical fingers. He watched them with bated breath as they swayed their hips, their bodies so close to one another's that their skin nearly touched. Sweat beaded down their backs and looked like small glistening gems in the skylight. In the Force, they formed an overpowering tide of fear and discomfort. It was an effect of his aura, brought on by his narrow connection to the dark side, but more than that, he revelled in their

perpetual dread. The fear of punishment drove them to perfection as they danced for him. He had not felt such delight in decades.

It would not be enough. Even these succulent beings were not enough to keep his mind off Arcia Cortel or his shameful failure. One more week had passed since the meeting with that slime-ridden filth, Vrego. Selling the prisoner into slavery had been a bluff, a ploy to illustrate the hopelessness of her situation. She was at his mercy and he needed her to know that. He had been so certain that the prisoner—closer than ever before to her breaking point—would finally cede before such an ignominious fate. A military admiral reduced to pleasing her slave master's base desires; Oscura could think of no worse fate for one like her. Yet again, against all expectations, she had rebuked him. She had suffered by his hand but this did little to sate the Dark Jedi.

Following the meeting with the Hutt criminal, Oscura had abandoned the lady Cortel to solitude. Va'ars and his two cronies were forbidden to set foot inside her quarters or otherwise reach out to her. She had not been fed since. He had watched through the holovids as the desperate woman had tried to take her life with the chain around her neck. She had nearly succeeded in choking herself, but instinctive self-preservation had kept her from ending her existence.

He knew not where the epiphany originated, nor what had tipped him so abruptly, but it suddenly dawned on him like a star destroyer crashing down on city block. Sitting in his quarters, watching these dancers perform for him, he understood. He had not failed. No. From that moment when he first awoke across from her in that frigid cell back on the *Arach*, he had pictured the collapse of that emotional barrier in her mind. He had fantasized about her snivelling pleas for mercy even as she blurted out all which she knew concerning the Odan-Urr rebellion. The sheer desire to experience this collapse, this submission that never came, it had clouded his judgment

and rendered him utterly blind to the truth.

That truth was simple: she would *never* tell him. Not because of some impregnable will or mental barrier, nor was it due to ignorance. Oh no. She knew *everything*. Had she been a Jedi, he could have bent her to his will, lured her to the dark side of the Force and turned her against her former allies. Unbeknownst to him, the situation was a whole lot simpler. She *was* broken. His methods had been successful in that regard. There was no denying it. It was clear to him then. She had surrendered herself to her fate. She had forfeited her very existence in order to protect her people. This was the kind of woman that she was. A woman willing to endure *anything* for a cause greater than herself. It was her duty and purpose. Above all else, it was her honor. And without honor, she was nothing. Worse than nothing, without honor she became those she so despised.

The dancers swayed ever so sensually as they drew closer to Cyrus. He took a sip from his wine cup as he regarded them. They swirled around his throne with smiles on their lips, and fear glistening in their eyes. Their hands, their skin, their bodies grazed him. The air swirled around him, filling his lungs with their smell. He barely registered them.

The importance of his realization, the truth he had long struggled to comprehend, far outweighed petty pleasure. They moved about him, running their fingers over him, over his lips, along his robes. He only saw *her* in his mind's eye. Arcia Cortel. The woman who had reduced him to a brooding, reclusive tyrant. This desire, this longing to destroy the prisoner burned inside him. He had been made a fool of and he had allowed it to endure for far too long. No one dared play so with the Black Hand.

His lips quivered at the very thought. He *needed* her. Never had he desired to kill so vividly.

The diagnostics system on his robes beeped frantically, ripping his attention back to the present. It began with a light sweat. There was an itch in his throat, a rash escalating quickly until his throat clamped shut. He lurched forward then, knocking away the wine cup. The crystal glass smashed against the floor as he pushed to his feet. The dancers around him froze at his frantic movements. Some scampered away as he staggered forward. He had been poisoned. His lungs were on fire. A thousand scenarios swirled in his mind. Who dared poison him? Someone seeking revenge for Boss Vrego? Va'ars Rend? Had the Inquisitorius come to punish him for failing?

He saw her then. The human dancer was smiling, her piercing blue eyes riveted on him.

Warm fluid was flowing from his nose. Sudden, wracking pain tore through his gut and pulled him off his feet. He crumbled before his throne. In a last ditched attempt at survival, he called upon the Force even as darkness threatened to claim him. Oh how he longed to rejoin the dark.

Not yet.

Va'ars Rend led the human dancer down the hall toward Arcia's cell. Though the woman assured Rend that the Black Hand was dead, he moved with haste. He had underestimated the sorcerer time and again, and he wasn't about to lose his head over it. He'd stuck his neck out far enough for the Cortel woman enough as is. He stopped the would-be rescuer just around the corner from the cell.

"Two guards up ahead," he said.

The woman nodded and a pair of small blasters seemed to appear in her hands out of thin air. He looked her up and down with a dumbfounded expression. He could not begin to fathom where she had hidden those guns in that revealing synthetic outfit. He could make out every single curve of her body.

"No killing. These two are idiots, but they don't deserve to die," he told her. She stared at him coolly. He puffed his chest and crossed his arms. Rolling her eyes as both guns vanished. She motioned for him to take the lead.

He did so and headed straight for the Gran and his Bothan partner, moving with purpose. Hurot was the first to see him and cocked his head.

"Trouble, boss?" the Bothan asked.

"No. The old man wants this one to clean up the prisoner," the Harch did not care to lie to his boys but it was for their own good, "My guess is she's going back on the market tonight."

The Gran gave a shrug, "Sooner she's off our hands, sooner we go free."

Va'ars chuckled uncomfortably, "Yea, free."

The former captain stepped past the two guards and punched a code into the wall terminal. The door slid open on a pitch black chamber. Light from the doorway illuminated the debilitated husk of Arcia Cortel. The prisoner frantically scurried off into the darkness like a nocturnal beast caught in the headlight of a speeder bike.

"By Mand'alor!" the dancer gasped. She gave a shrill shriek as wheeled on Ky'ree and Hurot and brought their heads crashing together. Her blasters flashed in her hands again. Va'ars snatched her wrists and yanked her back.

"You end them, I end you," he threatened. His voice softened as he said, "Arcia needs you, Elequin. Focus on that."

With those words, he released the woman who rushed into the darkness. Va'ars grabbed the two guards by the collars and dragged them inside. No sense leaving them out there for others to see them.

He heard whispers from inside the room. He did not wish to interrupt a heartfelt reunion, but considering that time was of the essence, he clicked his tongue.

"Let's get moving, Mandalorian!"

Elequin stepped into the light as she guided the weakened prisoner forward with one arm around her shoulders and one on her waist. Arcia stumbled but the mandalorian woman caught her. The Harch tried to calm himself but found himself anxiously tapping his foot. Another three laborious steps and he'd had it.

"Move, I'll carry her," he growled as reached for Arcia.

Elequin moved like lightning and cold metal pressed into the Harch's neck. He heard the blaster's energy cell rewinding up.

"I will end you, Rend," Elequin promised.

"Look, I get it. If we had time, I'd get her to a bacta pod. We don't. You are kidding yourself if you think the Black Hand is dead."

"Then I'll end him now!"

"You can try. Spoiler: You won't make it and I'll have to carry the girl out over my shoulder anyways." Va'ars did not wait for Elequin's approval. He reached out and hoisted the prisoner up over his shoulder. Relief washed over him when the Mandalorian reluctantly stored her guns.

"Let... me go," demanded Arcia.

"Unless you can fly, that's not happening, sister." He would have none of it. If they didn't put enough distance between them and the Black Hand, none of them would be

leaving Hutta Town. Ignoring his two new companion's complaints, he ducked out of the door with the girl hanging like a sack of jogan fruits.

"Time to go, ladies!"

His laughter echoed throughout the room as he writhed over the concrete floor. It was a dry, ominous, cackling sound, dripping of madness. The dark side of the Force seeped through him as it aided his immune system to filter the effects of the fatal poison. It felt as if his entire body had been dunked in a pool of lava. He pictured his very skin turning black and crackling before the unbearable heat. He reveled in the agony, which only amplified his laughter. When the seething bite of the poison began to dissipate, they gave way to more sinister emotions. The room around him appeared to fade into darkness. Tendrils of blood-colored flog slithered over the ground and swirled around him. The air dragged through his dry throat with each labored breath.

A faint fog formed before his lips as the air grew ever colder. A shiver quivered up and down his spine as he recognized their presence. The crimson fog carpeted the darkness. The smoke rose upwards, forming into silhouettes. The apparitions surrounded Cyris, forming a sea of spectral forms, all of them remnants of times long past. There were hundreds of them, spreading well beyond the confines of the meager chamber in which he had been standing moments before.

He knew well the reason of their coming, even as he was losing control of his mind. His strained, maddened laughter welcomed them.

The cloaked figures of the Dread Cult formed the first ring around him. They were twelve, the very first Dark Jedi who had rallied to him in an age long before the Clone

Wars. In their presence, the legends of the Black Hand had come to life. Towering above the Dread Cultists was the silhouette of his master, the treacherous Kaine Mandaala. Oscura beheld the presence of the Dark Lord Jac Cotelin, the witch Arania Lawakiro, of the tyrannical Mejas Doto, and beyond them countless dead apprentices dotted the sea of ghosts. Beyond these were countless faces he could no longer remember by name. Victims, enemies, allies, endless faces that had belonged at one time or another to the Dark Brotherhood.

Long, slender fingers outlined the shoulders of two Dread Cultists as a cloaked woman pressed her slender form between them. Each step crossing over the other, she swayed her hips with uncanny sensuality as she approached what had once been her master. The glowing yellow of her eyes beckoned him from underneath her hood. Her sultry smile mocked him. Cyris was unmoving as she circled him, her eyes running the height of his body.

"Hello, dear Master," she finally said, her voice an ethereal reverberation.

"Sariss, I—" the Black Hand began but she attacked him. A yellow blade flashed before his eyes. His body contorted as he rolled aside. With a flick of his wrist, he brought his own crimson blade to bare to intercept her weapon. Sparks flew off the plasma blades as they met. The Force swarmed his body, empowered it beyond its frail capacities and Cyris pushed into his long-dead apprentice's weapon.

"You are pathetic!" she hissed as she slid free and swung for him again.

Left and right the blows came so quickly that he could barely keep up. Each attempt to counterattack were outsmarted and he found himself staggering. She was fury incarnate, a maelstrom of incoming strikes. When a split-second lull presented itself, she spat insults at him.

"You are weak, old man! You are nothing. The Black Hand died on Vanir II!"

He could not breathe, his heart was thumping so hard it might have ripped through his ribcage. She lunged, she stabbed, she spun around him with a backhanded slash.

"How dare you!" he roared.

"You failed to retrieve information from a pathetic insect!"

The pounding in his temples nearly overwhelmed him. He could barely manage a basic thought. His instincts drove him as he forced her into defense. Again and again he hammered his saber down on her with all his strength, screaming and laughing. Harder and harder he hit until the yellow blade was ripped from her grasp. In a move belying his old age, he launched in the air, twisting his body in a whirlwind as he cut through her. The lightsaber passed through her without leaving a single trace. His eyes went wide. It was her turn to laugh, as her clawed hand clutched around his neck. Her might was inhuman. She leaned forward and pressed down on him until he was kneeling.

Terror. Agony. Helplessness filled the Black Hand, all emotions that had long deserted him.

Like a rising tide they drew closer, the inner ring tightening around him. They were screaming. A thousand voices shrieked in his mind. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. All he could do was scream with them.

"Kill her!" Sariss commanded.

"Make them suffer," demanded the voice of Jac Cotelin.

"Destroy them all!" begged Arania Lawakiro.

Her sharp grip around his throat faltered only momentarily but that was all he needed. He launched up into her as both blades of his lightstaff spat to life. Crimson met flesh and severed Sariss' arm above the elbow. Howling like a rampaging rancor,

he charged into the sea of apparitions. As he cut them down he heard it over and over again in his mind. *Destroy them all. Make them suffer.* It was his own voice urging him to slaughter.

Suddenly, he was back in his chamber on Nar Shaddaa. The walls were scarred with still-glowing arcs. The dancers that had been cowering around him, lay dead, cut apart in his madness. Disoriented only for a moment, his eyes locked on the exit.

"Kill them all," he muttered as he stepped out into the hall. It would be over before the sun set.

He would finally be free.

The Odan-Urr rebellion no longer mattered. The Inquisitorius and their schemes had *never* mattered. He served no one but himself. He had been humiliated, and he would have his revenge.

His lightstaff dragged along the floor as he marched towards Cortel's cell. Limb from limb, he would cut her apart without mercy. He would keep her alive through it all. If she was willing to endure anything to protect her people, then he would make sure she would endure it all, all of it until she pushed her last breath. Oh, but it would not come soon.

He rounded the hall to find the Gran and Bothan arguing before her chamber. Their movements were sluggish and their posture swaying as if they had recently woken up. They saw him coming and stared back at one another frantically. The Bothan's electrostaff clattered to the ground as he grabbed his head with his hands.

"She left!" was all the Gran had time to say before his ugly three-eyed head was severed from his shoulders.

A wordless plea left the Bothan's lips as a crimson blade cleaved him in two from shoulder to hip. The Black Hand stopped before the cell only for a moment. He

reached out with the Force, searching for Arcia's presence. His consciousness shot from being to being in the streets below, all of them unfamiliar. He had spent so long with in her presence, he could recognize her wherever she went. And he did. On the streets below. She was being carried by another presence he recognized.

So, the Harch has betrayed me, he thought.

The Black Hand kicked his leg up over the walkway's railing and dropped to the streets below. His black robes, fluttering as he fell, made him look like a predatory bird diving for his prey. He landed with one knee on the ground as his momentum kicked up a cloud of dust. Gasps and startled screams came from all directions as he straightened up. Head hanging low, eye closed, his lightstaff still blazing in his mechanical hand, he searched the Force for the whereabouts of his prey. He felt fear, her desperation, but it was the shining beacon of hope in her heart that drove him mad. Blinded to all that surrounded him, caring not for the attention he was drawing, he lumbered after them. A passerby imposed himself before the Dark Jedi.

It was the last thing the fool did.

Chapter 6

The distant screams tore Arcia out of her stupor. Bouncing up and down over the big alien's shoulder did not make it easy for her to focus. All around them, citizens had stopped to peer in the direction from which they came from. Elequin appeared to her right as they passed her. Despite being dressed like a sleazy belly-dancer, the Mandalorian looked like she was ready to head back and fight. *Don't leave me with him*, Arcia begged in her mind, too hazy to speak the words. If her bodyguard left now, she would never make it.

Elequin shook her head as if to shake loose any heroic notions and followed after Arcia and the big Harch creature. Va'ars Rend was relentless. No matter what came up, now matter how dense the crowd was ahead of them, he never slowed down. He

pushed passersby as if they were ragdolls. Those who he didn't move, he knocked down with his sheer mass. Gratefulness and disdain were at odds in her mind. The former captain of the *Arach* was the sole reason Elequin had found her, but he was, at least in part, responsible for her predicament. And he stunk. Did Harch always smell like smoke and sulfur?

"I can move," she finally said with a croak.

"I don't think so." It was the same response from the Harch every time she spoke up. She wasn't so sure what drove him, but he wasn't about to let her slow them down.

"Oh boy. The big guy was right," Elequin said with no small amount of frustration, "Scar-face is still alive!"

Arcia knew all too well that Elequin would spend a long time beating herself over the head for allowing the Black Hand to live; assuming they would actually survive the next hours.

"Doesn't matter now! Move it, Mando!" Va'ars wasn't playing.

The Hutta Town plaza was bustling with activity of all kinds. Speeders, cargo-carriers and throngs of civilians turned the area into a blasted maze. It was utter chaos, and they were separated on more than one occasion. Twice, Elequin was forced to climb atop a carrier to find them again. Arcia figured it was the Harch's unusual appearance that gave them a chance.

Pointing to an hexagonal spire on the far side of the plaza, Elequin shouted, "The ship's on the other side of the building!"

"We better cut through the alleys beneath it!" advised Va'ars.

"Stick to El's plan," pleaded Arcia, her voice still a slur, "If we get split up in there, we may not find each other again."

"We go around!" insisted the Mandalorian.

"Pfassk, wont either of you just trust me? I've operated out of this dirtball for years! We lose precious time if we go around now. No more time to argue!" Va'ars veered left towards the nearest descent.

"What are you doing?" Arcia asked frantically, but any follow up words died in her throat. Her knees when limp when she glimpsed the black shadow that jumped from one carrier roof to the next with lightstaff in hand. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined the old man would be capable of such acrobatics.

"He's here," announced Elequin.

"Keep moving!" urged the Harch as he lead them through an open gateway into an alley, "You take the lead, Mando! Keep the spire visible overhead and you'll reach the docks!"

"Roger, big guy!" Like a blur, Elequin dashed passed them. Arcia saw the Mandalorian's arm throw something back and glimpsed a small, glistening sphere.

"Run!" Arcia urged Va'ars even as she kicked him as if he were a mount.

"Keep it up, sister, and I'm making you walk!" he threatened.

"I've been asking you to let me walk since—"

"Stop kicking me!"

The alley exploded behind them. Stone and debris flew in all directions. Arcia's heart sank. First came a glimpse of crimson light through the billowing black smoke, then a shadow. An unnatural cold gripped Arcia, doused the flame of hope in her heart. They were never going to make it. How foolish she had been to call on Elequin. What could one Mandalorian possibly do against the monster that was Cyris Oscura? She had summoned her friend to her death.

Elequin fired at the Dark Jedi, but Oscura deflected the bolts as if it were a game, never breaking his pace. His yellow eye never left Arcia. No matter how fast they ran, no

matter how much debris they knocked into the alleyway, he seemed to gain ground on them despite showing no haste in his stride.

For the corner of her eyes, Arcia saw Elequin attempt to push past the Harch but the burly alien held her back with his thick arms. She hit him, he pushed her onward.

"Let me THROUGH!" Elequin begged.

"NO!"

There was a jolt and Arcia was heaved off Va'ars Rend's shoulders. Her knees nearly buckled under her own weight but he held her upright. She didn't understand. She peered into the Harch's round face, at his six gleaming red eyes. Before she could say anything, six gigantic hands shoved both Arcia and Elequin away.

"Move you, bantha-brained girls! Get to the ship!"

Arcia nodded at him before the two girls took off, but Va'ars Rend had already turned his focus to the Black Hand.

"Time to hold back a storm," he muttered with a sigh. He cracked the knuckles of his six hands and drummed one fist against his chest. The Harch moved to intercept the sorcerer.

The Harch felt rage building up inside him; rage that he had worked for this monster, rage for the part he had played in this insanity, rage that he could not see the girl to safety. Above all else, he was angry with himself for ever leaving Secundus Ando in the first place. Not a day had gone by when he didn't miss his homeworld. Yet, one contract led to another, pulled him away like a tractor beam. He could never decide what drove him so? Greed? Fear? Self-loathing?

It no longer mattered. Va'ars Rend had known for some time that he would never leave Nar Shaddaa again. He was already dead, he just kept on breathing like the stubborn old spider that he was. He had dared to hope, he had dared to believe that saving this Arcia Cortel might somehow set him free.

He glanced over his shoulder and caught one final glimpse of Arcia as she disappeared around a corner.

Good luck.

Humming filled the air, the sound of the sorcerer's laser sword.

"That was foolish, captain," mused the Black Hand.

"Not as foolish as destroying my ship!"

Diving beneath a storm of red plasma, the Harch launched into the Black Hand shoulders first with a deep guttural battle cry that rippled through the alley. On Va'ars Rend's mind was the loving faces of his grandchildren, the one good thing to come from him.

They were boarding a small VCX shuttle fighter when the Black Hand finally caught up with Arcia and her rescuer. So intent was the Mandalorian on strapping in her ward that she did not see him coming. The lady Cortel shifted faintly in her seat, teetering on the brink of consciousness. Oscura advanced without haste, each stride steady and determined. The flame of hope that flickered in the Force, it taunted him, bid him snuff it out, but he would not hasten them to their death.

It would come slowly and painfully.

The rescuer plopped down in the pilot's chair. Before long the deafening sound of revving engines filled his ears and the starfighter shuddered. She would not take Arcia away from him. He would not allow her! He reached out with his prosthetic arm, visualized the Mandalorian's throat and clenched his fingers.

It all went down quickly. The ship bucked as Arcia seemed to come to life. He could not quite tell what she was doing, moving frantically like an insect. Intent on breaking her rescuer's neck, he squeezed harder and harder. His eye met Arcia's. What he saw, was neither fear nor hatred. What he saw was victory. The shock, the humiliation was so vivid that his grip on the Force wavered. The Mandalorian slipped out of his grasp.

A mechanical hiss caught his attention even as the hair on the back of his neck stood up, a warning of impending doom. He saw it in the Force a split-second before the concealed blaster cannon appeared out of the hull. It belched out a burst of blue bolts.

He saw the flash of light. Cyris' perception of the world around him slowed to a crawl as he surrendered himself fully to the Force. Sickening pleasure and a murderous rage flooded him as the dark side coursed through him, through his every muscles as its very essence empowered his pathetic body.

He was a blur as he launched sky high, soaring well over the hell that broke loose beneath him. Dirt and metal debris were thrown meters high with a thick bellowing cloud of black smoke. He flipped through the air out of harm's way.

The shuttle veered to the right as its repulsorlift engine kicked in. The pilot was steering away from the dock when Oscura landed on top of them. In one swift motion the Black Hand spun and flung his ignited lightstaff outwards in a red whirlwind of destruction. He lashed onto the weapon with the power of the Force and directed it

like a puppet down through the cockpit's transparisteel windshield. There had been no time to activate the small craft's deflective shields. Like a circular saw spitting a rain of sparks, the weapon's twin blades sliced straight through, ending its run in the shuttle's dashboard.

The hint of blue sparks flickered from inside the cockpit. Without controls, the ship bucked and maintained its course, steering away from the docks as the pilot had last commanded. The nose began to dip as it pulled further away from the platform. Before long, they were on a crash course straight into the bowels of Nar Shaddaa's underworld. Cyris should have jumped off back to the launchpad, some distant, nigh forgotten part of him knew it. Instead, he locked his prosthetic arm on a handhold in the ship's hull. The fluttering in his cape increased exponentially as the shuttle fighter picked up speed. Had the ship's ion thrusters fired then, he would have been ripped clean off. Only the moon's gravity pulled on them as black fumes now spewing from the cockpit blinded their descent.

Ships and airspeeders whizzed past them, blasting their horns as the shuttle dove straight across an air lane. One freighter was thrown off course, ramming three speeders before disappearing out of sight. The Black Hand brought his free hand up and reached out with the Force, sensing their way forward. Never had it been more apparent that Hutta Town was a disarrayed cluster of buildings than while barreling through it. No real layout or order was immediately perceptible. One thing, however, was clear in the Force. The repulsors having stabilized themselves and no further commands incoming, their descent would end in the side of one particularly imposing skyscraper.

Pushing aside the dread of their impending doom, Cyris once more called to the Force for aid. This time, his mind was focused on the shuttle fighter itself, its idling

engine, the vibrations in its hull, the friction of the air as it plummeted. With his hand up, he tethered the ship to his mind, to his very will. He was out of breath before long, his heart hammering away at his chest as he tried to alter their course. He ground his teeth as their fatal destination drew ever closer, pushing harder and harder even as his hand shook. The ship answered his call if barely. Ever slightly, they veered. The skyscraper's looming shadow overtook them. He glimpsed a hint of a neon street sign through the smoke. The ground was coming up. They weren't going to make it. He gave one last, strained push before his grasp faltered and he released the vessel.

Concrete and glass exploded. The starboard side of the ship was shredded on impact, the wing torn clean. Debris clipped Cyris like mortar. Somehow, his mechanical grip held, even as his knee slipped. The ship heaved violently, its nose crushed against the building. Momentum lobbed them away spiralling away. They spun and spun faster yet without capsizing. He found himself flapping in the wind much as his cloak did as he held on with a single hand. He smashed against the hull, once, twice. Still he kept his grip. Nar Shaddaa was a wild orange blur around them, a maelstrom threatening to devour them. One thing was certain. They were coming up on the ground at any moment. Moving with inhuman speed only the Force could allow, Oscura yanked himself down against the hull. His feet immediately found foothold. Releasing his grip, he kicked his legs. The ship tore away from him as he spun through the air.

Fury. Hate. An insatiable thirst for darkness drove the Shadow with singular purpose. It had ceased to be Cyris Oscura. Entrenched in the dark side, it had become

something more, it had embraced the very root of those emotions it would need to succeed where the Black Hand had failed.

It slithered through debris and fire like a column of black smoke. Slowly it moved, its ailing shell teetering on the brink of collapse. Yet nothing would stop the Shadow, for it felt them in the Force. They were alive, these two petty beings pursued across Nar Shaddaa by Oscura. It felt their pain, their terror, their hopelessness as if they were its very own. A blinding beacon they formed, begging the dark side devour them. An ecstatic shudder rippled down its spine as it made for them. Arcia Cortel would never escape.

Smoke permeated the way forward with an ethereal gloom. Glowing embers floated in the wind. Nondescript silhouettes marred its path but hindered him not as it stepped over piles of debris. As it moved towards its goal, the Shadow laughed, a mirthful, tenebrous reverberation which overwhelmed all other sounds. Before long, it stood atop the shuttle's shattered wreckage, but it sensed them further yet.

They moved as one, rescuer and escapee, holding onto one another as they limped ever onwards without grace or speed; the hopeless parade of the damned. The Shadow tore them apart with a spread of its arms. They were sprawling on pavement and debris, several paces apart when it approached, laughing still. The Mandalorian fired twin blasters, but her bolts fizzled in the Shadow's outstretched palm. It clutched its claws, imitated by the dark side around this would-be rescuer's throat. As they always did—and this Mandalorian was no different—she kicked the air and clawed at her own throat. The sounds she made as she choked were music to the Shadow.

Arcia Cortel screamed out the woman's epithet, "El!"

"Ah lady Cortel, what a pleasure this has been," it mused with forked tongue, "Alas, our game comes to an end. Give me the Resistance's whereabouts."

"Never," was the answer.

"You will die. This is inevitable. Yet your friend may live if you answer me."

As it expected, the answer was negative. She would never break, yet the Harch Va'ars Rend had served its purpose well. In summoning this Mandalorian to the girl's rescue, it had offered the Shadow the second chance it had craved so.

It inhaled, a long drag of smoke-filled air that sizzled in its nostrils. Its lungs heaved with the pain but it dismissed the bodily function for what it was. There was little use fighting such afflictions. Cyris Oscura would return to the dark side's eternal embrace without delay. It turned its attention to the dangling woman. By its will, she rose and with one downward swipe of its mechanical hand, slammed her into the ground. It released her throat.

By the time the Mandalorian had recovered, the Shadow loomed over her, a wicked smile carved across its scarred features.

"If she will not speak, then perhaps you will... El!"

"Don't you dare!" warned Arcia. The fury blazing within her was sweet, empowering.

The Shadow was about to respond, to mock her, when this lady El produced a blaster out of thin air and pressed it to her throat, angled for her brains.

"Oh no you don't!" hissed the Shadow as it snatched her forearm through the Force. In a flash, it redirected the barrel of the blaster towards Arcia. When the Mandalorian pulled the trigger to kill herself and deprive it of information, she instead shot Arcia, the bolt catching the captive in the hip. She howled.

Its laughter redoubled as it felt the confusion and guilt tearing wreaking havoc through Elequin's mind. She had betrayed herself in shooting her ward. Arcia's

agonizing moans would be like daggers through her own back. The shock alone had frozen her in place.

Speaking of shocks, it mused.

"You shall tell me everything you know about your little resistance," he promised. With its hands drawn up like talons, it drew from the pool of emotions that surrounded it. The whip crack of lightning cut the air as forking arcs speared from its fingers. Elequin was shrieking before she could possibly know what was going on. On and on it let the dazzling jolts of pure, unabashed hatred flow into her. As she flailed, her very skeleton flashed blue through her skin.

It stopped, only to drop to one knee and snatch the Mandalorian's face tightly in its clawed mechanical fingers. The jagged metal tips dug deep through skin. In moments, blood pooled around and streaked down her face. She looked up at it with wide fearful eyes. Brave as all Mandalorians were, their valor meant nothing before the Shadow that was the Black Hand. It pressed its face so close to her's that blood smeared onto its greying beard.

"Why..." she slurred.

"You know understand what awaits your ward here, the Lady Cortel, should you fail to give me the information I seek."

"I cannot!" There it was, the crack in the ice. The Shadow laughed again at her words. A weak rebuttal compared to Arcia's "never". Where the lady Cortel had been duty-bound to Odan-Urr itself, this one was duty bound only to protect her ward. She made not the decisions. She was a shield and nothing more.

"Then she will die."

The Shadow shoved the Mandalorian's face away and stepped back. It moved away from the downed bodyguard as it levitated the moaning, senseless Arcia, its

every motion calculated and deliberate. Limp, she dangled mid-air, her arms and legs dangling before her. Slowly, she began to float forward. With an electrical roar, a single red blade came alive.

Elequin's eyes went wide. Her lips trembled. Arcia flew ever closer to the plasma angled at her chest. The Mandalorian produced a new blaster, training it straight at the Shadow's head.

"Shoot me," it urged her with a hiss, "But will I die before she is impaled?"

Unsteady was the hand that held the pistol. With each passing moment, her ward drew ever closer towards death. It thought she might pull the trigger when the blaster went down. The Shadow roared forward in a great flash of red.

"STOP!" screamed the Mandalorian. One inch. The blade had stopped one single inch from the prisoner's heart. Unwilling to risk her ward further, she tossed the blasters aside out of her reach.

"El... no, please no," Arcia mumbled as her eyes rolled to the back of her head. She sagged again.

"Forgive me." Elequin could not bring herself to make eye-contact with the friend for whom she was risking everything. Such rift would devour them, much to the Shadow's glee—at least, assuming he would let them live. Pain and sorrow hardened into something akin to stoic as the Mandalorian straightened herself up, "Let her live. I will tell you everything I know."

"Pheh," the Shadow grumbled, "You will both live. No need to be so dramatic!"

Again, it laughed, for the seeds of doubt and the seeds of guilt had taken root firmly inside their hearts, and it would spread.

Never again would they be the same.

Epilogue

Aboard the *Eye of the Abyss*, Atyiru Caesura Entar wore satisfaction on her lips like a medal. She found sheer relief in the empty medbay that surrounded her, with only the faint hum of the bacta tanks and the ever-present mechanical hum of the Star Destroyer to keep her company. After months of heavy toil since the Arconan Consul had green lit the treatment of New Tython victims, the medical staff had finally cleared its last patient. The Odanite was now in transit aboard shuttle between the *Eye* and the *Endor's Triumph*. It was a momentous occasion, a turning point in their rebellion against the Iron Throne, and much of the Resistance's fleet had regrouped for it. A new

system had been found and soon, they would push back against the Grand Master's tyranny.

Taking mental note to see the medical crew rewarded for their work, the Arconan Consul made her way through the Star Destroyer back to the command bridge. The crew, in high spirits, had never been more effective and focused. A new day was dawning and they would greet it with their A game. Nothing could have made the Miraluka more proud.

Yet, for all the satisfaction she felt, for all the hope she harbored, one thought troubled Atyiru. An old Odanite friend, one who had stood by her side time and again, was still missing. It had been well over a month since Destri—or rather, Arcia as she insisted on being called—sprung her trap for the Inquisitorius. Against all expectations, she had vanished from records, her last position pointing to a freighter known as the *Arach*. With the freighter's destruction, her tracks had gone cold. Then a transmission came from some hired gun claiming to know the whereabouts of the girl.

The council were deliberating on a plan of action when the Mandalorian Fade, Elequin Erinos, separated from the Fleet and took matters into her own hands. Driven by her love and duty towards Arcia, she had jumped to action without consideration for the potential fallout of such actions.

Yet, Atyiru realized this was not what troubled her. Her unease, her doubt, it all came from a far greater distance. A shadow was looming over them, a darkness waiting to consume them. She sensed it, a great disturbance in the Force.

A transcendent cold washed over her, froze her in place. Like a dagger plunging through her chest, a Super Star Destroyer burst out of hyperspace on top of them. The sheer size of the *Suffering*, the bane of New Tython, dwarfed any ship in the Resistance's fleet. Blood drained from her face when a second ship, a Resurgent-Class

Star Destroyer, appeared. A wave of terror washed over the Arconan Consul as she recognized the *Wraith*.

"Darth Pravus," the words were ash in her mouth.

The silence that gripped the command bridge was deafening. Atyiru couldn't move, as if she were held in place by invisible tendrils. *How? How can it be? How did they find us?* Her mind was reeling for answers. Again and again she thought of Arcia. Where was she? Had they killed her?

"Pre... prepare..." she stuttered. Pieces seemed to fall into place and she shook from her trance, "Prepare for defensive maneuvers! Alert the fleet! Position the *Eye of the Abyss* to protect over civilian transports!"

Acknowledging cries ripped through the deck, but she could feel their dread. She knew their dread, for it matched her own. Yet, she could not let Pravus win again.

Never again.

One, two, three more Star Destroyers snapped out of hyperspace before them, effectively lined up with the other Destroyers to form a spear. From their guts spewed a wretched swarm of Tie Fighters so thick it looked like metal tendrils reached out for the Resistance fleet.

Never again!