

# STAR WARS

## DARKEST YEARS

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#11708

Competition Entry for Part II: Teenage Years

*"You look ahead and see only the Dark.  
Take solace in its hidden Light...  
It is nothing compared to the darkest parts of me."*

## Prologue

His eyes opened to darkness. No surprise there. It was the same thing he saw every morning. Of course, he had no way of telling if it even was what would normally be referred to as 'morning'. The cycle of day and night lost meaning within his cell without any way of gauging the passage of time. In its stead, he had adopted a system based on sleeps. That was the so-called 'life' Atra Ventus had been relegated to, and it had been five-hundred thirty four sleeps since he began counting. Before that, he had been a teenager — just past the precipice of childhood — living on the streets of Corellia. A series of choices had led him away from that life; choices that could never be taken back.

If anything could be counted as a blessing under such conditions, it would be that he wasn't confined to a circular room. It was rectangular with corners and different lengths to the walls. That gave him a basis to work with. It was what had allowed him to mentally map out his living space and learn to maneuver through it. He knew there was a sink across from the bed where he was lying, and the facility that served as his bathroom rested in the furthest corner. Between these lay just enough space for him to walk around. No doubt a 'kindness' offered up by those who caged him.

Atra groaned as he pulled himself up onto his elbows. The sound echoed throughout the chamber, amplified by his lack of vision. The headache that used

to cause was a distant memory as he rubbed his temples. Continuing with his routine, the young man rolled his neck from side to side. The joints of his spine gave a satisfying crack in response. He then proceeded to all but fall off the bed by rolling over to the side. He landed on all fours, having intended to move to the ground, and began working through his morning reps.

The Umbaran grit his teeth together as the muscles in his arms burned with each subsequent push-up, but he ignored it. There were times when he woke up with a sense of dread. A whispered foreboding he couldn't quite make sense of, but he had grown to associate it with the worst of days. It was on days such as those that they came for him. The men and women that called themselves 'researchers' would use Atra for their experiments. He would eventually lose track of time under their tests, eventually pass out from the pain, and awaken again inside his holding cell.

It was that dread he had felt since awakening.

*Something wicked this way comes*, Atra thought to himself. Beads of sweat rolled from his brow and along his nose only to drop with a soft splatter against the paneling beneath him. He groaned mentally after the thought, even though he had been the one to bring the words to bear. It was like a trope he had heard overused a thousand times before, and yet couldn't help himself from using it.

The young man let out a long breath before collapsing to the floor, his arms finally giving out. The burning in his muscles was good; far better than the pain of his solitude. His mouth worked open and closed with ragged gasps of air that rushed into his lungs and expanded his chest, causing his torso to rise and fall steadily as he lay prone. Keeping his body strong was the one thing Atra still had control over in his life, and it was something that he refused to relinquish. No matter how much it hurt, or how often the days blend together, he would find the time for his small rebellion.

When the footsteps came, he wasn't sure if it was those that he heard or the thumping of his own heartbeat in his ear pressed firmly against the ground. The sudden blinding light cutting like a dagger through the darkness of his cell provided the unmistakable assurance that they had come for him.

"Good, the subject is already up," a man stated flatly from the opening. Atra had come to know the voice of the lead researcher well, with its clearly detached quality. *Must be how he sleeps at night*, the Umbaran mused.

"Got something fun planned today, doc?" Atra queried. His throat was still hoarse, not having had reason to speak since the last time they had come for him, but he still managed to drip sarcasm from each word.

"Collect it," the man directed to his peers — though Atra preferred to think of them as thugs, and suspected they did as well. "We have a full schedule today."

## Chapter 1

It was easy for so many to take something as simple as light for granted, but Atra wasn't afforded that luxury. His sensitive eyes, made even more so due to his confinement, sent jolts of pain through his nerves as they fought to adjust to the bright illumination around him. Yet he refused to look away. Pain or not, he drank it in like they were the first drops of water upon his metaphorical parched lips. He merely kept his head turned skyward, even as they worked him onto the medical slab and locked restraints around his arms and legs, and watched the light panels passing overhead.

The blinding light was a contrast to the darkness of his 'home' that Atra savored as best he could. As they proceeded to move his slab into research room he had come to presume was dedicated to his use, Atra turned to look at the others. The men on either side of his slab were utterly generic in appearance. Infuriatingly so.

The goons were blessed with the remarkable ability to be placed in a lineup of men and you'd never be able to pick them apart. Dark hair kept cropped with no facial hair or distinguishing marks to speak of. Their eyes were hazel and never drifted towards his own. It was as if they couldn't bring themselves to look him in the eye. Grunt 1 and Grunt 2 had been the names given to them, which made complete sense to Atra's young mind. They could be

swapped out by different people each time for all he cared, and they would remain under those names.

Atra craned his neck to glance around the room. As usual, it was meticulous. Everything was cleaned to the point of sterilization, impossibly white, and each tool or item had a uniform placement. Movement caught his eye and drew his gaze to Dr. Tormax Argon, who was looking over the nearby medical instrumentation. Atra had heard his name enough times for it to stick in his memory, and more or less had figured him to be the one in charge. He at least played the part well enough. Tormax was of a shorter stature, but his features were razor sharp. His skin was taut, almost like it had been forcibly stretched across his skeletal structure, with harsh cheekbones and a hawk-like gaze. His beady eyes were set deep in his skull and were of such a dark color that they might as well have been black. The look wasn't helped by his receding hairline and the remaining grey hair on top that he had painstakingly slicked back.

It wasn't Dr. Argon that the young Umbaran was looking for though, and he resigned himself to waiting instead. He hummed quietly to himself while counting the lines in the ceiling panels, getting deep into the double digits before hearing a door hiss open somewhere behind him. His nostrils flared, taking in the new scent wafting through the room. Of course, it wasn't the smell of perfume or cologne. No, the lab was far too sanitary for that... but he could smell her nonetheless. It was rich and full of life, like spices on a spring day.

"Good morning, Atra," a warm and almost delicate voice greeted him before she came into sight. "Let's see how you're doing today, shall we?"

His grey-gold eyes passed from her white lab-coat to her neck and the red skin that marked her as a Zeltron, before finally coming to rest on her amber

eyes. Dr. Shadra Yar kept her raven blue hair pulled back in a tight bun, though a few strands escaped to hang over her ears.

"Only if it's you," Atra replied with a smirk. His voice was already finding itself again, spurred on by her presence.

"Full of complements as usual," she said with a light laugh.

He watched without saying anything further as Dr. Yar began his physical check up. Amongst everything he had experienced since 'volunteering' for experimentation, it wasn't the sun that brightened his days, but rather her presence. He figured she was probably oblivious to the particulars of Dr. Argon's research, given her treatment of him, and Atra couldn't bring himself to shatter the illusion. Whether she knew or not didn't matter, after all. Even if their interactions were fake, they had become precious to him.

Better to believe a beautiful lie than a terrible truth.

Her touch sent goosebumps along his pale flesh, though she was merely taking his pulse. Atra couldn't help himself. "Never fails to amaze me," Dr. Yar murmured while entering the information into her datapad. "Your heart rate never deviates no matter how many times I've measured it this year."

That sounded about right, seeing as the Zeltron doctor had not been among those assigned to him initially. She had come later when Dr. Argon had realized the project would be more 'long term' than initially estimated. "What can I say? You just have a calming way about you," the young Umbaran replied. His accent was thick and caused his words to lilt in a dancing cadence.

"Must be so!" she exclaimed with a chuckle while running through the final few tests. "Looks like you're as healthy as always, physically at least."

"You sure? Maybe you should check again."

"I'm not trained for psychology, but I'll hazard by that you're good to go mentally too," Dr. Yar said and flashed him a smile.

"Oh man, do that again and I might catch my death!"

Shadra merely shook her head and placed her datapad on the nearby counter before turning to address her colleague. "Serat and Aja are waiting outside for your 'go ahead', Dr. Argon."

"Hm? Oh, yes, them. Right then, send them in to prep the subject on your way out then," Tormax mumbled while only giving Dr. Yar the slimmest portion of his attention.

"The 'subject' has a name," Atra and Shadra said in unison. It had not been the first time it had happened either.

Dr. Argon paused and glanced up from his instrumentation for a moment. His gaze flit between the others as if suspicious of something before the glimmer faded from his eyes. "I suppose it does, you can leave now," he stated dismissively.

"Until the next time," Shadra said quietly before patting Atra on the shoulder and making for the doors she had entered through. Dr. Argon's regular assistants replaced her presence within the room, neither as particularly standout as the Zeltron. Serat was a younger man with a steely focus. He was the one that tended to smile, ever so faintly, during the more painful procedures. Aja, for her part, would be best described as "bookish". She attempted to keep as small of a presence as possible while going about her work.

"We got a treat for you this time," Serat stated with a half-grin while double checking the Umbaran's restraints. "The bossman wants to review your progress personally."

Atra raised an eyebrow at that, unsure what to make of it. He had always figured Dr. Argon to be the one in charge, after all.

"I can't wait to see what he does to you," the assistant muttered quietly with a malicious glee.

"Can't wait," Atra managed with a roll of his eyes.

Tormax walked quickly over and ran his fingers across the control terminal, causing Atra's slab to pivot around and slide closer to the instrumentation. "The data is still inconclusive. Too much genetic tampering. A pure blood, untainted, would have been preferable. The subject is all we have. A pity," Dr. Argon spoke almost robotically as he prepped. "Bring me the probe."

Again, a feeling of dread welled up within the Umbaran, but this time the sensation was so powerful he felt sick. The heralding sensation was followed up by the sudden appearance of another man within the room. Macron Sadow entered through a side entrance, his ghoulish visage standing at odds with the room's sterile presentation. A ceaseless chuckle worked past his tattooed lips as his orange eyes worked through the room. His skin was pale but, unlike Atra's Umbaran flesh, appeared almost like dead tissue. The Sith was unmistakable for what he was, and made no attempts to hide it. Insanity was something he embraced.

"My Lord," Dr. Argon exclaimed. It was the first time Atra had ever heard the detached man seem to actually be *there*.

"Is he ready?" the giggling man asked, his red armour glistening in the lights as he strode into the center of the room. "Yes, I know he's right there," Macron hissed while snapping his head to the side, as if he were responding to a voice only he could hear. Just as suddenly as his focus had shifted, the Sith's head came back around and he reached a hand out towards Atra's form.

He wanted to pull away with every fiber of his being, but Atra was locked solidly in place. That didn't stop him from trying though, and the restraints chafed against his skin as he struggled. There was just something so incredibly *wrong* about the newcomer. He couldn't put words to how he felt, but Atra

wanted nothing to do with Macron. Even if it left him bloody and broken, getting free was all that mattered.

Of course, there was no getting free for him.

Macron chuckled to himself and placed a single finger upon Atra's exposed chest, running it down and sending waves of revulsion through the Umbaran. "Yes, I can see why you're having difficulties. Someone has been here before us," the Sith's voice hissed out as more of a breath than anything else. "How rude of them, to alter my toys."

"The genetic markers are solid, but we are having difficulty ascertaining the correct sequencing for the subject's eyes. As such, nothing we have designed thus far is suitable for instilling Umbaran sight for your purposes," Dr. Argon explained.

"We'll have to just dig in then," Macron chortled.

With a wave of his hand, the Sith beckoned the assistants into motion. They moved in like vultures and secured a clamp to either side of Atra's head before pulling his eyes wide open and locking them in place. A tempest of emotions stormed within the young Umbaran with fear chiefest among them. Again he tried to break free but found himself unable to push back against the restraints imposed upon him.

"Careful, boy, you wouldn't want to lose an eye... or perhaps you do?" Macron made himself laugh again while positioning a device over Atra's head. It was a rig with many small spines on it, and one long needle. The Sith Alchemist positioned it directly over the Umbaran's right eye.

"Apologies, Dr. Argon, it seems I left my—" Dr. Yar froze several steps inside the room as her eyes took in the scene in front of her. Atra's eyes flicked to the datapad still resting on the table, the reason for Shadra's return, then a desperate panic took the place of his temporary confusion.

"Ah, Dr. Yar. This is unfortunate," Tormax murmured while ringing his hands together. "You don't have clearance for this."

Macron's head snapped and tilted from side to side again, listening to the debate of the voices only he was privy to. A dangerous clarity of purpose glimmered in his eyes before turning slowly towards the Zeltron.

"Please no, please. Kriffing hell, let her go!" Atra shouted, suddenly renewed with vigor upon the slab. He pushed desperately against his restraints while grinding his teeth together. "I volunteered remember! Me! My decision! She has nothing to do with this."

"That's precisely the problem," Serat murmured into the Umbaran's ear as he watched the scene unfold. "She shouldn't be here."

Aja was busy making herself look very small again in the corner, not wanting to draw any attention. Who could blame her? The maliciousness that had permeated the room became more palpable with each passing second. It hung like an invisible blanket, without form yet heavy against Atra. He could feel it suffocating him, freezing his every joint.

"Someone explain what's going on here. You know what, hold that thought I'm calling security," Dr. Yar's voice had taken on a more aggressive note compared to her usual lightness. She spun about on her heel, lab-coat wafting through the air like a cloak, only to suddenly stop at the entrance. Her fingers reached for her throat in confusion as haggard gasps for air escaped her lips.

Macron's hand was raised and clutching, as if holding something invisible, and his eyes were focused on the Zeltron. Atra had no idea what was happening, but he suspected that somehow, in some way, the tattooed man had something to do with it. "Stop it!" he yelled again, his voice the only weapon remaining to him.

The Sith didn't listen, of course. He spun his wrist and made a beckoning motion which caused Shadra to fly through the air and into his waiting grasp, replacing the invisible grip upon her throat with Macron's very real fingers. "Hm. Yes, I can use this. Perhaps this as well," the Sith mused with a bemused tilt of his head. "This one will provide excellent material."

Positioned as she was then, Atra could see her clearly. The fear etched in her face, the confusion and despair that couldn't be willed away. The Umbaran could see the light fading from the woman's eyes and there was nothing he could do about it. He was trapped and powerless. The only one with power was the Sith as his fingers closed tighter around the woman's neck. "You bastard!" Atra shouted with the last of his strength, the veins in his neck straining as he fought his restraints with feeble effort once more. Shadra stopped fighting back, the light fading from her eyes, and her limbs fell limp to her sides, and Atra's rage washed over him like nothing else had before.

He screamed, there was nothing else he could do, and felt something stir alongside it. Something deeper within him. An explosion of energy lashed out around him and was answered by crumpling steel and shattered glass. Yet he didn't stop screaming, not until his throat was raw and merely a raspy rush of air passed over his lips.

Macron looked over the man on the slab with a wide, toothy smile. His face contorted in surprise suddenly, as if he just remembered what he still held in his grasp, and he dropped Dr. Yar's limp form with a thud. "Now then," the Mad Alchemist managed between giggles, "let's begin the experiment."

***"My eyes are open, but I cannot see.  
I am left hoping for the world as I want it to be."***

## Epilogue

Once more his eyes opened to darkness, but a rush of fresh anger came with it. Pain still radiated from the bandage wrapped around his head and right eye, caked with blood and stuck to his flesh, but his focus didn't waver. Instead of the stoic calm with which he greeted the cell, only the raging storm of Atra's fury could be mustered.

He rose to his feet and let out a rasping bellow before punching the wall. An echoing *thud* and *crack* greeted the unthinking act, no doubt shattering several bones in his hand. The pain was real, it was tangible... and just about the only thing that could cut through the grief that fought to claim him. Again he spun around, giving free reign to the fiery feelings within him, and tossed his cot against the far corner. The mattress did little to muffle the metallic frame which resulted in a terrible echo that bounced mercilessly from wall to wall.

Atra was trapped, powerless once more, left with only the one cramped space in which to vent his feelings. So he did, for how long he had no idea, but he kept going until his strength gave out entirely. The Umbaran collapsed to the ground, his body sagging around his frame. It was then that he felt something wet against his face. He reached slowly, with shaking muscles, and touched his cheek with his uninjured left hand. His fingertips came away damp, but the liquid didn't feel like blood. That was something he was all too familiar with.

His tongue flicked out, tasting the substance carefully. It was salty, but beyond that was near insubstantial. Tears, he concluded with a solemn certainty. It was tears that were staining his cheeks and running in ribbons from his eyes. How odd it was for him to cry. It was something that he had never managed to accomplish since the loss of his parents.

Laying there alone in the darkness, Atra curled into a ball and held himself. It was all he could do as a dreadful cold rushed in to replace the heat of his anger. He felt empty, like he had been hollowed out and there was nothing else. Atra could feel exhaustion creeping through his system and shutting him down slowly, pulling him into exhaustion. Yet, as the world faded further around him, he could still smell it... the scent of spices on a spring day.

## Author's Notes

When looking at this fiction and posing the question "how this moment helped make them the character they are today", all becomes clear when you look at the most important facets of Atra as a character. The one thing he can't stand, more than anything else, is the abuse of power. Whether that power is located in the Dark or the Light means little to him, with the focus falling entirely on the perceived intent.

As can be seen in this fiction, Atra was in a state of complete powerlessness, despite his own unawakened abilities. It was not the first time that his own inability to act resulted in loss, but this was the first that he could truly process. It hit him hard, and culminates in an unspoken promise written upon his very soul as a character. He would not allow power to be abused, and in so doing he would claim power as his own in order to ensure that it could never be used to take from him again. He wasn't able to save the only source of kindness in the darkest days of his life, but he would see to it that no one could take from him again... that is, until it happened with his lover and child... but that's a story for another time.

I hope you enjoyed!