

Part I - Betrayal

34 ABY

Hyperspace

VCX-100 Freighter Ravenous Hunter

Rian snapped up in the *Hunter's* co-pilots seat as a single emotion rolled over him with unparalleled power. Though Rian wasn't particularly skilled in telepathy, mere hints of emotions and feelings were usually the only things he experienced without intense meditation. But this time it struck him like a blow to the head; something severe has happened and it was related to Taldryan - Betrayal.

Over the course of years, in which Taldryan had become a part of his life — his family after the fled the First Order — events have crafted a bond between him and his brothers and sisters in the Clan. A brotherhood within a brotherhood as they called themselves. And this bond became only stronger when he was granted the honor to become a Taldrya. The small group of those within each Clan of the brotherhood who bear the right to carry the name of their Clan as their own, only then they became truly brothers and sisters, not by blood but in spirit — and now one of them has betrayed them. No not one, *the* one. He sensed him. Sensed that every other Taldrya has severed his or her connection to him. But why? From everyone he knew within Taldryan he would have been the one he would have been most willing to sacrifice his life for his cause. At his side Rian had fought so many battles, entire wars to protect what was right, and now within a blink of an eye the most trusted of them had raised his hand against his most trusting allies.

Next to the Mirialan, the woman piloting their ship raised her brow. She knew Rian since their childhood on Concordia where they both went to the same military academy. But time had changed the relationship between them, and by the time when they both had to make a decision, it was clear to her that she felt so much more for him than she was willing to admit until then. And so, she helped him to escape the First Order along with their friends, Zoe and Riccs. Of course, she had seen how he had looked at her since they became teenagers, but it took them some time to finally express their feelings for each other. At that point Rian was already well enrolled into the affairs of the mystical organization, that she and the others joined as well as part of its military. But that felt like ancient history and though she understood that Rian's connection to the Force let him see things in a much different way, she sometimes had the feeling that she too could grasp at the powers that lay within him when they were close to each other.

"Are you alright?" Kara asked next to him. She could clearly see the despair in his eyes.

"Something bad has happened, something very bad," Rian replied, not even trying to mask his feelings next to her. "Taldryan has been attacked by—" He swallowed hard, there was still some doubt that it was really *him*.

"By whom? Rian, tell me who it was. Arcona? Another Clan? Tell me who was it."

"It was Jac." Kara's face went pale. On more than one occasion she had met the former Grand Master during official events where she took part as Rian's partner. And later, during their engagement party, he even gave her a beautiful necklace as a gift. Yes she knew about his powers, powers far beyond even those of Rian and most of the other Elders of Taldryan; she knew, but never would she have expected him to betray them, not even to think about attacking one of them.

"You must be wrong, Jac could have never—"

"It was him, I felt it," Rian said, softly touching her. "Just like i feel you know.

Kara believed him. Never had her fiance lied to her and he trusted him with all her life as she had trusted him, and now she saw only sadness in his eyes. "What about the others, have they survived the attack?"

"I don't know. But if so, Pravus' Inquisitors will come for them as they will surely come for me," Rian said, already checking the weapons at his side. "How long till the rendezvous?"

"Just a few seconds," Kara said checking the ships internal chrono. "Do you think they will attack us on the *Godless Matron*?"

"Not sure, but we will know that soon enough," he replied, indicating at the blinking light marking their arrival the the designated rendezvous point.

Rendezvous point echo14

Deep Space

Streaks of white light turned into single dots as the *Ravenous Hunter* exited the unreal tunnel of hyperspace not far from the gigantic throat of the landing bay belonging to the pirate's flagship.

"Transmitting authorization code." Kara said purely out of habit before lining their ship in for their usual landing position.

Even from a distance they could make out that their welcoming party wasn't like the one that usually awaited them. A group of four black clad inquisitors forming a loose circle stood in between them and the rest of the ship.

"Well I guess the rumors spread fast around this part of the galaxy. Kara once we have settled down, link with the *Matron's* database and see if you can find out anything regarding survivors from Karufr," Rian said, rising from his seat. "And leave the engines hot, we might need to make a dash out of here."

Kara nodded, but Rian was already out of the cockpit. Secretly she opened a comm channel to the bridge. "Who ever is on duty, inform the captain that something is about to happen in the starboard hangar."

The lead inquisitor skipped not a single second once Rian's foot touched the cool metal surface of the *Matron's* hangar bay. "Rian Taldrya, Chief Inquisitor Hodrren requests your presence immediately. Please hand me your weapons and follow us."

"Whatever it is the Chief Inquisitor wants from me, he has to wait until I report back to the Herald, especially since I outrank him within the Inquisitorius."

"I fear you are by decret of the Grand Master relieved from all your duties within the Inquisitorius as well as your duties for the Herald, now please hand me your weapons, or else." In unison the crimson blades of the Inquisitor sprang to life.

"If you put it that way."

Rian's blade, the color of the sun, was up and lit the instant the Inquisitors lunged for him, carving brilliant arcs through the air. Being well trained in the art of Shien, it was an easy task to build up

enough momentum to keep all four of the black clad warriors at bay while reserving enough of his energy for an extended encounter. But where he normally would have drowned out his opponents before striking them out, time was crucial in this battle as sooner than later reinforcements for the Inquisitors would come.

The nearest doors leading from the hangar, leading deeper into the bowels of the Lucrehulk-class battleship, split open. But instead of reinforcements for the Inquisitorius, the Herald herself, as well as a squad of heavily armed pirates, entered the hangar, their blasters likewise trained at Rian and the Inquisitors.

"Weapons down, NOW! Or you get a piece in the cranium." Morgan's voice boomed over the sound of battle and made everyone turn their attention towards her. "Now someone explain to me, what the kark is going on here?"

The lead Inquisitor was first to speak up but was immediately silenced by a sharp glare from the Herald. "I am pretty sure he told you that he had to report to me first, and whatever it is the Chief Inquisitor may want from him has to wait until after that."

"Yes Milady." The Inquisitor swallowed hard, despite the urge to protest.

"Then why the frak did you start a fight, on *my* ship?!"

Silence.

"I thought so. Now Rian, let's take a walk so you can give me your report, and then you will meet up with the Chief Inquisitor."

Just when the blastdoors had shut behind them, Morgan spoke up again. "So how went your mission?"

"It was a full success, ma'am. We ensured a contract with the Aracane Refinery, they weren't sure if they could fill the Brotherhood's needs for weapon-grade Tibanna. But with the money offered by the Dark Council they agreed quickly."

Rian continued to outline the specifics of the deal he had made with the independent refinery in all details.

"Once more you did an excellent job Rian." Morgan felt the unease within her magistrate. "I have heard about Karufr, maybe we should talk about one thing or another."

For a brief moment Rian stopped in his pace, but quickly followed up with the Herald. He didn't sense any imminent danger coming from the Dark Councillor, who was now standing next to a door guarded by two soldiers of the Royal Guard — former Royal Guard, Rian reminded himself about the knack of the Herald to preferably assign outcasts and otherwise non-conforming individuals around her. The doors slid open and they entered Morgan's personal quarters.

"Please have a seat," Morgan said pointing at the comfortable looking couch under a near viewport, while pouring herself some sort of liquor into a glass. "You want one too."

Rian shook his head. "No thanks."

A few seconds later she joined him, taking a deep sip from the amber colored fluid.

"As I said, I heard about the events on Karufr and because of that I want to offer you a place in my crew." She waited a few seconds, scanning the emotions radiating from her Magistrate. Usually those whom she granted such an offer slightly agreed, if only to boost their own profits. But the Taldrya was different, he was cautious, calculating and loyal.

"And what if I refuse your offer? Will you hand me to the Inquisitors? Or the opposite, how do you plan to justify me becoming part of your crew before the will of the Grand Master?"

"You have been walking around my ship now for long enough to know that I tend to be less

conforming when it comes to the principles of Lord Pravus. In fact, Lord Pravus knows this very well, and allows it as long as I am loyal to his cause of creating a new order, which I am."

"Are you talking about the same "conformist" behavior you showed against your former Master that brought you into this position or the "conformist" behavior you showed against the Chief Inquisitor recently?"

"Do not overextend your position, Taldrya. Unlike many other Councillors, I have an abundance of patience, but that too can be worn thin."

Rian knew the real threat coming from the pirate captain weren't her words, but the tendrils of dark energy trying to break through his mental barrier fruitlessly. "I wasn't overextending my position captain," he replied matter of factly. "I too have played these games with the Dark Council for long enough to learn to always, not only have a backup plan, but to listen to things unimportant and see things not visible to most others. To be honest I don't care how conformist you are against the will of Pravus but be sure, sooner or later everyone of us has to take his own position in this game."

"And what position have you taken for yourself, Rian Taldrya?"

Rian rose, a faint smile on his lips. "The same position I always had, no, every true member of Taldryan always had. Right between the will and honor of the Iron Throne and the one abusing it for his own cause."

As the doors slid open, and he wasn't shot in the back by the time he passed into the corridor, Rian was sure he had said and done the right things, though it too meant that the next time he met the Herald or anyone of her crew, there would be at least his lightsaber between them.

Part II – Through Fires and Flames

"Coming out of hyperspace." Zara said pulling back the lever of the hyperdrive control.

Rian readied himself, but nothing could have readied him for what he saw through the gaps between the asteroid belt they hid in when the blue of the hyperspace started to fade into black. Almost the entire fleet of Taldryan's Naval Forces were either destroyed or disabled. The only intact ship inside view within the system was a Super Star Destroyer looming over Karufr.

"I'm picking up at least two more Star Destroyers within the system." Kara said. "One of them is orbiting the *Archanis' Redoubt* and the other - Oh my."

What's it?

"It's chasing a civil transport trying to escape the system."

"We need to help them"

"But how? Look at it, the fleet is either destroyed or gone and we definitely don't have enough firepower to engage a Star Destroyer in an open fight. It's bordering a miracle they haven't found us yet with the asteroid belt, especially with Jac among them."

"I know," Rian replied. "but we must help them, they won't make it without our help. Try to get us there keeping a profile as low as possible. You fly, I shoot, we need to take out as many of their guns as possible so they can make the jump to lightspeed."

On the bridge of the *Suffering*, Jac Cotelin watched the image on the console almost delighted. It was somewhat an amusement. A single Corellian Freighter took on the fight with one of the Star Destroyers. Of course the freighter was doomed to be destroyed during it to engage an enemy numerous times larger and far more powerfully armed. But though it took some hits itself, it proved itself to be quite a challenge to the *Vengeance's* gunners as it took out several of the *Resurgence-class* vessel's weapon emplacements, at least for the moment.

"Admiral Croom," The Justicar called for the *Suffering's* Commander. "order Captain Fy'eth to switch from turbolasers to her ventral cannons. I want this freighter to be reduced to rubble."

"As you wish my Lord." The Admiral committed to his orders with a slight bow.

"The Transport made the jump to lightspeed, now let's get out of—"

The *Hunter* banked heavily to its right as it was hit by a couple of missiles from the *Vengeance's* ventral cannons. Metal creaked and screamed under the sudden impact. Somewhere deep within the lower section of the ship, something burst with a hiss.

Rian jumped down the ladder and dashed for the cockpit. "Where?" he screamed over the whailing alarms.

"Doesn't matter, we got a hull breach. We need to head for the atmosphere or we will be out of oxygen in no time."

"Divert all energy despite engines and life support to the rear deflectors."

Rian worked the flickering controls. "There isn't that much more than engines and life support left."

"Then take the life support, the oxygen masks are behind our seats."

Rian took the masks, handed one to Kara before pulling the other one for himself.

Another explosion rocked the ship.

"Shields are gone." Rian's voice was muffled by the mask.

Flames engulfed the *Hunter*.

"Kara we are coming down too steep."

"Tell me something else, but there is no other way." Without a warning the engines went down. A fire within the engine compartment. "We are dead, there's nothing I can do anymore." Kara said in resignation while their ship fell through the stratosphere.

"No, we can still make it, we still got the *Harpy*." Rian jumped out of his seat. But we need to time it right."

Within the blink of an eye Kara knew what Rian was thinking of and yes with the right timing there was at least a chance they would be able to come out of this alive.

One after another they ran over the walkway to the hatch that connected the *Ravenous Hunter* with its auxiliary ship. Once aboard Kara dashed past Rian and took over the pilot's seat. Her hands flying over the controls and through the pre-flight checks, punching in all necessary controls except the last that would light up the *Harpy's* engines and rocket them away. Then finally she engaged the *Harpy's* ion drives and the auxiliary starfighter's thrusters pushed it off the dead freighter moments

before it crashed into the ground.

The end.