

SNAKES IN THE GARDEN

By Blade Ta'var

Blade Ta'var's Office
Caina, Cocytus System
A few days prior to 'Midnight'

Blade Ta'var, Quaestor of Excidium, sat in her dark office with only the glow of her holoterminal illuminating a small portion of her desk. Quick fingers sent commands to her terminal, one after another, as she worked with several open windows at once. The Zeltron was all business this evening, though few could say exactly what kept her up so long. The staccato rhythm of her fingers striking across the keypad was interrupted as she pulled open a drawer and grabbed several datachips. She inserted each into her terminal, waited patiently until the computer ejected it, and then securely stored it in a discrete sheath.

Once all the them were safely stored within their protective coverings, the Sith turned off her holoterminal. She groped in the dark for the datachips, hid them on her person, and left her office. The Warrior yawned, catching site of the time on her wrist comlink.

Another late night. You never know...

Ohmen outskirts
Judecca, Cocytus System
Evening, Several days later...

Blade Ta'var, clad in discrete clothing and a hood, scanned the daily patrols with her electrobinoculars, mentally recording guard shifts and anything else that might help the rebellious Palatinaeans retake their empire. She didn't know a lot of the details yet, but she had heard that the Emperor had been possessed by a personality known as 'Fallax'. His disciples were already actively protecting him, and even worse he had full control over the Clan's resources. The Sith smiled ever so slightly. Chaos was good. It brought with it plenty of opportunity: Save the Empire by killing Xen?

Works for me.

A tingle in the back of her mind disrupted her dark thoughts. She did her best to act normal, but secretly reached out to the Force to assess the situation. A dark presence was somewhere off to her right, though she wasn't sure of the exact location. That didn't matter as much as the power of that presence though. The Warrior kept a steady breathing rhythm, forgetting for just a moment that a powerful adversary was potentially watching her, and slowly walked away from

her hiding place and the potential sentient tailing her. Step after step she took, periodically checking if she was being followed. It was still there.

Schutta...

The Zeltron bit her lip as she made a snap decision and took a sharp left, plunging herself into the wild, mountainous jungles of Ohmen. Once under the jungle's canopy, the Sith took off at a run, trying her best to put as much distance between herself and whoever was following her. Letting the Force flow through her legs, she pushed herself forward even faster and ignored any background pain as she crashed through underbrush. She reached out to her surroundings only to find the same dark presence, but this time she could swear it was a little closer.

Must be one of Fallax's goons. Why now?

Blade ceded the advantage of speed to her pursuer, and took the harder path: guile. The Sith took a hard left, using her memory of the Ohmen jungles and anything she remembered from the maps provided to her to guide her stalker towards a particularly confusing section of the jungle. Beads of sweat rolled down her face as recalled stories of lost adventurers probing that area of the jungle, but desperate times called for desperate solutions.

The Warrior jogged at a steady pace, turning often and in as many unexpected directions as possible. Sometimes she even made a wide circle back, which often led to frustrated yells from afar. Blade couldn't help but smirk at the trouble she was given her pursuer. It helped her relieve stress from the constant pressure of being chased. Her heart was pounding and her nerves were on edge, especially knowing that one small misstep could doom her. Step by step, their deadly game of chase continued.

A threatening yell pierced the darkening jungle, making the Zeltron pause in a cluster of dense foliage.

"Come out, Palatinaean! I know you are here. You will be captured, and then I, Rylla, will torture you for everything you know about your precious Clan. Stop running like a coward and face your new masters, the New Dawn!"

Blade couldn't see what sounded like a woman somewhere behind her, most likely in a small clearing she had passed not too long ago, but she did feel the chill in the Force as her dark threat permeated the energy around her. The Zeltron shivered involuntarily, and thought quickly. She couldn't run forever, and the jungle would soon be smothered in darkness.

Only one way.

The Warrior didn't waste anytime. Taking a deep breath, she crept out of her hiding place and ran off to one of her favorite clearings, the only one she knew by memory. She just needed a few

precious moments and then Rylla could catch her. Blade let the Force flow through her leg muscles once more, running as fast as her abilities would allow.

“Come back, vermin!” Rylla sprinted after her again with a malice that was petrifying to say the least.

Blade didn’t bother to hide, but rather took the quickest route possible. Each step she pushed forward with a reckless abandon. She just needed to get to the clearing before it got too dark. Unfortunately, her luck ran out. She felt her foot trip on a raised tree root before she could properly correct herself. Her body fell semi-gracefully towards the ground, but she still lost her momentum as she rolled onto the ground in a heap.

“I’m coming!” yelled her deranged pursuer.

Heart and mind racing, the Sith scrambled to her feet and found the only available open patch of dirt that wasn’t mud. It would have to do. Rushed hands reached into a hidden pocket in her tunic, grabbed a sheathed datachip, and hastily buried it an inch or two within the ground.

“I feel you close. Come out and play...”

Blade ignored the woman’s taunts and hastily ran to the nearest cluster of foliage, slowly making her way to the densest pocket once she found cover. Concentrating her focus, the Arcanist masked her own energy signature within the Force, hiding herself from it as much as possible. After a few seconds that felt like minutes, it was gone. The Zeltron made herself very still, waiting for the telltale sound of Rylla’s footsteps.

The soft patter of boots on wet dirt came soon after. The Sith couldn’t see the woman but she imagined that the sound of heavy breathing and squelching mud came from the slightly haggard but confident New Dawn disciple. It was now or never.

Please work.

“What you want I give freely. There is no need to harm me. Look below at your feet. There is a patch of dry dirt, where you should see a clumsily dug hole. Inside it is a datachip with what you seek,” spoke Blade in a quiet, even tone.

“Sounds a bit too good to be true, vermin. Come out and hand it over yourself. Where are you?”

“Trust is earned. Give me a shot. Dig it up and you’ll see it.”

“I SAID COME OUT!” The angry hum of a lightsaber was followed by what sounded like a tree falling through brush.

“What do you have to lose? It’s not like I had time to bury it deep.”

She focused on keeping herself hidden, blocking out the angry pacing of Rylla and hoping a lightsaber wasn’t going to swing through her clump of underbrush. Time seemed to slow down. She could feel each bead of sweat fall off the tip of her nose as she counted the heartbeats till her pursuer’s footsteps went silent. Finally, they walked away from her and all she could hear was annoyed complaints about the damn Palatinaeans.

“Huh... Does this have the location of your current base of operations?”

“Yes,” lied Blade.

The Palatinaean silently waited on edge, hoping the woman found the datachip intact. The sound of squelching mud continued again, but this time it was slow and methodical.

“I expected to have to drag you in kicking and screaming. Yet, here you offer it freely. You are either a coward or a spy. Which one is it, Blade Ta’var?”

The Sith repressed a shudder at the surprise mention of her name and thought back to the members of her own House, Excidium, and her own goals for joining Clan Scholae Palatinae: its destruction. They conflicted with each more and more as she got to know everyone better. Feelings always made things more difficult, but some missions were more important.

“My reasons are my own. But know that I am no friend to my Clan. Please, use that information wisely and leave me alone. I am far more useful to you alive,” Blade offered with a grim determination.

Her pursuer let out a high-pitched laugh that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“You’ve got some nerve, schutta. Some nerve. You know, the New Dawn is always accepting recruits. A good spy is always welcome.” A delicious scent found its way over to Blade, urging her to accept. She had experienced something like it before, but this time it was stronger than what she would expect from a Zeltron. The Sith focused on her mission, pushing aside such urges for now.

“The best place for me right now is within my Clan. I can’t jeopardize my position.”

The Zeltron waited with bated breath for the New Dawn disciple’s final decision. She could hear the woman walk away from her again, and the sound of something dropping to the ground.

“Since you won’t show your face, I’ve dropped a comlink for you to use should you wish. It only communicates directly with me. Good bye, Blade Ta’var. Hopefully we meet again.”

The Sith waited till complete darkness had fallen on the jungle before she moved again. It would be a long night in the jungle, but at least she would wake up to live another day. The Zeltron curled up into a ball, ready to sleep the night away, and thought about the possible events she had set into motion. She hadn't given the New Dawn disciple everything the woman had wanted, but it was certainly enough. She wondered if her Clan would be able to strike back in time before it was used against them. Rylla certainly wasn't going to have an easy time of it returning back to the city.

Her corrupted yellow eyes stared out into the pitch darkness, looking behind the jungles of Ohmen. She finally let down her concealment, diverting her attention to darker emotions. Guilt, fear, and anger swirled within her as they rapidly built upon each other to form a never-ending cycle of hate.

Hello, Darkness, my old friend.