

*At the Foot of the Pinnacle*

Fly.

Fly, Ronovi.

Fly away from the center of the earth.

Maneuver your way through the aching mouths of stone walls. Gravity pulls you the other way, but above the tunnels, above the caverns, there is air. Cool air. And if there is air, there must be water to drink. No. something stronger. Something burning.

The flash is empty. Fly, my pretty.

I clawed my way up narrow passages, felt my heart quaking in my chest, a weak heart, a coward's heart. My saberstaff hung loosely at my side, unlit - dim, dull, lifeless, tame. The beast has been placed in a cage. It gnaws at the bars of its prison. It gnaws...

They are all dead. They are all dead. All my men. My assigned men. They're all dead.

Oh, God, they're all dead.

Now, here, in the Aliso night...I see them. The swarm. Like they followed me out. And they are all...well, not dead yet. Dying. Snuffed out among beating wings and clicking mandibles. Saliva drips from screaming jowls. One soldier has his head removed from its base. The Wraiths are buried among the locusts, silent in their own suffocation. Subjugates can do something, say nothing. Their lungs are stuffed with fire. They belch out their own decay.

This is a plague. This is a plague.

A plague from the gods. A plague from the stars.

The Geonosians swarm like locusts. They are a plague.

And I must fight them.

Why not? I've fought before. I've lived. I've endured. I've *won*. Winning, for a while, was the easy part. Swords and thrones. Blades and bones. I've slaughtered far stronger. I've even conquered mobs. I was a Prince in a system full of locusts. A Headmaster in a school full of locusts. A Dread Lord on a ship full of locusts.

Locusts destroy everything. They devour what they see. They do not need to be Geonosians to be locusts. They do not need wings. They are drones and simpletons and blind men. They are viruses. I've beaten them all before.

Come, saberstaff. Finally chew through those bars. Swallow the hot metal; it makes you stronger. I am at the foot of the Pinnacle. That tower must not be toppled. There is a lady in that tower.

Yes...for her. I'll do it for her. I'll fight for her.

I'll fight. I can fight. I *must* fight.

So many dead around me. The Geonosians' sonic blasters boom. Their scimitars slice through sinews like butter. The whole world melts around them. The whole world melts to nothing.

Both cerulean blades burst into bloom. Here, I hold up my weapon - my salvation. I drive my way into the horde. I force my way into the chaos. Here, I am the warrior. I am myself. I can do this. I can return to the master of the battlefield that I once was.

Here, slowly...slowly...pushing...a Geonosian wing brushes against my shoulder. Humming, fast, quick. The skin is scratched, just slightly. But the pain.

The pain.

I can't.

I *can't*.

I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't

I am gone. I run. Away from caves, away from the Pinnacle. Away from B-1 droids and Geonosians. Away from it all. I search for Aliso City, blindly. For Hak's Hideout. But it's been razed. It's all razed. There is no queen there. But there is also no lady.

Damn. *Damn*. What will she think of me? What will she do to me?

I need a drink. I need a drink now. My head hurts. It hurts. It *huuuuuuuuuurts*

I am gone.

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I sit alone by the edge of a festival, a dead one, and drink from a bottle that does not belong to me. Each light has dimmed in every home and shop. The dancing is done. The drinking is done. Well, save for my own. That I can maintain.

The whole city has been shut down. Martial law. They don't want civilians to die. The soldiers who don't have to fight the Geonosians - they're here. One tried to question me. I offered him the best pack of cigarras I had. He didn't bother me after that.

I am thirty-one years old. And yet...I am also still twenty-seven. Those four years I lost in stasis will never come back. I had no dreams. Only gray shadows accompanied me. And the feeling of cold. The feeling of frost.

I drink more. The whiskey is almost tasteless in my mouth. My throat is dry. My saberstaff is tamed again on my belt. No Geonosians died from its lashing tongues. It wasn't able to cause casualties. I didn't let it.

I don't know why.

Also, I do know why.

I am thirty-one years old.

Washed up at thirty-one years old.

I am a thirty-one-year-old bodyguard who was once a monarch. Who was once the steward of knowledge. Who was once the tyrant of Plagueis. Who was once revered. Who was once feared. Who was once a Dark Jedi more powerful than most who challenged her. Who was once - I was once - I was once something more than the sum of my parts.

I.

Was Once.

Great.

And I flew today.

I flew away.

I flew away from the center of the earth. Away from the foot of the Pinnacle. Away from the swarms of Geonosians, locusts. Away from death. I couldn't stomach it. I tried to. Four years lost. It's numbed me. Shrunk me. Atrophied my body and soul. I thought I had overcome this. I thought...

*What will she say?*

She will say:

*You are not worthy, Tavisæn, of a role in my circle.*

*You are not worthy, Tavisæn, as an advisor or confidant.*

*You are not worthy, Tavisæn, of a word from my lips, or a gaze from my eyes, or touch from my...*

*No, you're just a worn out veteran due for discard, aren't you?*

*Tavisæn?*

Would she say that? Would she actually say that to me? Would she say that? Would Selika

Hold me.

Would Selika

Hold me.

Would Selika

*I DIDN'T KILL A SINGLE GEONOSIAN*

And I am here.

By a festival of the dead. By a festival of the damned. While Aliso burns. While the Pinnacle falls. While she

I don't want to think about it. I don't. *I don't.*

She will hate me until her dying breath. That, to me, is worse than my own demise.

Aliso burns. The Pinnacle falls.

And I am here. Drunk, drenched with sweat, clinging to the shadows. The gray shadows.

I.

Was Once.

Great.

And I flew.