Shadows of Death
Lucine Vasano, #14877

"Darling?"

Lucine opened her eyes to look at the red-headed woman sitting across from her. Evangeline Vasano was looking at her expectantly. Absently, the Sith brought her hand up to the side of her head, trying to remember what they had been talking about. "I am sorry, Mother, did you say something?"

"I asked if you were enjoying your tea," the older woman said.

Lucine stared down at the delicate teacup in her hands. The scent of pomegranate tea drifted up to her, sweet and compelling. "It smells lovely," she replied. Yet, as she raised the cup to her lips, she realized that there was something terribly wrong. "What is this?"

"Be careful, darling, you might spill your tea. I would hate for you to burn yourself," Evangeline chided gently.

The Sith narrowed her eyes as she considered her situation. She now recognized her surroundings; she was in the sitting room of her family estate back on Coruscant. The large room, with its white paneled walls, soft carpet, and comfortable furniture, had been the site of some of her happiest childhood memories. "You did not answer my question, Mother."

"Well, your question was quite vague. I am afraid you will have to be more specific, darling," Evangeline replied as she regarded her daughter from over her teacup.

"Then allow me to elucidate. This is impossible," Lucine said in a tight voice as she gestured around the room. "This house was sold at auction more than seventeen years ago. I know for a fact that the new owner decorated it in some garish Nouveau Corellian style. Furthermore, you are impossible because you are dead. So I will ask again; What is this?"

Evangeline sighed heavily before shaking her head. "Can we not just enjoy this for a while? It has been so long since I have seen you. I will explain everything in due time, but please, can we just enjoy some tea and talk? I would love to hear about what your life was like."

"Was?" Lucine's eyes widened as she regarded her mother with shock. The teacup clattered quietly within the saucer, and she hastily set it down before it became apparent that her hands were shaking.

On more than one occasion, Atyiru had waxed philosophical about life, death and the worlds that fell between the two. Though politeness demanded that Lucine listen to her Master, she had never put much thought into it. But now, sitting with her Mother, she could not help but to wish she had paid more attention.

She whet her lips as she looked slowly around the bright, cheerful sitting room, before turning her attention back to the Vasano matriarch. She whet her lips, wanting to the question that lay at

the forefront of her mind. But fear of the answer made the words stick in her throat. FInally, she took a deep breath and summoned her courage.

"Mother, what do you mean by 'was'?"

The seconds dragged past as the older woman took a long sip from her own cup. "Darling, you really should try some tea. It is quite good, and I made it just for you."

"Mother!" Lucine said sharply. She took a few deep breaths, trying to quiet her thoughts and control her temper. "Mother," she started again in a more even tone. "Please, answer my question."

Evangeline smiled sadly. "Is it not obvious? All things must come to an end, dear."

Her hands were trembling harder now; Lucine clasped them tightly together in her lap, digging her nails into her palms. After a moment, she realized that she could not feel the sensation of her nails piercing her flesh. She frowned slightly, trying to order her thoughts.

Evangeline watched her daughter closely, the concern evident in her emerald eyes. "I must admit, this is not the reaction I was expecting," she commented. "What are you thinking, darling?"

"I am simply working through the chain of events. I remember I was at the battle over Nancora, aboard the *Shadow's Promise*. It had sustained heavy fire, and the order had been given to abandon ship," she said slowly. "This does not make sense. I was not injured when I boarded the escape pod. How could this have happened?"

"Does it really matter?" Evangeline asked.

"Yes, it matters," Lucine said as she closed her eyes, trying to recall what had happened. Little by little, she reassembled the memory. The escape pod had disengaged from the ship. Then someone, a Togruta maybe? Yes, a Togruta had shouted something about an incoming enemy craft. Then the escape pod had given a sudden jolt. She had struck her head against the hull—

Pain suddenly bloomed in the side of her head. She hissed and brought her hands up, but she could feel no injury there.

"Lucine!" Evangeline gasped in alarm. She hastily set down her teacup and moved to sit beside her daughter. "Darling, stop. You will only cause yourself undue distress." She reached out to clasp Lucine's hands in her own.

"I need to know!" Lucine snapped as she jerked away.

The pain worsened and spread. Her headache was now blinding. Searing agony shot through her stomach and her right leg. She sank her teeth into her lower lip to stop herself from screaming.

Through the red haze of agony, the room seemed to shift and shrink. She could dimly make out the crumpled hull and the ghastly form of a Togruta sitting nearby. One eye stared, but did not see. Blood and ichor flowed slowly around a shard of metal protruding from the other eye socket.

"Enough!" Evangeline cried out. "Look at me! Lucine, look at me!" When her daughter made no move to obey, Evangeline placed her hands on either side of the Sith's head and forced her to look.

As her mother touched her head, the room returned to normal. The smell of blood and fear was replaced by the perfume of the flowers that stood in a vase on the table. Slowly, Lucine brought her hands up to touch her mother's. She could still feel the headache, but it had faded to a dull throb. All of her other pains were gone.

"You must listen to me, darling. It is unnecessary for you to suffer like that. I am begging you, do not do this to yourself!" Tears sparkled in Evangeline's eyes as she spoke.

"I saw..."

"It does not matter. Please, darling, just forget about it," her mother pleaded.

Lucine stared into the older woman's eyes as realization slowly dawned. Though she was clutching her mother's hands, she could not feel them. The only sensation that seemed real was the distant throbbing in the side of her head. "This is not real," she whispered.

"Do not say that!" Evangeline gasped.

"This is not real," Lucine repeated. Her thoughts whirled as she tried to figure out what 'this' was. A hallucination? A delusion caused by her head injury? A midway point between the land of the living and the land of the dead? "This is... this is..." her voice trailed off as she struggled to find the right words.

"But it does not matter! This is so much better, is it not? You are not suffering. Please, darling, just stay here with me. Just for a few minutes! Then there will not be any more pain." Tears tracked down Evangeline's cheeks.

Lucine searched her mother's face. The sorrow and concern that was etched there seemed genuine. The expression seemed almost alien; in life, her mother had only smiled in her presence. Lucine desperately wanted to see her smile again.

But...

"I do not want to die," Lucine whispered. She tore her gaze away from her mother's and focused on the dull throbbing in her head.

"No!" Evangeline sobbed. She wrapped her arms around her daughter as if sheer will alone would keep her there.

Lucine's headache flared once more, and the pain in her stomach and leg came roaring back. She doubled over, resting her head against her mother. She was dimly aware that the older woman was screaming. "No! My daughter! My love! No! Please! Plea—"

Her mother's voice faded away, replaced by a ringing in her ears. The agony remained, searing and soul-wrenching. It made every second seem like an eternity. Her heart hammered in her ears. The sharp tang of blood filled the air; she could taste it. She could feel the hot tears sliding down her cheeks.

She tried to open her eyes, only to discover that the left would not open. She lifted one hand to touch it, finding that it had swollen shut and that the left side of her face was slick. In the dim light, she could see that her fingertips were coated in a dark liquid. Blood.

Cautiously, she assessed the damage. She could feel something sharp protruding from her side, a jagged piece of metal. Blood oozed sluggishly from the wound, just as it did from countless other cuts and lacerations that marred her flesh.

Finally, she glanced downward to assess the damage to her leg. It was nearly flayed; red muscle and white bone were exposed to her horrified gaze.

Her breath came to her in ragged gasps as she leaned back, trying to think through the red haze of pain. She had freed herself from whatever delusion she had retreated to, but she was still dying. The only difference was that now she could feel it.

Lucine closed her eyes and focused, drawing upon the Force to mend broken bone and torn tissue. She could feel the wound in her leg begin to stitch together. Her headache slowly abated. But the searing pain in her side did not recede.

The metal, she realized. *I have to remove it.*

Slowly, her fingers closed around the shard in her side. Weakly, she tugged at it, but it did not move. The shrapnel was embedded in the wall behind her. Grinding her teeth, she wrapped her fingers more tightly around the metal. Drawing upon the Force once more, she willed strength into her muscles and once again pulled. The sharp edges bit into the flesh of her fingers, drawing blood even as the metal began to give way.

Just as she began to think that her strength would fail her, the shrapnel pulled free with a wet sucking sound. She let it clatter to the ground as she pressed her hands against the wound, trying to slow the blood that now poured freely.

She tried once more to focus, to draw upon the Force to close the wound. But her thoughts were becoming fuzzy; it was difficult to think. *Tired. Maybe I should rest a moment,* she thought as she leaned her head against the hull. *Just for a few minutes. Then I will try again.* With a soft sigh, she let her remaining eye drift shut.

"That is a bad idea, my dear."

Lucine turned her head to see Atyiru kneeling next to her. The former Consul was clad in a hazy white gown and seemed to be surrounded by a nimbus of light.

The Sith stared at the Miraluka for several seconds, trying to understand what she was seeing. *She cannot be here. It is impossible.* Lucine frowned, trying to understand why she was so certain of that. Brief flashes of memory surfaced; a funeral, a pyre, a scarred woman shouting to the assembled crowd, promising vengeance.

And yet her eyes told her that Atyiru was kneeling right next to her. At last, she gave up trying to make sense of the situation. "Master," the Sith said hoarsely. "You are looking well."

"I wish I could say the same about you, dear," the Miraluka replied as she placed a hand on Lucine's shoulder. The redhead found the gentle pressure on her shoulder to be comforting; a bit of warmth that warded off the chill that was settling over her.

"Hmm. Are you really here? Or am I hallucinating?" Lucine asked as she rested her head against the wall.

"I am here, sweet one."

"That is nice. It is good to see you again," Lucine murmured as she closed her eyes. It was getting hard to think; she was so tired. "Forgive me, Master, but I am weary. Perhaps we could… could continue this conversation after I get some rest?"

"Lucine? Lucine!"

The Sith frowned at the interruption. Was it too much to ask for a few minutes of sleep? "What?" she asked irritably.

"You have to stay awake, dear," the Miraluka said urgently. "You have come so very far. Do not give up now!"

The Sith started to chuckle but was cut short by a stabbing pain in her side. She grimaced, clutching feebly at her wound before saying, "Giving up implies I had a chance to begin with." She sighed and let her head drift to one side. "It hurts so badly. I should have stayed with Mother…."

"The pain means you are still alive. It means you can still fight," Atyiru said. When the Sith only rolled her shoulders in a shrug, the Miraluka tsked softly. "In all the lessons I taught you, I do not recall ever saying that a defeatist attitude was acceptable."

"Just being realistic," Lucine murmured.

The former Consul studied her for several moments, searching for the words to motivate her apprentice. A brief, mischievous smile flashed across her face, as she said, "It's pathetic is what it is."

Lucine's good eye slid open and she tilted her head to look at her Master. "What?"

"Pathetic. Weak. Sad."

At Atyiru's words, the Sith felt a familiar spark of anger flicker to life within her chest. The Miraluka continued, "Should I go get a thesaurus? I am sure I could find more descriptors while you meekly wait to die."

"Meekly?" Lucine flared, her voice a little stronger.

"Meekly," the former Consul repeated. "I must admit, Lucine, I am disappointed. I would not have thought that you'd be content to die on a dust ball planet like this."

The Sith glared at her Master. Her anger grew, burning away the haze of exhaustion. "You are a fine one to talk. You got a turbolift dropped on you."

"But there is a difference between you and me, dear. I actually did something with my life. As a result, my death had meaning," Atyiru replied with a sweet smile. "It is a shame really. I thought I saw so much potential in you. But, it seems I was mistaken."

"How dare you!"

"Then prove me wrong, if you can," the Miraluka said. "Go on. I will wait."

Lucine narrowed her eyes, but her Master only offered her a placid smile in return. *I am not pathetic.* The Sith took a deep breath and focused on her anger. *I am not weak.* She drew upon her anger, using it to force back the exhaustion. Clarity returned, and with it she found the ability to concentrate. She reached out to the Force and turned her attention to the wound in her side. *I will not die here.*

The tissue began to knit back together. The flow of blood slowed as muscle and tissue and bone mended. But the process was slow, too slow. Doubt crept slowly into her mind as she struggled to find the strength to continue.

"Almost there," Atyiru whispered. "You can do this. I know you have it in you."

Lucine took a deep breath, and threw all of her ebbing strength into a final effort. The blood flow ceased as the wound finally closed. The Sith smiled wearily as she felt the intact flesh beneath her fingers, before looking once more at her Master. "I did it," she said, too tired to hide the surprise in her voice.

Atyiru was still there, though her image was translucent. Her hand was still upon Lucine's shoulder, but the Sith could no longer feel her touch. She offered Lucine a brilliant smile. "Oh, my dear. You are ever the contrarian," the former Consul said fondly.

Though her voice sounded distant, Lucine could still make out the note of pride in it. As she watched Atyiru's image became more and more difficult to see. "Be well. Live," came a final whisper, before her Master vanished entirely.

Lucine stared doubtfully at the spot where the former Consul had knelt. Had Atyiru really been there? Was there some sort of life after death? Or was that encounter simply the result of a dying mind? She shook her head slowly with a wry smile. This was not the time to ponder philosophy.

She shakily dragged herself upright and began to crawl toward the hatch. The dim cabin of the escape pod was littered with debris, the floor sticky with blood. She inched slowly along, crawling through the crumbled, broken pod.

After what felt like an eternity, her seeking hands found the hatch lever. She almost cried with relief as she dragged her body closer to it.

Her knees connected with something soft and pliant sprawled directly in front of the hatch. She suppressed a shudder, before using the weight of her body to pull the hatch release.

But the door did not open.

"No!" Lucine gasped, pounding her fist against the metal of the hatch. She was so close. Could it be that she had come this far, only to be doomed by a malfunctioning door? Would this escape pod be her tomb after all?

"No," she said again. "I will not die here."

She reached down to unclip the lightsaber from her belt and pressed it against the hatch. She thumbed the ignition and the emerald blade flared to life. Sparks flew as the plasma pierced the metal. She struggled to hold the lightsaber steady as she worked laboriously to cut through the hatch.

Once the hole was cut, Lucine pushed with all of her strength. The metal gave way, and she tumbled gracelessly out of the pod, landing upon something soft.

Sand, she realized. *It is sand.*

Slowly, she looked around, taking in her surroundings. It was a desert. Dunes stretched for miles in every direction, interrupted only by broken ruins. *The Badlands.* Lucine felt despair rise within her with the realization. She was not certain if she could make it another fifty feet. How in the world was she going to traverse the inhospitable wasteland in her state?

As if in answer, five figures appeared atop a nearby sand dune. The group appeared to be led by an athletic-looking Chiss. The other four women were deeply tanned with green hair.

"Huntresses," Lucine said with a dry chuckle. Of course the first group to reach the scene of the crash would be the enemy. The way her luck was running, she should have expected it.

The approaching women had clearly seen her. The Huntresses had their bows notched, but they did not shoot. The fact that they did not kill her on sight was encouraging.

She studied the group carefully. The Chiss was grinning, and there was a decided swagger to her step. That one was overconfident. The Huntresses, meanwhile, were identical, both in appearance and in movement. Clones? Perhaps.

Half formed ideas began to take shape in her mind as she weighed her options, trying to determine the best way to survive. Because, in the end, Atyiru was right. She would not be content to die on this miserable dust ball of a planet.

Live, her Master's voice echoed within her mind, and the Sith nodded slightly. This would be difficult, but she was determined. "I will not die here," she whispered, as the enemy drew nearer.