

The Lies We Tell

A Great Jedi War XII Fiction

Terran Koul (#91)

Terran rocked back on his heels, slowly releasing an exhausted, adrenaline-sapped sigh, and wondered - not for the first time - how he had gotten to this point. It had seemed like such a simple plan.

"Don't worry about it, Issh." The Kiffar displayed his trademark grin, half-cocksure charm, half-genuine earnestness. It was, as usual, all front.

The matronly Wookiee guffawed derisively, long-since used to his affectations. And, as usual, it still worked on her. She thought for a moment before growling a question.

"No sweat, Big Momma. Ol'val might be full of Force Users, but it's nowhere near as deadly as Nar Shaddaa. Besides, the bounty on Princess Rainbow Sunshine could pay for us to overhaul the Gentleman Bastard a dozen times with credits to spare."

There had been more back-and-forth, of course, and Kolot had expressed his own concerns. Most revolved around the lack of opportunities to blow things up on an asteroid with a self-contained atmosphere. But in the end, they'd agreed, as they always had. The crazier the job, the bigger the payoff. That had been three years ago.

The Quaestor's blue eyes flicked back to the timer in front of him. The crimson glare of seconds slowly sliding into oblivion was the only spark of light in the tight confines. It was like a coffin, air stale and suffocating, but coffins were cold. Looking at the complicated mix of coils, plasteel and energy store, he felt anything but cold. The heat was nearly enough to justify the tiny drops of sweat prickling his brow.

Two minutes until the last second melted away, and his concerns along with it.

They arrived on Port Ol'val with a load of Whyren's Reserve in the ship's hold and a smuggler's hatch packed to the brim with explosives. The alcohol itself was illegal to import into the Dajorra system, but it was small potatoes next to bringing in enough military-grade explosives to level a dozen buildings. The Corellian liquor paid off the local Hutt boss, but it was rumors of the explosives that caught the interest of Qel-Droma's then-Quaestor Celevon. After that it only took a few not-so-subtle uses of the Force, casually swaying negotiations among weak-minded shopkeepers to more favorable terms, before the Kiffar found himself recruited. Of course, things weren't as simple as they had planned. They never were.

For starters, the Miraluka's Summit Guard rarely left her side. And even when they did, she had a constant shadow in Jax. Moreover, the former-smuggler-turned-Consul rarely ventured to Ol'val, despite it being the source of most of Arcona's disposable income. Even when he became Celevon's second-in-command, Terran rarely encountered the ever-ebullient Equite, and never without others present. Finally, in a fit of impatience and pique, he and Kolot engineered the Human Quaestor's downfall. Surely the leader of one of her Houses would have more intimate access to the Arconan Consul.

Grinding his molars, the Kiffar shook his head to clear it, focusing instead on the numbers ticking away in the darkness. Ninety seconds left. But even as the timer seemed to slow, the memories rushed in faster and faster.

"I know, I know!" Terran practically shouted the reply, and the tension in the room was palpable. Kolot chattered back, his agitation plain, and even Isshwarr's fur bristled in irritation.

"You think I don't know how long it's been? It's not that simple." The Quaestor's blue eyes swung between his two companions and the stacks of paperwork that made a small fort out of his desk. Each of those pieces of paper meant something. Purchasing orders. Shipping receipts. Medical results. Condolence notifications. They all came back to people. People who needed to eat. People who needed to be paid. People who needed to be cared for. People who needed to be mourned.

"Look, they're not just pawns or obstacles. Not any more. They're more than that. And they're my responsibility."

There was a pregnant pause in the room, and the three exchanged a long glance. Eyes accused, and words unvoiced were heard. Finally, the Kiffar sighed heavily.

"Even if we could manage it. And that's a big 'if': kidnapping a Force-user of her ability, keeping her complaint through the long jump back to Nar Shaddaa, and transporting her back to Terrago alive is no small feat." Terran sighed again and ran his fingers through his messy hair. There were purple bags under his bloodshot eyes and his shoulders slumped noticeably. "Even if we could manage it, what about them?" He gestured towards the papers and, by extension, the Qel-Dromans under his command. "They need her. They rely on her. They love her."

Isshwarr grinned puckishly as she warbled in response. They do, eh? Kolot fell from his too-tall chair, erupting in a fit of laughter, and the tension broke like a dam. Relief washed over the trio as things unsaid - things that couldn't be said - buoyed them. Terran tossed a small, plastic paperweight at the Wookiee, and she just guffawed, reaching over to muss the Kiffar's hair even further.

In the dark, the corner of his mouth quirked up in a brief smile. Of course, the memories wouldn't stop there.

Wind whipped his unkempt hair across his eyes, briefly obscuring the pyre burning in the distance. His hand swiped across his face, pushing aside his brown locks, and came away wet. He felt something shatter inside him, like a stained-glass dream. Something else rose in its place, overwhelmingly larger and darker than Selen's midnight sky. Its tendrils clawed their way up his throat, and he ground his teeth to keep it inside. He started to turn, refusing to see the tiny light - too poor a symbol for the Light they had lost - and a massive furry paw settled on his shoulder. Isshwarr forced him back, inexorably, towards the Light. As she had once pulled him towards it. The Wookiee, his oldest friend, forced him to stare at the fire that kindled her remains. Remains that had kindled something in him he'd long thought had burned away.

Then the large, hairy arm wrapped around him from behind, steadying him. That would have to be enough.

He didn't know how long he had stood there, fire blurring in his vision, wind biting at his skin. And yet, in some ways he did. In some ways, he stood there still. Pyres burned, seconds ticked down. In the end, all became ash.

"You think I don't know it's a suicide mission?"

Isshwarr and Kolot both stared at him silently, but Issh's eyes at least showed a kind of tired, tender compassion. Kolot's were hard as stone.

"I know. I know!" Terran paused, biting his lower lip in a show of uncharacteristic self-doubt. "Looks, guys, you can stay here. I'll understand. But I have to go. It's what she would have done."

The Wookiee waved a huge, furry arm at the holoprojector, and at the daring - and mentally deranged - battle plan that hovered above it. The rays of blue light foretold carnage and destruction on a devastating scale, even in the best-case scenario. She opened her mouth, a rumble filling her throat as she carefully considered her words. Then she closed it and nodded.

Terran turned to Kolot. The pint-sized Ewok had his arms crossed in front of his chest, and his sharp incisors were bared. He returned the look mutely. Finally, he mumbled a tiny chirble under his breath. The Kiffar spoke enough Ewokese to understand.

"Don't blow yourself up."

The seconds grew shorter, less than a minute left, and an acrid stench began to fill Terran's nostrils. He thought of looking away, of closing his eyes, even of praying to Ashla and Bogan. But what would be the point? It wouldn't change the outcome. Sometimes intentions and efforts didn't matter. Sometimes, no matter how carefully you chose your ingredients and followed the plan, things still burned. Sometimes the universe served you *osik*, and you just had to eat it.

There had been a dozen of them to start with. Half each from Qel-Droma and Galeres. Soldiers, Slicers, Demolitions. A salvo of proton torpedoes from three full B-wing squadrons had managed to bring down the Braga's shields just in time for their makeshift assault module - a converted asteroid miner - to crash into the Dreadnaught's hull. Though the Dreadnaught's turbolaser batteries couldn't depress far enough to hit them, it had taken a concerted effort from those same B-wings - and their X-wing escorts - to keep wave after wave of enemy starfighters from turning them into so much smoking carbon. Eventually the asteroid miner's lasers had penetrated the Dreadnaught's armored skin.

The strike team scrambled out into chaos.

Their spy's intel had been bad. They were supposed to break through into an ancillary cargo hold. Instead, the room had been converted into barracks for the Collective's cyborg soldiers. Quick thinking by their demolitions group and the foresight to bring a number of EMP grenades had saved the Arconans from a massacre. Even so, two members of Nighthawk wouldn't be returning to duty.

With an irritated growl, the Kiffar waved at the oily smoke that wafted into his eyes. Even through his watering, tear-streaked gaze, the crimson timer continued its inexorable countdown. At least it didn't beep off every second, like some of the explosives they'd brought aboard the Braga.

It took nearly half an hour of stealthy, fitful false starts and slow, torturous advances. Crawl ways abounded on a ship the size of the Braga, and where such traversals weren't possible, their slicers had managed to spike their way into turbolift shafts. Even so, they'd encountered resistance at a half dozen junctures before reaching the ancillary engine room. Say what you will about the Collective, but they take their security seriously. The Kiffar mopped sweat from his brow as he looked around the cluttered room and its tangled maze of consoles and conduits. In theory, taking out the ship's secondary cooling system should cause the Dreadnaught's main power core to overload the next time it fired its superlaser. At least, according to their spy. So far, the intel he'd provided hadn't filled Terran with an abundance of confidence. Reigning in his own snark, the Quaestor assembled a mental map of the room and its exits.

"Okay, campers: we've got two main points of ingress, fore and starboard. Plus the grate we entered by and another one aft. I want three bodies by each door, and another by each grate. Chances are, the ship's computer has already flagged us as being out of bounds. We've probably got two minutes, tops, before a squad of troops come rushing through one of these doors. Let's get the charges set and get out of here."

Following his own instructions, the Kiffar took up position by the fore entrance, twin Westars unholstered and at the ready. Two of their demolitions experts got to work planting charges. The remainder of the strike team followed his lead, taking up positions around the room. As they settled in to wait, an eerie silence fell over the room, punctuated only by the occasional click of explosives arming. He steadied his breathing and strained to hear the tell-tale sound of boots on durasteel that would signal their welcoming party's approach.

Instead of boots, a methodical beeping filled the room.

He darted a glance at the demolitions team. "The frak is that?"

One of them paused long enough to glance his way. He looked at Terran as if the Kiffar were daft. "It's the timers counting down."

"The timers are audible?"

"Of course," the Devaronian replied, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. "The frequency of the beeps lets us know how long we have left."

"...and leads the enemy right to the device?"

The Devaronian raised a hand, mouth already open to respond, then closed it. His hand lowered slowly, stopping to scratch idly at one of his horns.

Terran just sighed. "Can you shut it off? Or will we have to stay here once they're set and blow up with them?"

"On it, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir', Demolitions."

The Kiffar shook his head, banishing the memory, as seconds ticked by in front of him. They'd made it out. The explosives had gone off as intended. And yet here he was, staring down another timer. He looked down to check his chrono out of habit, then realized it wasn't visible in the dark room.

Beyond the grate was pure blackness. No combat lightning. Not even emergency lightning. I've got a bad feeling about this. The Quaestor swallowed his unease and began loosening the thumb screws that held the grate in place. The last one stuck, misthreaded, but after a few seconds of jimmying he was able to get it free. The ship lurched around them, and the impact knocked the grate free from his hand. It clattered to the deck, a metallic crash echoing through the darkened chamber.

"Sithspit."

Terran swallowed heavily, ignoring the dread in his gut, and inched out of the crawl way. He could feel the Force screaming at him, thrashing in the back of his mind, urging him to turn around. He wondered, briefly, if that was how she had felt in the turbolift. Probably. And, like her, he was ignoring it. But not because of some altruistic desire to do good. Not even for the more prosaic hope of saving the day and being a hero. He ignored it. He pushed forward. Because it's what she would do.

Then the world erupted into crimson streaks of fire and all thought fled.

He still wasn't sure how they'd made it through that particular gauntlet. Luck? Training? Maybe Ashla and Bogan leant a hand. He wanted to feel dismissive at the thought. But all he felt was sincere wonder. The same wonder he'd felt when he heard her voice calling him back to consciousness.

"Terran."

"Terran, wake up. There's no time to sleep, grumpypuss."

His eyes shot open. His hands still clutched his blasters. The charred remains of their Devaronian demolitions expert lay to his right and a dozen troopers in full battle armor rushed towards him. He rolled over, sheathing a blaster and grabbing a fallen explosive charge from the Galeran as he scrabbled to his feet. The lights were on now, and they were blinding. But the Force was with him, and he could feel the troopers as they unleashed an unending salvo of plasma at his retreating back. He could hear the footfalls, smell the antiseptic soap on their bodies, even feel the subtle shifts of gravity as the ship maneuvered. But he couldn't see a thing. Was this what life was like her for her? Seeing everything, and also nothing? He thought what his own life might have been if he had never seen her goofy smile. His chest tightened and he banished the thought. No time for that now.

His vision began to clear just as he crashed into the door. He hit the emergency release next to it and it opened at a glacial pace. He dove through, tossing a thermal detonator back at his pursuers, and hurtled down the corridor.

There was still one last charge to plant.

Ten seconds.

A clatter on the other side of the door startled the Kiffar, and he swore under his breath. He tried to breath in, but the stench burned his nostrils and caused his gorge to rise.

"I swear to everything holy, Kolot!" the Kiffar shouted through the doorway, annoyance plain in his voice. "This is absolutely the last time I let you convince me to make one of your Ewok 'comfort foods' aboard the *Bastard*. This place is going to reek for weeks!"

The culinary station dinged with an annoyingly chipper tone, and Terran opened the grimy door. A quick tug of the Force freed the entree from its scorching confines and he turned back towards the door, waving it open before stepping out into the ship's main hold. Isshwarr and Kolot sat on either side of a small Dejarik holotable, expressions neutral. Then they burst into simultaneously laughter.

"Fine, fine. Laugh it up, fuzzballs. But I'm the one getting rewarded for blowing the *Braga*."

He sat down at the table, forcing a self-deprecating grin on his face. The movement caused the synthskin plastered across his cheek to itch. Small price to pay for a successful escape. And the *Braga's* destruction had gone exactly as planned. Cuts and bruises still marred his complexion, but they'd heal. Everything did eventually.

At least, that's what he kept telling himself.