***The Cat and the Claw***

***Fiction for “Don’t be Afraid”***

Written by

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***PROLOGUE***

The mood of Clan Naga Sadow has been tainted over the past few weeks. Before Pravus left the Iron Throne, the Clan Consul pledged allegiance to the Iron Throne and Dark Council. This seemingly appropriate act sent the Clan spiraling into a state of division. Some members in favor of the alignment and ousting the traitorous rebels who did not bend the knee to the Iron Throne.

Takagari has stayed completely neutral on the matter, as he saw no advantage in taking sides of the matter. There was no place for Clan brethren to be feuding for power that was not theirs to claim. There were too many other pressing issues that the Equite was taking head on and politics was not one of them. Though he told Grand Master Muz, if he needed him to fight at his side he would. The Lion approved of his Equite’s stance and said he would call on him if needed.

At the moment, Talon Squadron was imposing their will at the command of the Clan Naga Sadow’s leadership trying to push out those “traitors”. DarkHawk left all that political engagements to those who thought it was imperative to the cause. However, they seemed to overlook the fact that six grossly public murders have taken place on Tarthos. All six victims have been adolescent boys, all six killed violently and their bodies decimated and organs removed with precision. The killer’s calling card has been the removal of the victim's eyes, removed with surgical precision, the killer took their time with the procedure. Then publically displayed the bodies for all to see.

The local police were scurrying around with no clues or leads to the perpetrator. Two local Special Enforcement Officers have been assigned the case. A Cathar Lieutenant named CJ, and a female Chiss Lieutenant named Zaharra. Both have worked high profile cases before, both excellent cops, both know the who the Brotherhood is, and both reached out for help.

The only lead in the case was the statements of two local business owners. The second victim was displayed between their two establishments. Both shop owners said they distinctively saw a cloaked figure at the scene. Reluctantly the figure left the body in a haste as the owners startled the “Perp’s” routine when they came to open their shops for the day’s business.

CJ had gotten a coded message to the Battlemaster and asked for his assistance with the case. As DarkHawk read the message he already knew that this would be a good case to look into and keep his mind off the political hokum that engrossed the Clan.

CJ and Zaharra met with the Battlemaster on an early morning outside the city in a new housing development. The two cops divulged everything they had on the case. Zaharra, she was the tech guru and a very capable fighter, to say the least. She has developed and implemented her “LE” mini-drones and used them to listen in on a conversation regarding a local Transdoshan thug that had a record a mile long. He bragged about his connection to a new crime boss and enjoyed what was happening to the youths of the city. Coincidentally he was seen at the last victim's crime scene. DarkHawk found the situation very intriguing and told the two SEO Officers he would get back to them in a couple days with his investigation.

***Kar Alabrek***

***Tarthos***

***Near Central Hub***

The Transdoshan made very quick work of the rooftops as he traversed from one to the other. The reptile had a slight lead on a black-clad figure that was giving pursuit. The two moved almost in identical fluidity. The black-clad figure gaining ground as the two leaped across a huge gap in between buildings. A sense of familiarization flushed over the Battlemaster as he hurled himself over the void between the buildings.

As the Equite felt the rush of cool night air flow over his body, that familiar feeling engrossed his body. His momentum from the jump seemed to halt, and the Transdoshan that was just out of reach seemed to halt in mid-air as well. Before the Battlemaster knew it, his body halted from the jump and he overlooked a ten-story drop. The Transdoshan was then immediately hurled backward to the rooftop it had just jumped from and crashed into a maintenance building. The reptile hit the small building with immense force, bones could be heard snapping like twigs. The reptiles body seemed to fold itself up as it fell to the gravel rooftop.

DarkHawk watched this action take place and it seemingly moved in slow motion, but in reality, took a fraction of a second. The Battlemaster then was moving and was placed back on sure-footing of the rooftop. The Equite still could not move and he knew he was dealing with a Force user.

“Takagari! Why must you involve yourself in such insignificant matters, this is beneath you” the voice boomed out.

DarkHawk now able, spun around and before him was his friend and mentor Master Sith Bloodfyre. DarkHawk immediately dropped to his knee and bowed to the Elder.

“Master, I am honored you’re here..”

“Takagari, why are you involving yourself in these minuscule endeavors?” the Elder asked.

“Master, this Transdoshan may have information regarding a series of killings here in the city.” replied the Equite.

“I know the details of your being here, again you're wasting your talents with it. Let the locals deal with this.” Bloodfyre said gracefully.

The Shaevalian walked over to his friend, still in the position of respect for the Elder, Bloodfyre motion Takagari to stand. The two Shaevalians were behemoths in size. BloodFyre slightly bigger but both menacing in their own right.

“Master I gave my word that I would get to the bottom of this to two local SEO Officers.”

“Fine, inform them of your findings I have something for you.” The Elder stated.

DarkHawk once again bowed and paid respect to his Elder. The two looked over at the Transdoshan as it exuded moans of pain. The hissing was a low pitch and long, at least its still alive.

The two moved to the edge of the building and Master Bloodfyre scanned the cityscape. He handed Takagari a small slip of paper, the Equite took it and open the parchment and saw a series of numbers.

“Jump coordinates, Master? These look to be to Shavalis Prime.”

“Good DarkHawk, it is and they are exactly that. You asked me some time ago about the possibility of finding and acquiring a certain feline from home planet….you have a window of opportunity here. I must warn you, however, what you are about to endeavor will not be easy by any means. You will face your fears, you must overcome them or you will indeed perish. This will begin your journey towards homage to your Shaevalian heritage and bring you closer to your connection to the Dark Side.”

“Master, I don’t understand…” DarkHawk said inquisitively.

“You told me once that when you were a boy, you saw an Onyx Stalker and its cub. That is a rare event for most, normally there are no survivors. You said you don’t recall ever being that scared. I sense the connection that you have, and you must face that connection, face your fear, overcome it and you will be stronger. This is your path Takagari, you must take it.”

DarkHawk turned and bowed once again to his Master, “I understand, I will do as you command.”

“This will relieve you of the struggle you feel towards Clan matters, just know one prerogative is not always better than the next.”

***Kar Alabrek***

***Tarthos***

***Spaceport***

The Equite managed to garner a transport with one of the Special Operations Commandos ships. The ship was heading on a supply run to outside the Correllian Run and he managed to trade a few credits for the ride.

Within minutes the ship was launching and broke the barrier of space. The pilot punched in his final coordinates and pushed the throttles forward. The leap to hyperspace was instantaneous, the Battlemaster sat back and watched the stars speed by. He closed his eyes and engrossed himself with his connection to the Force.

***Shaevalis Prime***

***Shaevalis City***

***Shaevalian Forest***

The transport parked in its designated spot on the spaceport tarmac. DarkHawk gripping the throttles of his FC-20 speeder bike. One of the crew hit the cargo hold button and the doors opened. The Equite hammered the throttles and raced out of the transport, thru the spaceport and into the city. He kept the throttle wide open until the city was falling behind him. The beacon on his HUD highlighted a point about twenty clicks ahead. The Battlemaster kept the throttle wide open and race across the terrain. He could see the forest line on the horizon and a small smile crested his face.

The Shaevalian forest was nothing but thick, dense and intimidating, to say the least. The tall Ironwood trees engulfed the land and towered over the terrain. There was no room for a speeder bike to maneuver, so have to make the last leg of this on foot.

DarkHawk entered the forest, the ground covering of fern made for a soft terrain. The Equite punched a button on his gauntlet and a small holocron screen was visible. The blinking dot was even closer now, about five clicks to the East. Pulling his Nightsister bow from its cradle on his back, he snapped the collapsed bow into position and the bow was ready to fire if needed.

The Equite managed the rugged terrain successfully to the spot the coordinates instructed. He knelt down feeling the surface, morning dew still covered the ferns around him. He surveyed the scene looking for any clues. Nothing. As the Equite moved silently within the forest he could not help himself from the feeling of being watched. A ginormous Ironwood tree was directly in front of him, “*Time to get a bird's eyes view of this place*” he thought.

Scaling the tree came with little effort. Within seconds Takagari was perched on a massive branch about eight meters above the forest floor. DarkHawk scanned the area and reached out with the Force. He could feel his surroundings, he could feel the presence of living creatures around him. As he surveyed the area the feeling of danger rushed over him. He knew something big was close. *Could it be…*

The Equite’s connection to the Force was broken by a whiff of hot breath along the back of his neck. He slowly turned his head only to be faced nose to nose with a big Onyx Stalker. The feline snarled and bared its fangs, the cat’s breath was pungent, to say the least. Remnants from its last meal no doubt. DarkHawk never felt like this before, it was unfamiliar, foreign to say the least. The cat sniffed at its would-be prey, its shoulders prone ready to strike. There seemed no way out of this, and that feeling was more than frustrating to the Battlemaster.

“Easy, easy now..” DarkHawk said soothingly. That made no difference to the feral cat, it only hissed and bared its fangs once again. The Equite only had one thought in his mind, jump! Without any hesitation, the Sith hurled himself towards the forest floor. Before he even hit the ground he felt the fangs pierce into his left shoulder. The cat sunk its fangs in deep, and its claws were already piercing thru his Dark Armor combat suit. The feline thrashed at the Shaevalian and was making little work of the large man. DarkHawk tried to break free but the grip was overwhelmingly strong. Flashes of the blue sky through the treetops were the last conscious thought he had.

***Shaevalis Prime***

***Shaevalian Forest***

The pain shot through the Equite’s entire body. The smell of blood filled his nostrils, along with the aromatic tang of death. He slowly moved his head to gauge where he was at. It was dark, damp, must be the feline’s cave. He could hear scurrying near him, but he was not conscious enough to pinpoint it yet. He tried to sit up and the pain blasted from shoulder to foot. He looked over at his shoulder, he could feel the blood oozing from the wound. Two perfect puncture wounds on the front of his chest and in the back. He could feel his clavicle, it had been displaced by the bite. Shoulder blade was definitely broke, the force of the cat’s bite was impressive, to say the least.

He had to push the clavicle back into place, and start a quick healing process if he was to get out of this in any shape to talk about it. Expelling past the pain, Takagari concentrated on stopping the bleeding. His connection to the Force was interrupted by the source of scurrying sound he had previously heard. A small Onyx cub had just pounced on his chest licking at the blood still oozing from the wounds. The cub was purring, DarkHawk was not about to be this family’s next meal.

The cub could not have been more than five months old, but if the cub is near, mom surely was not far away. DarkHawk reached up with his right hand and tried to push the cub away from him. To his surprise that cub showed great strength even at this age. Before he could complete the task, the cat hissed and snapped at his forearm narrowly missing. The cub jumped off his chest and landed in front of him primed and ready to attack. Its shoulder already hunched, mom has been teaching.

DarkHawk took advantage of this time and reconnected with the Force. The bleeding slowed enough for him to sit completely upright. The Sith’s senses were coming back to fruition, he scanned the area once again. Nothing but himself and the cub, time to move. DarkHawk leaned to his right side and slowly stood on his feet. The cub now, hissing, even more, bellowing out with a newly found roar that surely was a call for mom. Feeling the cave wall he felt a protrusion of rock that would suffice what he needed to do. He took a deep breath and slammed his shoulder into the protrusion. The pain was agonizing, it took every bit of him not to scream. He felt the clavicle and it had popped back into place. He grabbed his small medkit from a pouch on his utility belt. A shot of medical foam directly into the front puncture wounds should do the trick. The foam burned as it made its way through the wounds and began expanding sealing the holes.

The next sound shot waves through the Sith’s body. Mom was answering the cries of her cub. They echoed thru the cave, piercing the silence. The cub tore off towards the dim light of the cave opening. DarkHawk could see the remains of the cat's victims as the lay almost in an adorning fashion throughout the cave. As the Sith turned towards the cave opening, both mom and cub stood guard. Proned and ready, the large female’s tails swirled in a circular motion before all three dropped. DarkHawk knew the strike was coming. The cat launched and the Battlemaster spun to his right out of the way of the attacking feline. The cat landed and without hesitation, its natural reflexes pushed it back into striking position. It was about to strike again when he felt the cub sink its fangs right above his boot into the top part of his calf. Even at its young age, the cub had a killing bite had he been a small prey. The only opening the Sith thought he had would be to use the cub to his advantage. He wanted no harm to come to either, but if it came down to mom or himself, Takagari was walking out of this cave.

DarkHawk quickly grabbed the cub by the nap of the neck, pulling it off his leg. He held the cub out in front, and the cub’s mother roared. Growling and swiping the ground with its paw in more than aggressive manner at the Sith. He knew that it would not attack as long as he held that cub. It took a minute for all of this to sink in, right in front of the Battlemaster was a least a three hundred pound cat. The cub struggled and in his grip. It shook his whole body and the shoulder still let him know of the residual pain.

The Onyx Stalker circled its prey, and DarkHawk kept the cub in front of him, between the advancing feline and himself. The cub continued to struggle and the Equite kept his grip not letting up. It was essentially a stalemate, if he dropped the cub the Stalker would attack, but how long could he hold the stalemate. Takagari at that moment had a vision of deja-vu, brief snapshots of his childhood. That day outside of the science lab was the first time he saw an Onyx Stalker. Though it was not a close encounter of this nature, even then both mother and cub stopped to inquire into the boy he once was. A preferable meal for sure, but for some reason, the two merely disappeared back into the thick forest. One of the few memories he has as a child.

As the two continued to counter each other's circular motion. The mother was obviously looking for an opening but was not about to jeopardize her cub. Stalkers are known for their tactics hence the name Stalker. As the Sith maneuvered the cave he almost tripped over something as he backed away from the female Onyx. A small hiss came from under his foot followed by a high pitched shriek. Takagari looked down only to find another cub, though this one was smaller than the one he had a death grip on. The mother roared once again, “*This situation is getting worse by the minute…”* he thought.

“It’s gonna be ok girl, I am not here to harm you or your babies,” DarkHawk said. Feeling almost sick to his stomach that he was not only in this precarious position, but he was talking to a cat.

The second cub just rustled in its makeshift bed and laid back down, letting out a few audible bellows. Its mother made no sound what so ever, it never took its eyes off the cub DarkHawk held. *“I wonder if it’s the runt, or she has rejected the cub?”*

This stalemate was not going to last very much longer. The mom was gonna make her move and it would come fast and aggressively. Nothing worse than a mom protecting her young. There was no other way to describe what DarkHawk was feeling…fear. Fear engrossed him, and as unfamiliar as it was to him, he knew he either had to embrace it or this would be his last day breathing. The big cat made a few charges, closing the gap between them with each aggressive showing. The Sith had to do something and quick.

Takagari figured giving into his fear meant he was going to have to kill this big cat. That right there did not settle well with him as he knew her cubs may not survive alone. He had to find another way. The only way out was through that big female, and to do that he would have to drop the cub. He maneuvered himself so that the entrance was right in front of him. DarkHawk took a deep breath and regained a connection to the Force. The timing would have to be perfect if he wanted to walk away from this alive. He dropped his right arm slightly in order to gain some momentum with the weight of the cub. Takagari then launched the cub directly at its mother. Like all cats, it landed on its feet and mom already poised to strike launched. The cat closed the distance with its strike in a fraction of seconds, its claws extended and ready to shred the Sith in pieces. DarkHawk raised his right arm once again and the big cat froze in mid-air. Fangs dripping saliva and ears still pinned back for the killing blow. He needed some time and was not about to waste this opportunity. In one swift motion, the Battlemaster swept his arm to the left launching the big cat into the cave wall. He could hear the air leave the felines lungs and she fell limp to the cave floor.

The big cat laid lifeless, and that feeling of fear still beckoning thru him, his breathing raced. Trying to gain control and slow his breathing and heart rate down. The one cub ran to its mom, purring and licking her snout. DarkHawk bent down to check on the feline, he could see her chest rise and fall as she breathed. *“Good just knocked her out for the time being…”*

He turned to the second cub who was still laying its daybed. Normally cats don’t den like this, the cubs are old enough to be out and about, but this one, this one must be the runt and mom must have thought it was going to die. DarkHawk picked up the sleeping cub and brought it close to him, its yellow eyes opened and pierced through his soul. The rustling from behind made the Sith come to point. There the female was on her feet again and her strong cub was between her front legs mimicking her movements and sounds.

“You have got to be kidding me…” DarkHawk said.

DarkHawk’s fear was more than at the surface of his being. And this angered the Sith more so than ever. He did not want to kill the feline but it looked as if he was not going to get away without taking her life or being its next meal. He embraced the anger, he let it flow through his entire body. He tucked the smaller cat painfully under his left arm. The pain shot through his entire body once again. Takagari slowly moved his right arm down to his utility belt and unsheathed his saber. He activated his saber and the Cobalt blade hummed to life. The glow of his blade illuminated the cave, and he could see that this cave had been used many times over through the years. There were piles of bones and carcasses which filled the cave.

Slowly the Equite moved backward towards the dim light of the cave opening. The mother and cub ensued never looking away from the eyes of their prey. Cautiously he maneuvered himself within feet of the opening. The feline once again taking swats at the ground in front of her with huge clawed paws. DarkHawk did the same with his saber, she was hesitant to strike at the moment. The Battlemaster needed to keep these odds in his favor. He took a big arching strike against the cave wall sending rock and rubble towards the two cats. The two felines were startled by the movement jumping back and avoiding the debris. As the Sith felt the warmth of sunlight on the back of him, he took two more steps and was completely out of the cave. The mother was already moving in for another charge. With another fluid motion and strike of his saber, he cut the rock above the opening and filled the opening with rock and rubble.

The cat's roars could be heard muffled behind the wall of rock. And without hesitation, DarkHawk plunged his saber back into the rock and with a downward motion cutting away more rock. “There you go girl, you will be able to claw your way out of that, just not in the next few minutes.” He said.

The hole he just made was big enough for the mother to push her head through. Snapping and hissing at her assailant. DarkHawk knelt down in front of her and allowed his connection with the Force to grow. He had never tried this before but given the situation, he felt the need to thank the mother for her gift. He sheathed his saber and held up his gloved hand to his mouth and gripped it in his teeth pulling his hand out. He held his exposed palm up just out of reach of the mother’s snout. He stared into her yellow eyes and allowed his connection to the Force tie the two together. The feral cat slowed her demeanor and her breathing became long and deep. She sniffed his palm, taking in his essence and surprisingly she seemed to analyze it.

“My name is Takagari KogaRyu, I mean you know harm,” he said.

The cat hissed, but DarkHawk never pulled his hand back. She continued to sniff, he pulled his hand away and brought the young cub still tucked away under his arm up to her. She sniffed one more time, and he once again cradled the cub into his chest.

“I promise I will protect this cub with my life, you have given me a gift that I will not squander or dismiss.”

DarkHawk knew he did not pose the power to communicate with the animal, but with his connection to the Force, he felt that she somewhat understood him. Her ferocity had diminished when he spoke and sniffed his essence. She pulled her head from the opening and her yellow eyes vanished into the darkness of the cave.

The warmth of the sun felt good on him, he had no idea of how long he was in that cave, he figured at least twelve hours. He brought up his GPS on his gauntlet and quickly made his way towards the blinking dot and to his speeder. The forest was so dense he wondered how that cat drug him to the cave. He did not want to stick around and investigate that aspect. Finally, after about thirty minutes, he found his way to his speeder. He placed the small cub in one of his small cargo holds and climbed on. He looked back at the mountain he just escaped from. He never felt fear like that, only once by the same source. The SIth accepted that fear and it diminished within him. He could feel his strength regaining, and he could feel a much stronger connection to the Force.

Takagari punched the throttle and raced back to the spaceport.