

# STAR WARS

## Unequal Reactions

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#11708

Competition Entry for [INQ] Counterpoints: Standard Fiction

*"The cycle will continue. You were attacked without provocation. Then you feel secure in your claim of 'justice'. So, you attack back. And then? Now they are the ones who seek justice. Back and forth. Given and returned. Who's responsibility will it then be...to be the one that takes the stand and decides that here—right here—is where it ends?"*

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"Well, well," Adalinde remarked while tapping a pale, slender finger against her crimson lips. "It seems zey 'ave decided to go 'public'. But you knew zat already."

The cabin was cramped and left the occupants little room to maneuver. One might call it 'intimate'. Atra Ventus was not such a one. The confined space put him on edge—more so than normal—and reminded him of the distant past. Of walls closing in on him...of darkness despite his sight. "Yes," the Combat Master murmured in reply. He sat with his eyes closed—which helped—and his arms crossed over his chest.

His Inquisitorius companion allowed herself a smirk and brushed her hand through her long, bright red hair. The movement of her bangs revealed tight, scarred flesh across half her face for the briefest of moments before falling back into place, obscuring Adalinde's features once more. Her cold eyes turned from Atra and settled on the holofeed once more. The feed's pale blue light reflected within the matching hue of her irises. "I wonder how ze rest will respond."

"Indifference, mostly," Atra offered, finally opening his black-gold eyes. He scratched lightly at his dark beard before glancing towards the exit. "Some will find motivation behind this declaration. Others will hold to doubt. To anger. Their supposed righteousness."

A steady beeping invaded their cramped solitude, accompanied by the stereotypically annoying flashing red light. Atra slid more upright in his seat, his furrowed eyebrows relaxing as he settled back into his calm. He would be free soon.

"So negative," Adalinde said with a laugh. "But we'll still 'ave our fun, no?"

The Combat Master stared ahead for a moment, blinking a few times and working his jaw incredulously before turning slowly to meet Adalinde's gaze. "I'm concerned by your definition of 'fun'."

Another laugh—somehow not conveying the cheer it should—answered him. "And yet, you still join in."

Atra flicked his eyebrows up quickly in acquiescence before turning away. He wasn't one for talking much anyhow. He wasted little time in opening the cabin's door and stepping out into the corridor beyond. Adalinde followed, her serpentine tattoo somehow shimmering in the changing light as she clasped her arms behind her back and almost began to skip. Her excitement was certainly palpable. The dark sash that made up most of her outfit's top fluttered in her wake and betrayed her haste. The Combat Master's boots came to a stop at the shuttle's ramp. He reached his gloved left hand towards the switch but waited to press it as he stared at Adalinde.

She began to purse her lips impatiently and rocked back and forth slightly on her heels. Yet, Atra still only stared. "Okay, fine," she exclaimed, shifting her weight to one side and jutting out her hip. "No unnecessary violence, stick to ze mission parameters, keep up."

A slight grin threatened to appear on the Combat Master's face as the edge of his lips tugged a little before he nodded with approval. His waiting finger finished its task and triggered the ramp. The opening hissed and let bright light into the transport. Atra winced as his eyes adjusted while Adalinde smiled from ear to ear and skid down the still moving ramp, getting out as quickly as possible.

Atra waited a few moments as he heard the ignition of a lightsaber and the accompanying blaster bolts and cries of pain that meant Adalinde had started her 'fun'. He could only blink slowly and give himself over to a suspiration. The Combat Master pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath before following.

Bodies were strewn across the hangar bay and waiting to greet him as Atra finished his descent. *Always controlled by her emotions*, Atra observed while kicking a severed leg off the end of the ramp. His hands fell to his sides and the Combat Master gave his jacket a quick flick, pushing the edges behind his hands as they fell into his pockets. The man tilted his head to the side and inspected the nearest intact body. The clothing tried to tell the story of an unaffiliated smuggler. The distinct cybernetics confirmed that to be a lie.

"Do you zink zis is the right path?" Adalinde suddenly asked, breaking Atra away from his thoughts.

He turned to look at her, seeing that she hadn't lost her mind completely and had actually taken someone alive. Her captive had messy brown hair and dark eyes, scars marring his chin and a patchwork beard. It was only a small team on the cruiser they had boarded—according to their once trusted and now questionable intel—so it wasn't a surprise that there wasn't more initial resistance. Adalinde grunted with effort, and a hint of

enjoyment, as she twisted the smuggler in her grasp. She kicked at the back of his leg, dropping him to his knees, and tightened her fingers against his scalp while drawing her crimson blade up to his throat.

Atra mulled over the question as he approached. "It's folly. A declaration. Meant to assuage one side, threaten another. Just more escalation." The Combat Master looked down at the smuggler, a sign of his shifting attention. "Talk."

The smuggler's tongue ran across the inside of his bottom lip before he spat blood and saliva at Atra's boot. "Oh? Talk? About what? Gonna have'ta be more specific. Maybe try some questions, I hear they help with the talking—" The human's snark was cut off quickly as the blade at his throat weaved through the air and slashed across his arm, leaving a scorching trail in his flesh before returning to his throat. Instead of being a smartass, the Collective smuggler could only cry out in pain.

Atra raised an eyebrow and nodded his thanks towards Adalinde—who was licking her lips, which was usually more than a little disconcerting. "Name?"

"R-Ruhk...Andromias."

"We know you're couriering data disks for the Collective. Where are they?"

"Have you checked in your ar—" Another superficial slash, bringing even more sweat to the surface of Ruhk's skin as his body struggled to cope with the stress. "Damnit, woman! Not even—not even a warning?"

Adalinde's curtain-like hair fell across Ruhk's shoulder as she leaned down close. Her tongue found an open cut across his neck and drew across it, then found her way to the edge of his ear before pulling away from his skin. "It tastes better with surprise," she hissed with a hint of promise.

"Adalinde," Atra intoned.

"Fun spoiler," she answered regretfully before pulling back from her prey.

Atra sighed, his arms folding over his chest once more. He had already wasted more time than he wanted to on this 'interrogation'. "I'll ask again. Answer, or I'll allow her the opportunity instead," the Combat Master stated.

That caused Ruhk's eyes to bulge. The Collective smuggler wasn't stupid. His life was already forfeit, long before question period began in this parliament of three. But, he knew what those choices represented. An easy way and an exceedingly unpleasant way. "We're not carrying any disks—"

"Ada," Atra said with sudden command.

"Wait! Wait—wait—wait!" Ruhk scrambled to speak, trying to draw his neck away from the blade. "I'm not lying! We don't have any! The data you're looking for is being stored in a cerebral node. In the crew chambers. One of us stayed behind. She has the data! Tyria has it!"

The Combat Master nodded slowly, as if thanking the Collective smuggler while absorbing the information. "Ada," he said again. A clipped cry was all Ruhk managed before the sizzling blade removed his head from his shoulders.

Adalinde chuckled as she spun away, still carrying the momentum of her executioner's sweep. Her fingers still held tightly to Ruhk's hair and carried his head as a result. Her saber disengaged and Adalinde brought the Ruhk closer to her, running a finger along his cheek before coming so close as if to kiss him. Her blue eyes suddenly flicked towards Atra, staring at him in the corner of her vision. His expression was mostly impassive, but the incredulity of his eyebrows all but screamed, "Really?"

"I liked 'im," she answered with a shrug. "'e seemed fun."

Atra didn't so much as sigh, merely motioned for Adalinde to follow and began striding towards the inner corridors of the cruiser. A thud from behind him and quick footfalls were all the tells he needed to know that the Inquisitor was at least keeping up. At the same time, there was a nagging feeling at the back of the Combat Master's thoughts. The cruiser was certainly large enough to command a fair number of troops. Yet, it remained with only a skeleton crew. Had they thought they would more easily pass as smugglers that way?

"I zink it's your turn, *Dark Seraphim*." Adalinde's voice twisted into a mocking tone as she used the Combat Master's moniker. She knew he hated formalities and titles more than anything else. "Tell me ze truth."

Atra acknowledged her with a glance over his shoulder before turning his attention back, looking out for any threats. "The Brotherhood is losing its stability."

That seemed like the end of it, with how even-keeled Atra always was, but Adalinde had been his companion long enough to know more was to come. It was rare, as Atra tended to only say what was enough and nothing more, but sometimes more was enough.

"The Collective took advantage of the infighting. Struck hard and fast. Disrupted the order of things. Yet we continue. We lean onto half-measures and quick solutions. The Council allows freedom for its vassals but demands compliance. Allegiance. The loose grasp upon absolute authority has allowed cracks to form and water found its way in. Now, that water has turned to ice. Expanded. The cracks become fissures, and stability is lost."

Adalinde smirked. "Oh, tell me 'ow you really feel."

"I question our purpose. I doubt our methods. These proclamations and placations." Atra allowed himself a scoff of derision. "Maybe the board should be wiped clean. A cleansing fire to begin again. To do it *right*."

The Combat Master's steps hastened and Adalinde took that as a sign the conversation was over. Still, she had been intrigued by what she had heard. It wasn't often Atra spoke his mind so readily. How fascinating.

Atra kept his focus ahead of him, refusing to dwell anywhere else. The layout of the ship was rather standard and, considering he had been practically living in cruisers of late, the Combat Master had little difficulty picking his path towards the crew quarters.

"Allow me," the Inquisitor offered, slipping past Atra to lean against the closed door. Adalinde's hand pressed against it and she closed her eyes, as if feeling out what lay beyond. She gave Atra a nod of confirmation before stepping back. Her lightsaber hissed to life once more and the crimson blade bit into the durasteel door with ease. The Inquisitor traced a large opening before thrusting her palm forward with a push of Force energy. Careful to avoid the glowing rim, Adalinde stalked into the crew quarters and passed her gaze across the clustered group of remaining smugglers. Somehow, the fact



only one of her eyes was visible added to her menace. The question then became, which of them was their target?

A question with an easy solution.

"Tyria?" Atra shouted from outside the room.

The quivering yelp from a sandy-haired woman at the back, with suddenly very large and round emerald eyes, confirmed their quarry. Adalinde grinned from ear to ear. "Well, zat's too bad for ze rest of our contestants."

Panicked shots rang out as the others tried to defend themselves. Adalinde's blade became a blur as she swat blaster bolts away to harmlessly leave sparking scorches against the paneling. The Inquisitor maintained her stance, acting as a shield for Atra as he made his entry. He flicked the lower right edge of his jacket back to reveal his lightsabers and opened both of his hands. The Combat Master turned his attention inward for the briefest of moments, plunging deep into the icy waters at his core and breaking into the depths of his power. It washed over him like liquid fire, chilling and burning in equal measure. Atra both revelled in the power and bent it to his grasp.

His lightsabers answered the unseen call and flew from their resting place and into Atra's waiting palms. He ignited both and their unstable blades hissed to life. The first, a rippling crimson blade with cascading sparks, was held in his right hand. The second, a crackling cerulean with energy surging across it, rested in his left. Neither extended to their full possible length and resembled shotos more than anything else.

Safely concealed behind Adalinde's protective wall, her blade writing calligraphy upon the air as it worked from point to point, Atra was able to focus completely on his new techniques. He hadn't had much chance to do so

in live situations, after all. The Combat Master took a deep breath and then stepped forward, throwing both weapons from his hands and around Adalinde. He kept his arms extended and moved them in guiding motions. His lightsabers followed the invisible tendrils of power, as if pulled by string towards their destinations. They moved as twin spiraling windmills and carved through the remaining smugglers. Atra continued to weave his arms back and forth in a martial dance and the weapons made short order of the ill-prepared combatants before returning to his grasp.

"And you say I'm ze one wiz ze odd sense of fun," Adalinde commented. "Now zen, do you zink she has to be completely alive to preserve ze data or can she be mostly dead?"

Atra didn't respond to the Inquisitor as he disengaged his lightsabers and returned them to his side. "Tyria, you will be leaving with us. Resistance would be unwise," he declared.

Tyria Senreiko took a deep breath and several steps back from her assailants. Quick glances over her shoulder confirmed that she had nowhere else to go, only a viewport behind her. Then again, Tyria had always known this was her final destination.

That feeling of dread returned all the more readily as Atra noted the change in Tyria's demeanor.

**"Until every chain is broken!"** Tyria screamed with conviction, pulling a detonator from her jacket.

Atra and Adalinde reacted with as much speed as they could muster, but that couldn't change the fact that they were still deep in the room. The suicide vest did its work and a blast wave preceded the coming of an expanding fire.

The blast hit first, knocking the pair from their feet as the explosion consumed Tyria. Atra managed to grab onto Adalinde and pull her into his arms with his back to the brunt of the coming blast—a lingering protective instinct for one of his longest lasting companions. The pain was excruciating, coupled only by the familiar heat of the licking flames. Atra was sent cascading from the room, still holding tightly to Adalinde, and they crashed into the corridor wall with a bone-crushing finality.

If it hadn't been for the ship's emergency systems, they would have been done for: sucked into space through the damaged crews quarters. Instead, the shielding came down and locked in the atmosphere.

Still, damage, heavy as it was, had been inflicted. They had walked into a trap. They had, for all purposes, failed.

Atra fought to control himself, once more demanding the Force heed his command. The world around him kept spiraling and he felt less and less connected to his surroundings. Even the constant ringing in his ears seemed to be fading away. The Combat Master put everything he had into controlling his failing body, willing himself into a state of hibernation. If he was fortunate, Adalinde would also survive. If not, well...it would be hard to say that Atra had lived a good life.

And then the world faded away.