

STAR WARS

The Dark Heart

By John Freeman

(Bale Andros - 826)

The sound of footsteps heralded their coming. Six, they moved in perfect synchronization, filing in twin ranks as they advanced, the harsh overhead lights streaming across the polished surface of their black armor like arcs of lightning. Meraxis shock troopers, highly trained men down to the last. As they strode forward they held their carbine rifles angled upward, held parallel to their plastrons, a parade of death. No one could doubt their capacity to use deadly force. It was a fearsome sight few witnessed inside the training facility. It was a fearsome sight even to her—especially to her—and she led this procession.

Marching at the head, clad in the tight, form-fitting attire of Meraxis Command, Serena Skye crossed the hall with long, calculated strides, hands crossed firmly at the small of her back, her sharp blue eyes a match for her icy demeanor. Trainees and crewmen dashed out of their way as she approached. She was the picture of authority and confidence as she moved. Underneath that stare, the attire, right down under her skin, she felt anything but confidence. She allowed herself one sharp swallow. She wanted nothing more than to spin on her heels and run right out the arching entrance. *You're going in alone*, she recalled her commanding officer's words during debriefing.

It was easy to forget that she was alone with these troopers at her back, but it was all an illusion. A trick. A ploy. Not for the first time, she had to remind herself that she was rather good at this sort of thing. She didn't fully grasp her skills, not yet at least, but they had come to her as naturally as breathing. With the empress' wise teachings, she was growing stronger by the day. The entrance was well behind her now, too far for her to flee, and with the swish of an automated door, she was locked inside an elevator cab with her escort, a full squad standing between her and the exit. She clicked her heels and spun to face them. A mistake. She didn't need to see the stiffening in their shoulders, the glances some exchanged, the droning "Uh..." that came one to her right to know the effects of her powers had already worn off. She felt it in the Force, the confusion welling up inside each one of them as they realized they weren't where they were supposed to be. When they saw her face, it confirmed something was amiss.

"You are not commander Aubrey," said the foremost trooper, the squad leader. She did not know his name. She didn't care to. The tightening of his hands around his blaster was subtle but she saw it.

With a click of her tongue, she served them a petulant roll of the eyes, slouching sideways in mock disappointment. It was a momentary slip and her expression snapped back to that rigid frown the commanded respect. They shifted with unease, exchanged more glances. She spoke smoothly as she swept her hand before them.

“You are mistaken. I *am* Commander Aubrey.”

In the snap of a finger they had regained their stiff, militaristic composure. The squad leader nodded tightly in acknowledgement. “I am mistaken. You *are* Commander Aubrey.”

“Once you have escorted me to destination, you will report to your unit for disciplinary measures, captain.”

“It will be as you command.”

Good boy. She bit her lip. She had almost said it aloud and this was no time for snark. She had a smart mouth on her. Serena knew that all too well. Exposure to Excidium’s brand of craziness had only worsened that regrettable trait. That, and there was really no helping it: she was her father’s daughter, after all. The Meraxians were a disciplined lot, ruled by an iron fist. If she got smart now, she was getting bit. This was no the place to test the extent of her powers and all it would take was one irregularity to spoil her efforts. Or to get her killed. *One blaster shot to the back. One unidentified female corpse dropped on a cold slab in the morgue.*

She could have moaned with relief when the elevator doors opened up, but she limited her reaction to a soft bristling of air through her nostrils. Back straight, arms crossed once behind it, she stepped forward. The drumming of armored boots followed her. More trainees. Some trainers. A few officers. All saluted as she passed by them. Most averted their eyes at the sight of the commander’s uniform but a handful few met her gaze. Respect, fear, and more fear. One eyebrow shot up, but the officer said nothing. More salutes came which she answered with cold eyes and a tight, hardset frown.

Still alive!

Now, where to?

“You did *WHAT?*” shrieked the hulking Zabrak, a rain of spittle flaring through the holo-projection.

The blue projection of Zehsaa Hysh flinched at his outburst. Then, her demeanor got cold. What began as a warm, pleasant call between two close friends had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. That was par for the course for them, Bale reckoned, but at that moment, he couldn’t give two squirts. She had gone too far. Zehsaa Hysh’s eyes tightened, the harshness of a killer overwriting the caring softness they previously held. A set of sharp, white teeth cut through the projection as sure as they could rend flesh.

“My orders and hers were clear,” she said, voice as harsh as those eyes, “If you think this was my decision—“

“It don’t matter none what I think, you just sent a lamb off to the slaughter. *My* lamb. There’s a blasted good reason I don’t trust your people, and you damn well know it. It’s bad enough you got *me* chained up to your lunatic empress, to get Serena...” Bale found he didn’t have the strength to finish that sentence as if to speak it was to condemn his daughter.

“Bale.”

“Don’t get cute with me, Zehsaa,” he snapped.

“Bale.”

“WHAT?” he roared, his massive knuckles white from gripping the comms station. He could have ripped it right out of the dashboard.

“I took precautions.” The Togruta’s voice shook but Bale wasn’t foolish enough to mistake that for weakness. She was trying to stem her own anger. One of them had to, and they both knew it wouldn’t be him. “She will be safe.”

“You are blasted right, *Kae’shi*, she *will* be.”

Zehsaa flinched at the venom dripping from her pet name and her eyes widened at his tone. Bale’s words couldn’t have been more transparent. “Bale. Don’t you dare. Don’t do anything. Trust me. Please. After Maqor, we’re lucky you aren’t rotting in a cell.”

Her voice was hollow in his ears. He couldn’t think for the blaze burning in his skull. The muscles on the side of his head were working overtime and his jaw was hurting for being clamped down so tight.

“Bale, listen to me. Don’t do any—“

The connection cut out. Zehsaa vanished. He barely registered that it was his fingers that did it. He took a long, deep breath but rolled in his throat like a deep, hungry growl. His eyes shot blaster bolts at the Rodian cringing in the pilot’s seat not two feet from him. She seemed quite pale, paler than usual. He didn’t think it possible for her kind. Not a word came out of her but she was positively shrinking under his glare. Her tube-like mouth twisted this way and that as she tried to swallow.

“Set course for—“

“Got it,” the Rodian squeaked as she jumped into action and punched in the coordinates.

Bale’s crew knew one thing. There was one rule above all others: you don’t mess with the boss’ daughter. Not ever.

Another day, another lesson. It turned out that a well-armed escort and a commanding demeanor only got you so far in the world. In this case, it got her right up to the proverbial door but it wasn’t enough to get her through. Thus, she found herself with Meraxis soldiers at her back and a Meraxis officer blocking the way forward, holding the not-so-proverbial keys. She level her coolest gaze his way as he repeated his previous questions.

“Clearance code?”

He looked at her with deference, without a hint of suspicion. This was no surprise. Why *would* he suspect her? She’d made it this far unhindered, hadn’t she? The guards behind her were enough to squash any doubts. She felt every bit the fraud that she was, but they couldn’t see through her disguise. The truth isn’t always as you see it, but Serena had found that most people settled for the ocular facts. Whether they simply walked down the street or stood guard in a highly secured training facility, it made no difference. People had an unshakeable trust for what their eyes told them.

“Clearance M, eight, four, six, *dash*, three, two, nine, X.” Serena felt the sudden urge to tug at her high collar. *Is it just me or it’s getting terribly hot in here?*

She could have chewed through her lips as she waited for the officer entered the code into his terminal. Zehsaa Hysh had, of course, guarantee its authenticity, but the stakes were infinitely high for Serena. This was her first mission, and someone had been foolish enough to entrust her with it despite the ISI's initial call for a highly trained operative. Receiving praise and support for the empress was one thing with both feet planted inside a Palatinaean star destroyer. She found it meant precious little alone in enemy territory.

It seemed like an eternity passed as she waited for the terminal to blink red and denounce the code as stolen. She felt terribly paranoid all of a sudden. Once again she could sense the squad's hesitation in the Force. It gnawed at them, the uncertainty, the confusion. She couldn't blame them. She sympathized, even. She too wondered how she'd been roped into this. They were likely playing it over and over in their minds, the trek through the courtyard, through the facility, raking their minds as to why they were escorting this so-called high ranking official when they should have been performing a perimeter sweep. They'd find their memories didn't quite line up with the present. Which one would figure out she was a fraud?

This is it, she thought. She winced in anticipation, braced herself and dug her teeth in for the incoming pain. *Here come the blasters. One unidentified female corpse dropped on a cold slab in the morgue.*

"This is embarrassing," she began to say, the vulnerability leaking from her words, but she was interrupted by the terminal. "You are cleared to proceed, Commander Aubrey," announced the officer. She stood where she was for a moment. It was all she could do to keep her legs from wobbling.

She could hear the uncomfortable shuffling of feet behind her back. The way the officer frowned at her, the way his jowls sunk, she became rather self-aware. Her legs felt weak, her fingers numb, her mouth horribly, horribly dry.

What was Zehsaa thinking? Why had the empress vouched for her? What fool at ISI had greenlit her for this mission?

It didn't matter.

She made a show of ironing out her uniform, stretched her neck this way and that, poked her chin up in defiance and stepped forward. The clattering of armored boots

made to follow Serena but she was quick to quell their ardor with one raised fist. The noise died instantly.

“Squad dismissed.”

The door through which they entered moments earlier—an age —slid open. One by one the deadly progression filed out and she watched them go, these killing machines in their black armor, the tip of their carbines peeking over their shoulders. The door clamped shut and Serena found herself gaping at the door.

She could have sighed in relief but nothing came out.

Still alive!

This was bad. Very bad. Zehsaa paced up and down the deck of the shuttle. No one was looking at her. The troopers were far too busy inspecting their boots or otherwise making sure they didn't meet her gaze. They had all heard her *talk* with Bale—if one could call it that. Zehsaa would have been mortified if she wasn't so angry. To think Bale didn't trust her after all they had been through. *The gall on that giant oaf!* If he thought she'd sent Serena down without a backup plan, he was more of a fool than she thought. Yes. There were risks. *Of course, there were risks!* No. She sure as the grass was red on Shili didn't like that Serena was down there. She didn't like it any more than that mangy bastard of Zabrak did. If it were Zehsaa's call, she'd be down there in Serena's stead. Sadly, her superiors did not share her love for the girl. They saw an asset. It was high time to put this asset's abilities to use.

Zehsaa had told Bale too much. He didn't know the location of the facility, but it would not be long until he found out. She may have been his liaison to Excidium, he had made his own contacts in the past year. He had never quite forgiven her for getting him roped up with the likes of Elincia Rei. Now that Serena had signed on as an operative—like any self-respecting rebellious child, against her father's best wishes and fiercest objections—there was no talking to him. Zehsaa could still sense his feelings for her, swimming somewhere just out of reach, but their encounters rarely ended well. She had hoped this time would be better.

It had instead been their worst.

What was I thinking?

Now she didn't know what to do. She could stay the course, wait for Serena's signal, and hope for the best. But then, she was beginning to realize that things seldom went as she hoped. Bale wasn't about to sit idle, no chance in that, and with his temper and his propensity for making an entrance, he was more than likely going to blow the whole operation. The repercussions would be dire. For all of them. If they somehow made it out of Meraxis territory, they were going to be dragged before the Grand Vizier or worse, the Empress. Fat chance of that, though. Once the Meraxians were alerted, there was no getting out.

"Blast it," she shrieked, slapping twin fists down on her thighs. *Blast HIM!* He always had to make things difficult. *Hey Zehsaa. How are you, Zehsaa? Glad to see you, Zehsaa. Let's make out now, Zehsaa.* No. Always with the temper. Always with the explosions and the killing and the headaches and the reprimands from her superiors. It had been fun, once. She was beginning to have her fill with it all.

She looked around, remembering where she was. Red lights. Soldiers lining either side of the crew hold, armed to the teeth. Her standing right in the middle of them letting her emotions run wild. She could sense their fear like a festering wound in the Force. *Good.* At least someone feared her. Maybe *he* would learn in time.

She flashed a vicious set of teeth.

"Initiate long range scans. Announce all incoming ships," she barked at the pilot.

"Yes, mam!" The answer that came from the cockpit was little more than a squeak.

"No mistakes. All. Of. Them."

"No mistakes, mam!"

Collision course it is, then. She sighed. Theirs had never been an easy tale. In fact, where Bale was concerned, nothing *ever* went as she hoped.

See you soon, my love.

She regretted the bitterness and irony in that last thought. There was no helping it now.

Still alive!

Sweat pearled and glistened like a map of constellations on her arms, the low red light of the maintenance shaft a veil upon the curves of her body highlighting her straining muscles. After an hour of climbing and twisting and squeezing herself ever upwards through the blasted conduit, she was just about ready for a nice, relaxing bath. A bath with a good, stiff drink snuck out of her father's stash. She smacked her lips. She could almost taste it. And she could already hear Zehsaa berating her. She inadvertently rolled her eyes at the thought. The Togruta woman was as overprotective as her dad on the best of days, though she would have boxed Serena's ears in for saying so.

Serena shook the thoughts from her head and set her mind back to the task at hand. None of this was happening anytime soon. Best not linger on it. She had a shaft to climb. Besides, there was her consolation prize: she was free from that stuffy uniform. Sadly, that did little to soothe her aching arms.

Up she went. She was making good speed of it, pushing and pulling her body ever upwards, moving with the grace of a feline, at least with as much grace as she could manage without a ladder and a clear foothold. Anything bolted down, every dangling wire, every bit of stubborn metal had to do its part. Up. Up.

And then her boot slipped free. The sudden lurch in momentum tore her fingers free and she dropped with a squeak. Flailing was the worst thing she could do, and that's exactly what she did. One boot caught on something, spun her around, slipped free again. Her elbow crashed against something hard. Her head cracked against a lamp. She fell. And she spun. And she screamed a soundless scream. Then the wind was ripped out of her by a crossbeam to the spine. At that moment, her body moved on its own. Her legs snaked out across the shaft and somehow found something, *anything*, to latch onto. Her heel got hooked. The world came rushing to a breathless halt and her mind swimming, she found herself folded in half over infinite darkness. She sucked in spit and air with greedy desperation, begging her last meal to stay right where it was. It refused and she ralphed the whole thing down into nothingness.

Vengeance!

She stayed as she was for a long time. She didn't care how long. She didn't care that her backside hung midair with all the suave of an airborne gungan. Eventually,

she regained control of her breathing. *Frag that bath. I'm going straight for the old man's stash.*

At this rate, she wasn't getting anywhere near that stash. She wasn't making it out of this facility. But she would try. Slowly, very slowly, moving as if a part of her might break off, she arched her arms over her head towards the wall and twisted her palms so they pressed against the cool durasteel surface. Her back, her elbow, her head, her lungs all screamed at her, but nothing fell off. It was as good a start as she could hope for. She applied pressure, slow and steady, pushing her body off the cursed crossbeam. Propped up, confident, she shoved at the wall and she launched forward. Wires. Thich cables. Metal brackets. Vents and grates. It all came rushing up at her in the crimson darkness. Her fingers clamped shut around a pipe. Before long she was upright and safe.

Still alive.

An abrupt *woosh* and a burst of bright light exploded under her. Her hands all but slipped with a start. The unmistakable chirping and whirring of a maintenance droid slashed at the hollow silence. The flaring of jetpacks killed it.

Blast it all!

Hand over hand, feet over feet, she pulled herself up the shaft with renewed haste. She slowed down only when she couldn't find a sure foothold. Under pressure, driven by a sudden and very real fear, she moved with the fluidity of a dancer, her fingers nimble, her feet swift and precise, her heart beating itself right through her ribcage. Up and up she went, an oblivious maintenance droid toiling underneath her. Sparks flew with the shrill hissing of welding equipment, burying any sounds she made. Serena allowed herself a long, drawn-out sigh before pushing—and pulling—on.

A faint *bleep* popped from her belt. *About time!* Sure enough, the sensor indicated she had reached her destination. As expected, a hatch awaited. *Thank you, Imperial Scholae Intelligence! I have no clue what your name means, but you came through!* Less expected, this hatch was locked tight. Worse yet, it's electronics were disabled. There was no getting through that lock, not during maintenance protocol.

Almost there, she reassured herself. Almost there.

The problem was that now she had to wait. *Curses, my one weakness!* Say one thing about Serena Skye, say that she cannot wait worth a damn. She was her father's

daughter, after all. She waited one minute. Two. Five. The droid's gleeful chirping chirped on, and the welding welded on, and the drudgery drudged on right under her skin. She clicked her tongue.

Kriff this.

She reached around to the small of her back. Her fingers ran slowly over the circular device stuck in her pants, gripped it firmly and tugged it free. One flurry, one sharp hiss, and a blade of violet plasma spat to life.

The hatch thudded heavily on the other side, its edges vivid orange where the plasma had cut through. Serena shot feet first through the hole in a spinning flourish that landed her beautifully low on the edge of a catwalk with all of her flexibility on display. She gasped at the gaping pit that greeted her. Gone was claustrophobic oppression of the maintenance shaft replaced instead by a baying emptiness of blinding lights. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the brightness, and as they did she took in the cavernous, octagonal chamber that appeared before her. It seemed to stretch to infinity above and below, disappearing in a swirling haze of white, a massive, towering pillar jutting upwards at the core. At its center, a massive pillar stretched between lower and upper infinity. Angular metal beams lined with strips of vertical lights formed a perimeter around the chamber. The central pillar, meanwhile, consisted of endless, identical compartments forming their own levels or stories, their octagonal surfaces studded with black, electronic boxes she now recognized as databases. Hundreds of thousands of databases. A goldmine of information and the very focus of her mission. Walkways formed a ring around the outer edge of the chamber while a second, inner ring jutted from the central pillar. There were no apparent bridges linking inner and outer rings. They stood separated by a gaping chasm far too wide to jump across. Yet, what confounded Serena was the seeming lack of any access points to the chamber. She could only just make out a handful of hatches like the one she'd entered through, but nothing offered a steady access. No doors, no elevators. The entire chamber stood a frozen, ominous, humming, vertical graveyard of electronics.

She too remained unmoving, as still as a ghost. She listened for the sound of alarms. She listened for footsteps or the sound of belching blasters. Nothing. The chambered hummed its hollow tune, oblivious to its new visitor. The corners of her

mouth curled upward with satisfaction. *Not bad for a novice*, she mused. *Not bad at all*. So much for Zehsaa's warnings and precautions! So much for dear old dad's protests!

He yanked at his left pauldron with a grunt. With each wrenching tug the straps dug deeper through his jumpsuit, clawing at his chest and arm pits. He barely even notice it, and he didn't much care either, if he was being honest. He slapped the big slab of scarred duraplast that passed for his plastron against his chest and secured it to the suit. He repeated the process with the backplate, the bracers, the arm guards, and the knee guards tightening everything right down to the tip of his armored boots. Every plate he fastened through muscle memory alone, and did the same strapping his trusty Bryar pistol over his leg armor. His mind was elsewhere. There was a storm brewing inside his skull, spewing cyclones and twisters of scenarios each one worse than the last. At the center of it all: Serena. If something was to happen to her... Not for the first time, he cursed himself for ever reaching out to the Dark Brotherhood.

It had been a rough set of years, like being dragged behind a speeder, bouncing and flopping over the road like a rag doll and hitting every blasted rock along the way. Nothing had ever been easy for him, for them, but he'd stuck his neck out and powered through. He'd worked for all kinds of vicious bastards throughout his career as a bounty hunter; crimelords, corrupt officials, vengeful nobles, the greedy and the wicked, but not a one measured to the likes of Elinacia Rei. The so-called doctor, now parading as some so-called empress, had welcomed them with open arms and gleaming smiles. She'd showered them with promises of research and cures, that she would do all in her power to help Serena. Help she did. Bale had to give her that. She'd cracked the source of Serena's sickness, developed the treatments that allowed his daughter to regain some semblance of a normal life. She'd conjured the answers and medical what-have-yous that still confused him to this day. There was no denying it, though. It worked.

But in the process of curing Serena, the scheming witch had all but swept his daughter away. Then there was the matter of cost. For each treatment, for each

advance in the good doctor's research, the noose around his neck and the barbed wire around his *choobies* tightened. He was her slave. He'd killed more people than he could count at her beck and call. He'd delivered her with a Kyber crystal mine, a working force, he'd fought alongside the Palatinaen troops in more skirmishes than he could remember. He'd been ready to sacrifice a whole lot to save his daughter. He was willing to sacrifice a whole lot more before this was done. That is if her got the opportunity to do so.

Bale Andros wasn't exactly the smartest fella in the room. He reckoned he had no delusions about that. One too many knocks to the head, he used to joke back when he'd been in a joking mood. Something was becoming terribly clear to him, though. For all his skills, for all the mayhem and destruction he spread in her name, it was really Serena herself that interested the Almighty Empress Elinia Rei. She understood something, saw something about the girl that no one else did, her father included, something that made her valuable in the eyes of an empress. Bale wondered how long it would be before she was done with *him*.

Accidents happen. One ship blasted back oblivion. Pew pew.

"Coming in on *Seraph*, touch down in Nardash on the hour," announced the Rodian pilot through the intercom, "You sure you don't want us coming down with you, boss?"

Bale backhanded the comms unit and responded, "Going in alone. The lot of you keep low and ready for my call."

"Copy that, bossman, but Rushk isn't going to sit—" The Rodian's voice cut out mid-sentence before resuming, her tone skittish, "Huh, got Zehsaa hailing us. Do I answer?"

"Uh. Patch her through to the hold, I'll take her call there." He didn't want to talk to her right then, not one bit, but on the off chance this about Serena, he would never forgive himself for being stubborn.

He swung a satchel bulging with gear of all kinds over his shoulder and double-timed it to the cargo hold. He didn't pass anyone on the way there. *Smart lads*. They knew him real well. Keep clear of the boss when he's on the warpath. Zehsaa Hysh's angry face appeared before him in all its blue, glowing splendor above the holo-projector. He thought of something snide to say but he didn't get a chance.

“I’m giving you one chance, Bale.”

“Heh. What for? What are you going to do about—”

“Listen to me, for once, you blasted kriff-eating *skag!*” The words were like the crack of a whip. Or perhaps more like kick to the crotch. Either way, it shut him up real good. He’d been called that and much worse over the years by a hundred, nay, a thousand different people. It never phased him none. But then, none of them were Zehsaa Hysh. It left him gaping at the screen like, well, like a *blasted kriff-eating skag*. A drooling one to boot. “Do you want to help Serena?”

Bale took a moment to answer. This wasn’t due to hesitation. Of course he did. He took a moment because he realised how unreasonable he’d been. “Yeah, I do.”

“Then I got a job for you. If you refuse my offer, I’m boarding your ship, cutting you open *coonies* to throat *with my lightsaber*, and I’ll strangle you with your own guts, *using the Force*. How’s that for a choice?”

“Uh.”

Bale swallowed hard. In her mood, he reckoned Zehsaa was just about ready to do good on her word. He liked his organs inside him and the Force as far away from him as possible, thank you very much. He dropped the satchel to the ground with a sigh. He reckoned that wasn’t much of a choice, threat or not. If this meant helping Serena...

“I’m listening.”

“And, got it!” Serena punched a command into the terminal and pulled the data unit from its slot with a sharp click. She looked it over. *Funny how such an insignificant bit of plastic can carry the fate of worlds*. With that thought, she stuffed it into her belt pouch and let herself pitch backwards away from the structure. Her legs slipped around the beam that served as her makeshift seat. She swung head over feet, spun through the air and landed upright on the catwalk below with the grace of a gymnast. She looked over her shoulder up at the structure. She didn’t much care for computers, they’d been a source of nausea and headaches growing up, and she was damned glad to leave this one behind her. She understood now why her dad kept that pesky droid around.

With that done, she had to get out, and that was easier said than done. Zehsaa had provided her with few solid options and left it up to her to feel out the situation. She'd felt pride. To be given such freedom on her first mission, it was a real show of trust. Serena suddenly felt alone. How nice it would have been to have someone she could bounce ideas off of. Someone to tell her if she was making a huge mistake. *No. I need to make my own decisions.*

First, she had to get out of the data core. To do that, she had to cross that pesky chasm. An easy choice. She closed her eyes, called upon the Force, bid it come to her, bathe her in its empowering caress. She felt it swirl around her. She felt it rush into her. It pulsed through her body. Her fingers tingled with anticipation. She felt stronger, faster, infinitely powerful. She took a step back, bent low like a runner at the start line. She kicked the ground. She was a blur of movements as she barreled forward, launching herself over the impossible gap, arms stretched outwards, legs and feet pointed and parallel. Twisting her body midair, she lurched forward into a majestic somersault. A full circle and her feet clapped against the catwalk. She landed upright, arms still held out. She grinned. *To think a year ago I was bed-ridden, a weak, pathetic wretch. Now look at me! This. This is freedom.*

She savoured the feeling for a moment longer and then she was off through the hatch back down that pesky shaft. The maintenance droid was done, his menial task completed. Serena couldn't help but grin at thought of the diminutive droid slaving away to reattach the cloven hatch door above. In her haste, she almost blew past the right exit, but she caught the white marker she had left herself from the corner of her eye. She propped herself up dangling over nothingness, something she seemed to be doing a whole lot of lately, and fished out in the crimson-lit darkness for the bundle that was the commander's overcoat. Nothing. She fumbled about, her hands slipping into every nook and cranny, a tinge of panic rising in her. The muscles around her eyes burned she was straining so hard to spot the overcoat. Still nothing.

Kriff.

It must have fallen. Worse, the Droid must have found it. A dozen different scenarios unfurled in her mind, but one thing was certain: the coat was gone and with it, her ticket out of the facility. *Funny such an insignificant mistake will be the death of me. One unidentified female corpse dropped on a cold slab in the morgue.*

She chomped down on her lip as she sat there, weighing her options, looking everybit like a petulant child brooding in timeout. That was exactly how she felt. An angry, stubborn child with their hand caught in the cookie jar. There were no two ways about it, she had to get out of there, and she was going to have to get through it in plain sight. She bit down on her lip a touch too hard and cursed at the pain. *Kriffing rookie.*

Her eyes lit up. She eagerly activated the control panel and the hatch slid open. White light poured into the shaft. Slowly, carefully, she poked her head through, eyes and ears peeled for any witnesses. There was the distant clatter of feet, some voices, but they were far enough. She pulled herself clear of the hatch into the maintenance closet, shut it behind her and slid into cover behind a stack of industrial crates. The clattering grew louder then waned as the source passed by,

She brushed dust and grime from her white tank top, patted her black trousers. There was a mischievous grin on her lips. If one disguise wasn't going to work, she'd have to make due with another one.

Without making a sound, like a Loth-cat, she slipped out of the closet and into the main hall. She recalled what she had seen on the way in, back when she played at being Commander, ran the images over and over in her mind. Satisfied, she took off at a jog, her boots slapping at the durasteel with each step. She shot past a pair of trainees walking side by side, gesticulating wildly, clearly enthralled by their heated discussion. They didn't pay her any mind. A twist of the corridor, another stretch and the hallway opened up into a wide open but oh so crowded courtyard. She had fully expected this. It helped none. Her blood still froze over with fear and with it, her steps. The courtyard was really a massive domed chamber crowned and lit by an artificial sky. Spread out underneath the fake clouds were several courts and a series of winding tracks. Trainees cluttered around them, hives of Geonosian beetles. On the nearest court, she watched two dozen rookies lined up before their trainer, every one of them moving in perfect synch as they went through through some martial art form she didn't recognize. It would have been a sight to behold had she not been in mortal danger. She swallowed hard and pushed forward past a small group of Meraxian rookies. A trio came bursting out of the hallway behind her at a jog in the same way she had.

“Move it!” screamed one of them as he hustled past her.

Serena would have apologized had the words not caught in her throat. She watched them go, taking solace in the fact that her outfit matched theirs. They weren't exactly the same. Her black trousers were cut differently, made of superior materials, materials fit for a commander. Her tank top bore the same insignia as theirs. She was a touch dirtier, some oily streaks marring the white top, but she could have easily taken a tumble. If they didn't look too close...

Someone behind her cleared their throat. She jolted, spun on her heels, eyes wide. She found herself staring up at a face she'd seen before. A hard jaw but soft features, clean shaven. It was the eyes and the friendly deference. The clearance officer. He saw fear in her eyes, the utter panic, the helplessness. She saw the satisfaction. She saw that deference melt into contempt, the little half-sneer on his lips.

“Move,” he snapped.

The realisation was a whiplash. She snapped to attention, all but threw herself out of the way as she averted her eyes. She saluted in the same stiff manner others had saluted her as Commander Aubrey. He lingered. She could feel his eyes on her like a burning laser on her skin. *Kriff. Kriff. Kriff.* He clicked his heels and carried on his way. When he was far enough, she blew the air out of her lung, realizing she had forgotten to breathe. Nearby rookies grinned at her, a knowing, crooked smile, like they'd been on the receiving end of such encounters before and were all too happy to witness it happen to someone else for a change.

She wasn't out of the woods, though, and that was all the more evident when she caught the clearance officer's gaze on her from across the chamber. At least, she thought it was on her, and it made her skin crawl. She quickened the pace, doing her best to meld into the crowd, her head angled down. She pushed her way past a cluster, slipped behind a second group, close enough to look like she was with them as they strolled across the chamber, laughing. Despite passing through the chamber some time before when she was in disguise as commander, it was a daunting task navigating the courts and races towards the exit. There had been fewer people crowding the walkways before. With her points of reference obstructed, panic clawing at her insides, it dawned on her that she was completely and utterly lost. She was swept up like a fallen tree in a wild river.

She lost track of time as she followed interchanging groups of trainees through the facility, laughing with them, exchanging jibber jabber, doing her best not to grab someone by the shoulders and scream. Her could feel her heartbeat in her temples. Clenching her hands until her knuckles turned bright white was all she could do to keep her hands from trembling. More than once she almost reached for her lightsaber hidden at the small of her back, wanting nothing more than to cut a rabid swath through this blasted facility until she saw the sky—the real one—again.

Suddenly, a hand clamped down on her wrist, tore her off her feet. By the time her mind caught up, she was standing in a side room of some kind, a blaster pointed straight at her chest.

“I thought I recognized you, *Commander Aubrey*.” The name was spoken with such venom she might have dropped dead on the spot. She did not know this man. He was far too old to be a rookie. His uniform differed from that of officers and rookies.

“There must be an erro—” She was about to wave her hand and turn the sway of the Force upon him when he warned.

“Move so much as a muscle and I’m pulling the trigger.”

“Who are you,” she whimpered, her voice thick with fear. The lightsaber burned at her back. She wondered if she could reach it before he got a shot off. She’d reach it, but it wasn’t reaching him. Not without a smoking hole in the middle of her chest.

“See, I’m halfway to my unit, about to report for insubordination when I realize this is highly unusual. Why would a commander break protocol over such a minor incident?” He grinned. A smart grin. A deadly grin. “I don’t know *who* you are, but you are not Commander Aubrey.”

Their eyes remained locked, her gold stare against his brown gaze, and for a moment they said nothing. There was no use playing a game. She was done. “You didn’t report me?”

“I’m not about to sell myself out over a little *shiess* like you. You got me to help you. You go down, I go down. But I found you, didn’t I? I can also make you disappear.”

“Wai—“

A red blast and the stench of ionized matter filled the chamber. She felt the strength drain from her knees as sure as the heat from her face. It was him who went

down, the blaster clattering to the floor up against her boot. He went face down with a sickening crunch, a tendril of grey smoke wafting up from the back of his head. Her ears were still ringing with the shot. She wanted to vomit.

“Are you ok?”

Serena heard the words, a hollow pang on the perimeter of consciousness, but all she saw was the dead man at her feet. A man who had threatened her, who would have killed her himself, and yet all she could think about was how it was her fault he had been put in this situation.

“Are you ok?”

It was her fault for tricking him, for using him. If it wasn't for her, he would still be performing a perimeter sweep with his squad. She thought of something her dad had once told her. *You think twice before killin'. Every crooked bastard means something to someone. A child. A parent. A friend. Killing ain't ever right.* She understood now. Were there children waiting for this man back home? A lover? *One Meraxian corpse dropped on a cold slab in the morgue.* She shuddered. She shook.

“Serena?”

When Serena blinked up, as the sounds rushed back into her head like a tidal wave, she found orange hands on her shoulders, shaking her. She found Zehsaa's face before her's. The worry in the Togruta's eyes were like a searing rod. Serena did not feel relief. She did not feel happiness. She realized that she felt nothing. A void. A numbness.

“I'm fine.” She answered with ice in her voice.

“Do you have it?”

“I do.”

“Good. Let's get out of here. Follow me.”

Still alive. The thought rung hollow in her mind. It brought no comfort.

The stench hit them like a hammer to the face. Zehsaa saw Serena recoil and slip. The girl went knee first into the rust-colored muck with a yelp. Zehsaa scrambled to help her up, her bare feet sloshing as gunk clung to her black jumpsuit like molasses. The

Togruta swallowed hard as she lead her friend forward. Staving off the nausea was a battle she was well on her way to losing. Serena, meanwhile, was positively pale, her features clamped up. She said nothing. She had been this way since they had ditched the soldier's body at the entrance of the sewage system. This concerned Zehsaa. A quiet Andros was a thing to be feared. The temper she was more than used to by now. She'd built quite the sturdy carapace. The whining she could ignore. The silence was like a pocket of magma building up a hundred miles beneath the crust of a planet. When that well burst, you didn't want to get caught in the pyroclastic blast.

"This reminds me of Tuhkatan V," she began, hoping to lighten the mood, get the girl talking. "Can you imagine a whole planet covered with industrial waste?" There was no response. She went on, "I'm not talking massive junkyards like those on Ord Mantell. No. I'm talking about a sea of waist-deep, bubbling sludge. Did your father ever tell you how we met?"

Still nothing. Zehsaa breathed in, reached out to her friend with the Force. Her face scrunched up as she felt what she could only describe as a maelstrom of torment, of shame, of doubt, pulsating like lightning from the girl ahead. Serena trudged on, calm on the surface, her arms wrapped around her wiry frame like a cloak, making nary a sound. The sad truth was that Zehsaa was all too familiar with those emotions. She'd been through a lot in her relatively short life, a whole lot more than most at her age. More than Serena. Zehsaa had never been all too good with words. A clumsy joke, a misplaced word, it always seemed to go wrong when she tried to soothe her friends. Yet, here she was. She owed it to Serena to try. She owed it to Bale. She quickened the pace, pulling her legs high in an effort to cut down on the resistance. Zehsaa placed her hand on Serena's shoulder. She forced her mouth in what she hoped came out as an encouraging grin. "You did real good up there."

"Real... good?"

Serena's eyes shot up at her. Dark eyes. Eyes full of malice and contempt, fury and terror, streaked pink from crying. The Togruta recoiled, reflexively pulling her hand away like she'd just stuck it on a burning stovetop.

"Serena?"

The girl sprung, clenched fist flashing from her belt to Zehsaa's chest. It thumped, a light jab, lingered there. The Togruta's stared down at it with a frown. She felt her

friend's hand tremble against her skin, tried to cup it with both of hers but it slipped away like a startled critter. A data chip sat in its wake. Zehsaa turned the device between her fingers, her jowls quivering.

"Here's what you wanted. Leave me alone."

"Serena, this isn't what I wanted."

No response. The girl pushed onwards.

"Serena, talk to me. I'm your friend."

The girl laughed. A joyless laugh, so unlike the girl Zehsaa had known all these years. Serena wheeled on her with a hiss. "My friend? *My* friend? No, Zehsaa. You are my father's plaything. Get this straight."

Serena's lips curled up but Zehsaa couldn't quite decide whether she was grinning or sneering. Whatever it as, it dripped of venom and it paralyzed her right down to her core. She stood there, her bare feet digging into the muck. Her eyes locked on the girl's back, watched her move away, her silhouette fading in the darkness of the sewage pipe, arms a shield around herself. *This isn't right.* Was Bale right? Was it her fault for getting the girl involved?

"Come on, Zehsaa." The voice came from ahead, irony oozing like industrial waste from her words. It jolted Zehsaa out of her trance. "We have a mission to complete."

Bale peered intently at the three dimensional wireframe map of the training facility as it hovered above the holoprojector. Or rather, he peered intently through it at his daughter sitting by herself across the room, her legs pulled up to her chest, her face buried against her knees. Serena had been in a dark mood ever since he'd picked them up some miles from the training facility. Just far enough to avoid raising suspicion. By all accounts, her mission had been a resounding success. Zehsaa had sung her praise without stop. So he didn't understand what in the blazes could possibly be up with her. If anything, the daughter he knew would have been rubbing it in his face with all her toothy, petulant glamour, and he would have gladly conceded she'd done good. He kept waiting for this moment. Begged it to come. All he got was more brooding.

He glanced over his shoulder at Zehsaa. Their eyes met for but a second before she averted her gaze and looked all the more keenly at the schematics. He could tell she was struggling not to look at him from the way her face muscles worked overtime. She was chewing her lip, and that could only mean trouble.

His mouth felt terribly dry all of a sudden. He pushed out of his seat with a sigh, forcing Zehsaa to move aside in the process, and went over to the liquor cabinet. He pulled out three glasses, a little scummier than he cared for, but then it was all he had on hand. He fished out a bottle, pulled the stopper, pushed it to his lips. He sloshed the drink from one cheek to the other then spat the liquid out. *Not good enough.* He dug his hand elbow deep into the cabinet, grabbing around blindly, knocking a bottle or three over in the process until he found the bottle he'd been looking for.

"Juvens Palor, best *kriffing* whiskey this side of the universe." He spoke aloud to no one and anyone. He poured himself one glass, looked over his shoulder at the others. When he was satisfied no one was looking, he threw his head back, swallowed the thing whole. The liquid burned down his throat like a dozen suns. Made him feel alive alright. Grinning to himself, he refilled the glass and then the other two. "You gots to be someone to have one of these. I reckon only bottle I ever say, other than this one, was on the mantle of my owner of my slave master, back when I was a kid."

He scooped up the three glasses up in one massive hand, strode around the room, first giving one to Zehsaa. The Togruta took it eagerly but did so without looking him in the eyes. For all her fire before, she sure had gotten docile. He shrugged, moved on. He stepped over to Serena, stood over her, looked down at his beautiful girl as he searched for something to say. She was so different. Not a year past, she'd be a shell, whitered to the bone, plagued with constant fever. He'd been so worried that he might lose her. Now she was as wholesome, as healthy as anyone her age. His two Zabrak hearts pounded in his chest as if a percussionist had taken residence in his chest. Fact was, this was the first time he was offering his daughter a drink. It was a big day for firsts, and he couldn't have picked a prouder moment.

"Don't want it," said the girl, flatly.

"You know what, I think you need this," he insisted.

"Tried it before. Snuck in here while you were sleeping." Her voice was sharp as a vibroblade and taunting to boot, fully intending to elicit a reaction.

“I know you did.”

Her head shot up, her eyes, tired eyes, red eyes, wide with surprise. She shuddered, curling her lips, “Tastes like Wookiee piss.”

Bale’s laugh was a boom across the chamber. “Now I reckon that’s a lie. Take it and shut up, kiddo.” He all be trust the glass into the girl’s hands. She did take it. And she drank it there and then.

So much for a toast. But then, that didn’t phase him none.

“I never told you where that bottle comes from, did I?”

“Huh, never cared to ask, either.”

Bale pushed his back against the wall and slid down, plopping his behind right next to her’s. He reached over, clinked he full glass against her empty one and then slurped it down noisily. “Was your mother’s.”

Serena didn’t flinch or move a muscle. She didn’t so much as look at him from the corner of her eyes. But she was listening. That was for damn sure.

“Yep. Won this in the *big brawl*. I know, I know, boring name, but we pit fighters were never known for our *pizaz*, heh? But I tell you, it was the big one, the mother of all tourneys.”

Zehsaa had stolen away into Bale’s seat and was listening to him until she spoke in excitement, “I heard about that! I remember friends of mine watching holovids of it when I was... er... well, when I was a kid. You were there? Truly?”

Bale nodded, “Aye, Reevah and me both. I got taken out by some Wookiee war hero. Dislocated both my shoulders. Caved my ribs in. Shattered my knee.” Bale was grinning madly as he recounted old times, “But I tell you, that Reevah Skye—*kriffing* Terror from the Void is what they used to call her—she was something else! Your mom, she was like some Goddess of War strolled out from some legend. Never seen anything like it before, never seen anything like it since. And she got showered with gifts for it. That there bottle was her most prized gift.”

“Booze?” Serena was looking at him all incredulous.

The Zabrak laughed again. “Yep. Good old booze. But your mom didn’t drink like me. Nah. That bottle represented freedom. That bottle meant she was somebody.”

“Huh.”

“It’s true.”

There was the hint of a smile now on his daughter's lips. He took a deep breath, enjoying the moment for what it was. He tapped his oversized hand on her thigh, ruffled her black hair with all the love borne by a father, then pushed himself up.

"Bottle's yours now. Just like she wanted. Don't drink it all at once."

Bale brushed off his pants and walked out of the room, wondering when his eyes had gotten so moist.

The Empress ran a long yellow finger over the edge of her cup, the steam from the beverage heating her hand in the process. She pulled it to her mouth, giving it a short pull. The liquid pooled on her tongue, warm, bitter yet sweet, and she let it sit there a moment longer before swallowing. It was all she could do to keep the boredom from oozing to her features. Her eyes remained riveted to the blabbering nobleman in audience before her but not by interest. This useless, sniveling roach of a man was the kind that begged for ever more without a thing to offer in return. There was little she despised more than uselessness. What kind of existence was that? To wake up each morning in your bed, finding life ever the same, and knowing your universe would be much the same when you crawled back to it night after night. She moved mountains at the snap of a finger. She dictated life and death at a stare. She sighed inwardly. All this, and yet here she was, listening to this drivel for the sake of appearances.

"And so you understand, your Magnificence, why I require an increase in funding."

"Oh, indeed," she said, her voice ever controlled, ever regal, reverberating across the throne room. "Alas, your progress has been less than agreed upon. Though you claim setbacks, agents of Imperial Scholae Intelligence offer an alternative explanation, one in the form of lavish parties. And so *you* understand why you will not be receiving further until the agreed upon progress has been met."

It was always impressive to how quickly one's demeanor could change. The man was now bloated red, jowls quivering, eyes bulging with shock. Such utter lack of control over one's self was nearly as despicable as their uselessness.

"That is all, Baron Fal—"

She felt it upon the Force, the tsunami of anger crashing through the corridor as she spoke. She sat back, brow cocked. Even she couldn't contain the hint of surprise, however slight, that clipped her face.

"Interesting," she thought aloud.

An explosion rocked the hallway beyond. The clattering of boots immediately filled the throne room as the four imperial guards snapped to action around her. In a matter of seconds a blockade of red, armored warriors formed between door and throne. The noble Baron Falrend could have been a statue if not for his hands visibly quaking. For her part the Empress sat back calmly as she always did, though she did set aside her cup.

There was a lingering silence. A hollow void that hung like a dark cloud over the throne room. The Empress was intensely aware of every minute detail, the readjustment of a guard's feet, every single crease in their cloaks, the slow, steady breathing of these four elite warriors, the stunted suckling of breath of the nobleman. The door slid open at an agonizing pace, revealing a hulking black silhouette against a backdrop of smoke and bodies. She felt them in the Force, the men beyond, unconscious but alive. A stun grenade.

"Bold," she mused.

The lone attacker pushed through the doorway, his massive armored frame stomping towards her with fists flailing. The line of red guards exploded forward as one, weapons cocked and ready for wanton murder. The attacker charged, head low. The Empress watched on as they collided at the very center of the throne room. He crashed upon the four guards like a roaring, ten-ton wave of steel. Someway, somehow, that one man sent those four imperial guards sprawling to their backs. But these were trained men, elite, and as expected, they were back on their feet in the blink of an eye. They moved like the wind, darting about him this way and that, their blades a whirlwind that sung for blood. *He* moved with all the grace of a protocol droid, and yet he had the upper hand. The first guard to reach him caught a stun blast at point-blank range from a wrist-mounted blaster. The second saw his vibroblade backhanded out of its fatal trajectory with one bracer. A massive hand clamped down on his collar. His feet left the ground. A horned head crushed into the red helmet and the guard was discarded like a rag doll. The third managed to nick armor as he slid

past the hulking menace just as the fourth stabbed a pike at the him. Both hands closed around the pole and yanked. The guard let go of the weapon and it soared spinning across the room. It punched once, twice, caught the attacker in the face causing him to stagger back at the same time as the other remaining guard came up from behind. One sweep of the leg and he was down. Quite unfortunately, he did not stay down. His arm muscles bulging as he pushed at the floor, the would-be attacker kicked the air, swung up, landed upright. They came at him again but he was ready. One arm shot out and a cable zipped out of his bracer. It coiled around the disarmed guard's ankles as he made to run. He went down. An armored boot to the back of the helmet knocked him out cold.

“Enough!” The Empress' voice boomed.

The guard stopped as ordered but a sledgehammer of a fist to the head sent him down for the count.

“Bale Andros. Ever you arrive to impress.” And he most certainly did. If it wasn't an explosive entrance, he arbored a fascinating disregard for protocol, structure and order. “Lord Felrand, leave us.”

The noble all but ran out of the chamber, giving the intruder a wide berth. The Zabrak watched him flee before his head snapped towards the Empress, his damp hair whipping around. He lumbered towards her, fists bunched up. She watched him close the distance, the clap of his armored boots the only sound in the throne room. She graced him with her best of smiles, the kind she had rehearsed all too often for Ferland's kind. The hulking bounty hunter crossed the invisible threshold where protocol dictated he stand when addressing the leader of Scholae Palatinae. He walked up the steps onto her pedestal. He walked up to her, his titanic silhouette eclipsing all around them. His shadow fell over her. She did not flinch. Her smile did not falter. She simply watched. And she was intricately aware of the lightsaber concealed within her robes.

She waited.

The bounty hunter dug into one of the oversized pouches on his belt, fished around and came up with a tiny data chip between two fingers. He leaned forward, plopped the down on the armrest of her throne. In didn't seem quite so small out of his hands. He straightened back up.

“Ah. Our Serena succeeded,” she mused. This was an extension of courtesy. The girl had stopped being his the moment he had showed up on doctor Elinia Rei’s doorstep begging for her aid. There was no sense in taunting a rampaging rancor.

“She did.”

“Yet, she did not turn it in to ISI.”

The ugly bastard gave her a wicked smile. A gruesome gash in his mangy beard. He spoke in a deep, rumbling bass, “I decided it was time we had a little chat.”

“Indeed?”

“Every day, your influence grows on the girl. I don’t need your kind’s talents to see the growing darkness. I will not pretend to understand your witchery, your Force, but I know where this can lead her.”

“Oh, do you?” The man was absolutely right. Serena Skye, her prized apprentice, was exceptional. She arbored a raw connection to the Force the likes of which the Empress had never witnessed before, a connection that could rival the elders of the Dark Jedi Brotherhood. The girl was growing in power with each passing day. The Empress had no doubt she could someday surpass her.

“Mark my words, Elinia,” he spoke the name with a scorn, “I will burn your so-called empire to the ground if harm befalls her. No blasted army will keep me from finding you, and tearing you limb from limb.”

How barbaric. This was almost disappointing, but then she never dared expect more from this brainless gun-for-hire before her. Her smile only grew on her lips with his every word.

“Of course, of course. And in the meantime, my good Bale, our agreement remains the same. You do as I tell you.”

She saw his fingers twitch. Then he exploded forward with speed that belied his build, and she found a bryar pistol buried in her ribs. Still she smiled. *How grossly predictable.* Ever he played in her hand. Even at Maqor. His greatest failure had only secured her power, rid her of Rajju.

They all would learn. She *always* won.

“You know what I’m capable of,” he growled.

She said nothing. Her eyes told him all he needed to know. He pulled away, slammed the pistol back into its holster, clearly satisfied with himself. Poor simpleton. Poor, poor expandable brute. There would come a time when he no longer had a use.

Serena Skye would be hers.

It lay there at her feet. A cold slab of rotten meat. Useless, lifeless, spread out for the world to see. Shreds of gray cloth still clung to its shrunken frame. Maggots writhed over it, a twisted dance of life and death. A single token shone bright, a beacon in the darkness and the fog, a symbol of the Meraxis Empire. She pulled her boots from the muck with the deafening sound of suction and splattering liquid, and stepped over it. She could clearly see it now, the rotten face, the back of its skull still steaming from a blaster shot.

Serena hugged her cloak around her shoulders, but nothing could stave off the deathly cold that tormented her. There was a faint, low hum in the distance, calling to her, bidding her to come forward. And so she tore her eyes from the corpse and pushed onwards down a winding trail. Each step came with the hollow, sloshing sound of swamp water around her feet. On both sides of the path grew twisted trees, crooked and curving to the heavens and looming over her like clutching skeletal limbs, all seeking to grab her, to smother her. Frost danced on her stuttering breath. It swirled around her. She pulled her cloak tighter. The trees grew denser yet as she pushed through the fog. From the branches hung what she first took for some sort of hanging sacks of flesh. They were dark teardrop shapes, swaying ever lightly to the absence of wind. Suddenly one of them uncoiled, spread pointed, fluttering wings, beat the air once, twice, three times before tearing free and flying off. It swung low, its talons flashing dangerously close, its piercing shriek painful in her ears.

The hum grew in intensity with every step. She came to a staircase cut into the rock face. She was all too eager to leave the swamp behind her. She was too afraid to step forward. She had little choice. She had come too far. There was no going back. Not now. Not after what she'd done. She thought she heard her father's laughter in the

distance, somewhere off in the woods. She definitely heard Zehsaa congratulating her for her outstanding work. Fools. All of them.

She took a deep breath, put one foot forward. Up she went for what seemed to be an age. A pair of dark silhouettes greeted her at the top of the steps. Two women cloaked in revealing armor, a thick black cloak around their shoulders, a cavernous hood over their heads masking their features. They stood straight as she approached. One held a lightsaber. The other a vibrospear. The first, the one with the Jedi weapon pulled her hood back. Serena found the face of Empress, her master, Elinia Rei, but not a Togruta. A Twi'lek. Deep eye shadow made her eyes pop with villainy. She said nothing. The second woman pulled her hood back. Serena nearly fell back as she was confronted by her mother's face. Reevah Skye, the Terror from the Void. With dark, olive skin, sharp eyes, scars and tattoos covering her body, she looked every bit the part of the Terror. She was beautiful, breathtaking, in a barbaric kind of way. Just like in the holovids.

"Mom," was all she managed to croak as she reached for the woman. To her dismay, the ghost from her past stepped aside and she stumbled forward. Her mother and the Empress stepped ahead of her, shoulder to shoulder.

"Mom? Master?"

There was no response. The fog had deepened, devouring all around them until she could only make out their silhouette, faint gray specters against a wispy white backdrop. She followed after them like a craven child, half running, half stumbling to catch up. With each step, the world around her grew darker. Soon enough, the world had shifted from bright white to pitch black. The two women now stuck out as they were the last two beings in existence. Serena approached, her hands trembling, her lips quivering. Her mind was reeling a mile a minute. Pressure was building up at her temples. So much so she wanted to scream until she realized that the growing hum that had drawn her forward had transformed into a dangerous, foreboding laugh, a rasp of grinding bones in her ears. A sinister, voiceless cackle.

Then she saw *him*. First, it was a dark shape nigh invisible behind the silhouettes of Reevah and Elinia. When they stepped aside, when faded into the darkness, she was left alone to face this creature of the shadows. She did not move. She did not breathe.

She could only stare.

His frame was withered and frail, barely human, twisted in much the same way as the trees outside. Hunched and on his knees, arms outstretched and bound in shackles, he should have appeared helpless. Harmless. She should have felt pity. One arm was of jagged metal, a gruesome, sinister thing, monstrous and skeletal. It had been grafted to his severed right arm above the bicep. The other was thin, the muscles atrophied. Coils of heavy iron chain slithered away from the shackled limbs into the darkness. His body was a heap of scars and filth, a living corpse. She should have felt pity. She felt only terror. And yet, somehow, she found that she was drawn by his power. Her heart was pounding in her throat. She wanted to scream. She wanted to turn away. She begged her body to run. Instead, she knelt before him.

The laughter died.

His head snapped up with a snarl, mere inches from her. A demon's face. An eye of searing gold and molten red peered into her soul, glowing with madness in the penumbra. Opposite of it, she found an empty, drooping eye socket. A long, unkempt beard crawled like vines from his ancient, disfigured head. A smile of fangs split it wide open. When he finally spoke, he spoke a whisper, the very voice of death.

"Welcome, my apprentice."

A smile of fangs split his ravaged features wide open.

Serena sat up in her bed. She was deathly cold despite being drenched in sweat. Frost still lingered on her breath. She wanted to scream, she wanted to cry, but her vocal cords refused to make a sound. In her hands, she found her lightsaber spitting violet plasma.

Welcome, my apprentice.

The words were a haunting echo at the back of her mind.

The end.