

Acquisition

You've nothing to fear, Rew'dago. You mustn't even entertain such feelings.

A dark smile played across Ciara lips as the unspoken words settled into her mind as clearly as though they'd been meant for her. Though her concentration required she focus her mental eavesdropping on only a single participant, the man's verbose replies made it easy for the Krath to imagine the other side of the conversation.

The Acklays serve me now as well as they served Kadyr. They will not question me – and you should know that better than most.

Even one as disinclined to empathy as Ciara could sense the pain that accompanied the next – and longer – lull in the conversation. But had it come from the listener or the speaker? Taking a measured risk to satisfy her own curiosity, Ciara shifted slightly in her seat a few tables away from the overtly silent pair just enough to give emerald eyes a chance to take in her future playthings.

The speaker, a human man of oddly regal bearing, was dressed in the morbidly gaudy garb one might expect of the leader of the pirate gang that took its name from the giant, crustaceous Acklay creature they employed as a tool of intimidation. He leaned uncomfortably close to his young, Twi'lek listener, who appeared grateful for even the narrow width of battered table between them. Occasionally, the pair exchanged words that none could hear above the noise of the tavern's other patrons, but Ciara expected they were as much for show as their posturing.

"Drinks, miss?"

A sullen girl in scarcely more than rags appeared for the second time that evening, still careful to address her inquiry only to the Twi'lek after being rudely dismissed by the man on her first attempt.

"Water, please."

Rew'dago's reply seemed to incense the waitress more than the thrown glass that chased her away from the table.

"Water! You're lucky Thijs is here or you'd be mopping our stalls with those headtails, girl!"

Do you see? I did not come into this role overnight. I rose through the ranks like the rest of the Acklays and earned my place at their head. All who know the name Avel Thijs fear and respect it. I am not proud of the things I have had to do ... but it is the duty of a Sentinel to do what no other Jedi can or will do to ensure peace – to ensure that weapons like these do not fall into the wrong hands or that young girls are not forced to join gangs to keep their family from slavery.

If Ciara had had that drink, she might have spit it out. A Jedi Sentinel at the head of the Acklays? The sharp lift of curved brows would have to suffice as expression enough for the shock at this development. She had questions, but feared her own inner monologue might attract the Sentinel's attention or detract from her own.

If you would be my apprentice, you must learn to accept this fate, as well. It is not ourselves or the present moment that we serve, but innocents, strangers and a future brighter than any darkness we may have to touch today.

A thud and a splash of murky, brown liquid over the side of the mug presented as an fulfillment of Rew'dago's order of water drew no reaction from the Twi'lek, who allowed the serving girl to return to her other patrons without so much as a glance.

Then you accept? Oh, Rew, you cannot know the lives you may save.

"I do believe I asked for water!"

The sudden outburst by the previously somber Twi'lek drew more than a few eyes. Apparently the dread had made her thirsty enough to ask for something potable.

You'll need to be assertive with the Acklays. They won't be happy about giving up their sale to you, but they will obey me. They will come to you with the shipment. I've told them where to find you.

"You'll get what you're given, ingrate!" came the reply as the waitress returned snatched up the previously laid mug and began to saunter away.

Amusement danced across Ciara's gaze as slender fingers slid their way within her cloak to find a few coins to toss on her own table as she snagged the sullen girl's arm as she passed, muttering softly, "I'll take that. No need for waste."

Once the mug was in hand and prying eyes elsewhere, her fingers found their way quickly back to her belt within her cloak, finding the cool vial rather thrilling to the touch as she emptied its contents within the mug. Whatever drudge the waitress had served, it looked no better or worse with its new additive.

No, we cannot risk this information being stolen by slicers. You must remember the coordinates. You will not fail. Too much is at stake. This is a powerful bioweapon.

Rew'dago, of course, was not the only one committing the coordinates to memory.

I must go. Give it some time before you follow.

The crime lord and Jedi Sentinel rose to his feet and found even the rowdiest patrons parting to let him pass. His would-be apprentice watched his departure as if

searching for some inspiration to bolster her own courage and powers of subterfuge before rising to her own feet – not to follow, but to track down the serving girl and test her powers of persuasion.

And so fortune smiled on the wicked that day.

When young Rew returned to her table with slumped shoulders and drooping lekku, she found, to her surprise, a mug of crystal clear water.

It worked! They just didn't want to let on. ...Or, else, some kind soul took pity on me. What does it matter, anyway? I may be dead tomorrow.

The water didn't go down as smooth as she'd hoped, but what could be expected of one of the town's seedier establishments? She'd earned it, and she was drinking every last drop.

Rew'dago would regret the decision. By the time she left the tavern, she staggered worse than most drunks who left it. The street seemed to rise to meet her then retract and become a wall. Shrinking from the stares of any who might recognize her, the last thing she remembered before passing out was the shifting face and steadying arm of a dark-haired woman.

Upon waking from her stupor, the effects somewhat abated, the Twi'lek's gaze did not find the dark-haired woman who had offered her aid and a place to rest away from prying eyes, but they looked upon – a mirror image of herself.

"What do you think, Rew?" came the voice even eerily similar to her own. "Will they buy it? Oh, that's right ... you're the buyer."

Whether from the horrific realization of what was happening or the after effects of the toxin, the Twi'lek emptied her stomach.

"Zero, nine, eight ... " Ciara continued to repeat the memorized coordinates as she drew closer to the young, aspiring Jedi and let her fingers find the welcoming hilt of her diamond sword, drawing the tip of its blade to her throat. "Just as you think you can walk the path of dark and light ... I think you will find your death a mercy."

"You will never get away with this!" came the unconvincing reply of paled lips.

"Won't I? I'm just who the Acklays are expecting. All I have to do is ... muster some courage ... and walk away with the weapon." Ciara continued, using the verbage from the young woman's own thoughts with a bemused swish of illusory lekku. "Would you like to know what a clan of Sith might do with your toys?"

Though she trembled with rage, the Twi'lek fell silent and hoped for death.

Ciara granted it.